

AUTHORIAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE
FICTION OF JOHN BARTH

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the development of the self-conscious authorial voice in the fiction of John Barth, especially as this self-consciousness relates to the fictional form in which it is found--realistic, fabular, and metafictional. Each chapter will deal with two of Barth's works, which themselves will also be dealt with chronologically. Chapter I will deal with the authorial self-consciousness in the realist mode, as seen in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road. Chapter II will consider the self-conscious presence of the author-figure in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy, both of which are attempts to create whole fictional universes, and which indicate in their form the exhaustion of the realist mode for Barth's purposes. Chapter III will deal with Barth's metafictional shorter works in Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera, works which take the continual exhaustion of fictional forms as their donnee or subject matter, and which emblematically as well as thematically attempt to describe the dynamics of this exhaustion. Attention will be paid to the last novella "Bellerophoniad," since it stands as Barth's ultimate gesture of exhaustion, culminating and devouring as it does all of Barth's previous fictional corpus. In addition, there is an Appendix containing a glossary of equivalent terms for those found in the allegorical Giles Goat-Boy. This is intended as a short reader's guide, and is by no means exhaustive.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will attempt to study, in the work of John Barth, the heightened consciousness of the authorial persona, whether under the guise of an engaging first person narrator or omniscient controller of events. This consciousness, by its very nature, is one of fiction as artifice. As a result, we as readers become conscious of our own role in this fiction. An author self-consciously concerned with his place in the fictional process will engender in the reader a corresponding self-consciousness. To be aware of oneself reading the created artifice of fiction is to become aware, Barth implies, of a fundamental aspect of one's human nature. One's view of the world, the ordering of its "facts", phenomena and mysteries, is analogous to that of the author who creates his artifice. Barth's self-conscious authorial stances, characterized as they are by a humorous skepticism about the stances themselves and a recognition of their limitations, paradoxically create value where none was originally found. The conferring of value upon an event is the product of a creative act which shares its roots with those of fiction.

Such intense self-awareness on both the author's and the reader's part is one that changes the ground rules of fiction even as it attempts to examine them. The act of involvement by the reader in Barth's work is one suffused with an awareness of the basic conventions themselves of fiction or "story". As we move through the body of Barth's work, we are asked to see the universe itself as fictive, and our previous conceptions of it as ultimately fictitious. (It is important here, before we proceed,

not to equate the terms "fictive" or "fictitious" with "untrue". For the purposes of this thesis, they refer to that which, in the absence of empirical verification, accounts for something, attempts to give it a place in a created order. It is that about which the final truth can never be known with certainty. To the extent that one denies the possibility of finding out the truth about anything, any view of the world is fictitious.) Barth moves from a typical existentialist despair at the realization of the loss of conventional values and sense of reality and the ennui obtaining from an acclimatization to this loss, to an awareness of the range and power of imagination as it confronts the world and "imagines it to be." This movement is not only reflected in the articulated concerns of characters in Barth's fiction, but in the structure of the novels and stories themselves. As we will see, characters come to concern themselves more and more with the very form and structure of their articulation, thus effecting a synthesis of form and subject matter. These two aspects are more thoroughly synthesized to the degree that characters become more aware of their own roles as heroes, narrators, authors, or any combination of those.

Barth's work cannot be read without an awareness of the tradition of formal experimentation in the novel form that preceded him. Indeed his work can be seen to follow generically on the heels of Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Faulkner and others. Linda Hutcheon points out that the evolution of the novel from the overt realism of the nineteenth century to the "subjective realism" of Joyce and others shifted the focus of attention away from "product" to "process,"¹ for those novelists intent on expanding the genre. The inner processes of the character's mind became

more important than the verified events he perceived. This concern for process extended not only to the character but to the novel itself. Subject "matter" became less important to a full appreciation of the artist's aesthetic intentions than how it was perceived, not only by the characters in the novel but also by the reader situated outside it. Although as a rule they never addressed themselves to the reader on these points, the innovations pioneered by Proust, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and others were directed at the reader, mainly because they demanded a great deal more effort of the reader. "Reading was no longer easy, a comfortable controlled experience; the reader was now forced to control, to organize, to interpret."² The result of this type of experimentation was to engender in the reader a heightened sense of the work of fiction as artifact, as a document governed by aesthetic principles which must be discovered by the reader on his own. One extension of this progression of formal experimentation would be a body of fiction that directly calls attention to its artificiality, its fictitious nature, to the processes by which it works. ✓

In traditional fiction, we meet "characters" who are looking out--at society, manners, plots; in the early twentieth century novel of consciousness or modernist short fiction, we are inside a character (or characters) looking out. In the world of the contemporary super-fictionist, we are mostly inside a character (or characters) looking in³

It is into this body of fiction that Barth's work as a whole falls, and it is in this way that his work can be said to follow in the tradition of formal experimentation initiated around the turn of this century. Indeed, as we shall see in the last chapter, the very subject matter of much of his later fiction revolves around the question of the progress and possible exhaustion of this type of literary experimentation.

Given the hyper-conscious atmosphere generated by Barth's basically self-declarative fiction, it follows that the author-figure, whether he be a pseudo-omniscient narrator, a first-person narrator, or Barth himself unmasked, shall become a potent personality or character in the fiction. The effect of such a personal authorial presence in a fiction that does not apologize for being fictional is to deny that fiction any power to transmit transcendent or enduring truths, and to substitute for that power a new relationship between author and reader. The reader, although ultimately still a receiver of transmitted information, has a far more active role in the reading of Barth's fiction, more active indeed than when reading the fiction of Joyce, Faulkner, or Virginia Woolf. The latter tended to act according to the artistic precepts of Stephen Dedalus, remaining invisible like the God of creation in their handiwork. By practicing total authorial self-effacement, they wished their work to have a life of its own, to be seen as an integral creation untainted by the peculiarities of personalities. This is a gesture that posits a belief in the immortality of the work of art. Barth, by thrusting the author-figure into the foreground of his fiction, and alerting the reader to the artificiality of what he is reading, changes the author-reader relationship. The reader no longer pieces together a jig-saw puzzle strewn before him by a nameless agent of creation, a puzzle whose fragmentary state is an analogue of the process of experience. In Barth, the reader engages the author-figure more personally, and is asked to know and judge him. In this relationship, the author is flawed and the reader, his partner in fiction-making. If the author constantly addresses the question of his work's artificiality, the reader is forced to address

his role in reading it. "The reader is explicitly or implicitly forced to face his responsibility toward the text, toward the novelistic world he is creating through the accumulated fictive referents of literary language. As the novelist actualizes the world of his imagination through words, the reader--from those same words--manufactures in reverse a literary universe that is as much his creation as the novelist's."⁴

In such a relationship, the author abdicates his responsibility as transmitter of enduring values and truth. Indeed, the implicit partnership between author and reader is much better suited to a joint exploration of the void that exists in lieu of absolute values. Barth's first two novels, The Floating Opera and The End of the Road, deal with this question of the absence of absolute values, and by extension the absence of objective truth. In the more recent stages of his work, these two points are taken to be certainties, and the emphasis shifts to the attendant metaphysical and epistemological acrobatics that obtain from the realization of this certainty. This indeed is the very substance of Lost in the Funhouse. Having removed value and meaning from the world by assuming that they are not conferred by a transcendent external agency, the author-figure comes to find that in writing fiction he ironically re-confers them with his creative imagination, tempered however with the realization that he is still not quite the God of creation. He is, rather, closer to what Jerry Bryant calls the "world-center", that point of view which accounts for the world as it occurs to him, which makes a model of the world "whose construction is governed by [the reader's] freedom from the assumption that any one or few points of view give a total explanation."⁵

As he goes on to say, "The novel is a kind of model of reality that liberates the intelligence from the bounds of its centrality so that it may glimpse the world from other viewpoints and come to a more profound insight into the world as it is" (ibid.). There is nothing in this about having finally arrived at any central Truth that underlies existence. The displacement of value and meaning from a previously imagined central position accessible to all men through some vague experiential process has its positive aspects, despite the entropy involved in turning truth or truths from absolute and enduring to tenuous and fragile quantities. As mentioned by Jerry Bryant, the novel that now insists on being merely a "model" of reality does liberate. It awakens man to the chilling realization that what he once thought of as absolute values and truths conferred from without, were actually the marvelously wrought products of his imagination in confrontation with the base fact of existence. That he should have believed his "deception" utterly for so long is not just a cause for lamenting his gullibility, but also to admit that he can spin a pretty fine tale, make a very interesting account of himself. In making this point the novels of John Barth point to a temporary victory of the imagination over the inscrutability of life.

This victory must always be a highly qualified one. The work of fiction is an edifice, a buffer erected between us and the void that must exist at the centre of life if we accept no transcendent values. It is the creation of fiction which is the acrobatics performed over the abyss. In Barth, it is, quite literally, a "stop-gap" measure, and his novels concern themselves with this very question. The heroes of his first two novels see the writing of their story, of their battle with the void, as

a means of getting at the truth. However, they cannot escape the void. Their struggle either ends in defeat (for Jake Horner) or in an acceptance of the dilemma (for Todd Andrews). Ebenezer Cooke's ambition to enshrine enduring Absolutes in a poem that itself will become immortal, is cruelly refused by the contingencies of human frailty and death in The Sot-Weed Factor. George Giles, duped into believing himself to be the new Messiah, leaves in the wake of his mission a trail of broken lives. His attempt to transcend his "studently" existence only teaches him the absurdity of the notion. In Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera author-heroes seek to immortalize themselves in fiction that is itself mortal. As they run out of new experimental forms in which to house their anxiety, they come to realize that art neither immortalizes nor is immortal. Death is never outfoxed by Art. Barth has a number of metaphorical constructs--the Pit, the labyrinthine funhouse, the endlessly reflecting mirrors, the multi-layered narrative--which point to the unknowability of life or truth. They hold off the void until it, like the Destroyer of Delights and Severer of Societies in "Dunyazadiad", overtakes us. Thus Barth's fiction, with its attendant author-reader partnership, is a journey through different levels of consciousness towards the abyss, not to discover the Truth at its centre, but to know as fully as possible the extent of our frailty and ignorance. Jac Tharpe says, "The best mind is always at the very most precarious brink of the abyss of unknowing. The impulse to life draws the mind back while the inability to distinguish reality from illusion continuously attracts it to the abyss."⁶

Barth's vision, to be sure, partakes of the despair generated from gazing intently into this abyss, but yet constantly mitigates it through

sheer force of language. The price one has to pay to stay alive in a post-existential world is the constant renewal of the imagination through words, and the progress of Barth's works shows him to be willing to pay it, though not without his fair share of rather vocal complaining. Since truths in this post-existential universe are Protean, man must constantly re-imagine them to sustain himself (like Menelaus holding onto Proteus himself through his many transformations as seen and heard in "Menelaiad"). Thus the act of creating fiction, of telling a story, writing a novel, or rewriting a myth, becomes an expression of and (simultaneously) a necessary exercise of this need to refashion truth and reality. Thus we see the reason for the conscious presence of the author-hero or author-narrator in Barth's fictions. They serve to remind us that we are engaged in a process, maybe the only valid one, that "accounts" for life. To remind us constantly of their artificiality is to shy away from the pretension of limning the truth, to show us that we are not able to deceive ourselves in this manner anymore. Jac Tharpe says that Barth's solution to the problem of a world that defies explanation is "to create a body of art that uses the technique of language to metaphorize--to put the ultimate reality off where it will bother nobody"⁷. Inasmuch as this recognizes Barth's fiction to be a type of intermediary between us and the void, it is correct. However, Barth's metaphorical constructs imply that language cannot but metaphorize. Barth uses language to metaphorize, but this very metaphorization becomes the explanation, the reality. As Barth's later fiction comes to assert (most notably in "Menelaiad", "Anonymiad", and "Dunyazadiad"), in order to survive man sees his world through the compulsive perceptual apparatus of his imagination. Barth seems to imply

in his work that the only "ultimate" reality is the fact of existence itself, and that men must realize that their attempts at ordering the wholeness of it are metaphorizations, exercises of their minds. So far from putting off that notion where it will bother nobody, Barth keeps it prominently in view. Tharpe explains Barth's method in transmitting this notion:

Barth's method, finally, is to make language operate analogously to the metaphysics of relativity that he perceives in the universe. If it is impossible and hopeless to make language accurately describe reality, why not let what language creates be reality? The only reality described or referred to then is what comes through that method--the edifice that exists is whatever edifice the language constructs.⁸

Language is the edifice housing whatever reality we all agree upon. Thus the continuous need and attempt (most notably in Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera) to articulate and seek out a listener/reader for confirmation of ontological, if not epistemological, security.

Barth himself has had a part in the fashioning of the critical vocabulary dealing with the type of fiction he writes (a rather fitting gesture of self-consciousness). It is appropriate that he named his seminal work "The Literature of Exhaustion", for although he says, "By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities",⁹ the idea of exhaustion, in both the sense of used-upness and decadence, is evident in his work. The spirits of Todd Andrews and Jacob Horner are drained, The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy attempt to exhaust the immensity of existence, and Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera echo the exhaustion of the author figure as he constantly re-confronts the very problems of obsolescence of his

craft. Indeed, there is good enough reason for this generally permeating feeling of exhaustion; one senses the overwhelming demand on one's energy as, like the author composing his fiction, one continually re-confronts the chameleonic truths of life. It is the energy demanded of all the major characters in Barth's fiction; by extension it is the energy required of us in reading Barth.

This extension is implied in the very nature of Barth's work. Lines between character, reader, and author are deliberately snarled or blurred to prove his point: "when the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in, we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our existence."¹⁰ Indeed, in Barth's last two books, the line between the external and fictional world is blurred, suggesting that the two are one cloth. This blurring of these basic roles in fiction also points to the difficulty of self-definition or -identification in a world of shifting truths. As a result characters will be seen to move from one elusive identity to another, as truths themselves change appearance. Witness the mask-wearing and role-assigning of Todd Andrews and Jake Horner, the many disguises and identities of Henry Burlingame III and Harold Bray, the anxiety of the sperm in "Night-Sea Journey", the naming of Ambrose, and the concern of Perseus and Bellerophon that they fit the requirements of mythic herohood. Thus, in short, Barth is commenting on the artifice of life by making his novels and stories as artificial as possible. His works are, as he says of Giles and The Sot-Weed Factor, "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of an Author."¹¹

The structural analogues of the fictitiousness of fiction and of life (Barth says his novels, although by his definition "imitations of novels," ultimately deal with the nature of life, not simply the nature of "fiction"¹²) tend to be those that emphasize the "layered" quality of his work. By that we mean that Barth deliberately encases his narrative by presenting it to us through a number of agencies. "Barth encloses the narrative within levels of perception, the effect of which is to cast a series of doubts upon the whole."¹³ The most obvious examples of this are Giles and "Menelaiad," in which the core narratives are framed by either a number of other narratives (as in "Menelaiad") or by fictitious documents that purport to verify or question the authenticity of the main narrative (as in Giles). There are other examples, to be examined in the specific works treated, that give us, as Tony Tanner and Beverly Gray Bienstock note, the sense of Peer Gynt's onion, whose layers peel away to reveal nothing at the centre.¹⁴ In this manner, Barth casts serious doubts on the usefulness of any activity that purports, by its peeling off of the layers, to find the centre. The heroes of his first four novels are all involved in this fruitless undertaking. For Barth, the layers have importance because they are all there is; by implication, man's fiction-making propensities, his imagination, and urge to articulate, are all that can be known, and all that can be talked about.¹⁵

Given that knowledge of man's imaginative capacity (the technique of his fiction) is all the knowledge there is, we can more readily appreciate

the ways the fictitiousness of Barth's novels and stories are deliberately played up. This conscious and consistent reference to the artificiality of the reading experience is seen in all of his fiction, from Todd's hyper-conscious first-person narrative in The Floating Opera to Scheherazade's and the Genie's discussions about technique in "Dunyazadiad". What changes and evolves over the period that Barth's novels cover, is the attitude of the author towards this realization of the fictitiousness and shiftiness of life. Having determined in his first two novels that there is no rational order to the universe and finding the thought of making do with one's tiny view of it overwhelming, Barth moves on, in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy, to create whole fictional worlds of his own which exemplify his view of the universe. The last two books, collections of short works, address themselves to the very ability of the author to create fictional worlds through his imagination. In grouping his works two at a time, we hope to show a progression in Barth's work that is itself highly self-conscious. The first two novels "exhaust" a realist convention. The second two attempt to create world-systems which perhaps shore up the inadequacies of the "real" world of the first two novels, and Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera address themselves to the attrition of mortality and literary "exhaustion" on the fiction-making process, culminating in a work, "Bellerophoniad," which wildly attempts to incorporate and sum up the entire preceding confusion itself. Throughout this process, Barth will be seen to use more and more ingenious means to assert and comment upon the paradoxes of a fictional world. Poised over the void, Barth and the reader experience the giddy delight of vertigo, and together are kept airborne by his imagination and wit.

Notes - Introduction

- ¹ Linda Hutcheon, "Modes et formes du narcissisme littéraire," Poétique, No. 29 (février, 1977), pp. 97-98 (translated into English by author).
- ² Ibid., p. 98.
- ³ Joe David Bellamy, "Introduction," in Superfiction, or the American Story Transformed, ed. Joe David Bellamy (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 8.
- ⁴ Hutcheon, p. 99.
- ⁵ Jerry Bryant, The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and its Intellectual Background (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 34.
- ⁶ Jac Tharpe, John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1974), p. 115.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 115.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 12.
- ⁹ John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," Atlantic Monthly, No. 220 (August 1967), p. 29.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 33.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 33.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 33.
- ¹³ Tharpe, p. 10.
- ¹⁴ Tony Tanner, "The Hoax that Joke Bilked," Partisan Review, 34 (1967), 103.
- Beverly Gray Bienstock, "Lingering on the Autognostic Verge: John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse," Modern Fiction Studies, No. 19 (Spring 1973), p. 69.
- ¹⁵ cf. The Open Decision, Ch. 1, where similar conclusions were made concerning the very nature of the physical universe: i.e., that all we can know is how we see things to be.

CHAPTER I

THE FLOATING OPERA and THE END OF THE ROAD

The Floating Opera and The End of the Road were originally written as companion pieces in 1955. Barth later said about that period that he thought he had invented nihilism.¹ What sets them off from the rest of Barth's fiction is the seriousness with which ideas and philosophical issues are dealt, despite the comic or ludicrous aspects from time to time of the characters themselves. The self-consciousness of the narrative voice in both novels merely underlines the intensity of the debate that goes on in both. The debate centres on what one does when one discovers that there is no reason or purpose for living. The narrative self-consciousness also serves to notify the reader that Todd and Jake are no strangers to intellectual exercise, and by this indicates how high the stakes of such exercises are in the debate. The stakes are life and death.

This seriousness, never so severe in Barth's subsequent work, is afforded by the "realism" of the novels. Realism purports--has always ✓ purported--to subordinate the words themselves to their referents, the things the words point to. Realism exalts Life and diminishes Art, exalts things and diminishes words.² Both take place in a geographically and contemporarily recognizable Maryland. The narrators of both are authorially self-conscious, and partly because of that and their glib, easy-going facility with language, engage the reader personally. Todd,

to use his metaphor, acts as a gracious host, fussing over the reader, while Jake, though not so forward, nevertheless addresses the reader implicitly in his admissions of authorial manipulation of material for the sake of convenience. The effect is to make them personally credible, even as the events themselves slowly strain our credulity. Thus there is a sense of growing alarm as the reader follows these personable narrators through adventures that bring them into contact with the meaninglessness of existence. That they are the work of an author who is engaged in his heroes' debates almost polemically is seen by the fact that the novels are deliberately contrived to revolve around ideas that tend by their articulation to engender events, and not vice versa. All the subsequent devices of narrative, most especially the narrator's personable manner, his contrived confidentiality with the reader, stem from Barth's intention to explore the possible human responses to a nihilistic awareness of life. Whereas in the later works, such ideas as this awareness are worked into the fabric of the narrative and are not treated much more than comically, in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road they have primacy. Both novels can be seen as exercises in reaching conclusions generated by these absurd and nihilistic ideas. Any comic aspects arising from the novels do so in our realization of their grotesque incongruity in relation to the serious mental acrobatics of the heroes, whereas in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy the grotesque and deadly are rendered miniscule and harmless in the vast canvas of their respective benignly uncaring, fabular universes. The latter two are exercises in the peculiar art of storytelling, the urge for which may be the antidote for the type of misery that grips Todd and Jake. One way of dramatizing the difference

between Barth's first two serious novels and his subsequent two, is to judge the reader's reaction to the immediacy of death in them. The deaths of Rennie Morgan in The End of the Road and Mister Haecker in The Floating Opera are greeted with a reaction that is much more immediate than that which attends the death of a Harry Russecks in The Sot-Weed Factor, or even Max Spielman in Giles. The difference lies in our involvement in the personalities of the victims in the first two novels, and the "larger" events in the next two.

The Floating Opera and The End of the Road are related to each other mainly in the area of the articulated anxieties of their two heroes. Todd Andrews and Jake Horner both share the belief that there is nothing intrinsically valuable in the world. They are also related by their "emotional hollowness and intellectual hypertrophy"³ and by their propensity to wind up in ménages à trois. Both characters, by their intensely introspective analysis, come to see a lack of self in their personalities. They both look at themselves and find nothingness. Each sees his external manifestations of self as "masks" or "stances", or "roles" that far from concealing their "real" selves, hide an inner void. In that sense, they are human models of the universe they operate in, and of the artfully constructed later novels of Barth which posit universes empty of direction and meaning.

However, Jake and Todd are not consistently nihilistic (both discuss consistency of personality at great length) in that they see a virtue or desirable goal in finding the "truth" about the world. In fact they are willing to subordinate life itself to this "truth". This is borne out in their scrupulous insistence on exactitude of detail. "Todd Andrews,

then I'm fifty-four years old and six feet tall, but weigh only 145."⁴ "I [Jake] am writing this at 7:55 in the evening of Tuesday, October 4, 1955, upstairs in the dormitory."⁵ Having thus found and named something worthy of their attention, they fall short of a totally nihilistic view of life which denies anything of value, and which does not just mourn the devaluation of what was once prized. What keeps these novels essentially serious is the inability of the heroes, through most of their stories, to come to terms with the intrinsic valuelessness of life. The heroes' confrontation with this fact occasions a spiritual crisis in them that brings them dangerously near to falling into the Pit. Todd contemplates and attempts suicide while Jake eventually removes himself from life to live in the Doctor's hospital. Thus, for all their intellectual talent, Jake and Todd still end up learning (valuable?) lessons and having revelations for which their intellect is unprepared. One suspects Barth of deliberately manipulating them to illustrate his point that the universe is indeed valueless, and that a considerable degree of imaginative energy is needed to keep afloat, as he has Joe Morgan say to Jake in The End of the Road (p. 47). Barth assumes that the reader is more likely than not to need this lesson also, as evidenced by the immediacy of the description of Rennie's abortion and death; we are shocked into seeing things his way. This almost polemical dramatization of events is not seen in the subsequent works, due to the allegorical or historical dimensions of the created worlds in them. Since these first two novels are written in the realist convention, the reader is expected to identify closely with the human verisimilitude of the characters and their fortunes.

Todd Andrews and Jake Horner also share the distinction of being not only the main characters of their fictions, but the putative authors as well. Their role as author-hero brings to mind Barth's statement in "The Literature of Exhaustion" of the fictitiousness of existence⁶ when the fictitiousness of the author is apparent. Also, the ubiquity of the authorial aspect of each character militates against the realism of the novels inasmuch as it serves to remind us of the artificiality of the accounts given. This is because we as readers cannot avoid detecting the hand of Barth behind the characters of Todd and Jake, and also behind the realist convention in which the novels are written. The personable manner in which Todd engages the reader as an entity, so often a means of reinforcing realism in other authors (e.g., Twain), ironically undercuts it in The Floating Opera because Todd's explicit references to his role as author (and not merely narrator) obliquely refers to Barth. The realism, in this case, "doth protest too much." This is true of The End of the Road, albeit to a lesser degree. The novels are merely the accounts of two characters possessed of a compulsion to articulate. Jake sees the act of shaping the world with words as something equivalent to an absolute: "Articulation! There, by Joe, was my absolute." (ER, p. 119). Todd is more evidently concerned with the problem of making order out of the world through language. He works for years amassing notes and data for his "Inquiry" into life itself. They fill numerous peach baskets that in turn threaten to fill his room. Both Todd and Jake tend to see the act of writing as "falsification" but try nevertheless to be faithful to detail. This glaring inconsistency may be viewed as a parody of the convention of realism by Barth, or merely as a deliberate flaw in the

characters themselves. Inasmuch as these novels are attempts by Barth to discredit a thoroughgoing rationale towards life, the parody of the realist convention and the inconsistency of characters who pride themselves on their consistency can be seen as parts of a larger authorial gesture.

The layered structural quality of Barth's work is more obvious in the structure of The Floating Opera, and is worthy of a detailed examination, because Barth abandoned its more obvious manifestations in The End of the Road, and did not return to the self-conscious intensity of it until Giles and Lost in the Funhouse. Todd's narrative is unique in that it is the attempt of a supposed self-confessed "novice" at storytelling and deals with the problems and demands of his craft in relation to objective reality whereas later works deal with these problems from the points of view of experienced writers.

The first chapter of Todd's novel is entitled "tuning my piano" and serves to show Todd as he settles comfortably into the task at hand.

I intend directly to introduce myself, caution you against certain possible interpretations of my name, explain the significance of this book's title, and do several gracious things for you, like a host fussing over a guest, to make you as comfortable as possible and to dunk you gently into the meandering stream of my story. (Fl.Op., p. 2)

When one realizes that this, far from being simply introductory, is the work of Barth writing his novel, the statement becomes one fraught with irony. Todd's caution against interpreting his name wrongly is supposed to be a mark of a certain sophistication and self-awareness. But in the middle of this caution later on, he stumbles onto the very symbolic interpretations (for all intents and purposes) he wished to avoid. He

says that his name means almost-death, which is the subject of the novel when one considers that a bungled suicide attempt is almost death. Of course, behind this is Barth manipulating Todd's literary naïveté. It allows him to be deliberately heavy-handed for the sake of irony. Also, Todd's express wish to make his reader comfortable is ironically undercut by the later behaviour of Todd himself, as he joyfully (if temporarily) embraces suicide and meanly manipulates characters in the novel, especially the Macks and Mister Haecker, in the belief that it does not matter because nothing has any value. The irony of this realization by the reader is compounded when Todd declares his wish to make the reading of his "Floating Opera" a "pleasure-dip I'm inviting you to, not a baptism" (Fl.Op., p. 2). In wishing to acclimatize us slowly to the "stream" of his story, Todd insists on the primacy of its artifice. By asking us to have a good time reading his book, he keeps us from involving ourselves too intensely with the characters and events in it. If we were to approach the realistic details of his story with a truly suspended disbelief, then the pleasure of detachment would disappear. Thus, on one hand, while the realistic details of this novel invite us to become vicariously involved in the fortunes of its hero (Todd's "decision" to write of that June day in 1937 indicates a need to communicate something of value to an audience, especially when we realize how ready he is to fuss over that audience), on the other hand there is the articulated wish of the author-hero that one not get too involved because, after all, it is a story. The net effect, cunning on Barth's part and bungled on Todd's, is to be aware of the story as artifice, but one with pretensions of being an accurate transcription of life. Todd seems to want to turn

his life into story, but to keep the story true to life. Encasing this is Barth, writing about a man named Todd who, by writing his life into story, tries to make his story conform to our generally agreed-upon picture of reality. The presence of Barth as the ultimate frame within which the novel is written is an implicit one. It is implicit because the "realism" of the novel does not permit so explicitly all-encompassing and self-conscious a presence. Later, in Lost in the Funhouse, there is no need for Barth to hide in his handiwork. The self-consciousness of Todd's attempt to render his story as realistic as possible militates against its success, because we recognize in his unsophisticated attempt to make the reader the deuteragonist, the immanence of Barth:

When I decided, sixteen years ago, to write about how I changed my mind one night in June of 1937, I had no title in mind. Indeed it wasn't until an hour or so ago, when I began writing, that I realized that the story would be at least novel length and resolved therefore to give it a novel title. In 1938, when I determined to set the story down, it was intended only as an aspect of the preliminary chapter of my Inquiry, the notes and data for which fill most of my room. I'm thorough. The first job, once I'd sworn to set that June day down on paper, was to recollect as totally as possible all my thoughts and actions on that day, to make sure nothing was left out. (Fl.Op., p. 5, my emphasis)

By using the word "novel" in its two different senses, Todd's "sophistication" is again evident. Having realized that his story is about to turn into a novel, he gives it a truly novel title, which serves to remind us quite correctly that what we have here is not a "traditional novel". The compulsive presence of Todd not only as narrator and hero but conscious shaper of material, makes this a "novel" novel when we compare it to the unselfconscious realistic novels of which it can be

said to be a parody. However Todd persists in wishing to be faithful to life in the recognizable outer world. His intention to include, "to make sure nothing [is] left out", is his attempt to make a virtue of the story's verisimilitude, its realism. This thoroughness on Todd's part both links this novel to, and differentiates it from, Barth's later works. We see a similar exhaustive thoroughness, an attempt to include everything, in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy. However in these two novels the attempt is to fashion complete and fabular universes whereas in The Floating Opera the apparent attempt is to be realistic. The choice of the title, while reminding us of the novel's novelty, is one that attempts to be a metaphor, not only for life in general, but for the structure of the novel. The novel he writes, like Adam's Floating Opera, "floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose " (Fl.Op., p. 7). Todd chooses to make the structure of his story reflect the meandering of a showboat on the tidewater, which in itself is a metaphor of life. "I needn't explain that that's how much of life works " (Fl.Op., p. 7). What is ironic about Todd's express desire to excuse the "meandering" of his prose, the looseness of the structure, by appealing to the same qualities in life, is the fact that the narrative, as Barth arranges it, is, as Gerhard Joseph points out, "the accomplished tour de force of an author who wishes to involve his audience as demandingly as possible in the protagonist's self-discoveries."⁷

Todd himself treats the structure of his story in the same manner that Barth arranges the whole of The Floating Opera; he layers his narrative. We find that the story we are about to read was one originally intended to be submerged in Todd's "Inquiry". The irony of this is that

the "Inquiry" itself becomes submerged in the novel. It appears as one of the notes and data collected to substantiate the narrative of June 21, 1937, the day around which the novel revolves. The narrative of this day serves as a core around which the narratives that together form Todd's life-story are clustered, in an apparently loose and random fashion.

Todd admits that this is indeed the case:

My method in telling this story will be to set down the events of that day as barely, for I know that in telling I'll lose the path often enough for you to learn or guess the whole history of the question, as the audience to my untethered showboat pieces together the plot of their melodrama--and I swear by all the ripe tomatoes in Dorchester that when the excitement commences, the boat will be floating just in front of you and you shan't miss a thing. (Fl.Op., p. 16)

Todd here admits to the role he plays as author, as manipulator of the fictive material. Having declared his intention to root his narrative in supposedly objective fact, he now must choose the material which will offer up the whole story. Far from "losing the path", Todd's narrative excursions fill in all the needed background for the events of that one day, the events themselves (except that of the attempted suicide) being as Todd remarks, no different than those of any other day. Thus the metaphor of the floating showboat becomes one of fictional convenience, allowing as it does the author-narrator's freedom of movement across time. Todd's job, simple enough, is to make sure the audience is in front of the boat at just the right moment.

This narrative "tuning" has a number of effects. First, in its structural function, it acts "to separate the reader from the experiences described in the novel, to frustrate his expectations of involvement in a "slice of life".⁸ At the same time, through the overly easy-going nature

of Todd and his cheery, confidently expressed intentions, it gives us insight into the ennui that follows the type of intellectual and emotional experiences that Todd has. In reading the novel a second time, this impression becomes very clear. Todd himself floats superficially on the tide of life. His arid and detached manner is the price of his realizations. This is the one very serious human defect of Barth's first two heroes, for it applies with equal force to Jake Horner, and gives evidence that Barth had yet to reach that stage wherein the person faced with the nihilistic fact of life is able through his imagination to re-animate his personal existence. Todd's and Jake's personal revelations of emptiness simply overpower them. In seeking ways to survive the onslaught of such a realization they sacrifice feeling to save their keen intelligence. As Todd confesses, "I'm interested in any number of things, enthusiastic about nothing " (Fl.Op., p. 4). Jake cannot work up anything more than a "thoroughgoing curiosity about one or two people at a time " (ER, p. 101). It is such a state of mind that brings them to the brink of the Pit (suicide for Todd, paralytic cosmopsis for Jake), but yet saves them from it because of their very non-involvement in life. Such a detachment serves them in good stead as they become the authors of their life-stories, for one is confident that they are certainly not keeping back possibly perjorative information about themselves. Indeed the reader is never tempted to question their intellectual integrity. This is so that their human failings may appear more stark. They are not overwhelmed by forces impinging on their rational stability, such as passion. Indeed it is their thorough intellectuality which impinges on the people around them, to everyone's detriment. In addition, the exercise of writing their stories serves to re-order their existence, if

arbitrarily. "On the edge of the nihilistic abyss, the very fact of his [Todd's, Barth's] novel suggests a tentative solution."⁹

This detachment also serves to locate Todd and Jake in a primitive stage of dealing with the meaninglessness of life. "Everything, I'm afraid, is significant, and nothing is finally important," Todd says glibly, masking an underlying disillusionment (Fl.Op., p. 6). That is because nothing has any intrinsic value, as Todd has occasion to say to Mister Haecker, and as Jake Horner and Joe Morgan accept as the basis for their intellectual debates. However, the thought of conferring an extrinsic value on existence is one which to Todd and Jake is a "falsification", and is found to be unacceptable. Thus they make the error of equating the unknowability of existence with an absolute lack of meaning, of equating the "fictional" with the "false". This is indeed their epistemological trap; both still yearn for a Truth that can be known and that can never be altered. Neither trusts himself yet with the task of assigning values. Joe Morgan, an emphatic denier of absolute values, says that one can live with relative values if, by a force of will, one resolves to make them absolute despite knowing their relativistic (that is, for Jake and Joe, meaningless) nature. This, of course, is to continue the search for absolutes under the guise of an intellectual toughness. Todd searches for it in an uncompromising refusal to avert the "reality" of meaninglessness, for Todd finds virtue in facing up to things. This is particularly evident in his relationship with the two other members of the Dorchester Explorers' Club, Capt. Osborn and Mister Haecker. Todd prefers Capt. Osborn's outrage in the face of imminent death to Mister Haecker's resignation. His comments on this reveal the vocabulary that determines his outlook:

. . . death for him [Capt. Osborn] would be the hyphenated break in a rambling, illiterate monologue, a good way for it to be if you're most people. He 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 paens to old age and gracious death: he was really fooling himself. (Fl.Op., p. 46. My emphasis.)

Todd assigns importance to what seems to be an objective truth about things. One must not, Todd says, be deluded. We must be able to face up to things as they are. He will not settle for illusion (or the illusion of illusion). For him it is the equivalent to delusion. This is, of course, as both we and Todd come to realize, a stance in itself and thus an illusion. Todd eventually comes to shed all of his illusions by the end of the novel, including the illusion that suicide solves the problem of "masks" or "stances". The masks are attempts at "the mastery of my fact" (Fl.Op., p. 15), that is, a final workable identity (almost separate from him) to which Todd can refer and which endures. As he says, "my whole life, at least a great part of it, has been directed toward the solution of a problem, or mastery of a fact" (Fl.Op., pp. 14-15. My emphasis). His reason for living disappears when that which he had directed his life towards proves to be illusory. He finally comes up against the harrowing conclusion that "there is no way to master the fact with which I live" (Fl.Op., p. 222). Previous to this realization Todd "had employed a stance that I thought represented a real and permanent solution to my problem" (Fl.Op., p. 15. My emphasis). That stance having failed, Todd is visited with a revelation. "I awoke, splashed cold water on my face, and realized that I had the real, the final, the unassailable answer; the last possible word; the stance to end all stances "

(*ibid.* Emphasis mine). It is, of course, suicide. This would surely be a stance partaking of a type of permanence; it would be the last word, and quite literally a stance to end all the others. But it was nevertheless a stance, taken out of the desire (curiously enough) to set himself in opposition to his mortality, as are all stances. They attempt to cover all the inconsistencies, to prove themselves impervious to the onslaught of time and flux.

Todd realizes his mortality and eventually accepts the uselessness of trying to escape the fact that, as a man, he is inextricably caught up in temporality and decay. Thus the taking of stances is seen to be illusory, but something which one does anyway. As he explains at the end:

To realize that nothing makes any final difference is overwhelming, but if one goes no farther and becomes a saint, a cynic, or a suicide on principle, one hasn't reasoned completely. The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth.
(*Fl.Op.*, p. 246)

Todd's "reasoning" goes beyond reason. If one assumes "stances" to be reasoned responses to the difficulties posed by life, then Todd's ultimate response, one which denies its own ultimacy, seems more imaginative than reasoned. Indeed it is his creative imagination which serves to extricate him from the cul de sac he has reasoned himself into by denying absolute value to everything. As Richard Boyd Hauck points out, such imagination is a necessary basis for a viable response to the absurdity of existence:

What the man who is conscious of absurdity must do, if he is not to commit suicide is to convince himself that an acceptance of what he must accept is an act of will. This decision is in itself absurd creation, for it has no rationale. The

rational choices are suicide or unthinking resignation, since to be conscious is to risk being afflicted by the sense of meaninglessness, and unconsciousness is an escape from that sense.¹⁰

Todd's self-consuming principle, one that disappears in the telling, reminds us of his statement in the chapter "a raison de coeur":

I begin each day with a gesture of cynicism, and close it with a gesture of faith; or, if you prefer, begin it by reminding myself that, for me at least, goals and objectives are without value, and close it by demonstrating that the fact is irrelevant. A gesture of temporality, a gesture of eternity. It is in the tension between these two gestures that I have lived my adult life. (Fl.Op., p. 50)

Todd's cynicism at the beginning of each day is the realization of mortality, the temporality of his life, the absurdity of attempting anything meaningful in this continually recurring cycle. His faith at the end of the day is due to the very fact that he is yet alive, and that perhaps he will live to see the next day. It is this that inspires such gestures of eternity as the writing of "The Floating Opera" or his "Inquiry". The stubborn fact of one's existence at the end of the day serves to point to the ultimate irrelevance of the realization that goals and objectives are without value. One does not die when one's reason for living is taken away; one exists almost in spite of such reasons.

The American absurdist knows that since acceptance of truths--even those called "self-evident"--is an arbitrary and absurd act of faith, it is ludicrous to make extravagant claims for the absoluteness of the end products of reasoning processes, which must necessarily begin from accepted truths.¹¹

That Todd should be so acutely sensitive to his mortality, and thus so able to come to the above awareness, is due to his heart disease. Todd has heart trouble, "doubly so; literally so" (Fl.Op., p. 48). The knowledge that any moment may be his last, informs his life and thus

allows Todd to experience dramatically the continued immediacy of mortality. This ever-present fact accounts for Todd's over-extended self-consciousness. It is also because of Todd's peculiar ongoing confrontation with death that he decides to become an author, and thus this may obliquely indicate Barth's conception of the basic urge of man to articulate, to make his world through language. If one is constantly, like Todd, on the brink of the void (which is what death is in a world devoid of values), one attempts to obviate it through asserting one's presence in fiction.

In the end, Todd's showdown with the despair of nihilism signals a qualified victory of the imagination over chaos. His fight with "utter despair, a despair beyond wailing" (F1.Op., p. 220) ends in a qualified truce. If his conclusions about the meaninglessness of life, and subsequently of suicide, do not indicate a positive affirmation of life, they at least stop short of embracing annihilation. Thus the victory is by default, though not much less a victory for that reason. In the absence of any active choices for living, one still lives for the time being. What Todd fails to affirm are the possibilities implied in the realization of his ability to reason completely, that is, imaginatively. The prevailing feeling at the end of the novel is peace, fatigue, and exhaustion. Todd stops short of pursuing the consideration of the possibility of living with consciously relative values. He says that "that's another inquiry, and another story" (F1.Op., p. 247). This ability to reason imaginatively includes in it a deliberate and occasional use of paradox, which is, in effect, to bow graciously to one's inability to understand those mysteries which, although they will always remain unmastered, remain nevertheless. Todd develops a view of life that is

paradoxical. However he still views his authorial capacities in the light of a desire to account for his life, or as his name suggests, his not-death. This is the desire of all imaginative authors, but one sees in Todd's return to his "Inquiry" a return to the search for those "facts" which explain events, even when they are proven to be illusory. However the search is no longer motivated by the anxiety to "complete" the task, to render up something whole and integral in the face of the void.

This attempt at justification underlines Jake Horner's exercise in writing The End of the Road, although it is not as explicit as Todd's. As we have seen, the closest thing to an absolute for Jake is articulation, but the events of his narrative lead him to the end of the road full of articulation and stop there. Jake accepts the absurdity of existence, yet he still reasons in a hyper-conscious fashion. His decision to go to the terminal at the end of the novel, is in itself a comment on the possibility of making "real" sense of the world through language. The last word of the novel is the signal of this articulated cul de sac: "'Terminal'" (ER, p. 198). The events also lead Barth to the end of a particular phase, which posits and "works out" in a realistic framework the overwhelming spiritual and epistemological questions arising out of a nihilistic, or rather imperfectly nihilistic, view of life. Having reached the "terminal" quite literally at the end of The End of the Road, Barth signals that he has finished with that type of language that purports to account accurately for what is the case. Indeed Jake's attitude toward language and articulation indicate that he sees it as a tool: with language, he can "have at" reality (ER, p. 119). However, he continues to write realistically of his misadventures, perhaps to demonstrate analogously that reality itself is inadequate. Having found the

key in articulation, Barth's later works abandon the domain of verisimilitude and enter fully the realm of created "fiction".

Todd's and Jake's articulative urges stem from the wish to make their fictive work for goals other than fictive. That is, their purpose in setting their stories down on paper is not, as Barth says his motivation is, "the impulse to imagine alternatives to the world."¹² Both write more out of a purgative desire, a desire to justify or account for the actions of their past. Todd feels compelled, and admits to swearing, to write about the day when he, in a very literal sense, changed his mind. Todd's intention is to find the cause of his father's suicide, and he says that "the nature of my purpose" is to "make as short as possible the gap between fact and opinion " (Fl.Op., p. 215) and even though he realizes the interminability of such an exercise as his "Inquiry", he works towards the attainment of the goal anyway. Jake writes presumably as a part of his therapy, since he tells us he is still with the Doctor. Both wish, through writing, to make sense of and order the events of their lives, to re-"create" them in a sense. We remember in Jake's remarks about articulation that it allows one to "deal with" experience.

To turn experience into speech . . . is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification if it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. (ER, p. 119)

By engaging in these therapeutic exercises, Jake and Todd are implicitly working towards a goal or end of sorts. The unspoken convention of their fictions, since they both place a high value on the accuracy of recall, is that by having written them, the stories will constitute a

definitive account of the events that will not have to be constantly refurbished in time. Thus the realistic setting and the earnestness of the grappling with the issues combine to keep us from seeing them as examples of a complete and mature awareness of life as totally relativistic, governed by flux, decay, and death, wherein solutions, goals, or terminals of any sort are not only non-existent, but unnecessary. This is what happens later when Barth comes to accept the fact that even created fictions have no more permanence than the life they represent or refer to.

The End of the Road, because it signals the uselessness of continuing in this realistic narrative convention, exhausts the possibilities of such fiction, and with them those of the author-hero in it. Jake's accounts of the events avail him nothing. Writing over what has happened seems to do no good; it fails even to offer up the limited awareness that Todd receives. What is pointed to is that to employ a realistic contemporary setting, peopled by recognizable types, is to assume implicitly a universe that can be agreed upon, that can be generally known. The nature of the heroes' experiences in this world is such as to contradict flatly this assumption. Thus the unity of the novel as artifice is threatened, and the role of the author-hero in it compromised for that reason. Since we assume that Jake's writing is just another of the Doctor's bizarre therapies, a realization that those therapies have availed him nothing informs our awareness of the limitation of such an exercise in his case. Jake's authorial presence works in a slightly different manner than Todd's, which we take by his more personal manner to be ingenuous. His presence as narrator and the events that he recalls

suggest that consciousness is paralysis, and that articulation (although necessary to a point) is dangerous, if not deadly. His unfortunate first encounter with Peggy Rankin illustrates this: "Her mistake, in the long run, was articulating her protest" (ER, p. 27). She, by putting into words her concern, ruined Jake's constructed games. Also, Joe, Jake, and Rennie virtually talk their ways to their respective fates.

There is a basic grim seriousness with which Jake pursues the therapies assigned to him, despite the impression he gives of a sense of humour. These therapies all start with the assumption that they in themselves are arbitrary, that is, in Jake's cosmos, meaningless. However this arbitrariness is one which Jake and the Doctor seem to work in spite of, despite their articulated acceptance of its necessity. The therapies, most notably Mythotherapy, serve as metaphors for Jake of the artist as he creates his fiction, and in a larger sense for us as readers, an analogue of Jake himself writing the account of his therapy with the Doctor. "'Mythotherapy is based on two assumptions: that human existence precedes human essence . . . , and that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will'" (ER, p. 88). The separability of existence and essence is what makes Mythotherapy, and by extension the act of writing, necessary. This is consistent with what has been remarked to be the existentialist assumptions of Barth's work in general. The Doctor's long explanation of Mythotherapy is one that has as its central metaphor the person as an imaginatively creative author assigning roles and masks to people in his life, including himself. Most people, the Doctor says correctly, are "always reconceiving just the sort of hero we are," (ER, p. 89) and he attributes this to the exercise of imagination.

In Mythotherapy, as in fiction, this imaginative faculty is consciously harnessed for the patient's "benefit". Like the artist, the patient undergoing Mythotherapy must invest himself totally in his task. By assuming a role and acting it out with singleminded tenacity, the patient directs his imaginative energy to a coherent goal, much like the author must do when creating his own fictional world.

If any man displays almost the same character day in and day out, all day long, it is either because he has no imagination . . . or because he has an imagination so comprehensive that he sees each particular situation of his life as an episode in some grand over-all plot, and can so distort the situations that the same type of hero can deal with them all. But this is most unusual. (ER, p. 89)

An example of this "most unusual" case is Joe Morgan, but for all the importance assigned to imagination, the Doctor's tone and Joe's behaviour belie the same type of hyper-conscious aridity that Jake suffers from. They can consciously see the need for an imaginative involvement of the self in the roles they choose for themselves in Mythotherapy, but the consciousness of choice is so strong that this imaginative involvement is impossible. The Doctor, being conscious enough to have formulated the therapy in the first place, cannot love his patients. "'They're just more or less interesting problems in immobility, for which I find it satisfying to work out therapies'" (ER, p. 79). The exercise remains one of the mind. Jake and Joe Morgan too are both unable to master an involvement that threatens their closed, well thought-out systems. This is seen in Jake's affair with Peggy Rankin, and in Joe Morgan's refusal to budge from his search for the "cause" of Jake's and Rennie's adultery, even at the expense of his wife's life. The Doctor says to Jake, "'It's extremely important that you learn to assume these masks whole-heartedly'" (ER, p. 90),

but Jake's involvement with the Morgans and with Peggy Rankin is characterized by his inability to do just that. His character shifts so radically from day to day that he cannot establish a relationship with anyone. Jake is always one remove from whatever he does, because he has no self to which he can consistently refer. He sees himself as the vessel of a number of different personalities, just as Todd's personality was a series of masks.

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

Joe Morgan and the Doctor, on the other hand, are all self, but are similarly beset with this intellectual hypertrophy. Their worlds are, by choice, totally objective, knowable, and manipulable, because everything in it is an object, including other people. However, once having imagined or defined their worlds, they rigidify. Part of the creative awareness that Todd comes to is a recognition that one must consistently re-confront and re-imagine existence. Thus he reconciles himself at the end of The Floating Opera to a life of more stances, roles and masks. Joe and the Doctor, however, contrive to make one mask fit the world and endure, much in the same way that the writing of The Floating Opera and The End of the Road are conceived by their narrator-heroes to be bulwarks against change. Thus Joe's disquisition on the necessity of seeing the lack of absolutes and creating enduring relative values in their place, is in itself a stance that is absolute. Joe insists on absolute consistency of character. The Doctor demands strict and undeviating adherence to his meaningless therapies.

Jake's lack of self is what sets him apart from the other two (and Todd). We can equate this lack of self as well as Joe's and the Doctor's omnipresent selves with a lack of imagination, because as author, Jake's imagination is what is needed to re-order the world and the events of his life. Joe's and the Doctor's refusal to alter their concepts of life is a refusal to re-confront it. This is in marked contrast to Todd's stratagem:

A good habit to acquire, if you are interested in disciplining your strength, is the habit of habit-breaking . . . to change your habits deliberately on occasion prevents you from being entirely consistent You have hundreds of habits Break them now and then, deliberately, and institute new ones in their place for a while. It will slow you up sometimes, but you'll tend to grow strong and feel free. To be sure, don't break all your habits. Leave some untouched forever; otherwise you'll be consistent. (Fl.Op., p. 122)

Jake never displays such a complete grasp of this paradox. His consciousness works against imaginative awareness. In the realistic setting, in which importance is assigned to fidelity of exactitude, consciousness is concerned with the gap between itself and "reality", and creates a gap between them impossible to bridge. Todd attempts to bridge the gap between "fact and opinion"; what he finds out is that thinking in terms of such distinctions is at the root of his dilemma. So too, realist fiction, in its attempt to reconstruct from the objective raw material of life, is an exercise in using the wrong distinctions. Jake's presence as author, though not so strong as Todd's, points on one hand to the fictitiousness of existence, that is, to that quality of existence that forces us to imagine it to be. On the other hand, the fact that Jake chooses the terminal at the end, and that he inflicts so much damage on

the people he encounters, attests to the failure of consciousness as a faithful agency in itself of the re-ordering of the world.

Jake's statements alluding to his lack of self, his lack of existence as Joe puts it, fail to grasp (as Todd would have) that this way of perceiving his state of existence is faulty or at least incomplete. The fact that Jake's presence in the lives of Joe and Rennie and Peggy effected so much is to attest to his existence and to a self with which other people have to deal. It was his perceptive apparatus that failed him. Joe's and the Doctor's peculiar solipsistic views of the world also fail to enable them to deal with such things as Rennie's death. Joe clings stubbornly to the belief that he can find a cause of the destruction of his life, as his final telephone call to Jake shows. Jake throws up his hands at what to do next and Joe, disgusted that anyone should be unable to know what to do, hangs up in contempt (ER, p. 197). Jake's inability to know what to do, seen in the terms set up by the novel itself (that is, the virtue of knowing the facts about things: the Doctor's first therapy is "Knowledge of the World" [ER, p. 82]) is a failing. It brings him to an impasse in his dealing with the situation in which he is embroiled. This impasse is "resolved", if one can use the word in this case, by his offering himself up to the Doctor, and subsequently writing the account we read. Yet even the writing of this novel does not alter the waste and destruction that has occurred. Writing as therapy is as meaningless as Mythotherapy. It starts from an incorrect set of ideas about man's urge to articulate. It is an attempt, by sheer force of will, to conquer the imponderable forces of life. It attempts by articulating to interpose an unchanging mask between man and

the void. It is in the supposed stability of the mask that Mythotherapy fails, especially for the patient with some imagination. This Mythotherapeutic urge to articulate goes beyond the merely therapeutic because it tries, although always vainly, to make sense of everything there is. Scriptotherapy and Mythotherapy, in their highly conscious states, see the vanity of trying to re-create everything, but since this comprehensiveness of detail is still implicitly valued above everything else, this realization brings with it not an imaginative awareness of the absurdity of the very urge (with which one returns to writing liberated from a sense of obligation to the Truth), but rather a disappointment. This valuing of fact over opinion is the cornerstone of realism, and so it is not surprising to find that The End of the Road is Barth's last realistic novel. By underscoring the inadequacies of realism, and a realistic view of the world, Barth seems to have "exhausted" that particular form for his purposes. Jake's pronouncements on the question seem to admit to his awareness of the need to edit life into fiction, but they betray his belief in a known goal for which one writes.

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

This is reminiscent of Todd's remarks about Capt. Osborn's supposed self-deception. Jake is the "even wiser" one in this situation, or so he thinks until he is confronted with a situation the complexities of which defy any arbitrary decision. He finds that life is not exhausted by Mythotherapy, or one imaginative construct.

The trouble . . . is that the more one learns about a given person, the more difficult it becomes to assign a character to him that will allow one to deal with him effectively in an emotional situation. Mythotherapy, in short, becomes increasingly harder to apply, because one is compelled to recognize the inadequacy of any role one assigns. Existence not only precedes essence: in the case of human beings, it rather defies essence. (ER, p. 128)

Thus the lesson of The End of the Road is that the fictive imagination (which creates fictional accounts of the world) is necessarily doomed to failure if it attempts to transcribe life. It must, rather, create it and inform it with its own values. Barth's next step is to attempt this by imagining whole fictive worlds wherein events work themselves out according to the laws set up by the Author. These "laws" are the product of the debates concerning value and meaning that raged in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road, and operate as the governing "givens" in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy. In this the next two novels grow out of the thematic concerns of the first two.

Notes - Chapter I

- ¹ John Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," Contemporary Literature, No. 6 (Winter-Spring 1965), p. 10.
- ² Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 11.
- ³ Gerhard Joseph, John Barth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1970), p. 16.
- ⁴ John Barth, The Floating Opera (1956; rev. New York: Bantam, 1967), p. 3. All further references to this work shall appear in the text, with the title abbreviated to Fl.Op.
- ⁵ John Barth, The End of the Road (New York: Bantam, 1958), p. 3. All further references to this work shall appear in the text, with the title abbreviated to ER.
- ⁶ "The Literature of Exhaustion," p. 33.
- ⁷ Joseph, p. 9.
- ⁸ Jean E. Kennard, "John Barth: Imitations of Imitations," Mosaic, No. 3 (Winter 1970), p. 122.
- ⁹ Campbell Tatham, "John Barth and the Aesthetics of Artifice," Contemporary Literature, No. 12 (Winter 1971), p. 65.
- ¹⁰ Richard Boyd Hauck, A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 7.

11 Ibid., p. 10.

12 "John Barth: An Interview," p. 4.

CHAPTER II

THE SOT-WEED FACTOR and GILES GOAT-BOY

The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy share some particular approaches to the novel genre, and taken together, comprise a distinct phase in Barth's developing conception of the artist and his relationship to the world. They are both concerned with not only the overwhelming enormity of existence (as evidenced by their sheer magnitude) but (also because of this copiousness) the task of coming to terms with it in fiction. Above all, these two novels are exercises of the imagination as it faces and tries to exhaust the vastness of life, to give it shape and meaning. This attempt, one which is perhaps overworked in Giles, differs markedly from that of being "realistic". These two novels are not concerned with verisimilitude, although in The Sot-Weed Factor there is a surface attempt to be so. They abound in stock fictional devices, stereotype characters, unlikely events, and are highly parodic. However, by being consciously fashioned alternatives to the real world, the novels, through their range of cosmological concern, point to the enormity of the task that the novelist (and indeed every man) has of creating whole fictional worlds.

In this sense they differ from The Floating Opera and The End of the Road, where the settings are much narrower. In these latter two novels, the heroes are, by their position as narrators and "authors" of their fictions, the point-of-view filter of our perception of the world

in their particular novels. In The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy, the heroes are placed in a universe that dwarfs them and defies understanding. As a result the novels emerge not only as attempts to affirm the ultimate inscrutability of life, but also as demonstrations, by the very fact of their existence, of ways of viewing and ordering it. In this sense they are more completely wrought "fictions" than either of the first two novels. Barth had originally intended to write "a series of three nihilistic amusing novels."¹ However, he decided to abandon realism: "I didn't think after The End of the Road that I was interested in writing any more realistic fiction--fiction that deals with Characters From Our Time, who speak real dialogue Reality is a drag."² The Sot-Weed Factor was written in lieu of the third realistic novel. It is a farce written in an eighteenth-century style, concerning the wanderings of Ebenezer Cooke, a very minor poet who actually existed. This Ebenezer Cooke wrote "The Sot-Weed Factor" as a diatribe against what he saw to be the barbarism of late-seventeenth-century Maryland life. Barth's Ebenezer is fleshed out to be a gangly, incurably altruistic, self-proclaimed virgin-poet, and Laureate of Maryland. In the novel "The Sot-Weed Factor" was originally to have been the panegyric "Marylandiad," a poem which Ebenezer, when confronted with the theft of his tobacco estate and other dastardly frontier deeds, changes henceforth into his diatribe. It is the classic tale of innocence confronting experience. Indeed, without realizing it, Barth had, in the character of Ebenezer, fulfilled twenty-three of twenty-five of Lord Raglan's prerequisites for ritual heroes.³

Stirred by the coincidence of this latter fact, Barth set out to fulfill these prerequisites completely in Giles Goat-Boy. When he appears as himself as a character in "Bellerophoniad", Barth takes the opportunity to talk about his interest in the wandering hero myths:

My general interest . . . dates from my thirtieth year, when reviewers of my novel The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) remarked that the vicissitudes of its hero . . . follow in some detail the pattern of mythical heroic adventure as described by Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, and other comparative mythologists . . . I was struck enough by the coincidence . . . to examine those works by which I'd allegedly been influenced, and my next novel, Giles Goat-Boy (1966) was for better or worse the conscious and ironic orchestration of the Ur-Myth which its predecessor had been represented as being.⁴

Giles Goat-Boy is a massively allegorical novel. In it the universe is one huge University, divided into East and West Campuses run by rival computers WESCAC and EASCAC, engaged in a Quiet Riot (Cold War) that threatens to erupt into Campus Riot III (Third World War). A young boy, George, raised as a goat by an eccentric who had turned his back on Studentdom (mankind), is convinced he is a Grand Tutor (messiah) sent to save the University from destruction. His mission is ultimately abortive and at a great price in human suffering. His "Revised New Syllabus" (Revised New Testament) is the spoken legacy of the blindness of the Student Body as well as his own.

Ebenezer Cooke and George Giles both attempt to assert the immortal aspect of their humanity against the background of imposing, heedless, and destructive worlds. At the same time the reader is forced to see the artificiality of the works that serve as the accounts of events in them. These two aspects combine to suggest that life itself is to be seen in a similar fashion to the way we view these two novels. Existence

is made up not only of what is "the case" (e.g., France is shaped like a teapot), but also that which in our imagination we would have it be. The peculiar dilemma of the human being, dramatically represented by the two heroes in these novels, is that he is unable to keep himself from trying to synthesize that which is and that which he imagines should be. Unwittingly exacerbating this dilemma, both heroes are unable to distinguish raw fact from their perception of it. Thus questions of what is ultimately real and ultimately illusory are impossible to answer. The realm of what is intermingles freely with the realm of imaginative perception, and these novels, with their artificial constructions and their heroes' very valid human quests, attest to this heterogeneity.⁵ They are examples of attempts to order the world comprehensively, but by their constructed and closed natures (they begin and end at certain points), they also point to the futility of such a gesture. Life defies arbitrary organization, and demands that we make sense of it anyway. Both Ebenezer and George come to realize this. This process of perceptive organization is perfectly analogous to that of the author composing his fiction. The open-endedness of the narrative events of these novels (The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy both feature "addenda" to the "core" events of the novels), as well as their structural layers, point to the open-endedness of this process of perception in life. Both novels fulfill a structural unity (The Sot-Weed Factor contains no event or character that is not crucially germane to the narrative, and Giles attains a symmetry in the way in which the central narrative is enclosed in equivocal frames), but their metaphysical concerns point to the inconclusiveness of their conclusions.

The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy do not display the type of authorial self-consciousness we see in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road. The author is not an identifiable character in these two novels, as he is in the first two. Todd Andrews and Jake Horner both claim to write what is before the reader. In The Sot-Weed Factor the "Author" is omniscient and, though a felt presence, not personally identifiable. Even the first person narration of Giles is not that of Giles himself, but his oral history filtered through two other agencies, WESCAC (the West Campus Automatic Computer) which receives the tapes, and his son Stoker Giles (or Giles Stoker) who prepares them to be presented to the public "for the furtherment of the Gilesian Curriculum."⁶ Authorial presence, then, is felt more through one's awareness of a prime mover behind this fiction. In worlds which seem to point to the absence of an animating principle or agency we have characters that are obviously moved about by a force perceived to be larger than the events. The style of the eighteenth-century novel in which The Sot-Weed Factor is written indicates the existence of the "Author", who emerges after the final chapter, to address the readers directly. In Giles, the question of authorship is at the centre of the use of the formal devices of introductory and post-narrative disclaimers; nobody wants to take credit for writing Giles, including "J.B.", Barth's authorial persona in the novel. (In one sense, this is appropriate. Giles, if it is to be taken as a comic Old Testament, as Barth has described it, or simply as the allegory that it obviously is, is the story not of one man but of mankind, since Giles is born from a sperm sample that includes the sperm of all the males of New Tammany College.) Thus we note a reversal. In the first two novels, the narrators are humanly recognizable characters who come to realize that the

world is not invested with meaning by some transcendent being, but rather void of it because this being is seen as an illusory imaginative construct. In The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy the heroes live in worlds wildly chaotic, but ones which betray through their lack of verisimilitude the presence of a being that constructs them. The insistence on the artificiality of the first two novels by their narrators does not obviate their attempt at verisimilitude. Their fictions are indeed artificial, but not because their worlds do not seem real. These artificial elements in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy reinforce the sense of a God-like author that we shall presently examine.

The Sot-Weed Factor pretends to record history. It does this in a number of ways. First, the style of the novel points to its assumed historicity. By writing an ostensibly mannered eighteenth-century novel, replete with the peculiar erudition of that age, the author good-naturedly invites us to credit its historical validity, despite our knowing better. Secondly, the novel takes as its subject the adventures of an actual historical figure. There actually was an Ebenezer Cooke of Cooke's Point in Maryland who wrote the poem entitled "The Sot-Weed Factor", and the version of it that we see in Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor is taken from the actual text of the poem written by the real Ebenezer Cooke. The novel abounds with characters both "real" and "fictional". The result of such a mixing of fact and fiction, of recorded event and sheer speculation, is to underline the interpenetrability of history and story, the real and the imagined, and to point to the ultimate inseparability of the two.⁷ What we know of what happened in the past comes to us basically as a recounting, a story. The novel is not only a mimetic form; so is

life. The implication of their mutual interpenetrability is that each draws life from the other. Life and art, Barth implies, are mutually mimetic.

The pretense of historical authenticity is, after all, a literary convention. That it is to be seen primarily as a convention is evidenced by the unlikely and coincidental peregrinations of Ebenezer. By being so obviously contrived, and yet purporting to record real history, the novel stands as an example of the necessity of attempting to order events despite the futility of such a gesture. History, in its attempt to recall as much as possible from the past, is doomed to constant failure. Yet knowledge of one's past is crucial to ontological awareness. By extrapolation, fictionalizing existence is crucial to our well-being. It is never fully up to the task of ordering existence, but there would seem to be no alternative to it. This is the lesson that Ebenezer learns in his many misadventures. The novel is not only a paradigm of this awareness; it is also a discussion of it, as we shall have occasion to note in our examination of the debates between Ebenezer and Henry Burlingame III. It is this that will characterize the rest of Barth's fiction. There will be a conscious attempt by the author persona (or simply the author) to make the fiction a paradigm of what is being discussed in it. Hence the layered narratives.

Our awareness of this novel as contrived and artificial is reinforced not only by its transparently fictive claim to historical authenticity, but by certain conventions that point to the literary character of the novel itself. The title of the novel is the title of the poem written by Ebenezer Cooke, and the novel is written around the writing of

this poem, much in the same way The Floating Opera was inspired by the show boat Barth saw as a child.⁹ One's knowledge of the poem's authenticity brings one to realize that this novel is a grand exercise of imaginative embellishment on another work of the imagination. This constitutes one of the "levels" of awareness in the novel. In addition, the novel is an account of the life of one person, but this account is fleshed out and made possible by a number of other "stories". Out of sixty-five chapters in The Sot-Weed Factor, twenty-eight concern the relating of a tale, the written account of an event, or that which pertains to the craft of fiction. Ebenezer is treated to stories as varied as those of the rivalry between Isaac Newton and Henry More, Joan Toast's tale of the "Great Tom Leech," the history of the Maryland Palatinate, the rape of the Cyprian, the tale of Hicktopeake, of Father Joseph Fitzmaurice, S.J., of Susan Warren the swine maiden, of Mynheer Wilhelm Tick, of Billy Rumbly, and of virtually every character that encounters Ebenezer.¹⁰ In addition the novel is sprinkled with the written accounts of Henry Burlingame I, Capt. John Smith, and the struggling poetic par-turition of Ebenezer himself. Indeed the novel can be said to be a collection of stories, of the ways people interpret events. This is unified by the fact that Ebenezer's quest, which constitutes the main narrative thread, is one which depends for its success on his own ability to make sense of what John McEvoy, Joan Toast's pimp and erstwhile lover, calls the "entire great real world" (SWF, p. 74). The scope of characters and side-narratives attempts to give the reader this sense of the world's vastness.

Another important aspect of the eighteenth century novel that re-asserts the artifice of the novel is the device of the chapter headings. Even before reading the novel, an examination of the chapter headings serves to acquaint us not only with the bare events of the story, but also with the "Author"'s position as controller of the narrative and philosophical concerns of the novel. The headings are obviously meant to be a compendium of the fictional whole. As we read them in the novel itself, we are made to pause and realize the presence of the Author. This is especially apparent in those chapter headings where the novel as artifice is alluded to.

The Laureate is Exposed to Two Assassinations of Character, a Piracy, a Near-Deflowering, a Near-Mutiny, a Murder, and an Appalling Colloquy Between Captains of the Sea, All Within the Space of a Few Pages. (SWF, p. 6, p. 255. My emphasis.)

The Rape of the Cyprian; Also the Tale of Hicktopeake, King of Accomack, and the Greatest Peril the Laureate Has Fallen Into Thus Far. (SWF, p. 6, p. 259. My emphasis.)

The Travelers Hear About the Singular Martyrdom of Father Joseph Fitzmaurice, S.J.: A Tale Less Relevant in Appearance Than It Will Prove In Fact. (SWF, p. 6, p. 259. My emphasis.)

The artificial aspect is reinforced not only by these allusions to the novel as artifice (allusions which themselves are a parody of the convention of eighteenth-century chapter headings) but also in those headings which articulate some of the philosophical problems Ebenezer confronts. The articulation of these concerns in such a reductive manner serves to undercut their serious importance for Ebenezer since by being abridged in this fashion and put into perspective against the background of events, they are made to seem easily mastered. One is reminded of a similar effect rendered by Joyce in the "Aeolus" chapter of Ulysses, where he

employs newspaper headlines as capsule burlesques of the matter about to be read. Barth's chapter headings warn us ahead of time what to expect, thus deflating the dramatic import of Ebenezer's revelations. A small sample of abridged philosophical "urgencies" that beset Ebenezer will suffice to demonstrate this effect:

If the Laureate Is Adam, Then Burlingame Is
the Serpent. (SWF, p. 7, p. 420)

The Tale of Billy Rumbly Is Concluded by an
Eye-Witness to His Englishing. Mary Mungumory
Poses the Question, Does Essential Savagery
Lurk Beneath the Skin of Civilization, or Does
Essential Civilization Lurk Beneath the Skin of
Savagery?- but Does Not Answer It. (SWF, p. 8, p. 638)

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. (SWF, p. 9, p. 725)

If these concerns, articulated as they are by the characters in the novel, are made light of in terms of their importance to the narrative whole, they nevertheless have a value for us as readers. The fact that the problems of finding a way to come to terms with the "great real world" are to a degree undercut by the inevitable comic failure of the characters to solve them does not indicate that they are not important to Barth. What is indicated in the manner in which the world seems not to care about man's spiritual crises, is the necessity of articulation. This way of seeing the world keeps man from the Pit. Burlingame explains this necessity. An avatar himself of the Protean character of existence, Burlingame's role as tutor to Ebenezer is appropriate. It is he who most thoroughly schools Ebenezer in the awareness that man lives in a world devoid of intrinsic direction and significance, and so through his own

genius must fashion the values necessary to survive in it. There is a fatalism in Burlingame's advice. He says to Ebenezer, to account for the need to act boldly: "My dear fellow, . . . we sit here on a blind rock careening through space; we are all of us rushing headlong to the grave We are dying men, Ebenezer: i'faith there's time for naught but bold resolves" (SWF, p. 36).

Burlingame explains existence in very modern terms to Ebenezer. His unceasing motion and energy stem from a desperate urge to forge his own identity before time overtakes him. This is made even more desperate by the fact that he has no identifiable link to the rest of the world. Being orphaned, he searches for his identity armed only with the words that make up his name. Thus he is ideally qualified to utter those convictions that otherwise were out of place in colonial Maryland, and thus afford Ebenezer a chance to fashion a more mature view of life, tempered both by Burlingame's assertions and the experiences which seem to bear them out.

. . . 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. (SWF, p. 349. My emphasis.)

Burlingame says that in spite of this realization, "'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 . . . '" (SWF, p. 364). The search for one's soul, he goes on to say, brings one to the realization that the search in itself, a form of self-articulation, is what sustains man in the face of a black and uncaring universe. This is "'the truth that drives men mad.'"

. . . 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! . . . 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. (SWF, p. 365.# - My emphasis.)

This desperate advice is the only course open to man, and in the intensity of its repetition, and in the many guises which Burlingame assumes to renew constantly this assertion, we see it as an implicit recognition of flux, impermanence, and mortality. However, man's gesture of self-assertion, his articulative urge, is generated from the suspicion that there is something in human nature that withstands the onslaught of change. To put it more "accurately", there is something stubborn in man's mode of perception that, in spite of the knowledge of the futility of ordering his world to pre-conceived systems, nevertheless does so, and by doing so believes in the possibility of transcending his mortality. The general tendency of people is to ascribe enduring value to the products of their urge to articulate themselves, rather than to the existence of the urge itself. Thus it is with Ebenezer. Although he recoils at the tone of Henry's advice, he nevertheless does attempt to affirm himself in his chosen role of poet and virgin. The combination of these two callings is obviously deliberate, and is competently explained by Ebenezer to himself. Having "won" Joan Toast in a wager, Ebenezer hesitates and then refuses to avail himself of her professional services. Instead he offers her his ideal love, one that he feels even after she angrily storms out of

the room. It is under the inspiration of this feeling of love that Ebenezer writes his first poem, his "Hymn to Innocence", affirming his dual identity as poet and virgin. The last stanza of his hymn sums up what his innocence means to him:

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!
 (SWF, p. 71)

Ebenezer defines himself in opposition to life as it goes on around him, seen mainly as a process of disintegration. Innocence, as this stanza points out, is a way not to live, to avoid metaphorically physical decay. Thus, Ebenezer reasons, he shall not die. The stratagem is not only to set oneself against the fact of mortality, but to withdraw from life by choice. Ebenezer, experiencing the loss of self in love, even claims not to have made the choice; rather, it was revealed to him. Ebenezer's abdication of responsibility of choice in the matter of his "calling" reinforces his sense of purpose and value, because he conceives of it as conferred from without. After signing his name and would-be title at the end of the poem, he unconsciously says "'Tis now but a question of time.'"

"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 badge of my strength and proof of my calling"
 (SWF, pp. 71-72)

Convinced of the superiority of this stance, Ebenezer sees each half of his identity as complementary to the other. The poet, by also being virgin, remains like God, above the world about which he writes, secure in his virginity from the taint of its physicality. The virgin,

by having the poet's vision, is able to see his state, as Eben explains to the sailors, as a positive metaphysical one (SWF, p. 251). This establishes the author-figure (Ebenezer) as divorced from the world, making it through his genius better than what it is. Ebenezer, in the early days of his own cosmopsis (exactly the same disease that Jake Horner suffered from) was unable to reconcile himself to what was "the case".

. . . 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 real world, they did not endow him with corresponding realization of its finality. He very well knew, for instance, that "France is shaped like a teapot," but he could scarcely accept the fact that . . . despite the virtual infinitude of imaginable shapes, this France would have to go on resembling a teapot forever. (SWF, pp. 18-19)

This impatience at the finality of existence leads him to wish for alternatives to the world that will extricate him from it. This accounts for his calling. However, the lesson of the novel is that this desire for absolute states, embodied in his dual role, that will withstand the Heraclitean flux, is ill-conceived. It does not account for the fact that, even though an author, Ebenezer is still a part of the great real world, which is "the case." Having been made to walk the plank by pirates, Ebenezer comes face to face with the immediacy and finality of death:

. . . in his heart the fact of death and all these sensuous anticipations were to Ebenezer like the facts of life and the facts of history and geography, which owing to his education and natural proclivities, he looked at always from the storyteller's point of view: notionally he admitted its finality; vicariously he sported with its horror, but never, never could he really embrace either. That lives are stories, he assumed; that stories end, he allowed--how else could one begin another? But that the storyteller himself must live a particular tale and die--Unthinkable! Unthinkable! (SWF, p. 288)

Ebenezer fortunately lives to see another day, and fails to face the fact that although the world of other lives may be fictional for him (in our definition of the word), his is also to be seen as sharing that aspect. He posits a Platonic Reality outside the physical universe, and does not come to see the folly of such a way of ordering the world until that view wreaks havoc on him and those around him. His much-vaunted innocence captures the imagination of Joan Toast, who rushes off to follow him to America. Her fate is to suffer rape at sea, and subsequently to be ravaged by the pox. Once in Maryland, she suffers indenture and ignomy for Ebenezer's sake. In addition, his innocence allows Ebenezer blindly to will away his estate, and be indirectly responsible for the fates of his sister Anna, and his valet Bertrand. Eben is part of the great real world despite himself, and his wanderings allow him to come to a contrite awareness of this by the novel's end. He bitterly turns his "Marylandiad" into a "Sot-Weed Factor", and comes to see his Innocence as a vain construction of the imagination. However, he does not throw away his innocence. As he says to Mrs. Russecks, turning down her invitation to bed (luckily for him: Mrs. Russecks turns out to have been his childhood nurse):

What moral doth the story hold? Is't that the universe is vain? The chaste and consecrated life a hollow madness? Or is't that what the cosmos 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 vain construction all nobleness allowed to fallen man. (SWF, p. 670)

As a result, Ebenezer, now convinced of the "fiction" of his imaginative construction, invests that construction with a new value, and sees in this deliberate awareness of its value in spite of its illusoriness, an exercise of his power to supply what the cosmos lacks. His loss of innocence will come at a time of his own choosing, and the gesture shall have, in its deliberateness, what Ebenezer calls "a right significance" (SWF, p. 671. My emphasis). This significance is found in his offering himself up to the diseased and dying Joan Toast, by this time his wife, so that he may repay her selfless love, provide Henry with the page missing from the journal of Burlingame I and thus make him (Henry) sexually potent, and regain his estate for himself and Anna; in other words, so that he can affirm his place in the temporal and physical world, and by offering up his innocence atone for the ruin it has left. Thus the moral of The Sot-Weed Factor is what the novel in its complexity exemplifies: that value and worth are the domain of man's imagination, and with that goes the responsibility to be human. Thus man renews himself in the face of entropy by seeing this power in himself, and exercising it with the compassion needed to keep it from turning into the dry and destructive exercise it becomes for a Jake Horner or Joe Morgan. Man needs to articulate to survive.

The novel ends with the intrusion of the "Author". This intrusion is designed to draw attention to the preceding events as artifice, and yet purports to fill in all the "facts" of the remainder of Ebenezer's life. This underlines the arbitrary nature of the "story", which begins and ends at predetermined points, calculated by the Author. Life goes on, and we are curious to find out what happens after the presumably

"happy" ending. Thus the Author's intrusion serves a dual, paradoxical purpose. It purports to draw a line between story and fact, fiction and "real" life. However it can only do so within the very fictional construct it seeks to transcend. The "novel" ends as Ebenezer regains Malden; the "story" of Ebenezer's life goes on. What we find is that the happy ending becomes qualified, the dénouement undercut. Our collective life cannot be experienced, so the Author's intrusion implies, but through articulation. The moment we begin to talk about what does on, we become authors. We fictionalize life even as we pretend not to. The main narrative in The Floating Opera and Giles Goat-Boy are also enclosed in this manner. It is a common device of Barth's to insist that the reader tarry with him even after the resolution of the main narrative. By doing so, he deliberately draws attention to the artificiality of ending a story arbitrarily. It is also a further example of the self-conscious intrusion of the author in his fiction for the purpose of pointing to the interdependence of life and one's account of it. Barth insists, by inserting these endpieces, that what has gone before them is artifice, but also that what follows after (even our perception of life itself) is no less so. Thus the Author's apology at the end of The Sot-Weed Factor is a re-affirmation of the power of the imagination to construct. The beginning of the Apology stands as Barth's best defence of his art:

Lest it be objected by a certain stodgy variety of squint-minded antiquarians that he has in this lengthy history played more fast and loose with Clio, the chronicler's muse, than ever Captain John Smith dared, the Author here posits in advance, by way of surety, three blue-chip replies arranged in order of decreasing relevancy. In the first place be it remembered, as Burlingame himself observed, that we all invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest;

the happenings of former times are a clay in
the present moment that will-we, nill-we, the
lot of us must sculpt. (SWF, p. 793)

The Author then claims that Clio's virtue was already forced before his attempt at her. She was "already a scarred and crafty trollop when the Author found her" (ibid.). Thus the Author claims that having tried the Muse, he "joins with pleasure the most engaging company imaginable, his fellow fornicators, whose ranks include the noblest in poetry, prose, and politics; condemnation at such a bar, in short, on such a charge, does honor to artist and artifact alike . . ." (ibid.).¹¹

In Giles Goat-Boy we seek in vain to find the "Author" of the account we read. More so than in any other work by Barth, the frames in which the core narrative is set serve to indicate just what are his epistemological and epistolary concerns. George's adventures as he actively pursues the vocation of hero bring him to a mature awareness of the impossibility of ordering life, of finding transcendent and enduring Answers. At the same time our fruitless search for the persona who is behind this fiction points to the necessary endlessness of the fictive impulse, especially in the absence of an externally verifiable ordering force (at a time when literature seems, in Barth's words, to have exhausted its forms). There is a disappointment of sorts for us in not finding out the "truth" about the "Revised New Syllabus",¹² just as there is for George in not having saved Studentdom (mankind), but these two letdowns are the same in kind. The search for Answers never ends. Uncertainty must perforce be the predominant feeling at the end of such a search, when one had hoped the search to be over.

Giles Goat-Boy comes to us as a transcript of a computer tape, cloaked in debates over its authenticity. It is not even (technically

speaking) the written account of its hero. Transparently claiming kinship with an oral tradition of "heroic" tales, Giles is the written transcript of a number of tapes "read to" a computer by a modern-day messiah (Grand Tutor) in a universe that is allegorized into a vast University. The computer then collates and "reads out" these tapes to his son, who brings them to a novelist who then brings it to his publishers, who finally present it to the reader. This very process of presentation wraps the core narrative, the "Revised New Syllabus", in a number of layers through which we must pass to enter and exit the novel. These layers also serve to make it impossible to ascertain the author of this "Revised New Syllabus".

The outermost layer of Giles Goat-Boy is the Publishers' Disclaimer which begins the novel. Although not ten pages in length, this Disclaimer needs to be examined, along with the other framing devices in the novel, because it contains the discussion that serves as the necessary backdrop to the "Revised New Syllabus". The Publishers' Disclaimer basically serves as a justification for the issuing of the manuscript sent them by a certain J.B., an author who himself disclaims authorship, claiming that he was given the manuscript by the son of the hero of it. In the Disclaimer we are given the views of the four editors who attempt to decide whether to publish the "Revised New Syllabus" at all. The Disclaimer, then, pretends to be non-fictional. It indeed debates whether the "Revised New Syllabus" is itself an "authentic" or "fictional" document, since J.B. does not take responsibility for it. This tone of authority is set in the very opening words of the novel itself: "The reader must begin this book with an act of faith, and end it with an act of charity.

We ask him to believe in the sincerity and authenticity of this preface, affirming in return his prerogative to be skeptical of all that follows it" (GGB, p. xi). However the reader knows better. The preface is not authentic, and so we must read the whole novel, including its Disclaimer, not with the act of faith with which we are asked to approach the Disclaimer, but with the skepticism with which we are permitted by the Disclaimer to approach the rest of the novel. This attitude will survive a total reading of the novel, with its "Revised New Syllabus", introductory remarks and postscript. In fact when we do suspend our disbelief, at least in the Disclaimer, we come to see that Giles Goat-Boy is apparently the product of not one but many fictional authors:

The professor and quondam novelist whose name appears on the title page (our title page, not the one following his prefatory letter) [here Barth refers to himself directly and thus like Todd and Jake becomes a character in his own fiction, a practice later developed more fully in Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera] denies that the work is his, but "suspects" it to be fictional--a suspicion that two pages should confirm for the average reader. His own candidate for its authorship is one Stoker Giles or Giles Stoker--whereabouts unknown, existence questionable--who appears to have claimed in turn 1) that he too was but a dedicated editor, the text proper having been written by a certain automatic computer, and 2) that excepting a few "necessary basic artifices" the book is neither fable nor fictionalized history, but literal truth. And the computer, the mighty "WESCAC"--does it not too disclaim authorship? It does. (GGB, p. xi)

Despite all these disclaimers of authorship, the characters involved in bringing this text to its readers all tamper to some degree with it. The publishers "have exercised as discreetly as possible our contractual prerogative to alter or delete certain passages clearly libelous, obscene, discrepant, or false" (GGB, p. xx). J.B., Barth's persona, admits to making "certain amendations and rearrangements which

the Author's imperfect mastery of our idiom and his avowed respect for my artistic judgement encouraged me to make" (GGB, p. xxxvi). The raw material for the text was, we are told, assembled, collated, and most importantly of all, edited by the computer WESCAC (West Campus Automatic Computer). It then was able to "recompose the whole into a coherent narrative from the Grand Tutor's point of view" (GGB, p. xxxii). And Stoker Giles, to whom the tapes were "read out", then "needed only to 'change a date or a name-place here and there,' as he vowed, to call it finished" (GGB, p. xxxii). We then, as readers, come to Giles Goat-Boy after it has been so tampered with as to preclude the possibility of determining who is the author. Yet the novel is hardly realistic. In its encyclopaedic detail, in the obvious artifice of the University-universe, there lurks an Author. This exercise in deception by Barth is to give us a clue to a proper reading of Giles. Nothing is as it seems, and our perception of the state of studentkind, as well as the perception of the characters in the novel, must be in a constant and total state of upset. No final truths or values are apparent; they are always in flux. The absence of a personally identifiable Author, or the efforts of him to conceal his identity, especially in a work that purports to "revise" the "New Syllabus" (New Testament), is exactly the substance of that revision. The lesson that George learns is that there are no Answers at which one can arrive in order to reach Commencement (salvation). Answers exist in the realm of articulated order, and meaning and value can only accrue to these Answers when there is a correspondence between that realm, ultimately a static one, and that of the "fluctuating realities." However, since the "realities" fluctuate, so meaning and value fluctuate, and hence there are

no final Answers. What is left "is not meaning, but a way of talking about the impossibility of fixing meaning."¹³

We are given another clue of Barth's intention when he allows Editor B in the Disclaimer to talk about J.B.'s artistic predilections. While recognizing the danger of too closely equating J.B. with Barth, there is enough evidence to suggest that Barth indeed lurks somewhere in J.B. (Indeed, he may well lurk in Editor B also.) Editor B's comments about J.B. apply with equal force to Barth himself, given what we have read in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion". B's remarks have a good deal to say about Barth's abandonment of realism.

. . . it is everywhere agreed that the best language is that which disappears in the telling, so that nothing stands between the reader and the matter of the book. But this author has maintained . . . that language is the matter of his books, as much as anything else, and for that reason ought to be "splendrously musicked out"; he turns his back on what is the case, rejects familiar for the amazing, embraces artifice and extravagance; washing his hands of the search for Truth, he calls himself "a monger after beauty", or "doorman of the Muses' Fancy-house." (GGB, p. xvi)

In addition, the degree to which J.B. does resemble Barth is borne out by the fact that Barth clearly seems to be parodying himself in J.B.'s "Cover-Letter to the Publisher." In it, J.B. is thirty, a professor-novelist who "one novel ago . . . hatched a plot as mattersome as any in the books, and drove a hundred characters through eight times that many pages of it" (GGB, p. xxiv), a clear reference to The Sot-Weed Factor. Also, by grieving the fact that "I and the Muse, who . . . had not co-habited these many months, are now divorced for good and all . . ." (GGB, p. xxi), we are reminded of the Author of The Sot-Weed Factor and his remarks about the Muse. By thus referring to things clearly outside

of the novel, such as himself, and other works of his, Barth blurs the line separating this particular piece of fiction from life. He refuses to draw a line separating the novel from its set of referents, allegorical or otherwise, in life and other fiction. (The realistic novel, curiously enough, insistently draws this line.) However, by choosing to include these "exterior" referents in the novel, Barth is making them part of a deliberate fictional stratagem. This stratagem underlines again Barth's desire to point to the interpenetrative relation between life and art, or life and one's perception of it. In articulating this relationship, Barth again affirms the impossibility of ascertaining truths in each.

This search for Answers is at the heart of the main narrative of George Giles's "Revised New Syllabus". The metaphorical vehicle of this search is, naturally enough, optical acuity. George must learn to see life correctly, and the characters he meets all display various optical and visual tendencies corresponding to their view of the world. Max Spielman, his mentor, is a "Psycho-Proctologist" whose "only crime was to suggest . . . that his science alone could plumb the bottom of man's nature" (GGB, p. 42). Psycho-proctology, as a science, combines the images of a systematic search for Knowledge with those of the bestial and psychological aspects of man's nature. Max then, in his own way, affirms the necessity of coming to grips with one's total nature (comically underlined by the fact that Max's disgrace in the College Senate stems from his insistence that one not only be made to pass Qualifying Orals, but Qualifying Anals as well) a task that he sees as never-ending, incomplete, and non-transcendent.

This Enos Enoch [Jesus Christ], Billy: ages ago he was the shepherd of the goyim, and I like him okay. He was the Shepherd Emeritus that died for his sheep.

But look here: he told his students Ask, and you'll find the Answer; that's why the goyim call him their Grand Tutor, and the Founder's own son. But we Moishians say Ask, and you'll keep on asking (GGB, p. 65)

Max's view of the proctoscope brings him to a cyclical view of the universe. His solution to the "sphincter's riddle" (his lifework is a book of that title) is the three-word Spielman's Law:

Ontogeny recapitulates cosmogeny--what is it but to say that proctoscopy repeats hagiography? That our Founder on Founder's Hill and the rawest freshman on his first mons veneris are father and son? That my day, my year, my life, and the history of West Campus are wheels within wheels? (GGB, p. 43)

The proctologist and the saint "see" the same thing. The sphincter's riddle and the mystery of the University are, to Max, the same or at least equally impenetrable.¹⁴ Consequently, his view of Graduation (the attainment of a state of grace) is tempered by his cyclological views. He is especially skeptical of the concept of the Grand Tutor (messiah-hero) upon whom the ultimate Commencement of the University depends. This has everything to do with George's view of himself as Grand Tutor. Inasmuch as a Grand Tutor embodies the Answers, Max disagrees with the concept. "I knew by heart his old indictments of any Answer which turned studentdom from realistic work upon the failings of life on campus . . ." (GGB, p. 308). Max's view of Graduation is consistent with this anti-transcendental view of life. It is, as Eblis Eierkopf calls it, a "secular-studentist" vision:

As for Graduation, if Sear meant by the term simply the emotional and intellectual maturity that normally followed the ordeals of adolescence, whether in an individual student or an entire college, then Max was quite ready to affirm its reality; indeed cyclological theory was founded on such correspondences as that between the celestial and psychic day, the seasons of

the year, the stages of ordinary human life, the growth and decline of individual colleges, the evolution and history of studentdom as a whole, the ultimate fate of the University, and what had we. The rhythm of all these was repeated literally and emblematically in the life of the hero, whose function, as Max took it, was the important but prosaic one of helping a college grow up or get out of a particular bind: more than that he denied [] . . . anyone maintained that there was something to herohood or Commencement beyond this unglamorous definition--something magical or transcendental--then we must excuse him, he had to patience with such notions. (GGB, pp. 309-310)

Transcendence is a concept inimical to Max's cyclological viewpoint. It, or even the implied need for it, destroys or interrupts the ongoing order found in the cyclical correspondences (celestial and psychic days, etc.) that Max observes everywhere in the University. Studentdom should not be allowed to believe it can be delivered from its woeful state, "commenced" by a "Grand Tutor." It should, Max says, work continually to improve its lot.

George, in coming to believe that he is a Grand Tutor, parts company with Max on the transcendental qualities of Grand Tutors. However, he retains a close affection for Max, and if we believe the "Postscript" to be "true" (at least insofar as it is related to the "Revised New Syllabus"), comes to an awareness that Max was, for the most part, well-advised to be skeptical about studentdom's chances to be Passed (saved). However, before coming to this final awareness, George encounters and evaluates the ways in which other characters "see".

Dr. Kennard Sear, who once worked under Max, shares his basic skepticism about Grand Tutors and Commencement, but not with Max's conviction. Like Max, Sear made his way through a number of disciplines, from radiology to psychiatry, but his mode of "seeing" never rises above

a decadent voyeurism. Sear is committed to Knowledge of the University, and his passionless quest leads to a glib nihilism, and the refinement of what is no more than a piece of intellectual preciousness. For Sear, always gracious and urbane, having any principles is "just simplemindedness" (GGB, p. 306). "'I'll go even further: innocence is ignorance; ignorance is illusion; and Commencement, while it certainly is a metaphor, is no illusion. Commencement's for the disillusioned, not for the innocent'" (GGB, p. 307). Like Max, he sees heroes and Grand Tutors as people who perform necessary functions and little more. Their work, he asserts, "has nothing to do with Founders and Dean o'Flunks" (GGB, p. 309). In place of a Grand Tutor, Sear admires the "tragic hero" like Taliped (Oedipus), the hero of the play that George watches with him and Max. The lesson Sear draws from this parodic rendering of Oedipus Rex into modern slang is that man's knowledge, far from saving him, condemns him:

"That's my Grand Tutor!" Dr. Sear whispered proudly.
 "Poor blind Taliped and his fatal ID-card, stripped
 of innocence! Committed and condemned to knowledge!
 That's the only Graduation offered on West Campus,
 George" "We have to plumb the depths
 of experience," . . . "If there's such a thing as
 Graduation, it is not for the innocent; we've got to
 rid ourselves of every trace of innocence!" (GGB, p. 353)

Earlier, when Sear is introduced to George during the orgy in the Living Room, he is described as dried-out (GGB, p. 231) and totally cynical (GGB, p. 234), and this impression survives. Sear, in his singlemindedly intellectual approach to experience, is finally victimized by the same ennui that overtakes Jake Horner. Like Jake, Sear's behaviour does little good for other people. He admits to putting his wife through great ordeals, but nevertheless affirms that it was necessary. However, he is a much more sympathetic character than Todd. His virtue, insofar as it

affects George, is to encourage George to re-imagine and re-experience continually the world. By insisting on the endlessness of the search for knowledge, Sear helps to prepare George for the realization that there are no Answers to be found at the "end" of the search. If the search is endless, then one can never totally obtain the Knowledge. He gives George a mirror, to remind him that "'there's always another way of seeing things: that is the beginning of wisdom'" (GGB, p. 404). Indeed it is the first step towards the wisdom that George has at the end of the novel, but Sear himself fails to venture far beyond it. George, toward the end of the "RNS," unaware that Sear is already dead, declares him a Candidate for Graduation as he himself finishes his "work" on Founder's Hill. He makes this gesture because Sear was correct in affirming the necessity of suffering for understanding the nature of one's existence. However, Sear fell short of realizing that suffering, through Knowledge of the University, is the vehicle of insight and not the insight itself. His mistake was to assume that, since suffering denies man the Answers, it was a kind of Answer in itself. Hence Sear's ready acceptance of the notion that Commencement is through Failure, and his eagerness to seek out and embrace suffering. Like Peter Greene and Leonid Andreich, he is totally blind by the end of the novel, reinforcing metaphorically his inability to see beyond his suffering. Sear's decadence indeed leads him perversely to cherish it. His final act, thinking in his delirium to have achieved a spiritual illumination, is to emasculate himself in a gesture echoic of Taliped's. We are told by George, significantly enough, that he died of those wounds and not of the cancer that had eaten away most of his face, which had served as the condition of suffering under which he

operated. Thus, even while ravaged by a condition that ensured his death, Sear is the instrument of his own destruction. This act was an attempt to deny his participation in worldly and fleshly pursuits. As such, it is an ill-advised attempt to separate spiritual illumination from the experiences that helped bring it to pass, an attempt which serves to invalidate that very illumination. Nevertheless, he helped George see what Max had been telling him since the early days of his tutelage, that "Self-knowledge is always bad news" (GGB, p. 121).

Eblis Eierkopf is another character who denies Grand Tutorial transcendence to George. Max denies it on the compassionate grounds that George should approach his herohood with the proper humility and acceptance of human weakness that must temper all good works. Sear objects to it because the transcendental qualities of Grand Tutorhood are not as humanly appealing as the suffering of Taliped, who is overcome by forces greater than himself. Eierkopf, on the other hand, is skeptical because there is no scientific or phenomenological basis for the existence of a Grand Tutor of the type George claims to be. Eierkopf sees in the University the working out of an inexorable order, governed by passionless laws that are never broken:

"You want spooks and spirits? Bah, George Goat-Boy! We look with our microscopes and telescopes, and what do we see? Order! Number! Energies and elements! Where's any Founder or Grand Tutor?" he tapped his gleaming skull. "In here, no place else. And in Tower Hall basement [home of WESCAC, the computer that was taught desire as well as logic]. That's all there is! (GGB, p. 377)

Without any concern for human issues, Eierkopf dedicates himself totally to his research ("Mirrors and lenses are my favorite thing" [GGB, p. 379]). Indeed Eierkopf worked in the Bonifacist (Nazi) riot-effort, and moved

from there to work on the Cum Laude Project (genetic manipulation) and the sophistication of EAT-weaponry (nuclear weapons). However he absolves himself of responsibility for the effects of these endeavours. He blames the passion that rules men and by which, according to him, he is not affected. He is, as he says, a "disengaged intelligence."

. . . the evil on campus was done not by disengaged intelligences like his, . . . it was done by principled people like Max Spielman, who prided themselves on having hearts as well as brains; who committed themselves with a passion to high-minded middlebrow causes; in short, who claimed or aspired to membership in the human fraternity. (GGB, p. 364)

Commencement he sees as the very eradication of these heartfelt principles.

"Commencement is a conclusion, . . . There's nothing mysterious about it: when you've eliminated your passions, or put them absolutely under control, you've Commenced!" (GGB, p. 376). This is why Eierkopf has hanging on his wall the motto "Graduation is a state of mind".

Because Eierkopf sees such rigid order in nature, he makes the mistake of believing that all of his abstracted ("disengaged") notions concerning the natural University are translatable into fact. Thus he believes he can find the absolutely perfect halfway mark between Tick and Tock on the Observatory Clock, which is physically impossible, since any physical quantity can theoretically be further divided ad infinitum. Doomed to consistent failure by his insistence on a thorough and knowable correspondence between the realm of intellect and physicality, knowable by a disinterested observation of phenomena, Eierkopf can only believe in transcendence when he observes the laws of nature to be themselves transcended. Eierkopf needs a "miracle" for proof. Indeed Eierkopf confesses to George that his absolutely scientific way of viewing the

world is followed in the hope that perhaps one of its incontrovertible laws will be broken, if only for a moment. That, he says, would be a sign that miracles are possible, but he asserts that everything in the University, including its "miracles", can be explained ultimately, if one uses the right lenses. "'There aren't any mysteries; just ignorance. When something looks miraculous, it's because we're using the wrong lenses'" (GGB, p. 379). Eierkopf's gift to George is, like Sear's, optical. He affixes a number of lenses to the intricately carved stick given George by Croaker. His parting words to George after their initial encounter is consistent with Max's earlier warnings. George may look and keep on looking, but he will not find any Answers:

"Look all around the University," he advised me.
 "You'll see stars and planets you didn't know about,
 and girls undressing and doing things with their
 boyfriends. You'll see your blood cells and your
 crablice and your spermatzoa. Some things that
 look alike you'll see to be different, and some
 you thought were different will turn out to be the
 same. But you can look from now until the end of
 terms, and you won't see anything but the natural
 University. It's all there is." (GGB, p. 379)

Other characters regale George with their peculiar notions of Graduation and Passage. Peter Greene, who lost an eye when he threw a rock at his reflection in a funhouse mirror, has as a result no depth perception in the one good eye he has left, and a subsequent aversion to mirrors. It is to be expected that such a character exhibit a corresponding superficiality and lack of understanding about himself, the metaphorical equivalents for his condition. Greene puts his faith in the fate of New Tammany College (U.S.A.), and sees his Commencement as linked with that of New Tammany. He is fervently alma-matriotic, as is his Nikolayan (Russian) counterpart Leonid Andreich Alexandrov. Each is

committed to his political system, and sublimates his personal goals into those of his particular college. Andreich himself loses an eye due to a shattering mirror, and together with Greene is blinded by the end of the novel.

Lucky Rexford, Chancellor of New Tammany College, and modelled after John Kennedy, puts forth a cheery, genial view of man's fate that reads like an advertisement for the President's Council on Fitness. "Graduation . . . consists in fulfilling one's Assignment on this campus. Since studentdom by definition is composed of rational animals, it's the Assignment of every one of us to have the best mind in the best body he can manage . . ." (GGB, p. 411). Lucky believes in light and order, moderation, enlightenment, and lives, appropriately enough, in the Light House. Maurice Stoker, who is reputed to be his brother, is the embodiment of chaos and unbridled energy. His is so undirected a chaotic energy that it has no recognizable sexual manifestation, making him the only character in the novel who does not distinguish himself in any sexual exploits. Placed in charge of the Powerhouse that supplies the power both to WESCAC and its rival EASCAC, he is the antithesis of Lucky Rexford. The two, in opposition to each other, effect a political stability, however precarious may be the Quiet Riot (Cold War) between New Tammany and Nikolay Colleges. Although he acts out a role that represents the dark energy in man, Stoker does not espouse total disorder, or at least does so in the knowledge that there are forces at work to balance his. "There is order!" he insists to George, and affirms a Manichean view of the University, balanced by tensions between East and West Campus, order and disorder.

George culls his wisdom piecemeal from these characters, and has little difficulty in dealing with each of them as ingenuous personalities. However the one person who defies George's understanding is Harold Bray. Bray functions much like Burlingame in The Sot-Weed Factor, remaining totally unidentifiable throughout the novel. Bray is said to have arrived on campus mysteriously, and assumed many identities, from poet to psychotherapist to survival expert, excelling in each. Bray finally declares himself Grand Tutor, sets up office hours and "Certifies" everyone in sight for Graduation, including all of George's tutees. His challenge to George makes even more urgent George's anxiety to establish his Grand Tutorial authenticity. George descends twice into WESCAC's Belly with Bray, an action that the computer is programmed to punish by EATING the offender, unless he be a Grand Tutor. Both times, Bray and George emerge unhurt. Each time George is almost lynched by an angry mob as the false Grand Tutor while Bray goes free. Even after George seems to complete his Assignments and fulfill the signs of his Grand Tutorhood, Bray steals the show. As George confronts Bray on the occasion of Max's Shafting (execution) for the murder of an ex-Bonifacist, Bray reveals his chameleonic nature. In front of the crowd, he assumes the faces and forms of all the major characters in the novel, including George himself, in whose guise he Passes Max seconds before the latter's death.

George's "routing" of Bray at the end of the novel leaves the fundamental mystery of the latter's identity unresolved. Indeed in the final moments before his expulsion, Bray, with his oleaginous faceless appearance, exhibits a malign mechanistic nature. He "buzzed and flapped" and gave off a "horrid foetor" (CGB, p. 752). When Tommy's Tommy's Tom,

grandson of George's boyhood goat playmate, charges Bray, he shoots out something from under his tunic and kills the goat instantly. In addition, his servicing of Anastasia, unsuccessful in its attempt to beget a son, is characterized by the eerie and alien green emission he leaves behind. Truly, as Anastasia attests, he is different from other men, an embodiment of the alien and incomprehensible. He is to be dealt with, but not finally understood. His function is crucial to George's understanding of himself and his role on campus. Bray is the dark and malign Other, the false face who must not be allowed to deceive the student body, and George's ultimate act of heroism is his expulsion of him. Indeed this rout is not characterized on George's part by ill will, or by a misplaced admiration, as his first two descents with him into WESCAC's Belly were. It is undertaken because George sees their two functions as complementary, his to expel, and Bray's to test him.

Bray's presence in the novel also serves to put in relief our view of the gravity and use of such a quest for Answers that George undertakes for studentdom. By braying forth cleverly facile epigrams (Tragedy's out; mystery's in!) he is able to attract more students than George can ever hope for. While George seeks the Answer, Bray seeks an audience. By comically undercutting the seriousness of George's quest in his lecture on the "First Principle of Life in the University", Bray functions to make us as readers aware of what we are doing in reading Giles Goat-Boy. This lecture, encasing as it does numerous levels of glosses and glosses-upon-glosses, is a prototypical parody of the novel itself, with its layers of narrative. In both, fundamental questions about life in the University are presented by an author about whom little is known. As we

delve through the layers in each, we come to see the absurdity of the very notion of Answers. Bray's lecture carries the University metaphor, replete with its vaunted search for Knowledge, to extreme and ludicrous lengths. In plumbing depths that only show the uselessness of a purely intellectual approach to the primary mysteries of the University, it comically exposes the inadequacy of such a quest. Out of it all George, truly impressed by Bray's erudition and rhetoric, nevertheless determines to find his Answers in the "real" University, not in books and lectures. The comical aspect of this realization lies in the fact that George can be moved by the language of Bray's invocation to the Founder, couched in bawdy metaphor:

Be keg and tap behind the bar of every order, that
the brothers may chug-a-lug Thy lore, see Truth in
the bottom of their steins, and find their heads
a-crack with insight. Be with each co-ed at the
evening's close: paw her with facts, make vain her
protests against learning's advances; take her to
Thy mind's backseat, strip off preconceptions, let
down illusions, unharness her from error--that she
may ere the curfew be infused with Knowledge. (GGB, p. 454)

That George is moved by language like this only serves to underscore the nature of George's mission. It centres not so much on the Answers (although George is unaware of this at first) but the language one brings to bear on them. To show studentdom the way to Commencement Gate requires that one be able to articulate what is exactly the object of the search. Since George is told that Graduation is an experience, something to be felt before understood, the problem of saving studentdom becomes the problem of the author. The Grand Tutor, like everyone else, must confront the problem of putting into language that which transcends the categorical nature of language. That Commencement is a state of being insures that it cannot properly be reached, as if it were a point

in the distance. Further, the urge for its attainment is something which cannot be dispensed with upon attainment, since it is the very substance of the state itself. That language cannot account for this paradox ensures that the articulation go on, for the very reason that it affords only partial understanding. Like a sieve, the language retains only the palpable parts of intellectual perception. In communicating to others, language relies on the listener or reader, through some systematic process, to reconstruct faithfully the intent of the speaker. For this reason, Graduation or Commencement can only be a private phenomenon, and while we may suppose that George has attained that state himself, it is obvious that he has failed to bring his message to the student body.

The function of language is to differentiate between, although in clever hands it may be used to synthesize, concepts. George's choice in relating his message to the University is between the tendency to distinguish and the tendency to merge, or as Gerhard Joseph says, "of knowing whether the essential cognitive act in judging one's fellow beings and the great world is discrimination or synthesis."¹⁵

George's early experience with language is supplied by Lady Creamhair, as he calls her, who visits him while still a "kid" in Max's goat-barns. (She later turns out to be George's mother, Virginia Hector.) George is put on a diet, literal and figurative, of stories that he would read and then eat. This is, significantly, George's first encounter with the world beyond the barn where Max tried to protect him from people. His reaction to these stories is rapture: "Never was such a wonder as this story!" (GGB, p. 55). George soon realizes that the "miracle called story" is something that separates him from his companion goats.

In language and story, he finds himself armed with a new faculty, imagination. This faculty of invention serves in turn to develop in George a sense of self, the most fundamental differentiating function of language. Reading the many stories that Lady Creamhair brings him, George assigns himself roles. "One day I would see myself as Great William Gruff, and Max and Lady C. as Trolls bent on keeping me, each in his fashion, from the Cabbage of a glorious destiny" (GGB, p. 57).

George later learns to differentiate between story and life, when he in his late boyhood makes the mistake of appropriating the terms of love-making to everyday behaviour. Coming upon a pair of "Beists" (Beats) George listens as the male employs an hilarious recasting of Wordsworth's "Upon Westminster Bridge" ("Labs, towers, dorms, and classrooms lie all bright and glittering in the smokeless air . . ." [CGB, p. 67]) to seduce a co-ed who is helpless before this stratagem. (This is another ironic Barthian exploration of the link between literary and sexual urges.) Exhorting her to "Be" (the Beist term for total union of two people) with him, he finally services her in the grass. George, much aroused by the sight, takes the next occasion with Lady Creamhair to ask her to "Be" with him. Lady C. innocently assents, unaware that George is using Beist terminology, and is immediately set upon by George, fortunately unsuccessfully. George learns from this frightening episode that words are sometimes freighted with more than their literal meaning.

George's education bears some resemblance to that of Ebenezer Cooke. It is characterized by a reluctance to face the finality of fact and by a tendency to view things in "fictional" and pluralistic terms, even when it comes to the fact of his own existence:

Indeed, if I [George] never came truly to despair at the awful arbitrariness of Facts, it was because I never more than notionally accepted them. The Encyclopedia Tammanica I read from Aardvark to Zymurgy in quite the same spirit as I read the Old School Tales, my fancy prefacing each entry "Once upon a time Nothing for me was simply the case forever and aye, only "this case." (GGB, p. 117)

This independence of spirit leads George to consider alternatives to the facts. Like Ebenezer, George decides on a life work that reflects his desire to reshape the world to his liking. Where Ebenezer decides to be a poet and fashion a Maryland of the imagination, George decides to become a hero and save studentdom from its destruction by WESCAC's AIM (Automatic Implementation Mechanism) which presently is able of its own accord to embark on an EAT-riot (nuclear war).

George's approach to his mission passes through three phases, each having its roots in his approach to language. In the first, George affirms utterly the distinction between Passage and Failure, and declares that commerce between the two is itself flunked:

I declared that the first reality of life on campus must be the clear distinction between Passage and Failure, the former of which was always and only passed, the latter flunked. (GGB, p. 468)

. . . surely the blurring of distinctions, especially between contraries, was flunking And just as the first step to Commencement Gate must be differentiation of Passage and Failure, so (it seemed increasingly to me) the several steps thereafter--in the completion of my Assignment, for example--must depend upon corollary distinctions. (GGB, p. 485)

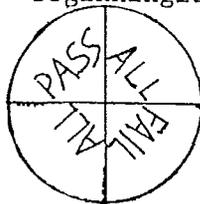
One of George's assignments is to "End the Boundary Dispute" between New Tammany and Nikolay Colleges. George's advice to Lucius Rexford on this point depends on just such a corollary distinction. Instead of engaging in mutually cryptic diplomatic negotiations on the subject, George insists

that New Tammany have no communication, official or otherwise, with the Nikolayans, for to negotiate with a flunked enemy is to court flunkage oneself. Advice based on other corollary distinctions is given to other characters. To Greene he gives a mirror, so he can face up to himself, and a recommendation to see Sear for treatment. He tells Eierkopf to repudiate his association with Croaker. All of this advice, much like Ebenezer's judgement at the patently "unjust" court in Maryland, based as they both are on a clarification of distinctions and a belief in their applicability, leads to chaos, and George is nearly lynched for it.

Realizing that he has failed to complete his Assignment successfully, George turns to the opposite approach to the terms he had declared mutually off-limits. By employing a "logic" of paradox, George comes to believe that his insistence on the separateness of opposites was simple-minded. Believing himself to have transcended language and its categories, he synthesizes the categories, asserts that Passage is Failure and vice-versa. Studentdom, he now says, because of its human nature, which is flunked, is passed because of its very humanity. To assert and accept the flunkage of human nature is a passed act, a kind of forgiveness. His new philosophy is based on one word: "Embrace!" Falling into the error of believing that because his earlier distinctions were wrongly drawn they were "false", George reverses his advice to those who took it. This time he exhorts Eierkopf, Rexford, Greene, and the rest, to follow their selfish and animal desires, because to do so is to affirm one's flunked human nature, which is, by the inverted logic George now uses, to pass. The result is equally chaotic, sending New Tammany to the brink of apocalypse, and again George is nearly lynched for it.

As George has occasion to survey the wreckage he has wrought through his advice, he hovers near despair. His moment of insight delivers him not only from his error but from the responsibility of articulating further Answers. George's earlier stances are undertaken with a faith in the authenticity and applicability of the terms he uses to articulate them. If Passage and Failure are to be defined as different, then it is because they are. If they are shown by other logical means to actually embrace their contraries, then so be it. George's Answers are clever and intellectual, but they lack insight into what it is these terms reflect. They reflect states of being, for which there can be nothing so prescriptive and all-encompassing as an Answer. The error that George makes as his tutoring proceeds is to assure himself that each position arrived at is the only one, and that it is the whole truth. George, rather than coming to another well thought-out conclusion, undergoes a transformation. He experiences, through his suffering and the suffering he has caused, a revelation:

. . . my spirit was seized: it was not I concentrating, but something concentrating upon me, taking me over, like the spasms of defecation or labor-pains That circular device on my Assignment-sheet--beginningless, endless,



infinite equivalence--constricted my reason like a torture-tool from the Age of Faith. Passage was Failure, and Failure Passage: yet Passage was Passage, Failure Failure! Equally true, none was the Answer: the two were not different, neither were they the same; and True and False, and Same and Different--unspeakable! Unnamable! Unimaginable! Surely my mind must crack! (GGB, pp. 708-709)

George comes to see that the tendency of language to render the terms of existence static, significant, and recognizable, actually changes the terms by its formulation of them, renders them incomprehensible in a full sense. At the same time he sees the necessity of such formulation, as it is the only way we can "see" life from our individual vantage-points, and communicate this fact to others. (Oddly enough, Jake Horner comes to this realization.) That language can so act to alter and fragment our perception of life is parodically dramatized by the scholars assembled to collate all the variant editions of the Founder's Scroll (Bible) into one "authoritative" edition. Not surprisingly the main obstacle to success lies in the difficulty of translating the two words signifying Pass and Fail:

The "etymons," as he called them, were the root terms for Pass and Fail, but inflected with prefixes, infixes, suffixes, diacritical marks to such an extent, and so variously from fragment to fragment, that conflicting interpretations were possible; indeed the history of certain such interpretations, . . . could be said to figure the intellectual biography of studentdom
(GGB, p. 722)

Studentdom's view of its history, then, depends on how it comes to distinguish Passage from Failure. George's main lesson is well summed up by Jerry Bryant: "Barth's point, by now familiar, is not to avoid making distinctions, but to avoid using them as substitutes for rather than accompaniments to existence."¹⁶ Life, Barth implies, does not offer itself up through language alone, although it is necessary for self-definition. Insight is gained equally from the process of differentiation and the transcendence of distinctions. The latter means of insight is achieved through communion with another differentiated self. George's final descent through the Belly of WESCAC is made not with Bray but with

Anastasia, whom he loves and by whom he is loved. The latter fact is something George never comes to understand fully. It lies at the root of the mystery of life, perpetuating it and, in this regenerative aspect, giving it meaning. George realizes that the love union is one way to transcend the categories that determine his understanding of existence. Locked in intercourse, George and Anastasia unite the polarities, the opposing principles, in an act of regeneration:

In the sweet place that contained me there was no East, no West, but an entire, single, seamless campus: Turnstile, Scapegoat Gate, the Mall, the barns, the awful fires of the Powerhouse, the balmy heights of Founder's Hill--I saw them all; rank jungles of Frumentius, Nikolay's cold fastness, teeming T'ang--all one, and one with me. Here lay with there, tick clipped tock, all serviced nothing; I and my Ladyship, all, all were one. (GGB, p. 731)

George's love act flies in the face of despair that accrues from a close inspection of life, by creating new life. In the same manner articulation flies in the face of nihilism, even while qualifiedly asserting it, by continuing to fill the void it discovers.

This latter realization is most intense when one realizes that as reader, one is party to this process of articulation when the ironic presence of the Author in his work is detected. This is dramatically rendered in the incident where George approaches the information desk in the Circulation Room of the Library and asks for a way to the Belfry aside from the elevator, which is guarded. Ordinarily the problem of inventing another way up the Belfry at this late pass in the novel would pose a problem for the credibility of the action. Instead, Barth chooses just such a difficult spot to reaffirm the fact that this is, after all, a fiction:

The pimpled maid, . . . looked over the spectacles from the large novel she was involved in and said with careful clarity--as if that question, from a fleeced goat-boy at just that moment, were exactly what she expected--"Yes. A stairway goes up to the Clockworks from behind me."

. . . Mild, undistinguished creature, . . . Passage be yours, for that in your moment of my time you did enounce, clearly as from a written text, your modest information! Simple answer to a simple question, but lacking which this tale were truncate as the Scroll, an endless fragment!

"-less fragment," I thought I heard her murmur as I stooped through the little door she'd pointed out. (GGB, pp. 724-725)

Barth solves the problem of fictional self-consciousness by making the fiction a character, as it were, in his fiction.

The Posttape, the Postscript to the Posttape, and the Footnote to the Postscript to the Posttape serve the function of other Barthian endpieces examined. It serves to "de-dramatize" the action by insisting that life goes on beyond the assorted dramatic insights that usually "complete" stories. One's life is an ongoing phenomenon governed by flux and impermanence, and these forces can be assumed to take their toll on the integrity of the vision we share with the hero at the close of his "heroic" exploits. Indeed, since the rendering of such accounts must occur after these exploits, such postscripts will not improperly address themselves to such attrition. This is indeed the case with the Author's "Apology" in The Sot-Weed Factor. It is also true of the tripartite addendum to Giles. (Later, in Chimera, "Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad" devote themselves fully to the exploration of post-heroic despair.)

Like all things, even a Grand Tutor's serene insight must pass, and in the Posttape we find Giles, twelve years later, in his cell awaiting the end. His awareness is now tempered by the ultimate cause for

despair, mortality. "Late or soon, we lose. Sudden or slow, we lose" (GGB, p. 763). He considers the "Revised New Syllabus" a "vain, inescapable labor" (GGB, p. 762), probably because it is obvious that he has failed to save studentdom. By agreeing, reluctantly at Anastasia's behest, to read his "Revised New Syllabus" into WESCAC, he pathetically attempts to teach what he knows to be unteachable, to be only learnable by each individual student. The Postscript attempts, in its sadder wisdom, to disavow the previous effort. However, this disavowal itself is seen to be pointless. The pervading tone of voice is that of exhaustion:

No matter. Futility and Purpose, like Pass and Fail, themselves have meaning only for her [Anastasia's] sort, and her son's For me, Sense and Nonsense lost their meaning on a night twelve years four months ago, in WESCAC's Belly--as did every such distinction, including that between Same and Different. (GGB, p. 755)

George sees his life go the way of all other Grand Tutorial examples. It is systematized, codified, rendered into doctrine and dubbed (by Anastasia) with a name, Gilesianism. Disciples proselytize, and by doing so bastardize its message. It is rendered into language, and so must fail.

It comes as no surprise that, as the Postscript to the Posttape points out, the Posttape may be spurious. J.B., the Gilesian neophyte, goes to great length to reinstate the textual integrity of the "Revised New Syllabus" by discrediting the Posttape. However, one of the grounds on which J.B. bases his rejection of the Posttape, that the typescript is different from that of the "Revised New Syllabus", is used by the Editors against J.B., pointing out that the typescript of the Postscript to the Posttape differs from that of his Cover Letter. Thus the novel ends on a note of total uncertainty. We are asked to discredit the

claims of authorship, and ultimately, the work itself, yet despite its "unknown" parentage, Giles Goat-Boy still stands before us. It attests, through its deliberately mysterious begetting, to the equally mysterious and unresolvable questions of human existence.

It is important to note that Barth ceased to write novels after Giles. The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy comprise the second distinct phase in Barth's journey to literary exhaustion. It will be seen, as we examine the third phase of short fiction, in Chapter III, that each phase seeks to move beyond its predecessor by incorporating the major insights offered up by the use of the particular form of the previous phase. Barth's views of the world and the capacity of literature to deal adequately with it remain fairly constant. Human existence consists of endlessly attempting to make sense of a world that either offers up no values, or whose values are beyond the power of people to imagine them. Despite either possibility, it is necessary to employ one's imagination constantly to create and re-fashion sense and value where none is indicated. This is the process of fictionalization, whether inside art or outside it. Barth, in his art, is at great pains to indicate this latter notion to his audience, and it is in the employment of different literary forms that he seeks to transmit most effectively his world-view. For Barth, art and life do not partake of different natures. As his first four novels assert, distinctions such as that between art and life are meaningless. As he uses each form, he attempts to produce a sense of his ironic view of the necessity of fictionalization by holding in mutual influence three factors. One is his authorial self-consciousness, which more than any other factor contributes to an awareness of the artifice.

The second factor is the form the fiction takes and how that form may be ironically or otherwise altered by the authorial self-consciousness. The third factor is the actual "stuff" of the narrative--the characters, events, and overtly articulated metaphysical concerns of the fiction. It too is affected in some measure by the first two factors. In the first two novels, the realistic form was parodied and undercut not only by the self-consciousness of the putative authors but the existence of a greater author-figure who is responsible for the purported verisimilitude. However the metaphysical subject matter of the novels revolved around the possibility of existing in the real world by making absolute values out of what turn out to be relative ones, and taking responsibility for it. His subject matter is ideally suited to a realist form. Hence a certain tension can be said to exist between the dynamics of the form in conjunction with the authorial self-consciousness, and the dynamics of the form as it is suited to the subject matter. As a result, it is the form that is "exhausted", and discarded.

The form employed in the second stage is arrived at by considering the inadequacy of the realist form for Barth's purposes. Realism, by attempting so strenuously to adhere to reality, implicitly differentiates art from life, and posits a unilateral mimesis. Art imitates life in realist fiction. Realism also attempts to fix one's perception of life. It purports to fix, like Keats's urn, the transient character of existence in its gaze and will never admit that it (existence) could be otherwise. To Barth, for whom the urge to re-invent the world is one of fiction's regenerative functions, one which holds at bay the finality of existence¹⁷, realism is bound to be found wanting. So he decides to re-invent the world in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy.

The cosmological vastness of The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy is eschewed by Barth as he passes into the third and most recent (possibly final) phase of his work. The abandonment of the novel genre can be seen as an abandonment of the authorial effort at world-making. The authorial personae in these last two novels tends by the nature of this world-making posture to be less personally engaged in a relationship with the reader. The result of this is that authorial presence in the work is alluded to ironically. Ebenezer is the poet-hero who comes to face his mortality and, given the quality of his work, that of his art also. Nobody wants to claim responsibility for Giles Goat-Boy, but it stands as the creation of an artist who, by making its "parentage" a crucial issue in it, not only parodies his effort at composing it but renders ironic the self-effacement of the authorial personae. Such ironic self-parody serves to doom the effectiveness of any particular fictional form to fulfill the needs of a self-conscious fiction.¹⁸ It does so because the main metaphysical concerns of self-conscious fiction centre on the inadequacy of any one view of the world to account for everything, especially when this view is undertaken beneath the glare of self-consciousness. Thus the novel genre, once its attempt at ordering existence completely is parodied, soon becomes useless for Barth. In his third phase, he will attempt, in shorter fictions, to underscore the rapidity with which forms become exhausted under a ruthlessly self-conscious and personally immediate authorial scrutiny.

Notes - Chapter II

- 1 "John Barth: An Interview," p. 11.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 12.
- 4 John Barth, Chimera (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Crest, 1972), p. 207.

5 Campbell Tatham, in speaking of The Sot-Weed Factor in particular, points out the "reality" of the adventures of Ebenezer, comments which are clearly pertinent to the adventures of George Giles as well:

What makes this novel "real" is not the language or the accurate yet involved account of seventeenth-century Dorchester politics--indeed they make the novel seem more fabulous than otherwise; what makes it real is the "stuff" of the "metaphors," the problems and concerns of the characters which survive to haunt us today. Rational pretensions as opposed to animalistic behaviour; sexual innocence in confrontation with orgiastic excess; fixed identity in the face of cosmic elusiveness; the temptation to suicide and the need for engagement: these and more make up the novel's thematic webs. Yet these problems and concerns, for all their relevance, are subordinated to the aesthetic implications of the basic form; and the artifice becomes the basic point. (John Barth and the Aesthetics of Artifice", p. 68)

6 John Barth, Giles Goat-Boy (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Crest, 1966), p. 37. All other references to this work shall appear in the text, with the title abbreviated to GGB.

7 Richard Nolan blithely states:

"It is of no great importance in the novel, but it is interesting to note that Ebenezer Cooke was a real person." [Richard Nolan, "John Barth and the Novel of Comic Nihilism," Contemporary Literature, No. 7 (Autumn 1966), p.250.]

Perhaps it is not important in the novel, but it is definitely crucial to the novel inasmuch as this added fact enlarges our awareness of what Barth is doing in merging the factual with the imagined. Cooke's actual existence is as important as the fact that the novel is set in an historically accurate Maryland, peopled partially with characters who actually lived and participated in the political life of Dorchester County at the time.

⁸ See Chapter III and the "Principle of Metaphoric Means," p. 154.

⁹ "John Barth: An Interview," p. 7.

¹⁰ John Barth, The Sot-Weed Factor (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1960), pp. 5-9. All other references to this work shall appear in the text, with the title abbreviated to SWF.

¹¹ This bawdy view of the process of fictional parturition is one that recurs in later works. One "creates" fiction by coupling with the muse in The Sot-Weed Factor. In Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera the act of literary creation and the relationship between author and reader is consistently seen in sexual terms. In the story "Lost in the Funhouse," Ambrose's sexual anxieties merge with those of the author concerning his creative potency, and this anxiety acts as the backdrop against which the other stories operate. In "Dunyazadiad", the genie asserts that the writing of fiction is an act of love (not rape), a coupling of the articulating voice and the listener.

¹² A full explanation of the allegorized names and terms used in Giles Goat-Boy is much too involved to include in the body of the thesis. The central allegory is that of the universe as University. Thus a number of terms such as "Founder," "passage," "flunking," "Commencement,"

"Dean o' Flunks," require little explanation. However, in addition to translating the universe into the University, Barth has given many of his characters traits which are identifiable with those of fairly recognizable figures from the near and far past. The figures alluded to range from Socrates and Dante to John and Jacqueline Kennedy. For this reason, the reader is directed to the Appendix, where a glossary giving the equivalents of most of the major characters and terms can be found.

Further help in decoding Giles Goat-Boy is given in John W. Tilton's article, "Giles Goat-Boy: An Interpretation," Bucknell Review, No. 18 (Spring 1970), pp. 93-119, which very thoroughly plots the allegorical course the novel takes, not only in its close adherence to the hero motif, but also in explanation of topical references.

13 Tatham, p. 71.

14 As if to reinforce comically this notion, Barth endows each of the main characters with a sexual quirk. Max, as seen, is interested in the "sphincter's riddle" and has taken to the goat-barns for reasons that are not, we are permitted to infer, totally altruistic. Hedwig and Kennard Sear compulsively seek any decadent sexual experience that offers itself, from group sex to homosexuality to voyeurism, in order to alleviate their ennui. Anastasia is simply nymphomaniacal. Eierkopf is impotent and Croaker surcharged with animal lust. Ira Hector commits incest. Virginia Hector, George's virgin mother, is impregnated by a computer, and Peter Greene indulges in adulterous miscegenation.

15 Joseph, p. 16.

16 Bryant, p. 299.

17 "John Barth: An Interview," p. 8.
18 See also Hutcheon, pp. 96-98.

CHAPTER III

LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE and CHIMERA

If forms exhaust themselves under the glare of authorial self-consciousness, then a form which takes this very notion as its raison d'être can be said, in one sense, to be the self-appointed "ultimate" fictional form. In Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera Barth seeks, through a number of shorter fictions, to perfect that form. In these two collections, Barth moves fully into the realm of metafiction--that fiction which addresses itself to an apocalyptic fictional ambience, engages the reader as a co-participant in the process of fictional creation, and thus by extension points to a mutuality in the relationship between life and artifact, reader and author, self and others.¹ Most of the stories deal with apocalyptic or "ultimate" situations, whether personal, fictional or otherwise, and do not resolve them so much as suggest paradoxically means by which they can be put off indefinitely. The means suggested is, in fact, the articulation of the ultimacy: the created fiction, by being produced, forestalls the very annihilation which is its main theme. Only insofar as this ultimate metafictional form can exhaust itself does extinction exist as a possibility. (Even so, this extinction will be turned by Barth into a positive statement concerning the regeneration of art.) Indeed, as the latter stories point out, this extinction befalls us all eventually, and it is the tension that exists between the constantly articulating voice and ultimate extinction which serves to keep the

fictional impulse alive. However, to the degree that fictional forms are exhausted for the metafictionist, the concept of the immortality of art (or its power to immortalize) is refuted. What the anonymous minstrel of "Anonymiad," Menelaus, Perseus, and Bellerophone come to see when they appear in Barth's fiction, is that the acceptance of mortality, personal, fictional, or universal, is a corollary to a metafictional world view. By seeing the world in fictional terms, they learn, one finds a means merely to deal (however imperfectly) with the enormity of life, not ascend beyond it to immortality.

What distinguishes this phase of Barth's work from the previous two is the thoroughness with which this metafictional stance is rendered through the various aspects of his work. Characteristically, this is undertaken quite self-consciously. In his "Seven Additional Notes" to Lost in the Funhouse, Barth outlines his governing aesthetic principle:

. . . the regnant idea is the unpretentious one of turning as many aspects of the fiction as possible--the structure, the narrative viewpoint, the means of presentation, in some instances the process of composition and/or recitation as well as of reading or listening--into dramatically relevant emblems of the theme.²

In Lost in the Funhouse, Barth explores the possibility of the viability of fiction in other media--tape, live voice, Moebius strip--to underline the difference between our usual conception of the format of fiction (words on a page) and the urge to fictionalize by recounting or accounting for what goes on. Since the ambience of this stage of Barth's fiction is apocalyptic and self-conscious, the author-figure re-emerges as a personable figure in it. This author-figure manifests his "personality" (i.e. fictionality) by addressing the reader directly or articulating

his fears and concerns to a listener- or reader-figure. Since there is an urgency to the authorial voice, it comes as no surprise to find the tone of these last two works to be one of almost frantic desperation. This tone also serves to underscore the necessity for Barth of dealing in shorter fictions. If fiction is itself limited in its power to account for the world, because one view of the world is hopelessly inadequate, there must exist a multiplicity of views, constantly re-shaped, in order for the fiction to adhere as closely as possible to the "regnant idea" espoused by Barth. In addition, as the author-heroes of the fictions come, like Jake Horner, to view articulation as that which postpones literal or figurative extinction, there arises a concomitant prolixity, something which Barth parodies quite successfully in "Bellerophoniad" and "Lost in the Funhouse". As we shall see, the fictions, as they are considered as a series, move toward an inexorable exhaustion defiantly chattering into the void. As Barth writes "Bellerophoniad", he culminates his previous copies into his final story, exhausting as he does so the very metafictional form used to discuss the exhaustion.

Lost in the Funhouse, although its primary theme can be said to be the fictional nature of existence and its attendant articulation, considers other themes corollary to those. Since a metafictional form is suited to a consideration of life vis à vis art, it can also be suited to an examination of a number of sets of distinctions taken for granted: language and referent, self-curiosity and love of others, sexual and creative urges. In Lost in the Funhouse Barth, echoing George Giles, suggests that the distinctions we draw between these sets are ill-conceived. If life and art are merely manifestations of the same urges

or forces, so too are the other sets. Implied in this partial identification of opposites is the analogous relationship of one set to the other. The metaphysical crises generated by a consideration of life and art are similar to those generated by a consideration of self and others, et cetera. Since Barth exemplifies this similarity in fiction, the corollary distinctions may be said to be subsumed in that of fictional life. This is the consideration that frames the others.

The series begins appropriately with a "Frame-Tale," which when assembled by the reader according to instructions, turns into a Moebius-strip, one-sided and infinite, a paradox emblematically formed. What is paradoxical about the Moebius-strip, and what makes it the perfect embodiment of the metaphor of "storyness", is, as Barth points out, that it can be considered one-dimensional (it has but one side), two-dimensional (it is an endless plane), or three-dimensional (it exists in space) (LF, p. ix). In the same way the story may be said to exist simultaneously in each of those three dimensions, or in none of them. Fiction exists abstractly, and yet upon becoming artifact, partakes of a physical existence in time and space, governed by decay and regeneration. However, the "story" written on the strip is itself the distillation of the fictional impulse. The words of the "story" are "Once upon a time there was a story that began" Linked as they are on the strip, the words become an endless story of stories: "Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time . . . ". Besides being an embodiment of the multi-dimensionality of fiction, it is also a story that goes on forever, and thus an emblem of the timelessness of the urge to articulate. This is indeed the ultimate frame-tale of

fiction inasmuch as all of fiction can be said to be contained in it. It is moreover, the quintessence of self-conscious fiction.

Barth moves from such an abstract consideration of fiction in "Frame-Tale" to the examination, in "Night-Sea Journey," of the ontological insecurity and anxiety of a sperm cell as he swims, beyond his assent or control, to his destination with an amorphous "Her". "a mysterious being, indescribable except by paradox and vaguest figure" (LF, pp. 9-10). His night-sea journey is characterized by two forward surges followed by a lull in which the sperm, along with at least one fellow cynic, considers the weighty issues of who he is and where he is going. His attitude towards swimming, or life's journey, is reminiscent of the fatigue and lack of enthusiasm characteristic of Todd Andrews and Jake Horner. "Swimming itself I find at best not actively unpleasant, more often tiresome, not infrequently a torment" (LF, p. 4). The narrator-sperm sees his very existence as absurd. In the moments of rest, he searches vainly to satisfy himself of his purpose. Admitting that he may have a Maker, he cannot know what this Maker's motives were in creating him, and cannot see the system that decides who among the spermatazoa may live. His cynical companion regales him with a number of theories concerning their Maker. This cynic-sperm posits that the Maker made them not on purpose, but actually "despite himself" (LF, p. 6). His speculations expand to include suspicions that the Maker makes "other seas and swimmers, at more or less regular intervals" (LF, p.6), and that sometimes he wishes that the sperm could be "unmade," and indeed sometimes tries to keep them from reaching Her. The speculation moves into, for the hero-sperm, the unthinkable notion that their Maker is not, as it were, spermatomorphic,

nor indeed immortal, but one of millions of Makers living in a different order of existence and far from endowed with divine qualities. Consequently, the narrator-sperm can see no purpose to his existence that is not absurd, and hence, feels that his life is meaningless:

. . . these . . . same intervals that keep me afloat have led me into wonder, doubt, despair--strange emotions for a swimmer--have led me, even, to suspect . . . that our night-sea journey is without meaning.

Indeed, if I have yet to join the hosts of suicides, it is because (fatigue apart) I find it no meaningfuller to drown myself than to go on swimming. (LF, p. 4)

This is exactly the reasoning that Todd employs in his circumvention of "meaningful" action in The Floating Opera.

The sperm rejects the existential advice of others who counsel him to "embrace" the absurdity of the swim, and to find compassion for fellow-swimmers for sharing the same absurd fate. The sperm then explains why he chooses neither to embrace the swim nor kill himself: "I continue to swim--but only because blind habit, blind instinct, blind fear of drowning are still more strong than the horror of our journey" (LF, p. 5). However, as Richard Boyd Hauck points out, all choices in an absurd world are absurd. Indeed the sperm's choice is more absurd than his fellows':

. . . even as he rejects these alternatives, he is dedicating himself to the more intrinsically absurd, if not the more dramatically absurd, solution: swimming on in the full awareness of the absurdity of swimming on. He does not reject the absurd mode after all; where others say nay or yea, he says both at once.³

The simultaneity of contradictory attitudes again brings us back toward Todd and Jake, and by extension, to the position that the author must take vis a vis the raw material of his fiction. In order to write fiction,

the author (Todd's and Jake's roles as their own chroniclers reinforces their pseudo-nihilist poses) must both affirm and deny the life that he must simultaneously be a part of and apart from. That man has come, like the sperm, to affirm and abjure what he sees to be the absurdity of his own life points merely to life's "fictional" nature. It is necessary for the author, and indeed for anyone who fictionalizes existence, to be aware of the paradoxical nature of his existence as defined by his terms, and to see those terms as arbitrary agents of reference that must be transcended by an understanding of the power of those terms not only to transmit but sometimes to obfuscate. The sperm fails to move beyond the distinctive terms of his existence: "Her" is for him the "Other", inimical to his highly developed awareness of self. Their complementary natures, which ultimately serve to abolish any distinction between the two, are not apparent to the narrator-sperm.

The sperm is nevertheless drawn toward Her, helpless against her tidal power. According to the cynic-sperm, whose speculation of Her is said to be his "maddest notion," the end of the journey, given a Her, could be described "only in abstractions: consummation, transfiguration, union of contraries, transcension of categories" (LF, pp. 9-10). Furthermore, only one sperm out of billions the "Hero" is to be allowed to make it to the end of this journey and be united with Her. The Hero in this case is he who proceeds to and encounters the mysteries of existence denied others. Upon this encounter, the Hero becomes immortalized and transfigured. When the Hero and "Her" merge, according to the cynic, they "become something both and neither" themselves (LF, p. 10) (as they do verbally, of course: HER/O). Yet the realization that "the issue of

that magical union had no memory of the night-sea journey . . ." (LF, p. 10) renders the immortality achieved meaningless to the Hero-sperm. As Hauck points out: "The union is an ambiguous event, just as traditional mystical union with the godhead is ambiguous: it is ecstasy but it is also intellectual annihilation."⁴ The sperm is a creature ideally suited to speculating about the integrity of self and the danger involved in contact with the "Other." The sperm lives out a paradox: his function in life is inimical to his existence as sperm, and awareness of this fact constitutes a type of curse. At the same time, he comes into being only to fulfill that function. Ironically, for all his awareness, the sperm cannot grasp the grand design of which his life is so crucial a part. He is too self-involved to imagine it. His powerlessness in the face of the forces which surround him engenders a desperate denunciation of love, that power said to have generated him, and which is responsible for the qualified immortality he is about to receive:

What has fetched me across this dreadful sea is a single hope . . . : that You [who he is about to become] may be stronger-willed than I, and that by sheer force of concentration I transmit to you . . . a private legacy of awful recollection and negative resolve . . . my dream is that some unimaginable embodiment of myself (or myself plus Her if that's how it must be) will come to find itself expressing, in however garbled or radical a translation, some reflection of these reflections. (LF, pp. 11-12)

The fact of the story's existence ironically fulfills this prophecy. The sperm instructs the author into whom he has been transfigured (indeed an "unimaginable embodiment" from the sperm's point of view) to deny this force which destroys consciousness: "'Hate love!'" (LF, p. 12). The irony of this instruction is that the sperm's very existence depends on this night-sea journey which is itself generated by this imponderable

force. Existence precedes consciousness, and consciousness is generated out of the curiosity concerning this force that drags the sperm, kicking and screaming, to his fate.

"Night-Sea Journey" is placed strategically at the beginning of a series of "fictions" that is a rough analogue of the cycle of life. Beginning with a frame-tale that distills the basic urge to utter forth experience, it is followed by a story that is concerned, literally and artistically, with conception. The Ambrose stories chart the parallel courses of growing up and self-awareness, merging in Ambrose's dilemma in "Lost in the Funhouse," after which the authorial concern widens to include the crisis that faces culture and society as, in their increasing self-consciousness, they come face to face with the void that lies beyond their conventions and language.⁵

Following "Night-Sea Journey" is "Ambrose His Mark," one of three Ambrose stories, each showing Ambrose at successively older and more crucial stages of his life. "Ambrose His Mark" deals with the way in which Ambrose comes to get his name. Ambrose's grandfather, wishing to brew mead, contrives to spirit away the bees of his next-door neighbor Willy Erdmann by setting up a hive as close to the latter's as possible. At the same time Ambrose, as yet only dubbed Christine in honour of Garbo in Anna Christie by his mother Andrea (she had hoped for a daughter), is publicly suckled by her in the backyard. This serves not only to titillate Grandfather and sundry passers-by in the alleyway and cause scandal (Ambrose's father was by this time in an asylum for asserting that Ambrose was not his, and for bursting into the delivery room to pronounce the mark on his face a devil's mark) but to keep Erdmann from attempting to

sabotage Grandfather's hive. One Sunday the prodigal bees cross the alleyway to swarm on Andrea's breasts (causing her to swoon away), and consequently on the face and head of Ambrose. In the uproar that ensues one ill-tempered bee stings Andrea on the breast, an event that signals the end of her involvement in Ambrose's feeding, and which occasions the family's determination to give Ambrose, at long last, his name.

Ambrose's name, recalling as it does the bee-swarmer of Saint Ambrose in his youth and his subsequent reputation as a great speaker, is an appropriate one to bestow. In addition, Ambrose's role as narrator of this story confirms the prophetic foreshadowing of his wordcraft. His relationship to his name is ambivalent, and suggests the greater ambivalent fascination he will have toward language itself in "Lost in the Funhouse":

As towards one's face, one's body, one's self, one feels complexly toward the name he's called by, which too one had no hand in choosing. It was to be my fate to wonder at that moniker, relish and revile it, ignore it, stare it out of countenance into hieroglyph and gibber, and come finally if not to embrace at least to accept it with the cold neutrality of self-recognition, whose expression is a thin-lipped smile. Vanity frets about his name, Pride vaunts it, Knowledge retches at its sound, Understanding sighs; all live outside it, knowing well that I and my sign are neither one nor quite two. (LF, p. 32)

Unlike the headstrong sperm, Ambrose sees language as a double-edged sword, not simply serving inertly to transmit raw thought into expression, but creating meaning and confusion on its own. Being able to recognize this latter function of language, Ambrose is well suited to a life of wordcraft. Cursed with intelligence and consciousness, he comes to his highly qualified sense of self-awareness by recognizing the

arbitrariness of such a gesture as that of his naming, a gesture which he enlarges upon by narrating the circumstances surrounding it. His intention in doing so is not to create a myth of self which might serve to assert self-worth, but to comment upon the peculiarity of the relationship between words and their referents. This comment is essentially about fiction and art.

His own naming follows an outrageous sequence of accidents at the origin of which is a desire created by a work of art (Grandfather Thomas' craving for mead, inspired by a recitation of MacPherson's Ossian.) Thus "Ambrose" is the end-result of a forgery, and his identity will always remain fictional . . . Andrea is stung on the breast, so that the medium which ostensibly nourishes the self is also "enflamed with venom."⁶

Ambrose's ambivalence towards words reflects a realization of this latter fact; words are necessary to a sense of self, but they can also exacerbate its excesses, as we saw in "NS-J". Unremitting self-examination is to be Ambrose's fate by the end of the last of the Ambrose stories, ultimately manifested in the choked and garbled narrative of "Lost in the Funhouse." Indeed unremitting examination of anything tends to blanch the object perceived and draw attention to the process of examination. The object examined as a result becomes on one level an ikon, as it were, of the process of examining it, a vessel through which the mind becomes aware of its power. This notion is explored evocatively by Barth in the Ambrose stories, but more succinctly and emblematically in "Glossolalia," in which six glossolalists utter forth short incomprehensible bursts of language, of which we as readers are invited to make sense, to become authors ourselves. In his "Seven Additional Author's Notes," Barth addresses himself to the apparent opacity of "Glossolalia," and by

extension, to this notion of language's informing power:

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

In "Autobiography" Barth moves from human to fictional self-examination. Designed for tape, the speaking voice is that of the story itself. (Barth claims paternity, and ascribes motherhood to the tape-recorder.) The story's rambling anxiety over who or what it is, is the attempt to "compose" itself:

I see I see myself as a halt narrative: first person, tiresome. Pronoun sans ante or precedent, warrant or respite. Surrogate for the substantive; contentless form, interestless principle; blind eye blinking at nothing. Who am I. A little crise d'identité for you. (LF, p. 33)

This identity crisis echoes Ambrose's. The story admits, "My first words weren't my first words . . . Among other things I haven't a proper name. The one I bear's misleading, if not false. I didn't choose it either" (ibid.). As it gains momentum the story comes to account for its history, and achieves a measure of self-recognition. Paradoxically, one of its realizations is that it may lack consciousness:

I perceive that I have no body. What's less, I've been speaking of myself without delight or alternative as self-consciousness pure and sour; I declare now that even that isn't true. I'm not aware of myself at all, as far as I know. I don't think . . . I know what I'm talking about. (LF, p. 35)

Despite its inability to know itself ("I don't think"), the story's story of itself ("I know what I'm talking about"), does, if by nothing else than definition, come to be a story. As unself-conscious self-consciousness, the story stands as the fictional impulse distilled, lacking form and intention, in a state of childlike self-amazement.

"Water-Message", the second of the Ambrose stories, continues this theme of growing childlike self-awareness, dealing with the awakening of imaginative and sexual awareness in Ambrose as he confronts two very mysterious experiences which, though they seem to be unrelated, are linked dimly by Ambrose's groping imaginative energy. This energy is manifested throughout most of the story in innocent daydreaming, the assignment of ritual significance to the club his brother forms, and thinking up humorous things to say to appease his tormentors. He is even imaginative enough to assent to the notion that he is not quite old enough for "initiation" into life, a sentiment shared by the story in "Autobiography" with respect to its fitness to be considered fictional. Ambrose is not resentful at having been denied membership in the Occult Order of the Sphinx, his brother Peter's secret club, despite the fact that it was he who conceived the name. As he says: "Let little kids into your Occult Order: there would go your secrets all over school" (LF, p. 44). Ambrose accordingly has a reverential awe of hidden knowledge and language's "compound code":

And the secrets were the point of the thing
It would be a secret club--secret passwords, secret initiations. But these he felt meant nothing except to remind you of the really important thing which was--well, hard to find words for, but there had to be the real secrets, dark facts known to none but the members. You had to be initiated to find them out--

that's what initiation meant--and when you were a member you'd know the truth of the matter and smile in a private way when you met another member of the Order because you both knew what you knew
(LF, p. 44)

The Occult Order is the boyish effort at transforming the banal into the exotic, to search beneath the surface for "dark" secrets of life. Even though Ambrose is not yet initiated into the Order, he is initiated into life by encountering a dark episode that takes place in the hut belonging to the Order, and learning the rudiments of imaginative interpretation needed to understand events of that kind.

The members of the Occult Order, with the younger Ambrose and Perse Glotz tagging along, are shocked when they stumble upon Tommy James and his girlfriend Peggy Robbins in their hut, in an obvious but unspecified carnal encounter. Peggy Robbins occupies an important place in Ambrose's heart, hovering dimly and semi-erotically in his romantic fantasies, indulging his crush on her with remarks such as "How's my lover today?" What went on inside the hut, and what the older boys find in there to their prurient delight later on, Ambrose can only guess at. However, it is in his guessing that he is able to glimpse a truth about the encounter by observing certain details of Tommy James's comportment:

Ambrose's stomach felt tied and lumpy He could not bear to think of the mustachioed boyfriend: that fellow's wink, his curly hair, his leather jacket over white shirt and green tie, filled Ambrose's heart with comprehension; they whispered to him that whatever mysteries had been in progress in the Den, they did not mean to Wimpy James's brother what they meant to Peggy Robbins. (LF, p. 49)

Ambrose is not let in on the secret, but he is able to glean one of its characteristics by collating imaginatively what he has seen. He knows now that the mysterious goings-on meant different things to each of the participants. This confirmation of a multiplicity of points of view concerning the same event helps him to see the world as other than necessarily monolithic and hostile to him. As we have seen, a recognition of the world's pluralistic nature is, for Barth, a necessary prerequisite for an understanding of the fictional character of existence.

The second mystery Ambrose confronts occurs when he fishes out of the water a bottle with a message in it. At the top of the page is written "To whom it may concern" and at the bottom "Yours truly". There is nothing written in between. This gratuitous greeting, across time and space, is the quintessential impulse both of fiction and of love, and appears later in "Anonymiad" and "Bellerophoniad", travelling not only from person to person but, appropriately enough for Barth's painfully self-conscious fiction, from story to story. The greeting is generated out of an impulse to articulate. This impulse itself serves two sometimes conflicting functions. On the one hand, it attempts to account for oneself, to declare oneself and one's experience to the world, and ultimately finds its expression in fiction or art. The complement of this impulse to articulate is merely the curiosity to know about the Other to whom the greeting is addressed, and the world in general, in order to arrive at a shared view of existence. This complementary impulse finds its ultimate expression in love, which in Barth's universe is merely that inexplicable force that draws people to one another, a force which, as witnessed by "Night-Sea Journey," is ambivalent in its effects and inimical to a sense of differentiated self. Ambrose's two experiences

are, one can infer, identified with one another. The mysteries surrounding the occurrence in the hut and the message in the bottle are the two complementary halves of the urge to articulate: to establish a sense of differentiated self, and to engage one's fellows. Ambrose is able to recognize the link between the two events even though he cannot as yet express it. They draw Ambrose both into and out of himself. However, it is important to note that the revelations offered up by these two experiences are incomplete and fuzzy. The urge to articulate, both with respect to its manifestation in love and in self-assertion, is never fulfilled.

The secret identity, or lack of identity of the author of this strange letter brings Ambrose to a pause in his "fever of imagining." Confronted with new and imponderably deeper secrets to discover, Ambrose moves into a new more serene stage of selfhood. The two events become, as Max Schulz points out, "harbingers of Ambrose's future"⁷ as he shall try to complete in his life what was left undone that day:

Ambrose's spirit bore new and subtle burdens.
 . . . Tonight, tomorrow night, unhurriedly, he
 would find out from Peter just what it was they
 had discovered in the den and what-all done:
 the things he'd learn would not surprise now
 nor distress him, for though he was still inno-
 cent of that knowledge, he had the feel of it
 in his heart, and of other truth. (LF, p. 53)

The other truth that he feels is the "logic" of imagination which vaults past the objectively apparent and arrives at an understanding not so much of the "hidden" event as its own power.

Using that power, Ambrose makes a final ingenuous observation as the story closes. He notices, for the first time, that there are bits of wood-pulp in the paper on which the mysterious note was written. The

wood-pulp triggers an inarticulate awareness of the paradoxically dual nature of fiction. The abstract notions by which art is generated must be recorded, or engraved as it were, in a physical medium. This, if nothing else, points to the ultimate mortality of art, about which Barth will have much to say in later stories.

The paradoxical duality of abstraction and physicality are further addressed in "Petition," a letter written by a nameless freak to "His Most Gracious Majesty Prajadhipok." A Siamese twin with a difference, this petitioner's belly is attached to the small of his brother's back. The anterior twin is the epitome of the physical world, gregarious, lusty, changeable; the posterior is withdrawn, studious, "detached as it were" (LF, p. 59), and bookish. The former, given to synthesis, denies their twinship; the latter, educated to discriminate, affirms it. No possibility seems to exist for cohabitation. The petition itself, a request that the potentate pay for surgery to separate the twins, is prompted by the desire of the twins to seek a love union with the same woman, in whom each appropriately sees a different person. The two, being embodiments of inseparable distinctions, cannot resolve their mutual antipathy; each wishes to be shed of the other. The maddening fact of their existence (and each man's duality) is summed up by the petitioner, who is himself appreciative of its finality:

"We have nothing in common but the womb that bore,
the flesh that shackles, the grave that must soon
receive us" (LF, p. 60)

Echoing George Giles, but failing to resolve like him the paradox of his state, the petitioner enunciates the trap man perceives himself to be in: "To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither is unspeakable" (LF, p. 63). It attests to the failure of static language

to account for, even though it may partially create, the multi-dimensionality of existence.

In "Lost in the Funhouse" the paradoxical relationship between sexual and fictional urges is explored. Both of these urges were dimly foreshadowed in Ambrose's calm and detached assurance of their inevitability at the conclusion of "Water-Message." The story itself is a halting, disorganized narrative of Ambrose's family's trip to Ocean City for a day at the seaside. The uncertainty with which the story proceeds, punctuated as it is by authorial intrusions that discuss the story's progress and the author's dissatisfaction at the lack of same, reflects the uncertainty in Ambrose's adolescent mind. The story opens with the theme of adolescent uncertainty in the face of sexuality. "For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion" (LF, p. 69). The self-conscious use of italics is then commented upon in an authorial intrusion. The self-consciousness of such an intrusion, whether Ambrose is narrator or not, reflects Ambrose's self-consciousness, both when charting his sexual fantasies, and in respect to his attitude towards words. Indeed this same use of italics is seen in "Water-Message": ". . . by looking at his arm a certain way he could see droplets standing in the pores. It was what they meant when they spoke of breaking out in a cold sweat" (LF, p. 49).

In this way the narrative moves, like Ambrose's well thought-out fantasies. What becomes evident as we proceed through the story is that the image of the funhouse, labyrinthine, full of grotesquely distorting mirrors, is one that is analogous to the story itself. We are, like Ambrose, lost in a maze of truncated narrative and unwieldy exegesis:

The funhouse . . . is a metaphor for the labyrinths of existence Barth seizes on the mirror room of the funhouse, and on Ambrose's "coming of age" there, as a rendering of modern man's (and the contemporary novelist's) search through the distortions and "endless replication of his image in the mirrors" for ontological confirmation of his existence.⁸

The funhouse is in one sense Ambrose's own mind, and that of its author too, both of whom reflect upon themselves almost to the point of paralysis. Ambrose's fate upon being lost inside the funhouse is to imagine, with the same lack of assurance as the narrative, what that fate will be, which is the perfect paradigm of the author's dilemma in this whole series of fictions. Being lost in the labyrinths of fictional modes, the author writes a story about how to confront imaginatively this dilemma. This is an inwardly spiralling operation; by the way in which Barth controls the story and its setting in a larger work of the same name, Ambrose finds himself lost in the funhouse in "Lost in the Funhouse" in Lost in the Funhouse.⁹ By the story's end, Ambrose significantly remains lost in the funhouse, imagining that his words are being faithfully recorded for posterity, and dreaming of bigger and better funhouses which he would invent and control. Thus the author who has ventured into this realm of "ultimacy," as Barth himself calls it, is condemned to wander there forever, being able, however, to imagine possible ways out of it. The inherent failure of articulation insures its survival, even when there seems to be nothing left to say. As this story and others in Lost in the Funhouse suggest, the self-consciousness thus produced is similar to the reflected images in the funhouse mirror: grotesque, constantly shifting, and grimly comical.

As we come to see, the imagined endings to his story are inextricably entwined with dreams of a qualified amorous success:

He died of starvation telling himself stories in the dark; but unbeknownst unbeknownst [sic] to him, an assistant operator of the funhouse, happening to overhear him, crouched just behind the plywood partition and wrote down his every word. The operator's daughter, an exquisite young woman with a figure unusually well developed for her age, crouched just behind the partition and transcribed his every word. Though she had never laid eyes on him, she recognized that here was one of Western Culture's truly great imaginations, the eloquence of whose suffering would be an inspiration to unnumbered. And her heart was torn between her love et cetera and her womanly intuition that only in suffering and isolation could he give voice et cetera. (LF, p. 92)

This self-romanticizing, while reflecting self-consciousness, is the very act of imagining oneself to be the hero of one's story and shows to what extent Ambrose fictionalizes his existence. It also demonstrates the peculiarly adversarial relationship between love and a sense of self that can be identified with the fictional urge. This relationship was explored in "Night-Sea Journey" and its general characteristics remain the same. Love and self deny each other, the former by nature abjuring a sense of differentiation from others, and the latter, especially when it leads to solipsism and purely intellectual curiosity, militating against a sense of selflessness and synthesis. Ambrose comes to suspect that his imagination, even while it entertains him with thoughts of his amorous successes, disqualifies him from them because of his desire to enact self-consciously all that his imagination presents him. Thus Ambrose finds that the funhouse is a place of "fear and confusion," while lovers revel in its entertainments. Only those who are spontaneous or unself-conscious make it through the funhouse without getting lost. Ambrose realizes that

he is not of their company and accepts his different role. His final thoughts in the story are those of the author who finds himself lost in the funhouse of self-awareness, and show that Ambrose conceives of himself, however reluctantly, as an artist malgré lui:

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

One notes in these words a resignation to a fate larger than oneself, as well as the peculiar combination of controlling power and helplessness that is the fictionist's lot, and which is the lot, given the arguably fictional nature of human existence, of everyone. The process of fictionalizing, of articulation, partakes simultaneously of the need to engage others and to be aware of one's role in doing so, which runs counter to the selflessness of the former need.

The opposition between the self-consciousness of the author and his need for engagement is placed in a mythic context in "Echo," a story of Narcissus' myth, retold by a voice in the form of Narcissus relating how he told the story of his myth to Tiresias in the prophet's cave, in a third person narrative. (Barth cryptically leaves us to wonder whether the voice is his, Tiresias's, Narcissus's, Echo's, or any combination of the four.) Since Narcissus' fate underlines the dangers of self-awareness, his role as apparent narrative vehicle suggests the danger of self-consciousness for the authorial voice, predictably unidentifiable and yet aware by virtue of addressing itself to the problem. To avoid the self-immersion that obtains from narcissism, Tiresias advises author-Narcissus to detach himself from his story. "One does well to speak in

the third person, the seer advises A cure for self-absorption is saturation: telling the story over as though it were another's until like a much-repeated word it loses 'sense" (LF, p. 95). The author obsessed with the crisis of himself vis a vis his fiction renders this situation into fiction by telling his story in the third person, thus continually renewing himself and his fiction in the face of exhausted forms and possibilities. At the same time, this articulation is a reaching out to others, with whom the totally solipsistic Narcissus is supposed to be afraid to be involved. Yet if this is Narcissus's story of his encounter with Echo, his death must perforce be part of the story. But the story goes on. The authorial voice (ironically on monophonic tape in this case, considering the multiplicity of identities in it), asks: "How is it this voice persists, whoever it is?" (LF, p. 99). It concludes by asserting that "his death must be partial as his self-knowledge, the voice persists, persists" (ibid.).

Faced with this problem, one may suggest that the voice belongs to Echo, driven by love of Narcissus. Her immortality would account for the persistence of the voice. In fact, her immortality consists of a petrified wasted body and an immortal, endlessly mimetic voice. She says nothing on her own, but merely repeats the words of others. This complete self-effacement is the price of her immortality. Thus if her words are those of others, whose are they, if not Narcissus'? Perhaps they are those of Tiresias, the seer who foretold Narcissus's fate. However, the story is told in the form of Narcissus telling the story to Tiresias. Given that Tiresias can see back and forth in time, he may indeed be narrating from the future that which Narcissus will be

narrating to him.¹⁰ A further complicated possibility is that it is Echo echoing Tiresias narrating Narcissus' narrative to him from the future. As the voice understates: "Can it be believed? . . . The story of Narcissus, Tiresias, Echo is being repeated" (ibid.). The reader is curious to know by whom, but this is never answered. The fourth possibility, of course, is Barth-as-author, but as he warns us, the voice may be any combination of the four. The "real" identity of the voice is never revealed. It is concealed well within the story. It is with reason that the voice says: "Thus we linger forever on the autognostic verge" (LF, p. 100). The anguished self-consciousness of the author who knows he is on the verge is counterbalanced by the need to give voice to this anguish and thus differentiate himself from it, since by "voicing" it he turns it into his fiction, something "other" than himself which "persists" after he dies. The relationship of the author to his fictional voice or language is the same as that of Ambrose to his name: anguished but inevitable.

The degree to which the author realizes himself in and apart from his fiction is more baldly examined in "Title" and "Life Story," where the subject is explicitly the fictionist's crisis of identity and art. Max Schulz notes that these stories are "paradigms of the creative process, the fictional characters realized only to the extent that their storyteller can self-consciously imagine himself as a distinct person."¹¹ "Title" is, as Barth describes it, a "triply schizoid monologue" (LF, p. x), and can be presented in six different media formats. The one prescribed by Barth is a stereophonic dialogue between two "sides" of the debate, in the same authorial voice, with the live author who "like Mr. Interlocutor between Tambo and Bones in the old showboat-shows, supplies

such self-interrupting and self-censoring passages as 'Title' and 'fill in the blank'" (LF, p. xi). This monologue, so Barth instructs us in his introduction to the book,

. . . addresses itself simultaneously to three matters: the "Author's" difficulties with his companion, his analogous difficulties with the story he's in the process of composing, and the not dissimilar straits in which, I think mistakenly, he imagines his culture and his literature to be. (LF, pp. x-xi. My emphasis.)¹²

The subject of the story, then, is the very story that is being told. Because of its subject, it is doomed to an ever inwardly regressing self-consciousness. Indeed the two debating voices, neither identifiably distinct from the other, plead for an end to it: "Somebody please stop me" (LF, p. 104). However, the story goes on, filling in the blanks, fulfilling the thematic bequest of "Frame Tale":

The final question is, Can nothing be made meaningful?
. . . If not, the end is at hand. Literally as it were. Can't stand any more of this.

. . . This is the final test. Try to fill the blank. Efface what can't be faced or else fill the blank. With words or more words, otherwise I'll fill in the blank with this noun here in my prepositional object Everything's been said already, over and over

What's new? Nothing. (LF, p. 102)

Like earlier Barthian characters, the schizoid voice realizes that the role of author affirms the "fictional" quality of existence. Something is made meaningful only when meaning is assigned to the "blank." It is assigned through language, "with words or more words." In this story the reader is invited to turn author, and fill in the blank himself. If nothing can be made meaningful, even by the filling of the void with language, then indeed the end is "literally" at hand, as it were. What cannot be faced is the void that remains to be filled. Despite the

necessary self-consciousness of the author who realizes the "vertigo attendant on his recognition" (LF, p. 85) of his role in assigning meaning, the blank must be effaced in order for this meaning to exist. "The storyteller's alternatives, as far as I can see, are a series of last words, like an aging actress making one farewell appearance after another, or actual blank" (LF, p. 108). Authorial self-consciousness invites the author (and the reader) to make a never-ending series of "final" statements on the state of his art, a prospect so intellectually rarefied and lifeless, the story implies, that readers will abandon the author to his fate. One half of the debating duo seems to plead the reader's case in the face of such prolix navel-gazing:

Historicity and self-awareness, he asseverated, while ineluctable and even greatly to be prized, are always fatal to innocence and spontaneity. Perhaps adjective period . . . In the name of suffering humanity cease this harangue. (LF, p. 106)

The author becomes so entangled in the mess of his own fiction, and in the responsibilities arising out of a view of existence as "fictional," that something must happen to his fiction in order to extricate him from it. The voice, or at least one of its schizoid parts, posits four alternatives to the crisis of fiction that has exhausted itself into solipsism:

The first is rejuvenation: having become an exhausted parody of itself, perhaps a form . . . may rise neo-primitively from its own ashes. A tiresome prospect. The second, more appealing I'm sure but scarcely likely at this advanced date, is that moribund what-have-yous will be supplanted by vigorous new: the demise of the novel and short story . . . needn't be the end of narrative art

The final possibility is to turn ultimacy, exhaustion, paralyzing self-consciousness and the adjective weight of accumulated history Go on. Go on. To turn ultimacy against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new

Silence. There's a fourth possibility, I suppose. Silence. General anesthesia. Self-extinction. Silence. (LF, pp. 105-106)

Of the four this story is a working-out of the third possibility, the same one Barth in "The Literature of Exhaustion" congratulates Borges for using.

. . . he writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work.¹³

In an impassioned self-wrangling the "voice" asserts that fiction must deal with people's lives: "what goes on between them is still not only the most interesting but the most important thing in the bloody murderous world, pardon the adjectives" (LF, p. 109). However such eloquence, as the story illustrates, is choked in the garbled idiom of self-consciousness:

And that my dear is what writers have got to find ways to write about in this adjective adjective hour of the ditto ditto same noun as above, or their, that is to say our, accursed self-consciousness will lead them, that is to say us, to here it comes, say it straight out, I'm going to, say it in plain English for once, that's what I'm leading up to, me and my bloody anticlimactic noun, we're pushing each other to fill in the blank. (LF, p. 109)

In the face of this effluence, one can credit the agonized tone of voice that predominates at the "end" of this story:

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

As the story has amply demonstrated, the blank at the end of it can never be filled because that would literally be the "end" of it. It is for the reader to imagine suitable "end"-ings.

"Life-Story" winds itself forever inward on the notion that if the nature of existence is "fictional," then it is natural to assume oneself to be a fictional character of a fiction "authored" by someone else. It is ostensibly a story of an author who suspects that he is a fictional character. This author-hero is also writing a story whose hero is an author who suspects that he is a fictional character, and so on. The "original" author searches for a "ground-situation," a state of affairs that would establish him as "real," and all the other layers of author-heroes as false. However, this ground-situation "obstinately withheld itself from his imagination" (LF, p. 114). Such self-consciousness is obsessive, even when the author-hero revolts against the type of story this ground-situation necessitates: "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus in infinitum! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes?" (*ibid.*). Such art is successful only when spontaneous and unself-conscious. However, true spontaneity cannot occur in art, which is by definition contrived. Such artistic spontaneity turns out to be artificial. Once the author becomes concerned with the state of fiction, its processes, "ground-situations" too become contrived. However, this fact is an admitted part of the fictional process in this story.

The author-hero of "Life-Story," himself progenitor of the endlessly replicating layers of other author-heroes like himself, wonders about his own author:

Now he understood that his author might as probably resemble himself and the protagonist of his own story-in-progress He too might wish to make some final effort to put by his fictional character and achieve factuality or at least figure in if not be a hero of a more attractive fiction, but be caught like the writer of these lines in some more or less desperate tour de force. (LF, p. 119)

Barth in this way contrives to speak about himself as a character in fiction, as well as literally to situate himself as a character in his story, a technique that will be pursued much more fruitfully in Chimera.

The distance that exists between teller and tale is bridged, and the two parts fused imaginatively in "Menelaiad," as it is later to be in the same manner in "Bellerophoniad." In these two stories, the main character and teller of the tale is immortalized by being transformed into his voice (like Echo), or in the case of "Bellerophoniad," into the pages of his story. Being the voice that tells his tale, the immortalized Menelaus, like the story-voice of "Autobiography," is not even aware of what he is telling, a most "telling" irony when seen in view of the painful efforts of the Menelaus in the story to come to a degree of ontological realization: "this isn't the voice of Menelaus; this voice is Menelaus, all there is of him. When I'm switched on I tell my tale, the one I know, How Menelaus Became Immortal, but I don't know it" (LF, p. 127). Menelaus having literally become "Menelaiad," is given life only when "switched on," that is, when there is someone there to hear him:

One thing's certain: somewhere Menelaus lost course and steersman, went off track, never got back on, lost himself, became a record merely, the record of his loosening grasp. He's the story of his life, with which he ambushes the unwary unawares. (LF, p. 128)

and selfhood: "" . . . curiosity undid him; how could he know her and not know how he knew?"" (ibid.). Menelaus is so haunted by self-doubt both with respect to his relationship with Helen and his own identity, that he leaves her with Paris to consult the Delphic oracle. The oracle's wordless answer to his question "Who am I?" lies at the centre of the concentric framing tales, and appropriately serves as the implosive climax which, in turn, triggers the climaxes of each successive frame-narrative. Abruptly confronted with the opacity of the principal mystery of his existence, Menelaus resolves to be "done with questions" (LF, p. 153), and hastens back to Helen, prepared to love and be loved by her. Unfortunately, he arrives to find Helen has gone, and it is to be eighteen years before he regains her. His search for a tangible reality, an Answer to his questions, fails. The story, itself a model of the bottomlessness of such an inwardly regressing search, offers up no final understanding: "Place and time, doer, done-to have lost their sense . . . re-entering Helen I understood that all subsequent history is Proteus, making shift to slip me . . ." (LF, p. 160).

Menelaus's immortality, like Echo's and like the sperm's apotheosis in "Night-Sea Journey," is purchased at the expense of consciousness. He turns into "Menelaiad" and is only aware of his former state to the extent that the story records it:

When I understood that Proteus somewhere on the beach became Menelaus holding the Old Man of the Sea, Menelaus ceased. Then I understood further how Proteus thus also was as such no more, being as possibly Menelaus's attempt to hold him, the tale of that vain attempt, the voice that tells it . . . Menelaus's carcass is long wormed, yet his voice yarns on through everything, to itself. Not my voice, I am this voice, no more, the rest

has changed, rechanged, gone. The voice too, even that changes, becomes hoarser, loses its magnetism, grows scratchy, incoherent, blank. (LF, p. 161)

In the same way that the "immortality" of the sperm in "Night-Sea Journey" is actually the mortality of another kind of existence, so too the immortality of storyhood for Menelaus is qualified by a slower attrition. Stories live longer than their tellers (as Perseus tells us in "Perseid"), but they too must meet their end. What is left that can be said to be immortal is the concept or force that generates such stories. In "Night-Sea Journey" consciousness is generated by a curiosity about love (the force that for better or worse, is the raison d'être of the story), as it is for Menelaus in "Menelaiad." The dual impulses of fiction and love are inextricably entwined:

I'm not dismayed. Menelaus was lost on the beach at Pharos; he is no longer, and may be in no poor case as teller of his gripping history. For when the voice goes he'll turn tale, story of his life, to which he clings yet, whenever, how-, by whom-recounted. Then when as must at last every tale, all tellers, all told, Menelaus's story itself in ten or ten thousand years expires, yet I'll survive it, I, in Proteus's terrifying last disguise, Beauty's spouse's odd Elysium: the absurd, unending possibility of love. (LF, pp. 161-162)

The series of fictions is completed by "Anonymiad," which recapitulates the odd relationship between love and fiction, and which, both in its expressed concerns and its specific location in the series, stands as the fitting endpiece to it. Like others in the series "Anonymiad" is the story of its own conception, gestation and composition. It is also the story of an author's confrontation with the demise of his craft, a situation that demands a statement of its "ultimacy." The nameless minstrel who is the hero-narrator of the story leads a life that stands as

an analogue of the progress of literature through the ages, from its pastoral innocence and spontaneity to its tortured self-wrangling. Singing songs of his own invention to two-score nans and his nymph Merope, and inspired by the latter's love, the minstrel, hoping to see his music whisk him "Orionlike to the stars" (LF, p. 167), sets off for the court of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Having won the admiration of the Queen for his songs, he and Merope move to the city so that he can ply his art full time. In time his dedication to and love for his art become separated from and supersede that which he feels for Merope: "The trouble with us minstrels is, when all's said and done we love our work more than our women" (LF, p. 177). His sophistication, cynicism, and indeed cowardice are displayed when he agrees to spy on Clytemnestra in Agamemnon's absence in exchange for the title of Chief Minstrel upon Agamemnon's return from Troy. However his anxiety concerning a lack of experience about the outside world undoes him. Aegisthus arrives in Mycenae and wastes no time setting about to seduce the Queen and Merope. Unself-conscious, lusty and spontaneous, Aegisthus charms the ladies and dramatically shows up the minstrel's inadequacies. His presence is proof to all, the minstrel included, that experience of the world is necessary for the preservation of vitality. The minstrel's fears that his limited experience of Mycenaean court life, passive at best, needs to be widened are heightened by the presence of Aegisthus, and render him vulnerable to the manipulations of not only Aegisthus, but also the Queen and Merope. Together they induce him to go on a small trip with Aegisthus along the coast, daring him not to believe what they have in mind for him: "'Don't forget,' he reminded me with a grin: 'I might be out to trick you! Maybe

I'll heave you overboard one night, or maroon you on a rock . . .'" (LF, pp. 181-182). At their first stop, Aegisthus clubs him unconscious and maroons him on an island with but nine amphorae of wine.

These events serve as the backdrop to the composition of the "Anonymiad," which is the subject of the story. The story itself, dealing with questions of epic importance--the history of literature and the nature of the creative impulse--begins, in epic convention, in medias res. Invoking the amphora as muse, he recapitulates his history in the head-piece:

Twice-handled goddess! Sing through me the boy
 Whom Agamemnon didn't take to Troy,
 But left behind to see his wife stayed chaste.
 Tell, Muse, how Clytemnestra maced
 Her warden into song, made vain his heart
 With vision of renown; musick the art
 Wherewith was worked self-ruin by a youth
 Who'd sought in his own art some music truth
 About the world and life, of which he knew
 Nothing. Tell how ardent his wish grew
 To autograph the future, wherefore he
 Let sly Aegisthus ship him off to see
 The Wide Real World. Sing of the guile
 That fetched yours truly to a nameless isle,
 By gods, men, and history forgot,
 To sing his sorry self. (LF, p. 163)

However, this epic work, written as it is at such a late date in the history of the minstrel's art (and by extension, the art of literature), is no longer in verse. Alone on the island, forced to husband as best he can his energy and art, and constrained by the limited materials at hand, the minstrel spends his time according to the last two stanzas of his appropriately names "Minstrel's Last Lay:"

Stranded by my foes,
 Nowadays I write in prose,
 Forsaking measure, rhyme, and honeyed diction;

Amphora's my muse:
 When I finish off the booze,
 I hump the jug and fill her up with fiction. (LF, p. 164)

The minstrel's stay on the island becomes a capsule history of literature. Armed at first only with his voice and a repertoire of Mycenaean minstrel-tunes committed to memory, the minstrel finds that the lack of audience and inappropriateness of the subject matter of the tunes are unsatisfactory for his present purposes. The unself-consciousness of the oral tradition hardly benefits a man stranded on an island, alone and deep in meditation over his plight. Thus the minstrel finds that he must devise a way of recording his material:

Artist through, I'd been wont since boyhood when
 pissing on beach or bank to make designs and clever
 symbols with my water. From this source . . .
 sprang now a torrent of inspiration: using tanned
 skins in place of a sand beach, a seagull feather
 for my tool, and a mixture of wine, blood, and
 squid-ink for a medium, I developed a kind of
 coded markings to record the utterance of mind
 and heart I came largely to exchange song
 for written speech, and when the gods vouchsafed
 me a further great idea, that of launching my
 productions worldward in the empty amphorae, they
 loosed from my dammed soul a Deucalion-flood of
 literature. (LF, p. 186)

The first two amporae are filled with "rehearsals of traditional minstrelsy" (ibid.). The third is filled with different versions of the Trojan war, with a number of alternate endings. Three jugs later, the first rumbling of what is to become the "ground-situation" of the "anonymiad" is heard:

By the seventh jug, after effusions of religious narrative, ribald tale-cycles, verse-dramas, comedies of manners, and what-all, I had begun to run out of world and material--though not of ambition, for I could still delight in the thought of my amphorae floating to the wide world's shores, being discovered by who knew whom, salvaged from the deep, their contents deciphered and broadcast to the ages I could soothe me with the thought that somewhere outside myself my enciphered spirit drifted, realer than the gods, its significance as objective and undecoded as the stars'. (LF, pp. 187-188)

The minstrel is undaunted by the paucity of material. He fills the seventh and eighth jugs with "long prose fictions of the realistical, the romantical, and the fantastical kind" and "comic histories of my spirit," (LF, p. 188) which correspond roughly to the rise of the novel and its increasing concern with internal experience, a concern which offers up a new source of material. As the minstrel runs out of world to treat, he treats himself more and more as the subject of his fiction, and by doing so affirms his ontological significance. However, the minstrel himself is subject to the attrition of time, and in one sense, exhausts himself insofar as he is a fit subject for fiction:

. . . if I had lost track of time, it had not of me:
I was older and slower, more careful but less concerned;
as my craft improved, my interest waned, and my earlier zeal seemed hollow as the jugs it filled.
Was there any new thing to say, new way to say the old?
(LF, p. 188)

The drying-up of this last source of material ushers in the state of formal "exhaustion" wherein there is nothing left to say. The minstrel's dilemma is the very one Barth describes in "The Literature of Exhaustion," and his way of addressing it is the one that Barth prescribes in that essay.¹⁵

In a fit of self-disgust, the minstrel smashes his eighth jug, and is forced to load its contents into the seventh. When the seventh sinks under its double weight, the minstrel's heart sinks "into the dullest deep" (LF, p. 188). He languishes in this state, one which brings us back to the sperm in "Night-Sea Journey" and Ambrose in his stories. He, like the sperm, is "a survival-expert with no will to live" (LF, p. 189). His "very name lost sense" (*ibid.*), like Ambrose's does when he thinks too much on it. A bottle, perhaps the one destined to float by Ambrose centuries later (and by Bellerophon generations earlier), floats by with an indecipherable parchment in it. From this occurrence a "new notion" comes to the minstrel: "I began to imagine that the world contained another like myself" (LF, p. 189). The possibility that a fellow-artist may exist and be communicated to (even if that artist is himself from another time) is sufficient to inspire the minstrel to compose his new type of fiction, the metafictional "Anonymiad," and this inspiration is the same as that which brings Ambrose to a pause in his "fever of imagining" in "Water-Story," and which vouchsafes him a vision of the future. Having written himself out, and by so doing fulfilling one half of the fictional impulse (that of self-assertion through his art) the minstrel is now subject to that complementary half of the impulse, which is the need for the asserted self to seek out and establish contact with others of his kind, whenever and wherever they may exist. This contact with another of one's "kind" is marked in metafiction, where the kinship between author and reader is quite explicitly underlined.

The task the minstrel sets himself in attempting to compose his "Anonymiad" is formidable. It would be both tragic and comic:

. . . when I reviewed in my imagination the goings-on in Mycenae, Lacedemon, Troy, the circumstances of my life and what they had disclosed to me of capacity and defect, I saw too much of pity and terror merely to laugh; yet about the largest hero, gravest catastrophe, sordidest deed there was too much comic . . . to sustain the epical strut or tragic frown . . . Whimsic fantasy, grub fact, pure senseless music--none in itself would do; to embody all and rise above each, in a work neither longfaced nor idiotly grinning, but adventuresome, passionately humored, merry with the pain of insight, wise and smiling in the terror of our life--that was my calm ambition. (LF, p. 191)

The arduousness of such a challenge is compounded by the rigours of necessity. In his languor, the minstrel failed to keep up the goat husbandry that furnished him with the skins necessary for the preservation of his art. As a result, there remained but a nan, dubbed Helen. In addition, the minstrel was left with one amphora in which to put his story. In the face of such constrictions, it is hardly surprising to find that the "Anonymiad" is far from what the minstrel had hoped for. With so much to say and so little vellum on which to say it, the minstrel is forced to cut corners and encapsulate. In Part 1-1/2, which as we come to see was composed after most of the story had been written, he justifies his mode of composition and the emendations necessitated by the shortage of time and skin. This justification amounts to a precis of the work itself:

What I had in mind was an "Anonymiad" in nine parts, reflecting (so you were to've nudged your neighbor and observed) the nine amphorae and ditto muses; or seven parts plus head- and tailpiece: the years of my maroonment framed by its causes and prognosis. The prologue was to've established . . . the ground-conceit and the narrative voice and viewpoint: a minstrel stuck on some Aegean clinker commences his story, in the process characterizing himself and

hinting at the circumstances leading to his plight. Parts One through Four were to rehearse those circumstances, Five through Seven the stages of his island life vis a vis his minstrelling--innocent garrulity, numb silence, and terse self-knowledge, respectively--and fetch the narrative's present time up to the narrator's. The epilogue's a sort of envoi to whatever eyes . . . may one day read it. But though yo-'re to go through the several parts in order, they haven't been set down that way: after writing the headpiece I began to fear that despite my planning I mightn't have space enough to get the tale told; since it pivots about Part Four, . . . I divided Lelen's hide in half to insure the right narrative proportions; then instead of proceeding with the exposition heralded at the tail of the headpiece, . . . [I] began in the middle, and wrote out Parts Five, Six, and Seven. Stopping at the head of the tailpiece, which I'm leaving blank for my last words, I returned to compose Parts One, Two, and Three, and the pivotal Part Four. But alas, there's more to the matter and less to my means than I'd supposed; for a while at least, I'll have to tell instead of showing; if you must have dialogue and dashing about, better go to the theater.

(LF, pp. 171-172)

This lengthy justification ironically exacerbates the problem of his dwindling resources, just as self-conscious fiction generally aggravates self-consciousness. Part Two is foreshortened into a brief summary; only samples of the narrative are given to provide the reader with a taste of what might have been written had circumstances been more favorable. By Part Three, even the summary is eschewed; Part Three itself is completely removed: "No use, this isn't working either, . . . Part Three, Part Three, my crux, my core, I'm cutting you out; _____; there, at the heart, never to be filled, a mere lacuna" (LF, p. 177). Part Four brings the minstrel finally to his island exile, and, according to the sequence in which the tale was written, to his final words.

The "Anonymiad" as conceived by the minstrel is a failure. The inspiration to write for another such himself forces the minstrel into self-consciously apologizing for the work before it is completed. The conditions of "ultimacy" which prevail--an exhaustion of narrative forms and paucity of writing material--dictate that the "Anonymiad" be chiefly concerned with them, since it is these conditions which define the story as a type of final statement. However, the final form of the "Anonymiad" does afford the minstrel some insights. This minstrel, who through his art wished to be whisked to the stars, finds in the "failure" of his art the serenity that eluded the sperm in "Night-Sea Journey." The minstrel at the end of his work comes to an acceptance of the impulses which paradoxically draw him both to his art and his lover, into and out of himself, and imaginatively recognizes their peculiar kinship. This contrasts sharply with the frantic refusal of the sperm to submit to Her in "Night-Sea Journey." The minstrel's closing words are to remind us of the difference between him and the sperm at the end of their respective journeys:

The water's fine; in the intervals of this composition
I've taught myself to swim, and if some night your
voice recalls me by a new name, I'll commit myself to
it, paddling and resting, drifting like my amphorae,
to attain you [Merope] or drown. (LF, p. 193)

The minstrel realizes that his art, far from being an end in itself, is merely the manifestation of an urge over which he has little control, but which, if only in its most elementary biological form, is regenerative. The minstrel learns not to hate love. He sees assertion of self and engagement of others as parts of a greater whole, and wordcraft as their medium, however inadequate it may be to account fully for these diametrically opposed forces:

It was my wish to elevate maroonment into a minstrel masterpiece; instead, I see now, I've spent my last resources contrariwise, reducing the masterpiece to a chronicle of minstrel misery I've ceased to care whether this is found and read or lost I have no doubt that by the time any translating eyes fall on it, I'll be dust, along with . . . Merope I could do well by you now, my sweet, to whom this and all its predecessors are a continuing, strange love letter. (LF, p. 193)

This notion of fiction as a manifestation of love (or its "absurd, unending possibility," as we recall from "Menelaiad" (LF, p. 162)), becomes Barth's dominant concern as we move into Chimera, especially as it seems to play a crucial role in the resolution of the problem of "exhaustion" or "ultimacy" faced by the author-hero. Although, like art, this contact between people necessarily fails, its qualified failure makes it possible, even necessary, for articulation to go on. As in "Menelaiad," one of the main points made in "Anonymiad" is that even art, that supposed vehicle to immortality, is eventually doomed to perish some time. This ironically assures its regeneration.

"Anonymiad," written as it is by the minstrel who "invents" literature, and situated as it is at the end of a series of fictions whose chief concern is the problem of "exhaustion," offers up no definitive statement on the resolution to this problem. As the minstrel points out in the tailpiece, "there's no denouement, only a termination or ironical coda" (LF, p. 193. My emphasis.). The irony of the coda lies in its very inconclusiveness. The "Anonymiad" begins in medias res ("I'll begin in the middle--where too I'll end. . ." (LF, p. 164)), and ends there, in the middle of the minstrel's life, "upon the noontime of his wasting day" (LF, p. 194). If we may imagine "Anonymiad" to be itself the coda of

Lost in the Funhouse, the recapitulated major theme of the series would seem to be the endlessness of the articulative urge, the theme anticipated in the "Frame-Tale" Moebius strip. This urge is the antidote for the incomprehensible void that stares out at us from the centre of all serious investigation into the reasons for our existence, and the possibility of universal, enduring truths. As Gerald Gillespie remarks: "Artifice is an ambiguous mystery created in response to life, its ultimate foil."¹⁶ Or, to echo the anguished voice in "Title": "Only hope is to fill the blank" (LF, p. 102). What survives is not the particular artist or work, but language itself, the articulative urge, subsumed in which are the twin impulses of self-assertion and -definition, and love. The sad wisdom afforded to Barthian heroes is the realization that this urge transcends mere men, encompasses them like the sea.¹⁷ The minstrel casts his corpus adrift in the sea, not finally caring about its fate, and is himself ready to plunge into the water to swim towards his Merope, a name which means "the eloquent."¹⁸ At a terrible price to his self-esteem, the author confronted by the exhaustion of his craft finds that, through using this very condition as the ground-conceit of his art, the problem can be handled. By articulating how precipitously close to the void he is, the author at once confronts it and is saved from it by language. To transcend himself, the author must go "swimming" in the sea of language.

The importance invested by the minstrel in his grand work is virtually absent by the end of "Anonymiad": "No matter. It is finished" (LF, p. 193). Even though he faces the "unwritable postscript" to his work in silence and without company, there is a notable lack of the type of anxiety heard and/or seen in "Title," "Lost in the Funhouse," or

"Night-Sea Journey." The realization of his own mortality and the qualified immortality of art is responsible for this, as is the recognition of the peculiar and simultaneous cross-tensions of love and art.

It is from this point that Chimera proceeds. The apparent anguish of the author-heroes in Lost in the Funhouse in the face of formal exhaustion is replaced, at least in "Duyazadiad" and "Perseid," by the power of the author-hero to create new forms through language's magical power. We have been prepared for this by Barth's earlier fiction. Even in the overtly realistical first two novels, Barth's intention is to demonstrate through the experiences of his characters that there is no "stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe."¹⁹ This is indeed the one unmistakable lesson perceived by Ebenezer and Giles. Having made us suspend our belief in the first four novels, Barth moves to a consideration of the implication that man, in creating fiction, creates his reality, that what he does in looking upon and interpreting his own life is the same thing the author does in fashioning his fiction. The anxiety perceived in many of the characters of Lost in the Funhouse stems from their insistence on continuing to view the two "worlds" created by this process to be antagonistic to each other, much in the same way that the demands of art and love are seen by most of the characters to be mutually exclusive. By the time we get to Chimera, we move beyond the question of the intelligibility of the world. We assume that the world is, in a final sense, unintelligible, but are not much bothered by the fact. What seems to take place, and what is indeed discussed by the Genie and Scheherazade in "Dunyazadiad," is a new understanding, perhaps even a new shared agreement as to where to

place the animistic "given" and the humanly created aspects of life. This acceptance of the unintelligible absurdity of the universe is partly due, as Joe David Bellamy suggests, to the increasingly surreal nature of reality,²⁰ and to an acceptance of the post-Newtonian notion that the governing tenets of existence are relativistic. Given these realizations, it is no longer necessary to insist on a generic difference between the reality of the external world and that of the creative imagination. In Chimera, they are both equally true and false according to the particular story. Art and life are freely interwoven in the three stories to the point where they can be said to be one tissue. One of the major correlates of this association is the notion discussed enthusiastically by Barth—the Genie and Scheherazade, that the interaction of author and reader is primarily erotic. Another is the very presence of Barth himself as a character in "Dunyazadiad" and "Bellerophoniad," as well as specific references to the body of his work and particular themes found in it, such as the floating opera, the framed tale, the menage à trois and triangles in general, cyclology and the pattern of heroic behaviour, and the crisis of the author and hero as they approach the mid-point of their lives.²¹ Each of the stories begins in medias res, overtakes the present and moves to its dénouement which, as one might suspect by this point, is no denouement at all.

If one assumes a universe devoid of absolutes, wherein life and one's view of it are indistinguishable and mix freely, and where no "ground-situation" exists by which to measure events, then the framed tale becomes a very effective structural paradigm of this universe, especially when so constituted as to indicate nothing tangible at the centre of the

frames. In "Dunyazadiad," Barth has written a framed tale about Scheherazade, that ultimate frame-tale-teller, whose tale-framing serves as a survival tactic and a gesture of extreme heroism. In much the same way, the particular manner in which "Dunyazadiad" is framed serves as a survival tactic for Barth. The endlessly spun-out tales do not in themselves alleviate the gynocidal crisis in the kingdom of Shahryar, but fill in the blank where execution takes place. As if to echo this fact, Barth appears as a Genie in the story to help out Scheherazade and at the same time count on her inspiration to save him artistically, inasmuch as he finds himself unable to continue as he has. In turn, the first part of the story is itself narrated by her sister Dunyazade to the latter's groom-to-be, Shah Zaman, himself brother to Shahryar, the virgino-cidal king. It is Part One which moves the narrative up to the present, which in this case is the wedding-night of the two kings Shahryar and Sha Zaman to Scheherazade and Dunyazade respectively. Part Two moves us up to the "gripping" climax as Shah Zaman, his member clasped by Dunyazade with a razor at its base, pleads for his life. Part Three is a direct address by Barth to the reader concerning the story's proper dénouement. In each of these three parts a particular person is addressed: in Part One, it is Shah Zaman, intended victim of castration; in Part Two, it is mainly Dunyazade; in Part Three, the reader. The effect of this is to establish the process of fictionalization as gregarious and binding. It serves to fill in the blank until the time comes for us to be no more. It is fiction which turns Shahryar into a loving husband, saves the sisters' lives as well as the life and honour of Shah Zaman.

In Part One, Scheherazade outlines the problems she must confront on the eve of her first night with Shahryar:

"'Little Donny,' she said dreamily, and kissed me: 'pretend this whole situation is the plot of a story we're reading, and you and I and Daddy and the King are all fictional characters. In this story, Scheherazade finds a way to change the King's mind about women and turn him into a gentle, loving husband Now, no matter what she finds--whether it's a magic spell or a magic story with the answer in it or a magic anything--it comes down to particular words in the story we're reading, right? And those words are made from the letters of our alphabet: a couple-dozen squiggles we can draw with this pen. This is the key, Donny! And the treasure too, if we can only get our hands on it! It's as if--as if the key to the treasure is the treasure!'"²²

Upon the uttering of these last words, a genie appears, none other than Barth himself from the future. Beset by his own crises, Barth-the-Genie is himself at an impasse. Thinking of a story in which a man realizes that the key to the treasure is the treasure, Barth wrote the words down and found himself immediately transported across space and time to Scheherazade and Duniyazade. Since the Genie has already read The Thousand and One Nights, he has but to transmit these stories to Scheherazade in time for her to tell them to Shahryar. In turn Scheherazade helps him to circumvent his artistic impasse by furnishing him the inspiration for the composition of "Duniyazadiad." As a result, in exchange for a thousand and one frame-tales, Barth himself is encased in a story. The author, the ultimate framer, is himself framed, thus structurally denying an absolute "ground-conceit" for the story. This very phenomenon is discussed by Barth and Scheherazade, in one of their many discourses on narrative and other arts:

They speculated endlessly on such questions as whether a story might imaginably be framed from inside, as it were, so that the usual relation between the container and contained would be reversed and paradoxically reversible. . . . Or whether one might go beyond the usual tale-within-a-tale . . . and conceive a series of, say, seven concentric stories-within-stories, so arranged that the climax of the innermost would precipitate that of the next tale out, and that of the next, et cetera, like . . . the chains of orgasms that Shahryar could sometimes set my sister catenating.

(Ch, p. 32)

The former example refers to the very story in progress, with Barth framed inside it. The latter frame-tale example refers to "Menelaiad," a story from another fictional as well as "real" time and place. These references to other works, other times and other worlds establish a sense of imaginative freedom and possibility that flies in the face of formal exhaustion. To an imagination faced with the seemingly total depletion of formats within which it can work, the fictionalization of that situation provides a way out.

The analogy between "Menelaiad"'s structure and Scheherazade's coital proclivities is the central one not only of "Dunyazadiad" but of the entire Chimera. In it, language and sexual intercourse are identified with each other as sources of regeneration and sustenance:

The Genie declared that in his time and place there were scientists of the passions who maintained that language itself, on the one hand, originated in 'infantile pregenital erotic exuberance, polymorphously perverse,' and that conscious attention, on the other, was a 'libidinal hypercathexis'--by which magic phrases they seemed to mean that writing and reading, or telling and listening, were literally ways of making love. Whether this was in fact the case, neither he nor Sherry cared at all; yet they like to speak as if it were (their favorite words), and accounted thereby for the similarity between conventional dramatic structure--its exposition, rising action, climax and denouement--and the rhythm

of sexual intercourse from foreplay through coitus to orgasm and release. Therefore also, they believed, the popularity of love . . . as a theme for narrative, the lovers' embrace as its culmination, and post-coital lassitude as its natural ground (Ch, pp. 32-33)

The Genie asserts, Scheherazade's reservations notwithstanding, that the teller's gender is masculine, the reader-listener's feminine:

Narrative, in short--and here again they were in full agreement--was a love-relation, not a rape: its success depended upon the reader's consent and co-operation, which she could withhold or at any moment withdraw; also upon her own combination of experience and talent for enterprise, and the author's ability to arouse, sustain, and satisfy her interest--an ability on which his figurative life hung as surely as Scheherazade's literal. (Ch, p. 34)

Thus the list of "paradoxically reversed" roles is fleshed out. Scheherazade, under threat of death, tells stories to the king to forestall execution, as Dunyazade listens and observes. Barth-the-author, beset with what may well be a terminal artistic condition, becomes a character inspired by the stories he had read of Scheherazade, herself not an author per se but a raconteuse who is told what to say by the Genie. And Dunyazade herself, the consummate listener, narrates this section of her story. As she finds out to her astonishment, even her life hangs in the balance. The reader himself is quite directly addressed by Barth-the-author in Part Three, and as the above quote testifies, it is he (she) upon whom life depends. If we suppose fictionalization in its widest sense to be the attempt to define one's ontological status, it does so only as it is credited by another person.

At the end of a thousand and one nights the Genie, who since the beginning of the arrangement had been working on his own series of three novellas (two of which were completed by this time--a veiled reference

to "Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad"), arrives to tell the two sisters that the stories have been used up. When asked to reveal what happens next, the Genie replies that there are multiple versions of the end of The Thousand and One Nights. His particular version ends with the double marriage of the sisters to Shahryar and his brother. Scheherazade, who was aware that the Genie was working on a fiction of his own, is astute enough to guess that the three of them may be part of the Genie's new fiction, and makes sure to ask him whether by "his version" he means the copy of The Thousand and One Nights from which he had been reading, or the fiction he was in the middle of composing. Thus Barth fully integrates life and art: he is a real-life author as well as character, and Scheherazade and Dunyazade are characters who are themselves aware of their fictional status. Barth-as-Genie calls attention to Barth-the-author by overtly acknowledging that the story is in the process of being created:

The Genie . . . repeated that he was still in the middle of that third novella in the series, and so far from drafting the climax and denouement, had yet even to plot them in outline. Turning then to me, to my great surprise he announced that the title of the story was Dunyazadiad; that its central character was not my sister, but myself (Ch, p. 40)

For the Genie, it is Dunyazade who is the archetypal figure facing narrative exhaustion. He terrifies her with the spectre of her approaching rendez-vous with fate, in so doing outlining the extent of her "ultimate" exhausted choices:

'All those nights at the foot of the bed, Dunyazade! . . . You've had the whole literary tradition transmitted to you--and the whole erotic tradition, too! There's no story you haven't heard; there's no way of making love that you haven't seen again and again And now it's your turn Shah Zaman has . . . had two thousand and two young women at the least since he killed his wife, and not one has pleased

him enough to move him to spend a second night with her, much less spare her life! What are you going to do to entertain him, little sister? Make love in exciting new ways? There are none! Tell him stories, like Scheherazade? He's heard them all! Dunyazade, Dunyazade! Who can tell him your story?' (Ch, p. 41)

The Genie promises to do his best to find a fitting and safe conclusion to the story. However, Scheherazade has plans of her own. Declaring her intention to strike a blow against the patriarchal order of things, she arranges to have herself and Dunyazade use razors on their husbands on their wedding-night. By promising them a new and unheard-of sexual delight, they are to bind their grooms spread-eagle on the bed, at which point, according to Scheherazade's instructions, they are to take the razors, prune their husbands, and choke them to death on their severed pendula. Then they are each to slit their throats to escape the wrathful revenge awaiting them. Part One ends as Dunyazade rehearses these final details to Shah Zaman, to whom all of Part One has been addressed, razor poised to strike at the base of his member.

As intended by Scheherazade, Dunyazade's recounting of the circumstances leading to Shah Zaman's predicament serves to reverse "not only . . . the genders of teller and told (as conceived by the Genie), but . . . their circumstances, the latter now being at the former's mercy" (Ch, p. 47). In Part Two, Shah Zaman, in order to escape certain death, does as Scheherazade did, and turns storyteller to save his life. The story he proceeds to tell her is an attempt to discredit the widely held notion that he had been taking a virgin to bed every night for two thousand and two nights and had her executed in the morning. (He had begun this practice at the same time as Shahryar, but had not had the good fortune to encounter a Scheherazade.) What really happened, he tells Dunyazade,

was that his vizier's daughter had come to him on the first night out of simple love, and had even offered to die when she heard of his gynocidal plan. Loath to marry her despite the love he comes to have for her, and torn between this love and a fear of what Shahryar might think of his failure to implement their plan of rape cum execution, Shah Zaman searched for a way out. The one offered by his mistress is the one that Barth himself adopts in his writing of Chimera: the use of the words "as if," the Genie's and Scheherazade's favorite words, the magic spell of fiction cast over what is to make something more suitable, to shore up the inadequacy of reality. "'To a person satisfied with seeming,'" Shah Zaman's mistress tells him, these words "'are more potent than all the genii in the tales'" (Ch, p. 57). Since the thrust of Barth's fiction is to demonstrate the impossibility of ascertaining what is, these words are not only the tools of fiction, but of survival as well. Indeed it is fiction itself which serves to save the lives (figurative and otherwise) of all the characters in the story. Fiction casts doubts on inevitability: it is the one weapon, given to the otherwise defenseless, with which they can conduct a guerilla war with death. In real life, this death is most often one of the spirit or imagination; in fiction, it is "real." Shah Zaman tells the unlikely story of an Amazon society set up especially for the protection of his putative victims. Dunyazade has a difficult time believing his story, but as both the story itself and Shah Zaman assert, the particulars of the story are "too important to be lies. Fictions, maybe--but truer than fact" (Ch, p. 61). Shah Zaman offers himself up to Dunyazade in love through fiction, "as if" they were equals. His story, although probably bogus, speaks a different truth: fiction is

primarily a means of drawing people together and enriching their lives. To the end, as the dawn approaches, Dunyazade cannot decide what to do. There is no conclusion.

In Part Three, Barth comes to us unmasked, and recapitulates the acceptance of mortality, personal and artistic, which furnishes him with the qualified serenity that is the most pronounced difference between this story of "ultimacy" and exhaustion, and those in Lost in the Funhouse:

If I could invent a story as beautiful [as The Thousand and One Nights], it should be about little Dunyazade and her bridegroom, who pass a thousand nights in one dark night and in the morning embrace each other; they make love side by side, their faces close, and go out to greet sister and brother in the forenoon of a new life. Dunyazade's story begins in the middle; in the middle of my own, I can't conclude it--but it must end in the night that all good mornings come to. The Arab storytellers understood this; they ended their stories not "happily ever after," but specifically "until there took them the Destroyer of Delights and Desolator of Dwelling-places, and they were translated to the ruth of Almighty Allah, and their houses fell waste and their palaces lay in ruins, and the Kings inherited their riches." (Ch, p. 64)

By accepting the pervasive presence of death and the notion that all things are doomed to it, whether they be stories or stars, one is delivered from the need to attempt to establish absolute truths, enduring values, or works of art that are "immortal." The focus, in light of this, shifts from product to process. Oddly enough, since all things must end, one can benignly ignore the end and revel in the means. It is this that justifies the endlessness of language; the treasure lies in the speaking, not the spoken. The key to the treasure becomes the treasure:

To be joyful in the full acceptance of this denouement is surely to possess a treasure, the key to which is the understanding that Key and Treasure are the same. There (with a kiss, little sister) is the sense of our story, Dunyazade: The key to the treasure is the treasure. (Ch, p. 64)

"Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad" both concern themselves with the anxiety of middle life as the heroes tell the stories of their youth. To the extent that we find Barth in a similar situation, both as Genie in "Dunyazadiad" and himself in "Bellerophoniad," these stories may be said to be indirectly about him:

Like Perseus and Bellerophon, Barth looks at the point midway in his journey when his career has reached a climax--according to Freitag's life-story line. Barth and his avatars live their days nostalgically, examining the question of their heroics--their performances.²³

Such heroics, authorial and mythic, automatically raise the question of immortality and the form it takes for the hero and author. It is no coincidence that these middle-age heroes ache for immortality, and seek to attain it through the rehearsal of their exploits. Barth, conjured in "Bellerophoniad" as a character from the future delivering an unintelligible lecture to students at the University of Lycia, presumably about Bellerophon's qualifications for herohood, speaks quite intelligibly to us readers about his own interest in heroic myths, and their applicability not only to his thematic but also his personal concerns:

"Several of my subsequent fictions--the long short-story "Menelaiad" and the novella "Perseid," for example--deal directly with particular manifestations of the myth of the wandering hero and address as well a number of their author's more current thematic concerns: the mortal desire for immortality, for instance, and its ironically qualified fulfillment--especially by the mythic hero's transformation, in the latter stages of his career, into the sound of his own voice, or the story of his life, or both. I am forty." (Ch, p. 207)

Thus Barth, like Perseus and Bellerophon, may be said to be seeking artistic immortality, by "turning into" the sound of his voice, as in certain oral fictions in Lost in the Funhouse, or the story of his life, as seen in such revealing appearances in Chimera as well as thinly-veiled autobiographical sorties in Lost in the Funhouse. However, whatever highly qualified immortality is achieved by his heroes is done so through acts that have little to do with their heroic qualifications. The Genie and Perseus achieve a type of immortality by accepting the final dénouement of all things and performing acts of selflessness. Menelaus's story is not of his heroics in the Trojan war, but of his powerlessness in the face of Helen's love for him. Bellerophon, as we shall come to see, does not even exist in the chaotic "Bellerophoniad."

"Perseid" opens with the spirit of "Dunyazadiad"'s dénouement still fresh in the reader's mind, and recapitulates it:

Good evening.
 Stories last longer than men, stones than stories,
 stars than stones. But even our stars' nights are
 numbered, and with them will pass this patterned
 tale to a long-deceased earth. (Ch, p. 67)

Perseus, according to the myth, was estellated for his heroics, and "Perseid" is the story, told to his beloved Medusa each night as the stars come out, of the story of Perseus as he relates it to his devotee Calyxa in Chemmis, Egypt. Calyxa herself chronicles Perseus's exploits on panels that wind outward in a spiral from the bed Perseus awakens upon at the beginning of the story, having been transported to Calyxa by a hooded figure. This same hooded figure, a devotee of Athene who in fact turns out to be a recapitated Medusa, furnishes Calyxa with enough material so that the latter can draw the panels that awaken Perseus's

memory and enable him to continue with his narration. Calyxa stays one panel ahead of Perseus, and has but one rule for conducting the rehearsal: "explixation after forn" (Ch, p. 94). Each of the episodes recounted by Perseus occurs in the post-coital lassitude that is so much of the Genie's theory of art and love in the preceding story. However, it takes many tries by Perseus before he can even attain potency, so racked is he by the spectre of what he sees to be a failed life. This problem is exacerbated by his delusion that he is in heaven, not in Chemmis. Calyxa chooses not to disabuse him of this notion at first, and it is only as the panels approach the present that Perseus comes to realize that he is yet beworldeed, alive, and thus capable of retrieving some lost glory. It is this latter realization that fires his ardour, sexual and heroic, and sends him off to his ironic reunion with the Medusa. Perseus's post-Medusan years were anything but heroic. Trading on his past, Perseus spent these years boring his family and court with

. . . this endless repetition of my story: as both protagonist and author, so to speak, I thought to overtake with understanding my present paragraph as it were by examining my paged past, and thus pointed, proceed serene to the future's sentence. (Ch, pp. 88-89)

After literally shipwrecking his marriage with Andromeda, Perseus decides to set out to retrieve through heroic endeavour his lost glory. Before setting off, he consults Athene in her temple. A hooded young woman, mistaken by Perseus for Athene herself, appears at his side and tells him that Medusa had been made a Gorgon in punishment for her being raped by her uncle Poseidon in Athene's temple. She had not noticed his approach because she was occupied in putting up her hair and admiring herself in the mirror. Unaware even then that she had been made a Gorgon, Medusa

could not understand why all her suitors turned to stone, and so decided finally to pretend not to notice the next one when he approached. The next one was Perseus, and when she finally saw her reflection in his shield, Medusa was happy to be decapitated. In time Athene decided that Medusa had been punished enough and restored her to her original appearance. Her petrifying glance was rendered inert, provided Medusa clung to stringent conditions. In fact, under certain conditions, her glance would be allowed to immortalize.

Fired by the news of a new Medusa, Perseus rushes from the temple to seek her out and decapitate her once again. However, his haste leads him ultimately to abandonment on a desert shore. Here the hooded girl re-appears, identifies herself as the new Medusa, and describes the conditions of her rejuvenated existence which Perseus did not stay to hear earlier:

. . . first, should she ever again look at her reflected image, she'd see a Gorgon, not a girl; second, should she show her face to anyone, she'd instantly return to Gorgonhood But there was one compensation and one escape clause. Athene granted her the power to juvenate or depetrify, just once, whomever she gazed uncowed at or whoever uncowed and gazed at her; but the conferral of this boon on the beholder must be at her own cost, since by the earlier stipulation she'd be reGorgoned I . . . asked what Athene's last condition was At last she got it out: if the man who uncowed her, and on whom she laid her one-shot grace, were her true lover, the two of them would turn ageless as the stars and be together forever. (Ch, pp. 113-115)

Perseus is too wrapped up in the failure of his relationship with Andromeda to declare unconditional love, and so the hooded figure disappears. After wandering the beach, making messages in the sand, he falls asleep, and

awakens to find himself in bed with Calyxa at the centre of the spiral. It is here that the narrative events of the "Perseid" begin; the present is overtaken at this point. Realizing that he is yet mortal, Perseus reluctantly quits Calyxa to seek out Andromeda. At Joppa, home of Andromeda's parents, he is ambushed by Danaus and other court intriguers, but escapes unharmed. He dispatches Danaus with a goblet, and with Andromeda stands as one of the two lone survivors of the ambush. Face to face with Perseus for the last time, Andromeda spurns him and wrathfully recommends him to his "girlfriend with the hood" (Ch, p. 183), who is standing by the door.

After a pause wherein he considers what kind of man he wishes to be, Perseus strides over to Medusa, uncowl and kisses her. At this point the two are estellated. In addition, at this point the story turns into a dialogue between Perseus and Medusa, who are locked in a starry embrace. Since Medusa rises in the constellation later in the night than Perseus, she appears later in the story, appropriately enough at the point where she and Perseus assume their "immortal" existence. Their immortality consists of the paged "Perseid" itself, just as Menelaus's immortality consists of the "Menelaiad," the sound of his voice. As the stars rise in the evening, Perseus recites his tale ("Good evening") until he is joined by Medusa. From that point the two discuss the "Perseid." "Half of each night I'll unwind my tale to where it's ours, and half of every we'll talk" (Ch, p. 134).

Their dialogue centres mainly on the conditions of their immortality. Like that of the sperm in "Night-Sea Journey" and Menelaus in "Menelaiad," the immortality of Perseus and Medusa is separated from

their mortal existence by a lacuna of consciousness. Indeed their mortal lives continue on after their estellation. However the pair are not permitted to know what happens to their mortal halves. Nevertheless, Perseus is hardly annoyed by this. What most concerns him is his inability, in his embrace, to look upon Medusa: "Why is it I look at empty space forever, a blank page, and not at the woman I love?" Medusa's answer, and its implications, are chilling:

At that last moment in the banquet hall. . . when
you discovered me and kissed me open-eyed . . .
what I saw reflected in your pupils was a Gorgon . . .
it nonetheless remains a distinct and distinctly
unpleasant . . . possibility that your kiss was in
complete bad faith: an act not of love but of suicide,
or a desperate impulse to immortality-by-petrification.
In that event, I revealed my beauty to the wrong man
and became a Gorgon forever. (Ch, p. 140)

Perseus calmly replies that that final possibility holds no water. He has no wish to return to the days of his youth, which immortality-by-petrification is an attempt to achieve analogously. His qualified immortality is granted him not for his achievement in heroic behaviour, but is afforded him when he decides to give himself selflessly in love and lay by his self-centred quest for heroic immortality, which is achieved mainly through acts of destruction. As he replies to Medusa: "it wasn't you who discovered your beauty to me, but I who finally unveiled it to myself." "Perseid" ends, much like "Dunyazadiad," in love and serenity, acceptance and contentment; it is to be told every evening as the stars come out, in an embrace:

My fate is to be able to imagine boundless beauty
from my experience of boundless love--but I have a
fair imagination to work with [T]o have become,
like the noted music of our tongue, these silent,
visible signs; to be the tale I tell to those with
eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise

you up forever and know that our story will never
 be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men
 and women read the stars . . . I'm content. (Ch, p. 142)

"Perseid" continues the pattern of storytelling established in "Dunyazadiad" and to be continued in "Bellerophoniad": the stories are dialogues addressed to a specific listener- or reader-figure, and this partnership is seen as a bulwark against the attrition of time and inevitability of death. What one must work with is, as Perseus tells us, one's imagination, and if the story of one's life is still not immortal, it is guaranteed a life as long as there are kindred spirits to draw meaning from it. That is the incentive left to the anonymous minstrel after the other conventional artistic incentives are exhausted: to seek out others like oneself. It is Perseus's good fortune to have re-found Medusa.

Such is not to be the fate of Bellerophon in "Bellerophoniad." Unlike Perseus, Bellerophon is not transported to the heavens for his deeds but is flung to earth by Zeus for presuming to reach Olympus by flying there atop Pegasus. Bellerophon's sin is pride; unlike Perseus in "Perseid," who finally reconciles himself to the mutability of all things and gives himself to Medusa, Bellerophon in "Bellerophoniad" is totally self-involved and committed to becoming immortal. As he sums up his story to Melanippe, his Amazon lover and chronicler, at the end of Part One, he mimics the minstrel's summing-up in "Anonymiad"²⁴ but fails to grasp its most important point:

He likes to imagine it drifting age after age,
 nudged by great and little fishes, under strange
 constellations bobbing, bobbing, while the genera-
 tions fight, sing, love, expire, et cetera. While
 towns and statues fall, gods come and go, new
 worlds and tongues swim into light, old perish,
 stuff like that. Let's see. Then it too must
 perish, with all things deciphered and undeciphered--

no, no, scratch that; it mustn't perish, no indeed; it's going to live forever, sure, the voice of Bellerus, the immortal Bellerophon, that's the whole point. (Ch, p. 301)

"Bellerophoniad"'s prolixity and mindless mimesis are illustrative of his overbearing narcissism. The narrative events can be said to be the scaffolding on which are hung documents, digressions, disquisitions, and diagrams of a mostly spurious nature, acting like Bellerophonic letters to betray and discredit. "Bellerophoniad" itself is a transformation of words into document. Bellerophon's dictation of his life-story to Melanippe undertaken in self-conscious imitation of the dialogue between Perseus and Medusa, is transformed into the pages of "Bellerophoniad," written in English and floating in the tidal waters of the marshes of Dorchester County in Maryland. Indeed the bizarre events of the novella, and the equally bizarre order in which they occur, are governed not by a logic of temporal continuity, but triggered by the appearance of a document, usually one which the shape-shifting seer Polyeidus turns into.

The parallels that exist between this novella and "Perseid" are deliberate; Bellerophon finds a copy of "Perseid" floating in the marshes and reads it, deciding to base the pattern of his story on that of Perseus. As Bellerophon sets forth on a structural disquisition of the "ideal" "Bellerophoniad," we are reminded of the self-conscious anxiety of the minstrel in "Anonymiad" as he attempts the same thing with respect to his story:

Beginning in the middle . . . this original or best Bellerophoniad proceeded with the unostentatious skill to carry forward the present-time drama (my quest for literal immortality) while completing the plenteous exposition of my earlier adventures--a narrative difficulty resolved by the simple but

inspired device of making the second half of my life recapitulate ironically the first, after the manner of the Perseid . . . Bellerophon, it seems to me, while always ultimately addressing the reader from pages floating in the marshes of what has become Dorchester County . . . used to begin by rehearsing his prior history to pretty Melannippe in the marshes of the river Thermodon, near Scythian Themiscyra. The narration was repeated daily and lasted all day: two tideslengths, to be exact, corresponding to the halves of my life and work. (Ch, pp. 150-151)

The First Flood, the First Ebb, and Second Flood of these tideslengths cover the events of Bellerophon's life up to his rehearsal in the marshes of the Thermodon. The Second Ebb deals with his attempt on Olympus and its failure. However, since these are features of an "ideal" "Bellerophoniad," they suffer the same fate as those features of the ideal "Anonymiad;" the tide-conceit fails ultimately to act as a cohesive structural analogue for the story. Bellerophon admits as much:

Full knowledge of the five tidal "constants" . . . the four periodic variables . . . and the three non-periodic variables . . . would doubtless afford a complete understanding of Bellerophoniad's narrative processes--but such comprehension, difficult to acquire, is impossible to crave. (Ch, p. 152)

Such involution is complicated even further by the intrusion of at least two other forces on the paged narrative: Melanippe's criticism of the narrative she is required to copy down, and Polyeidus' disruption of the written narrative by his very nature as shape-shifter and seer. An example of the former will suffice to illuminate the halting character of the narrative. Bellerophon, finding himself at forty a successful king with a beautiful wife and adoring children and subjects, cannot abide the overwhelming success of such a situation. Determined to be a hero at all costs, and aware that heroes at his age should be the opposite of content, he sets about to wreck his marriage, home, and kingship.

The problem of simultaneously relating this purposeful disaffection and accounting for his earlier deeds is resolved by his chronicler Melanippe, who shows a grasp of narrative economy that eludes Bellerophon. She suggests that Bellerophon alienate his family and subjects by recounting in boring detail the story of his life. This would serve the dual purposes of deliberate alienation and rehearsal. In addition, she notes that the former rehearsal is by necessity framed by "our affair lore on the Thermodon" (Ch, p. 154), and so suggests that it be punctuated "whenever convenient with conversation between Bellerophon and Melanippe . . ." (Ch, p. 154). Such punctuation and intrusion engenders a sense of authorial uncertainty like that seen in "Echo:" it becomes increasingly difficult to attribute "Bellerophoniad" to one authorial persona. This sense is heightened by the role and presence of Polyeidus, by far the most disruptive influence on the narrative, whose effect is such as to define, indeed (as we shall see) "embody" the entire "Bellerophoniad." It is to be Polyeidus' misfortune not only to be a shape-shifter and seer, but one with little or no control over his power of transformation. In addition, his powers decrease as soon as he recognizes what they are. His original transformations and prophecies concerned themselves with "historical personages from the future":

'It will be alleged that Napoleon died on St. Helena in 1821,' he would announce with no more notion than we of the man and place and date he meant, or the significance of the news; 'in fact he escaped to the Eastern Shore of Maryland to establish his base for the Second Revolution.' (Ch, p. 160)

Polyeidus' powers are diminished to the point where he can change only into documents, mainly epistolary and either false or deliberately deceptive, that is, Bellerophonian. This diminished power is

problematic at best, since writing was not invented at the time of Bellerophon. Bellerophon sees this discrepancy clearly, but he sees no need to resolve it. Polyeidus assures us "writing itself . . . would be invented some generations later by a stranded minstrel pissing in the sand of a deserted Aegean isle, making up endings to the Trojan War" (Ch, p. 168). This is one of many references to the corpus of Barth's work. Some indeed are passages taken nearly whole cloth from certain stories or novels; others are merely echoes of other fictions.²⁵ These echoes are so numerous as to create an atmosphere of fictional "voices," as it were: they become, for Bellerophon, substitutes for imaginative thought, but, for Barth and the reader, they suggest a type of fictional summing-up, a grand depository of referential material. Other major references to his own work appear in the lecture given by Barth, which mentions not only "Menelaiad" and "Perseid," but also The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy. This Polyeidic text occurs, in keeping with Polyeidus' lack of control over its manifestation, after the question-and-answer period before which it properly should have occurred. Barth discusses not only the degree to which he had become captivated by the wandering-hero myth, but the peculiar appropriateness of the myth of Bellerophon to his artistic purposes. In his disquisition on the Bellerophon myth, he quotes from Robert Graves's The Greek Myths and reflects on the motifs common to it and his own work:

Those familiar with my fiction will recognize in this account [i.e., Graves's] several pet motifs of mine: the sibling rivalry, the hero's naivete, the accomplishment of labors by their transcension (here literal), and the final termination of all tasks by the extermination of the taskmaster; the Protean counselor . . . the romantic triangles; et cetera. (Ch, p. 210)

Of these motifs, the first two are found in The Sot-Weed Factor with Ebenezer and his twin sister Anna. The following two refer to Giles and Max Spielman. The Protean counselor can be Harold Bray or Henry Burlingame III, and romantic triangles abound in Barth's first two novels. Barth goes on to "recount" how, inspired by the images of Pegasus and Chimera, he set out to write a companion-piece to "Perseid," only to see that project turn to quicksand. However, as he says, he overcame his malady, and "composed another story." This latter story was to reflect a new "general principle:"

I think of it as the Principle of Metaphoric Means, by which I intend the investiture by the writer of as many of the elements and aspects of his fiction as possible with emblematic as well as dramatic value: not only the 'form' of the story, the narrative viewpoint, the tone, and such, but where manageable, the particular genre, the mode and medium, the very process of narration--even the fact of the artifact itself. (Ch, p. 212)

This brings us back to the "regnant idea" behind Lost in the Funhouse, and indicates the degree to which Barth was concerned with structure as a means of emblematically explicating his major themes.

The story which most fully reflects this principle is the very story in which this lecture is given. "Bellerophoniad," as we come to see, is not about Bellerophon but about the chaos of artifice unredeemed by imaginative substance, of the quest for literal and figurative immortality. It works out this principle not only emblematically or dramatically, but substantially as well. The form of the story is one of uncalculated and uncontrolled deception, and this is reflected, as demanded by the principle, in the narrative viewpoint, the tone, and the process of narration itself. Even the mode and the medium of the story,

"written" in English before writing and the English language itself were invented, are "false." Bellerophon's singleminded quest for heroic immortality is carried out by correspondence, relying as it does on such things as the Pattern of Mythic Heroism culled from the future by Polyeidus, the lecture by Barth, and plagiarisms of his work. Given that Polyeidus is the informing agent of the narrative, and that he is powerless to control his misleading Protean proclivities, one comes to accept nothing in the story as true in any sense. This suspicion extends even to the identity of Bellerophon himself, who comes to look less and less like a character and more like just another Polyeidic creation:

What I'm experiencing cannot be called an identity-crisis. In order to experience an identity-crisis, one must have enjoyed some sense of identity. Polyeidus, . . . I know you're here between the lines, among the letters' curls and crooks, spreading through me like the water through the marsh. (Ch, p. 158)

As we see later, this suspicion is eventually confirmed. In more ways than one, Bellerophon is a "creation" of Polyeidus.

Even Barth himself, as he appears through references to his work, is not immune to Polyeidic tampering. Not only is his work plagiarized, as we have seen, but it is attributed to another "historical personage from the future." When Bellerophon goes strolling in the marsh to "devour my own soul a bit, et cetera" (Ch, p. 218), an amphora floats by with a wild Bellerophonian discursion inside. It contains a letter, written in 1971, from Napoleon on Lake Chautauqua, New York, to George III of England, who resides at Tidewater Farms in Redman's Neck in Maryland. In the letter, which itself contains excerpts of other letters, one written aboard the HMS Bellerophon (the vessel Napoleon surrendered to in 1815), Napoleon proposes that the two join together for a second "novel"

revolution. A second amphora floats by later containing a much thicker letter, addressed to none other than Todd Andrews, who in this case is Executive Secretary of the Tidewater Foundation, also located in Redman's Neck. The letter, dated July 4th, 1974, is an application for a renewal of a grant for the reconstruction of a computer which will compose a "Revolutionary Novel NOTES" (Ch, p. 256). The applicant is one Jerome Bray, a descendant of Napoleon's brother Jerome, and putative pretender to the throne of France. More importantly, he claims to be the "J.B." who was visited by Giles Stoker and given the "Revised New Syllabus":

. . . like Polyeidus he [Bray] was reduced to teaching . . . and to writing out for public sale a kind of myths called novels. His political enemies conspired to prevent publication of at least two of these latter, entitled The Seeker and The Amateur; worse, when he was visited . . . by a kind of deity--a minor goat-boy named Stoker Giles or Giles Stoker--and vouchsafed, not a winged horse but a sacred scripture called Revised New Syllabus, publication of which would have made him immortal, those same enemies contrived to plagiarize it entire, bring it out under a name with the same initials as its true editor's, and--most insulting of all--not only represent the R.N.S. as "fiction" but allege that Bray's touching forward, which they pirated verbatim, was fictitious, the work of a hypothetical author! (Ch, p. 258)

Fleeing to the "Remobilization Farm," a place supported by a Harrison Mack II, who imagines himself to be George III of England, Bray decides that with the aid of a computer, into which he would feed prototypical works and concepts, he will write a Revolutionary Novel. The first product, entitled NUMBERS, turns out to be "no masterwork, but an alphabetical chaos, a mere prodigious jumble of letters" (Ch, p. 262). Vouchsafed a second insight, Bray returns to the computer with additional data, preliminary to the composition of a second "quintessential fiction"

to be entitled NOTES. The computer indicates that this new fiction will transcend all previous, and at its "navel" will be "a single anecdote, a microcosm or paradigm of the work as a whole" (Ch, p. 266). This paradigmatic core work is to be, much to Bellerophon's surprise as he reads this, "Bellerophoniad," which Bray describes as "that exquisite stain on the pure nothingness of NOTES; the crucial flaw which perfects my imitation of that imperfect genre the novel . . ." (Ch, p. 276). However, his dreams are shattered by the response to his application: Todd Andrews decides to have nothing to do with the idea.

The effect of such an absurd, inwardly spiralling digression is to add yet another layer to the characteristically layered self-conscious fiction of Barth. The digression self-consciously parodies self-conscious fiction. We, as readers, observe Bellerophon, obsessed with immortality, reading the manifesto of a counterfeit author-cum-madman, as the latter attempts to produce the transcendent "quintessential" fiction, the fiction that recapitulates and culminates all other fictions. The kernel of this fiction is the very story we are reading, its author imputed to be counterfeit by a counterfeit character of one of its digressions. The story itself sums up and recapitulates all of its author's previous works, and in its parodic posture vis a vis the original authorial intention behind them, transcends them. In the ultimate gesture of ironic authorial self-consciousness, Barth turns his work into one great Bellerophonic letter, the story of Bellerophon serving as the perfect vehicle for this Zeus-like whim. Authorship is a type of Bellerophonic adventure. Hoping to fly to Olympus on Pegasus, the horse of the Muses and symbol of poetic flight, the author, in forging his fiction, attempts the impossible: to

fly in the face of mutability and establish something permanent and absolute. His sin is pride, like Bellerophon's, his gesture as absurd in a sense. Barth's fiction up to "Bellerophoniad" progresses to an uneasy realization of this point. If the author has come to see the creative power of imagination with regard to articulation, he has also come to appreciate the absurdity of frail and pompous man playing at God. In "Bellerophoniad," using the same power of imagination which granted him the serenity evident in the first two stories of Chimera, Barth, in one broad stroke, transforms his objectively real artifacts into frauds, his straightforward accounts of himself and his theories into the unintelligible by placing them in a Big Lie. Barth, like Zeus with Bellerophon, shoots down his corpus, preserving in the process the urge to articulate (Pegasus) and the power to create or transform (Polyeidus).

The deception continues unabated to the end. In Part Two (yet another self-conscious layer modeled on the dialogue between Perseus and Medusa), Melanippe, the chronicler of the story and the supposedly ageless lover of Bellerophon, turns out to be, more likely than not, Bellerophon's daughter by the original Melanippe of the story, who was raped by Bellerophon in his war against the Amazons. Melanippe II, like Medusa, turns critic and echoes what has been reverberating through the reader's mind all story long: "It's a lie! It's false! It's full of holes!" (Ch, p. 302). In Part Three, the greatest deception of all is brought to light. Having turned into the gadfly that is to bite Pegasus and tumble Bellerophon, Polyeidus finds himself stuck on Olympus, buzzing around a pile of god-droppings. Unable to change out of this state, he is given one chance by Zeus to escape. In exchange for biting Pegasus,

Zeus promises to transport Polyeidus three millennia into the future. Polyeidus obliges, is swatted by Bellerophon in the process, and plummets earthward with the latter. However, Polyeidus has a contingency plan for this situation:

I was plotting to my best interest this denouement-- how I might begin by becoming the terminal interview which follows; grow thence into all of Part Three and ultimately permeate . . . the whole Bellerophoniad; grow narratively on in death like hair and fingernails until I comprehended the entire Bellerophonic corpus and related literature; con my son the imitation hero . . . into taking my place, or part of it, in death's company by becoming his own life story, the myth of Bellerophon. (Ch, p. 312)

Our earlier suspicions about Bellerophon's identity are confirmed; Bellerophon is actually Polyeidus' son. The shape-shifter was able to impregnate Bellerophon's mother by changing himself into the form of Poseidon (the putative father) in the form of a horse. Thus Bellerophon is by definition no mythic hero, no demigod. However, the fraud does not stop there. Bellerophon is not only not a hero, he is not even Bellerophon:

Right. POSEIDON'S SON HE ISN'T. I'm not a star-bound Bellerus, but starstruck Deliades. Bellerus died in the grove that night, in my place I was his mortal killer; therefore I became his immortal voice: Deliades I buried in Bellerophon, to live out in selfless counterfeit, from that hour to this, my brother's demigoddish life. It's not my story; never was. (Ch, p. 318)

Deliades, who adored his demigod twin, asks to be turned into the "Bellerophoniad," offering to take Polyeidus' place. Polyeidus, who can turn only himself into something else, offers a compromise. He will turn into his son-in-"Bellerophoniad"-form: "a certain number of printed pages in a language not untouched by Greek, to be read by a limited number of 'Americans' . . ." (Ch, p. 319). Polyeidus comes to embody "Bellerophoniad." The story and character are an appropriate pairing. Since "Bellerophoniad"

is actually Polyeidus in one of his forms, and since Polyeidus is the embodiment of shape-shifting gone wild, "Bellerophoniad" must be what it is: false, deceptive, out of control, a vast ironic plagiarism. As the hero says seconds before he is transformed by Polyeidus: "It's a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longueurs, lumps, lacunae . . ." (Ch, pp. 319-320).

"Bellerophoniad" is a fitting end-piece to the body of Barth's work. The breadth of its commentary, not only on Barth's work per se, but on his insistent themes as well, suggests that Barth has come to the end of his self-conscious work, to be followed either by fiction that is no longer obsessively self-conscious (highly unlikely), or by silence. That everything must eventually come to pass is one of Barth's most steadfast themes. The cycle of authorial self-consciousness, of fiction concerned with the exhaustion of narrative forms, must itself eventually be exhausted. It is paradoxical that Barth, who in his fiction was fearful lest he encounter some final formal cul de sac, should in that fiction come to affirm not only the endlessness of the fictive urge, but also the mortality of the artist and his art, and ultimate mutability of the universe. As he moves into middle life along with his characters, he is able to parody the anxiety of such characters as Ebenezer, Ambrose, the sperm, and the voices of "Title," all of whom are driven to seek a means to defeat life as it is. "Dunyazadiad" and "Perseid" most overtly transcend this anxiety. Even Bellerophon/Deliades, falling to his fate in the Dorchester marshes, is able to say: "Not mortal me, but immortality, was the myth" (Ch, p. 315). However, once the main source of authorial conflict and energy is resolved, the question of "what next" is raised.

Barth moves beyond the problem by writing artfully constructed analogues of the non-transcendent character of life. Being unable to perceive a quintessential form in the void and accepting the pervasion of death as an ironic function of regeneration on a wider scale, Barth concludes that the artist and his reader do not transcend themselves in fiction, but merely come, through the creative power of their imagination, to know more fully their collective unknowing.

It would not be inconsistent for Barth to choose silence after all that he has written. His particular self-conscious metafictional vision is, oddly enough, not at all self-centred. His self-consciousness produces an acute sense of the other-ness, as well as the kinship, of the rest of the world: the self-conscious author comes to see the crucial role played by the reader in his art. He is not alone. Just as in much of his work characters come to realize the plurality of existence and the multiplicity of truths, so too Barth comes to see himself as part of a much wider fictional universe. If all art and all artists are doomed to mortality, then the extinction of a particular form or individual voice does not spell the end of art. Unlike many other novelists before him, Barth's view of the world is not monolithic: other art forms, other artists exist. The primacy of internal experience is not insisted upon. As he says in "The Literature of Exhaustion": "Whether historically the novel expires or persists seems immaterial to me That's one of the fringe benefits of being an artist instead of a prophet. There are others."²⁶ Silence, in the light of comments like this, thus becomes an act, not of resignation, but of faith in others.

If we accept that Barth's work as a whole shares characteristics of its particular fictions, then his whole corpus stands as a working out of the Principle of Metaphoric Means, as does indeed his post-Chimera silence. In this third phase of short fiction, not only are the subject matter, style, and structure fully integrated to promote the major theme of personal and fictional exhaustion; so too is the corpus of his work, and indeed his very silence. All of these gestures constitute layers of fictional self-consciousness. Barth's work as a whole, incorporated into "Bellerophoniad," plummets with it to its typically Barthian fate: to be turned into the story of itself. "Bellerophoniad" may well be Barth's personal authorial exhaustion, an example of a self-conscious fiction that purposefully will not construct a fictive order adequate to account for the world, but the body of his work stands to attest that the voice, whosever, will continue to yarn on.

Notes - Chapter III

¹ See Hutcheon, pp. 96-98.

² John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse (1968; rep. New York: Bantam, 1969), p. x. All subsequent references to this book will be found in the text, with the title abbreviated to LF.

³ Hauck, p. 206.

⁴ Ibid., p. 207

⁵ Indeed Gerald Gillespie points out that there are two cycles of seven stories each in Lost in the Funhouse, divided into one whose stories are more contemporary, biographical, and "recognizable" as fictions, culminating in the title story, and one whose concerns are, as we have noted, wider, dealing with myth and history. "Completion of the cycle was accomplished . . . by 'rounding off' its themes, symbolism, and total pattern in the longer, subdivided story 'Anonymiad,' and by capturing the whole work in a terse frame, aptly called 'Frame-Tale'." Gerald Gillespie, "Barth's Lost in the Funhouse: Short Story Text in its Cyclic Context," Studies in Short Fiction, 12 (1975), p. 224.

⁶ Christopher D. Morris, "Barth and Lacan: The World of the Moebius Strip," Critique 17, No. 1 (1975), 71.

⁷ Max F. Schulz, Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 33.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ I am indebted to Dr. Hutcheon for pointing this out.

10 See "Seven Additional Author's Notes," p. x.

11 Schulz, p. 33.

12 Barth is, by his own admission, mistaken in assuming his literature or culture to be moribund. The atmosphere of ultimacy does not serve a prophetic purpose; rather it embodies and outlines aesthetic problems posed by self-consciousness. As Barth says in "The Literature of Exhaustion": ". . . the persistence of an art form doesn't invalidate work created in the comparative apocalyptic ambience" ("Literature of Exhaustion," p. 33).

13 "Literature of Exhaustion," p. 33.

14 Schulz, p. 38.

15 See "Literature of Exhaustion," p. 31.

16 Gillespie, p. 225.

17 Christopher Morris quite effectively analyzes the sea symbolism in the series as a whole:

. . . the sea itself functions as an image of a circum-ambient medium which, like language, seems to promise some referent, some shore or 'object' beyond itself, but which, like mother's milk, proves fatal. Everywhere the sea reveals that it is not the "see", but something far more menacing to selfhood. It yields the blank message devoid of any referent except to its own medium--"the shiny bits in the paper's texture were splinters of wood pulp." It conceals German submarines in "Lost in the Funhouse" and the contentless Proteus in "Menelaiad." . . . the "Anonymiad" . . . can only be composed after an undecipherable text floats to the nameless minstrel stranded on his island of artistic impasse. In these associations Barth extends the notion of language as an all-encompassing but autotelic medium, a Moebius strip which is wholly

independent of everything outside it, even the speaker who uses it. (Christopher Morris, p. 72)

18 D. Allen Jones, in "John Barth's Anonymiad," Studies in Short Fiction 11 (1974), 361-366, elaborates on the appropriateness of Merope's name for this story:

In Greek mythology, there were several Merope, but two stand out. One was the daughter of Oenopion, pursued and violated by Orion on earth; the other was a Pleiad, pursued by Orion on earth and in the heavens, but never caught--both fitting namesakes for a woman pursued by a minstrel who wishes to be whisked "Orionlike to the stars." (p. 366)

19 Kennard, p. 119.

20 Bellamy, pp. 4-5.

21 See Tharpe, pp. 107-108.

22 John Barth, Chimera (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest, 1972), p. 16.

All subsequent references to this book will be included in the text, with the title abbreviated to Ch.

23 Tharpe, p. 107.

24 See Lost in the Funhouse, pp. 193-194.

25 The most extended example of the theft of a passage from another work occurs when Bellerophon recounts one of the alternative versions of the story of his alleged involvement with Anteia, wife to Proetus and sister to his wife Philonoë:

. . . we talk impersonally and sporadically--mutual silences are neither unusual nor uncomfortable with that woman; on the face of it there is no overt word or deed that unambiguously indicates desire on the part of either of us; the Queen's manner, which I find attractive, is of exhausted strength: throughout the afternoon her movements have been heavy and deliberate . . . in the evening she sits mostly without moving and frequently upon blinking her eyes keeps them shut for a full half-minute, opening them at last with a wide star and a heavy expiration of breath; . . . at nine-thirty or thereabouts Anteia says

"I'm going to take a shower and go to bed, Bellerophon," and I say, "All right"; to reach the palace baths she has to go through a little corridor off the ale-room where we sit; to reach Athene's temple I must pass through this same corridor, and so it's still not quite necessary to raise eyebrows at our going to the corridor together; there, if she pauses to face me for a moment at the turning to the baths, who's to say confidently that good nights are not on the tips of our tongues? It happens that we embrace instead before we go our separate ways, and further (but I would not say consequently) that our separate ways lead to the same bed, where we spend a wordless, tumultuous night together, full of tumblings and flexings and shudders and such, exciting enough to experience but boring to describe

Any reader of The End of the Road will recognize this passage to be substantially similar to the one that describes the initiation of Jake's and Rennie's affair. (ER, pp. 99-101)

26 "Literature of Exhaustion," pp. 32-33.

APPENDIX

A GILES GOAT-BOY GLOSSARY

This is intended as a reader's short guide to the more recurrent terms and characters for which equivalents are fairly clear in Giles Goat-Boy. These equivalents are not strict in every case: with characters in the novel (as opposed to figures merely mentioned in the novel) the equivalence is merely suggestive. Lucky Rexford is not intended only to resemble John Kennedy, whereas Enos Enoch can be seen as the exact equivalent of Christ. The reader should have little problem determining the relative correspondences between the terms and their referents.

Agenora - Jocasta
Amaterasu - Japanese
Anchisides - Aeneas
Beist - Beat
Bonifacist - Nazi
Botanical Garden - Eden
Cadmus College - Thebes
Campus Cantos - The Divine Comedy
Campus Riot II - World War II
Classmate X - Kruschchev
College Entrance Riddler - Sphinx
Curricularists - liberals
Dean o' Flunks - the devil

EAT-wave - nuclear explosion
Eierkopf - Dr. Edward Teller
Enos Enoch - Jesus Christ
Entelechus - Aristotle
Failure - damnation
Finals - the last Judgement
Flunkage - state of depravity
Founder - God
Founder's Scroll - the Bible
Fruentius - Africa
Graduation - state of grace
Gynander - Tiresias
Informational Revolution - Industrial Revolution
Informationalism - capitalism
Laertides - Ulysses
Leonardi - da Vinci
Living Sakhyan - the Dalai Lama
Lost Professor - Dante
Lucius Rexford - John F. Kennedy
Lykeion College - ancient Greece
Maios - Socrates
Maurice Stoker - Satan
Moishe - Moses
Moishians - Jews
New Tammany College - United States
New Syllabus - New Testament

Nikolay College - U.S.S.R.

Old Syllabus - Old Testament

Pre-Schoolist - Romantic

Quiet Riot - Cold War

Reg Hector - Eisenhower

Rematriculation Period - Renaissance

Remus College - ancient Rome

Scapulas - Plato

Siddartha - India

Siegfrieder College - Germany

Student - man, human being

Student-Unionism - Communism

Taliped - Oedipus

Taliped Decanus - Oedipus Rex

T'ang College - China

University - the universe

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I chose the "revised" edition of The Floating Opera because it contains the original ending that Barth had in mind for it, one which was changed only under pressure from his publisher. For that reason, I consider the "revised" edition the correct one. I choose to ignore the "original" edition, because Todd's enthusiasm at having discovered relative values is inappropriate and uncharacteristic, and smacks of a facile and grasping ingenuity. This is especially evident when we see what happens to people who assiduously affirm relative values in The End of the Road. An examination of Barth's corpus indicates that the "happy ending" of the first edition of The Floating Opera is most un-Barthian.

On the other hand, I chose to use the original edition of The Sot-Weed Factor as opposed to the "revised" edition of 1967, because the revision made by Barth was not for the purpose of editing any crucial material, but rather "to make this long narrative a quantum swifter and more graceful." Since the two editions are equally authoritative, I have chosen the more inclusive of the two.

All the other editions used are the readily available paperback editions.

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