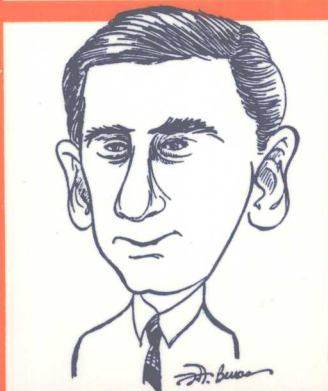
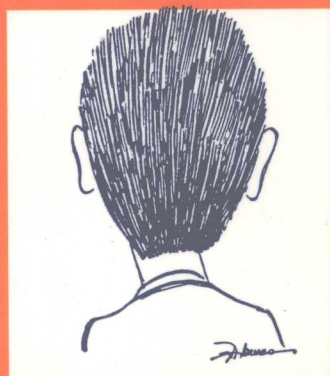
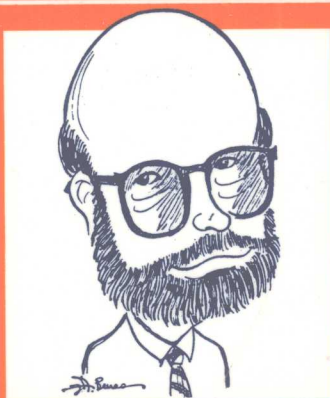


The Contemporary American Comic Epic

The Novels of Barth,
Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey



Elaine B. Safer

**The
Contemporary
American
Comic Epic**

Humor in Life and Letters

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**For my students
at the University of Delaware**

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 9

Abbreviations 11

- 1** Introduction: An Overview 13
- 2** Twentieth-Century Comic Epic Novels and Cotton Mather's *Magnalia* 25
- 3** Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and the Twentieth-Century Comic Epic 39
- 4** Comic Retrospection in John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* 50
- 5** The Tall Tale, the Absurd, and Black Humor in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* 79
- 6** Ironic Allusiveness and Satire in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* 111
- 7** The Absurd Quest and Black Humor in Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* 138

8 Conclusion 156

Notes 162

Selected Bibliography 193

Index 209

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following works by John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and Ken Kesey have shortened titles placed parenthetically in the text.

John Barth

<i>Chimera</i>	<i>Chimera</i> . New York: Random House, 1972.
<i>End of the Road</i>	<i>The End of the Road</i> . New York: Doubleday, 1958. Revised edition, 1967. Reprint. New York: Bantam, 1969.
<i>Friday</i>	<i>The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction</i> . New York: Putnam, 1984.
<i>Goat-Boy</i>	<i>Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus</i> . New York: Doubleday, 1966. Reprint. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest, 1968.
<i>Letters</i>	<i>Letters: A Novel</i> . New York: Putnam, 1979.
"Exhaustion"	"The Literature of Exhaustion." <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> (August 1967): 29-34.
"Replenishment"	"The Literature of Replenishment." <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> (January 1980): 65-71.
<i>Funhouse</i>	<i>Lost in the Funhouse</i> . New York: Doubleday, 1968. Reprint. New York: Bantam, 1969.
<i>Sabbatical</i>	<i>Sabbatical: A Romance</i> . New York: Putnam, 1982.
<i>Sot-Weed</i>	<i>The Sot-Weed Factor</i> . New York: Doubleday, 1960. Revised edition, 1967. Reprint. New York: Bantam, 1975.

Abbreviations

Thomas Pynchon

Lot 49

The Crying of Lot 49. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966.

Gravity's Rainbow
V.

Gravity's Rainbow. New York: Viking, 1973.
V. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963. Reprint.
New York: Bantam, 1968.

William Gaddis

JR

JR. New York: Knopf, 1975.

Recognitions

The Recognitions. New York: Harcourt,
1955.

"Rush"

"The Rush for Second Place." *Harper's* (April
1981): 31-39.

Ken Kesey

Cuckoo's Nest

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. New York:
Viking, 1962. Reprint. New York: Signet,
1962.

Notion

Sometimes a Great Notion. New York: Vi-
king, 1964. Reprint. New York: Bantam,
1969.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: An Overview

The epic traditionally has been lauded as a heroic poem, advancing “men to the quality of Gods,”¹ a narrative that records the moral vision of a righteous nation and the honorable exploits of its great warriors, and a work that is “elaborate above all others,” exhibiting a grandeur of effect as it selects for objects of imitation that which “ought to be.”² Because of its depth and breadth, John Milton used the form to “justify the ways of God to men” in a manner that would be “doctrinal and exemplary to a nation”; Cotton Mather employed it to reveal the “*Wonderful Displays*” of Christ’s work in America;³ and Walt Whitman used the genre to celebrate and sing of himself and all mankind, as well as of the transcendent meaning in all of nature. Epics customarily focus on events of great magnitude, exalting the heroic quest and placing it in the larger cosmic order.

This study focuses on the comic use of epic patterns in selected contemporary American novels of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and Ken Kesey. A number of postmodern novels of these writers are encyclopedic in scope, allude to grand themes in history, and often employ epic devices such as epithets, similes, catalogues,

The Contemporary American Comic Epic

and multiple cross-references. They incorporate themes, myths, and structural patterns that are found in traditional epics such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, and Whitman's "Song of Myself." Unlike the traditional works, however, the new epics offer an absurd hero's ironic quest instead of a holy mission; they build to disorder rather than unity, and use exaggeration to satirize all institutions and systems of knowledge—instead of celebrating a nationalistic or religious vision.

The postmodern narratives refer to revered American values and then disappoint reader expectation for the restatement of these customary themes, creating instead an absurdist vision. They allude to traditional conventions and then deploy these against themselves to present lively parodies of twentieth-century American society.

Epic Novels

The Sot-Weed Factor, *Giles Goat-Boy*, *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Recognitions*, and *Sometimes a Great Notion* have roots in the traditional epic and also in wide-ranging comic narratives. The role of their postmodern American authors seems to be burlesqued by Barth's Ebenezer Cooke, who intends to write an epic poem—"An epic to out-epic epics: the history of the princely house of Charles Calvert, Lord Baltimore and Lord Proprietary of the Province of Maryland, relating the heroic founding of that province" (*Sot-Weed* 83–84). Ebenezer Cooke ultimately lampoons the heroic much as the postmodernists Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey satirize rather than extol the people of their province (America). They, like Eben, reveal that they know *Paradise Lost* "inside out" and "*Hudibras* upside down" (*Sot-Weed* 11). And they, like Eben, draw upon works such as "the volumes of Milton and Samuel Butler . . . as references" (*Sot-Weed* 250) to reinforce their comic-ironic message.

In addition to such allusions, the postmodernists frequently use literary devices and themes that are prevalent in Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, comic narratives that Northrop Frye includes in "the anatomy."⁴ For example, all contain encyclopedic listings. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the comic catalogue of twins and those regarded as twins in history and legend includes Castor and Pollux ("the sons of light and thunder"), Helen and Clytemnestra from Leda's egg, Romulus and Remus in Rome, saints who were thought of as twins, and also "Heavenly Twins,

Introduction: An Overview

revered by sundry salvages [sic]" (*Sot-Weed* 534–35). The Rabelaisian catalogue includes strange births in mythology and legend—Bacchus "begotten by Jupiter's thigh," Minerva "born from Jupiter's brain . . . Castor and Pollux from the shell of an egg laid and hatched by Leda,"⁵ as well as the birth of Gargantua. Both Barth and Rabelais also revel in synonyms. In *Sot-Weed*, for example, two prostitutes verbally fling at each other a list of terms for whoring (for example, "Fastfanny," "Furrowbutt," "Tart," "Poxbox," "Trollop" [477–82]). In Rabelais, similarly, many synonyms for excrement are used (for example, "shit, turds, crots, ordure").⁶

Pynchon's detailed description in V. of the freewheeling activity of the "folk" of Manhattan—who go from one bar to another, ride in the subways, create paintings like Slab's danishes, and shoot alligators in the sewers—calls to mind Rabelais's panoramic depiction of the lower classes and their free-flowing bawdy laughter. Pynchon's listing of items in *Gravity's Rainbow*, ranging from rockets and weapons to songs, films, and items on Tyrone Slothrop's desk (18), resembles the encyclopedic catalogues in Rabelais that include stores in the Parisian marketplace ("the druggists' shops, the herbalists, and the apothecaries"),⁷ the food Gargantua eats ("hams, smoked ox-tongues, botargos, sausages"),⁸ the 216 games he plays (including "Flushes," "Beggarmy-neighbor," "Cuckold," "Scare," and "Flip-finger"),⁹ and the variety of oaths and curses aimed at Gargantua—"some in a fury and others in sport (*par ris*)"¹⁰—by those who escaped his "piss-flood," which drowned over 260,000 (for example, "Carymary, Carymara! My holy tart, we've been drenched in sport! We've been drenched *par ris*").¹¹

The cataloguing in Barth and Pynchon, as well as in Gaddis and Kesey, also has roots in Cervantes. The elaborate listing of legendary details about twins in *Sot-Weed* is similar to the listing in *Don Quixote* of the legendary chivalrous romances, including the well-known ones of King Arthur and those of Tristram and Yseult and Guinevere and Lancelot, who, the hero insists, were real persons. The mixing of historical characters in *Sot-Weed* (for example, Lord Baltimore and John Coode) with fictional ones (like Burlingame) echoes the "medley of truth and fiction" uttered by Cervantes's Don Quixote.¹² So, too, Ebenezer Cooke's foolish idealism calls to mind the early model of Don Quixote, whose heroic illusions and grand imagination are treated ironically as he engages in bizarre adventures, complex journeys, and hilarious battles such as those with windmills (envisioned as giants) and sheep (envisioned as armies).

The Contemporary American Comic Epic

The postmodern comic narratives have roots in the “comic Epic-Poem in Prose” described by Fielding in his Prefaces to *Joseph Andrews* and to his sister’s novel *The Adventures of David Simple*.¹³ This form, according to Fielding, is a narrative of great magnitude that differs “from Comedy, as the serious Epic from Tragedy: its Action being more extended and comprehensive; containing a much larger Circle of Incidents, and introducing a greater Variety of Characters.” Fielding stresses that this form “differs from the serious Romance in its Fable and Action,” which in the romance are “grave and solemn,” compared to the comic epic, which is “light and ridiculous”; and “it differs in its Characters, by introducing Persons of inferiour Rank, and consequently of inferiour Manners, whereas the grave Romance, sets the highest before us; lastly in its Sentiments and Diction, by preserving the Ludicrous instead of the Sublime.”¹⁴

This epic form is “truly of the Comic kind,” following nature, and thus is distinguished by Fielding from burlesque, which exhibits “what is monstrous and unnatural.”¹⁵ This form may use burlesque to arouse laughter but this would be done without distorting nature. In the preface to *David Simple* (1744), Fielding emphasizes the “extended and comprehensive” scope of the comic epic, as distinguished from drama, and also its “*main End or Scope*,” which is to “*be at once amiable, ridiculous, and natural*.”¹⁶ The contemporary novels appear to be new adaptations of Fielding’s comic epic.

In *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding used the comic to attack “the true Ridiculous”: the vain and hypocritical members of society, people whose vices and folly are judged against the ideals of those who exhibit good-natured simplicity, chastity, and charity. The good Parson Abraham Adams and Joseph are placed at the epic novel’s moral center—connecting them to biblical characters: Joseph, who rejects the sexual overtures of Potiphar’s wife; and the faithful Abraham, who is ready to sacrifice his son Isaac to carry out God’s will. Fielding also makes the innocence and idealism of Parson Adams and Joseph the subject of light humor—casting Joseph as a footman, resisting Lady Booby’s advances, and Abraham Adams as a forgetful country clergyman, journeying among people whose hypocrisy and hardheartedness are alien to his innocent goodness. The innocence and humanity of Joseph and the parson establish the pattern of Christian heroism in the novel.¹⁷

Like Fielding, Barth uses innocents and their corresponding contrast with an immoral world as the basis of his ironic comedy in *The*