



A reader's guide to John Barth

Zack Bowen.

A Reader's Guide to
John Barth

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For Lindsey

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
Abbreviations, First Editions, and Editions Used	xv
1. Barth's Transient Opera: <i>The Floating Opera</i>	1
2. Mythoscriptotherapy: <i>The End of the Road</i> and the Novel of Ideas	13
3. The New <i>Marylandiad</i> : Barth as Poet Laureate in <i>The Sot-Weed Factor</i>	21
4. The Revised New Syllabus: <i>Giles Goat-Boy</i>	35
5. Funhouse Reflexes: <i>Lost in the Funhouse</i>	51
✓ 6. Narrators and Heroes in <i>Chimera</i>	67
7. History, Sex, and Art in John Barth's <i>LETTERS</i>	81
8. <i>Sabbatical</i> : Conception Concepts in the Chesapeake Womb-World	99
9. Chiasmus in the Womb-World: Doubling in <i>The Tidewater Tales</i>	109

10. Replenishment and Reproduction: <i>The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor</i>	119
Appendix 1: Selected List of Recurrent Themes, Patterns, and Techniques	131
Appendix 2: Biographical Note on John Barth	137
Selected Bibliography	139
Index	147

Acknowledgments

This book was conceived more than twenty years ago, when I began to teach Barth in classes at the State University of New York at Binghamton. I was deep into James Joyce scholarship when, like so many others, I began to read and respond to Barth's omnivorous intellect, technical brilliance, and satiric outlook on life. For me Barth was the most daring, funny man I had read since Joyce, and the best part about his work was that, as with Joyce, there was so much to get excited about—to explain and discuss with classes—that teaching him was unadulterated pleasure. I first met Barth when he came to SUNY Binghamton for a reading, and my continuing thought during the hour or two I was privileged to speak to him personally was that, unlike some others I knew, I had never had the opportunity to talk to Joyce, and that now, thank the Dean, I was given the chance at last to be in the presence of greatness. I naively supposed I could perhaps be a Stuart Gilbert to Barth's Joyce.

However, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw an avalanche of Barth dissertations, then essays, eventually followed by books. I was heavily committed to ongoing Joyce projects, but had the luxury of exceptionally fine graduate research-assistant-colleagues who began to collect Barth scholarship for me. I am especially indebted to Marguerite Harkness, Barbara DiBernard, Ted Billy, and Paul Butera for their early help. Barth kept writing complicated epic tomes that required extensive reflection, and critics continued to publish the ideas I would have liked to have written, while I devoted my research time principally to Irish literature. With a current sabbatical and the help of a first-rate assistant, Adam Price, I am able at last to capitalize on the entire body of Barth scholarship in a commentary on all of Barth's ten novels, tracing the development of issues

and techniques that run through his works. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Bartheans John Balaban, Joseph Weixlmann, and Susan Strehl for their time-consuming, informed reading of my manuscript, and to Lindsey Tucker, my Ultimate Editor, for curbing my excesses.

Introduction

John Barth's rich, complex novels offer so many opportunities for discussion, explication, and critical speculation that the reader scarcely knows where to begin. An intelligent class of informed students who love literature and welcome the challenge presented by difficult works can make teaching Barth a delight. Surprisingly, after ten volumes of fiction spanning forty-five years of steady production, his books remain as much a part of the curriculum as they ever were, his ideas as intriguing and controversial, his comedy and eroticism as clever and Rabelaisian. While in recent books the number of orgasms per chapter may even have increased along with Barth's variations on his own themes, he is still an exceptionally funny intellectual writer whose sense of humor is as appealing as his puzzles can be baffling.

His works, alternating among ludicrousness, deadly seriousness, and intense realism, are principally novels of ideas. His art itself is, in a way, on critical/philosophical trial with every work. So many alternatives, both to composition and meaning, are explored that the books become less artistic artifacts than propositions pursued to that point of absurdity which is also the perimeter of truth. Barth transforms the practice of reflexive literary criticism into philosophical speculation even as he produces the works in which his points are exemplified. That enormous self-absorption is reflected in all his work is recognized by critics pro and con, but the issue is debated most hotly in Barth's own fiction, and in particular in his theoretical centerpiece, *Lost in the Funhouse*.

While Barth gets the jump on the critics by discussing—either directly or indirectly—in each work most of the critical points that the fiction itself raises, he also explores the issues of his craft in a series of published interviews and essays, and in *The Friday Book*, a collection culled princi-

pally from talks he gave at various colleges and professional meetings. His most prominent ideas are represented in two landmark essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment," which have nearly eclipsed his fiction in terms of their impact on contemporary literary criticism. While these documents provide a rationale for writing works informed by literary tradition, they also touch on the existential downside of Barth's philosophy. Grossly oversimplified, his essential message is that all the stories, tales, and yarns have been used up—that the ur-tales have already been told—but that the modern author can make an old statement new by regenerating the narrative process itself. In Barth's words, "Virtuosity is a virtue, and . . . what artists feel about the state of the world and the state of their art is less important than what they do with that feeling."¹ Barth's insistence on novelty and technical virtuosity of presentation calls for innovative parody: "Artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work."² Barth practices what he preaches, and his fiction is to a great extent the ingenious embodiment of those ideas.

This book was written for intelligent first readers of Barth. It is not intended as a substitute for reading, but as enhancement for those who have already read the individual works with some care. Thus my individual readings do not restate the obvious or rehash plots, but try to build a perspective based on informed close readings of the texts. While taking cognizance of the major published Barth criticism, each chapter offers a new interpretation of one of Barth's fictional works, and may for the most part be read separate from the others. The book encompasses all of Barth's major fiction, primarily explicating rather than seeking to frame any work in a single contemporary critical theory. Where theoretical issues are raised, they are explained in general terms rather than in the vernacular of the individual theory, even though further explanation of and sources for the theory itself may be found in footnotes. Where discussion of patterns or images from other Barth books illuminates the text discussed, I have not refrained from making such comparisons—especially in the light of Barth's constant allusions to his previous and even forthcoming works—in an attempt to identify the continuity of Barth's recurring ideas.

Barth's works are so pregnant with critical possibilities that while they demand full critical treatment, they also offer such a variety that no book can pretend to provide a definitive answer for any text. Instead, this study makes full use of those previous interpretations that seem to make the most sense, and at the same time tries to offer a new and unique perspective on each novel. So intertwined are Barth's repetitive motifs, themes, and char-

acters in his own fiction that I have offered a separate appendix pointing to a selection of such recurrent patterns.

Over the last four decades Barth has attracted the attention of a number of exceptionally perceptive critics, and this book has profited by their insights. It seems to me that Barth criticism has become increasingly sophisticated as scholars have had more time to digest and assemble the variegated strands of his fiction. Jac Tharpe wrote the first full-length study of Barth in 1976,³ and, while he covers only Barth's early works through *Chimera*, many of Tharpe's insights remain valuable today. Likewise, much of the Barth criticism that followed David Morrell's ground-breaking *John Barth: An Introduction*—which detailed material on Barth's sources, personal history, and process of composition—owes Morrell a debt of gratitude.⁴

The eighties elaborated and expanded the influence of the previous decade's best scholarship, beginning with Joseph Waldmeir's edition of collected essays.⁵ Three years later, Charles Harris revised some of his earlier seminal works for inclusion in his *Passionate Virtuosity*, which developed through a principally historical-philosophical perspective the way in which Barth attempts to resolve the problems about reality and how a writer's language tries to deal with or recreate it.⁶

E. P. Walkiewicz's book on Barth is the first to attempt a popular summary and critical reading of Barth works (through *Tidewater Tales*) for a larger nonscholarly Barth audience.⁷ Walkiewicz was followed by Heide Ziegler's sensitive readings of Barth works through *Sabbatical*. Ziegler's interpretations are structured on Barth's "twinning" pairs of novels, in which Barth "exhausts" a literary/philosophical tradition in the first and "replenishes" it in the second.⁸ The final book in the readers' guide genre is Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug's *Understanding John Barth*.⁹

Max Schulz's work, especially on Barth's self-reflexive approach to literary history, mythic background, modern philosophy, and contemporary affairs, represents some of the most informed and intelligent criticism written on Barth. His book *The Muses of John Barth* deals principally with *Lost in the Funhouse* and succeeding works through *Tidewater Tales*.¹⁰

The most recent volume of criticism on Barth to date is Patricia Tobin's *John Barth and the Anxiety of Continuance*, a study of Barth's works through the lens of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence theory.¹¹ Bloom's idea is so obviously applicable to Barth that it is a mystery why no one has made the connection before. Tobin's perceptive analysis was long overdue.

Because so much Barth criticism has appeared in essay form, the proliferation of articles, theses, and dissertations on Barth resembles the federal deficit. Unlike the deficit, however, the scholarship has slowed in recent years, even as the major studies in book form have appeared. Except for

Waldmeir's essay collection, all the books mentioned above contain fairly extensive bibliographies, and many of the most perceptive critical points have been restated so often as to fall into the public domain. While I have included a bibliography of selected criticism in this book, readers needing still further clarification of Barth's later works might be well advised to look at the bibliographies of the more recently published criticism mentioned above. Two separate book-length bibliographies of Barth criticism through 1975 are available, but Joseph Weixlmann's version is by far the better annotated, and more complete and authoritative. The seventeen years of criticism since Weixlmann cry out for a new, comprehensive bibliography.¹² Still, the riches buried in Barth's fiction have only begun to be mined, and I hope that what new perspectives are contained in the following chapters may yet add something to our understanding of this complicated, gifted writer.

NOTES

1. John Barth, introduction to "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Perigee Books/Putnam, 1984), p. 64.
2. John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," in *The Friday Book*, p. 205.
3. Jac Tharpe, *John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974).
4. David Morrell, *John Barth: An Introduction* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976).
5. Joseph J. Waldmeir, ed., *Critical Essays on John Barth* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980).
6. Charles B. Harris, *Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).
7. E. P. Walkiewicz, *John Barth* (Boston: Twayne, 1986).
8. Heide Ziegler, *John Barth* (London: Methuen, 1987).
9. Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug, *Understanding John Barth* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990).
10. Max Schulz, *The Muses of John Barth: Tradition and Metafiction from "Lost in the Funhouse" to "The Tidewater Tales"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). Also, see bibliography for additional articles.
11. Patricia Tobin, *John Barth and the Anxiety of Continuance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
12. For a more recent, if attenuated, descriptive Barth bibliography, see Joseph Weixlmann's "John Barth," in *American Novelists, Contemporary Authors: Bibliographical Series 1*, ed. James J. Martine (Detroit: Gale, 1986), pp. 43-81.

Abbreviations, First Editions, and Editions Used

First editions (in parentheses) precede editions used.

- | | |
|-----|---|
| C | <i>Chimera</i> (Random House, 1972). First edition used. |
| ER | <i>The End of the Road</i> (Doubleday, 1958), Bantam, 1972. |
| FO | <i>The Floating Opera</i> (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), Bantam, 1976. |
| FB | <i>The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction</i> (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984). First edition used. |
| G | <i>Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus</i> (Doubleday, 1966), Anchor/Doubleday, 1987. |
| LV | <i>The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor</i> (Little, Brown, 1991). First edition used. |
| L | <i>LETTERS</i> (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979). First edition used. |
| F | <i>Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice</i> (Doubleday, 1968), Anchor/Doubleday, 1988. |
| S | <i>Sabbatical</i> (G. P. Putnam's, 1982). First edition used. |
| SWF | <i>The Sot-Weed Factor</i> (Bantam, 1969). First edition used. |
| TWT | <i>The Tidewater Tales</i> (Fawcett Columbine, 1987). First edition used. |

Barth's Transient Opera: *The Floating Opera*

Opera is a transient, hybrid art calling for the suspension of the audience's sense of reality while the dialogue of drama, itself an imitation of reality, becomes the lyrics of an extended work of music. The music adds its own conventions of overture, repetition, and multiple-part singing, calling on its audience to believe that two or more characters simultaneously express identical ideas in unison or in harmony. Opera thus demands a suspension of credulity and an acceptance of form that few other artistic genres dictate. Float the whole performance on a barge drifting past an audience fixed in one observation point, as Todd Andrews's image demands, and the result is a fragmented knowledge of the opera's activities, chronology of events, or characters' motivations, coupled with a lack of hope for any comprehensive audience understanding.

Further complicating the situation is the conductor/narrator's own lack of understanding. While flawed narrators have been a part of English literature at least since Chaucer's time, the technique became identified with the modern literary experimentation of Ford Maddox Ford. *The Floating Opera* shares several characteristics with Ford's *The Good Soldier*: bad hearts, hopeless adulterous love triangles leading to suicides, and especially a confused first-person narrator who finds himself good at business though unconcerned with profit, and who writes down his history in a muddled effort to understand the meaning of his life. Dowell, Ford's protagonist, appeals to his audience for help in deciphering the meaning of the chaos around him, while Todd writes his journal in order to gain a private, personal perspective on his own problem as an aspect of his father's suicide. If he could understand or justify his father's action, he might be able to understand his own suicidal drive and/or his reason for not blowing up himself,

his daughter, and most of the town. Whether or not the journal improves his insight into himself is open to question.

His present narrative, typical of Barth's books, is begun *in medias res*, and derives from his journal. It concerns principally the climactic events of June 23 or 24, 1937, which occurred seventeen years before Todd purportedly rewrote them for publication as a novel in 1954.¹ During the intervening years Todd has managed to provide himself with a hindsight philosophical rationale for his actions, but it is not certain that the wider general audience of the book is supposed to agree with either his premises or his motivations. On the contrary, Todd's mental predisposition is so problematical as to be almost ludicrous or burlesqued, despite its seeming insistence on existential logic.

The novel resembles *Tristram Shandy* in its beginning self-consciousness, when it openly addresses its readers about the difficulties of its own composition. Beginning in the middle, the book, again like *Shandy*, emphasizes time frames and periods, rightly claiming that events of Andrews's life that precede the climax are necessary to an understanding of his thinking on the day he intends to commit suicide. Thus Todd writes his book with two predominant if subliminal purposes: to explain himself as mentally recapitulating his father's supposed reasons for taking his own life, and at the same time to detail the tortured existential logic that propelled both father and son to ultimate questions and their common putative answers in the form of suicide.

The suspense of the novel stems from the question of what happened on the big June day seventeen years before, and why and how the contemplated suicide did *not* take place, since we already know Todd survived. The primary question is the perennial existential one, "To be or not to be," coupled with its logical extension, "Why *be* at all?", and its contemporary converse, "Why not?" The issue was particularly rife during the postwar existential movement, with Sartre's and Camus's ultimate answers differing with each other and with themselves over a period of time. The early existential dilemma involved freedom of choice versus an inherent indifference to the obligation to make any choice at all. To Sartre the question extended to whether or not to join the opposition to the forces of oppression: to absent oneself and leave the world to its own idiotic devices, or to take up arms against a sea of evils and, by opposing, end them, an idea of personal versus social obligation renewed in *The Floating Opera*.

The dilemma is reflected in the metaphoric structure of the novel: If life resembles a floating show, complete with masks and characters who meaninglessly act out roles, what use is there in understanding what it is all about? Why even make an attempt? The question of hopelessness raises the

analogous question of why Todd should bother to write about it. The floating opera image acts as a reflexive metaphor of its own creation, and continues as the principal artistic conundrum of most of the works discussed in this volume. Todd discusses the creative rationale that ties not only this but Barth's ensuing books into his grand scheme:

It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along both banks. They would catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wait until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps they'd just have to use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbors or hear the word passed along from upriver or downriver. Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't. Lots of times they'd be able to see the actors, but not hear them. I needn't explain that that's how much of life works: our friends float past; we become involved with them; they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely; they float back again, and we either renew our friendship—catch up to date—or find that they and we don't comprehend each other any more. And that's how this book will work, I'm sure. It's a floating opera, friend, fraught with curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction, and entertainment. But it floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose: you'll catch sight of it, lose it, spy it again; and it may require the best efforts of your attention and imagination—together with some patience, if you're an average fellow—to keep track of the plot as it sails in and out of view. (FO 7)

The elaborate metaphor itself, with its affinity to the images on the wall of Plato's Cave, testifies to the artifice and craftsmanship required to build such a fictive vessel, even as the image denigrates the role of fiction as the ideal mirror of reality. The vagrant sperm cell, water message, and amphorae of *Funhouse*, as well as the voyaging turd in *LETTERS* and the canister in *Tidewater*, are all variations on this theme of floating creative reflexivity. This chapter will elaborate on the ways in which the title barge of *The Floating Opera* becomes a sort of artistic flagship in Barth's Chesapeake fleet of concerns about the creative process.

During the days leading to his projected suicide, Todd is regularly involved in the second of two attempts to build floating crafts. The first, begun by a child who possessed only desire and imagination, lacked the craftsmanship and art necessary to be brought to successful completion, and the second, begun with deliberateness and care, is a work in progress, the nautical metaphor for that section of Todd's *Inquiry* that is to become the current book. Andrews's boat/book has its analogue in the *Thespian*, the

registered name of the vessel with the trade name *Adam's Original & Unparalleled Floating Opera*. The *Opera* was built by one of Todd's several surrogates, Captain Adam, whose meticulous care and forethought in the ship's construction mirror Todd's own conduct of his life and boat building.

At least one major Barth critic posits his entire interpretation of the novel's meaning on Todd's being secure in his knowledge of the *Floating Opera's* soundness: Andrews *knew* the boat would never have blown up, since care would have been taken to avoid such an instance occurring—an opinion apparently voiced by Barth himself in an interview.² This view stems from what Todd learned about the safety of the boat from Captain Adam during Todd and Jeannine's afternoon tour, when Andrews conceived the plan to destroy himself and the audience during the evening performance. If Todd knew that the suicide attempt would be at best a harmless and irrelevant formality without the possibility of fatal success, why bother to turn on the gas at all? After the show was safely over, he could have jumped in the river, but declined to make the effort on the ground that killing himself wasn't worth the bother. Certainly if he had stepped off the dock into the water, the chances of his being involuntarily rescued by anyone in the departing crowd were as great as the assumed safety of the boat's ventilation system. Why should he suppose that jumping had a greater chance of success than blowing up the boat? Todd's rationalized existentialism is indeed as nutty as Dowell's social imbecility.

Ford critics often see Dowell's ineffectuality as that of an innocent caught in an Edwardian moral morass, and blame the Ashburnham tragedy on the decadence of the entire society. There is much in Todd's history to explain away his own actions on similar grounds. According to Richard Schickel, Todd's grand rationalization of his suicidal existential philosophy is born of "five occasions on which he felt deep emotion,"³ each a further realization that his emotions are intertwined with his actions and must be combatted with all the indifference his rationality can command.

His encounter with the German soldier in the foxhole—when Todd learns fear—is a primary instance of what Barth critics variously call his emotional climaxes or stages of psychological development. These scenes bear a strong resemblance to Joycean epiphanies. After befriending his would-be enemy to the point of total communion, Todd, afraid the next morning that the German might revert to something other than soul-mate, runs the German through with a bayonet. It is indeed a grisly scar on Todd's psyche.

At age seventeen Andrews discovers mirth—the ludicrousness of his all-consuming copulative aspirations—when he sees a mirrored image of himself in coitus with his first lover. What he learns is the ridiculousness of his own passion. While this incident chronologically occurs first, it is

presented later in the text to keep the evolution of his reactive development uniform.

Todd's discovery of his father's body hanging by his belt with eyes bulging, but his clothes neat and orderly, introduces frustration into Todd's emotional catalogue, and the rest of his life is spent in trying to explain his father's reasons and to assess his own involvement in the death. Todd's reaction takes the forms of his *Inquiry* and his imitation of his father's desperate act.

Critics are split over which two emotional scenes complete the five needed to complement Todd's five *Inquiry* conclusions. Schickel first singles out Todd's "surprise when Jane . . . [creeps] into his bed one afternoon, uninvited but not unwelcome,"⁴ and second, her later remark on Todd's clubbed fingers, introducing impotence, futility, and despair to his emotional catalogue.⁵ Other critics recognize Jane's remark as an emotional turning point in Todd's decision to commit suicide, but also see concern as the major factor in Todd's saving Jeannine along with the other 700 townsfolk on *The Floating Opera* in the first published edition of the book, and Haecker's life in the restored original version of the text.⁶

The problem with the emotional-moments theory is that no one seems to want to admit the all-important scene with the army doctor, when Todd is told that he has an incurable, possibly fatal circulatory illness. While there is nothing in the way of an emotional outburst here, the information—imparted with cold matter-of-factness by the doctor—is the major factor influencing all Todd's subsequent feelings of impermanence. If learning that there is a good chance of imminent death doesn't shake your psyche, occasional impotence certainly shouldn't. Many of Todd's other activities may be laid to other causes, but his more expensive daily payment of overnight rent is both precaution against a possible overcharge when he does die, and a daily graphic reminder of the threat of mortality hanging over his head. He avoids any effort to verify the diagnosis, preferring to live as if it were true. Surely this must give rise to some of his offbeat mental processes.

For example, Todd's penchant for list-making—for tediously rehearsing and rerehearsing the stages of his own intellectual debate—adds an attitude of zaniness to his attempt to apply logical sophistry to human behavior and events. His list of his five stages of consciousness and his list of potential outcomes of the Harrison *ménage à trois* (qualified by their probability of materializing) both presage his final systematic sophistry about life and death:

- I. Nothing has intrinsic value.
- II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational.

- III. There is, therefore, no ultimate "reason" for valuing anything . . . including life . . .
- IV. Living is action. There's no final reason for action.
- V. There's no final reason for living . . . (or for suicide). (FO 218, 223, 245)

The final parenthesis, to the effect that suicide is as futile and hence valueless and irrational as continuing to live, provides the ultimate logical rationalization for Todd's behavior, the end of at least this discursive detour on his extended philosophical inquiry. It is not, however, the end of the book, which concludes with his going "to bed in enormous soothing solitude, and . . . [sleeping] fairly well despite the absurd thunderstorm that soon afterwards broke all around" (FO 247). The conclusion suggests that the irrational and the absurd have a special and important place in the cosmos, whether or not they are part of Todd's plan.

The order that Todd tries to bring to life is nothing less than an attempt to control the chaos of the cosmos insofar as it affects himself and his actions. At the end, before falling off to sleep, Todd revises his bequest of philosophical truisms for his dead father. Barth draws attention to the absurdity of Todd's revisions by inviting comparison with its counterpart in Harrison Mack Sr.'s oft revised seventeen-draft will, which constitutes a major portion of the book's legal/monetary comic subplot. Todd's success as a lawyer is predicated on his knowledge of irrationality, on his detached understanding of the absurd, which is made all the more ridiculous by its own crazy logic. The elder Mack's estate consists of money, property, pickles, and his personal fecal legacy. The excrement that Mack held so sacred is the ultimate factor in deciding who gets the estate. Todd's father, in heavy debt, leaves for his son just as inexplicable a legacy of problems regarding his reasons for suicide. No critic questions old Mack's insanity, even when he meticulously keeps in chronological order the repeated versions of his will. However, the courts, in their twisted logic, strive to maintain the precise moment he went berserk, on one hand, and, on the other, whether the turds' repositories completely fulfilled the terms of his idiotic legacy. Eventually, through the appellate process, the entire legal structure of the State, up to the Supreme Court of Appeals, is involved in Mack's nonsense. Because Todd is not emotionally involved in the substance of the case (pun intended), he can manipulate and order its absurdity to his own purpose, delaying the trial until a favorable group of judges sit to hear it. When the gardener exhibits the only trace of common sense in the case by suggesting that Mack's increasingly odoriferous fecal matter be put to use as garden fertilizer, he commits the very offense that will ultimately result in a reversal of the lower court's decision. The legal victory

represents a triumph of absurd logic, one that only Todd, the cynic who cannot be cynical about his own absurd logic, is able to bring about.

The *Morton v. Butler* case represents another variation on the absurdity of the law when an accident causes a three-year litigation and an arena for local political rivalry. In the absurdity of legal entanglements that ensued, one of the litigants would have been forced to sue his own son in order to win his case against his opponent. Todd's involvement as Butler's defense lawyer stems from Andrews's totemization of Morton, whose Famous Tomatoes made him the richest man in town. At least one of the contributory factors to Todd's father's suicide was bad investments, which led the elder Andrews to the brink of bankruptcy. His only bequest to Todd was \$5,000, which Todd gratuitously gives to the person who needs it least, the rich Colonel Henry W. Morton, thus rendering absurd Andrews Sr.'s reason for death. Morton's reaction to this undeserved and totally incongruous gift is to try to return it, then to try to compensate for it, and then to try to befriend Todd, and finally to despise him for both Todd's indiscretion with Morton's wife and Todd's aloofness regarding money. In a way Todd's disposition of his legacy makes about as much sense as old Mack's, and Morton's putative sharing of his wife at his party is a rough analogy to the absurdity of the triangle among Jane, young Mack, and Todd.

This brings us to the irrational nature of the *ménage à trois* that has caused Todd so much subliminal damage as well as pleasure over the years. The Macks, by a twist of Bohemian existentialist logic, seek at the same time to prove their love for each other by engaging in adultery. The relationship between Mack Jr. and Andrews has all of the classical elements of latent homosexuality in their sharing each other by sharing a woman. The Macks' premises for planned adultery are on the surface roughly analogous to Todd's desire for existential freedom. The Macks will liberate themselves by consciously giving Jane, and thus both, the freedom to choose among lovers denied by the marital institution. The Macks' cutesy rationalizations supply the domestic equivalent of Todd's skewed profundities about the meaning of existence. Ultimately all are victimized by guilt, jealousy, and, finally, indifference—emotion, passion, and erection sickly'd o'er by the pale cast of thought.

Like the activities of both serious and comic subplots, all of the characters with whom Todd associates come to inform his ruminations and actions. The most prominent are Osborn and Haecker, respectively the pro-lifer who enjoys existence by railing against it, and the eventual suicide whose conscious acceptance of his life belies a subliminal abhorrence of its condition. Along with Todd, they are Explorers' Club members, whose chief explorations are conducted from the town bench as they greet each passerby

with preconceptions, personal history, and a biased pretense of detachment. Osborn, the most likeable and the one who eventually accompanies Todd to the *Floating Opera* performance, has the most profound effect on Andrews, because his complaining fulfillment is the most readily understood, and his hidden acceptance of life is paradoxically most attractive to the would-be suicide. Haecker, like Todd, suffers from being an intellectual, even if his wrongheaded argument for living contradicts his real despair at the ravages of an aging and purposeless existence. Even though Todd momentarily saves Haecker after a suicide attempt, Haecker's desire to end his life is no longer Todd's concern when Haecker later takes his own life in an institution. But despite his effort to philosophize his way into indifference, Todd cannot escape his perhaps irrational impulse to preserve life. We see this tendency early in the novel, during the scene when his father executes a chicken. Todd's own execution of the German in response to his consuming fear for his own life only reinforces this impulse. So disturbing is the elder Andrews's decision to commit suicide that Todd devotes much of his own remaining life to the search for a reason, and its relation to his own psyche.

All of the interlocking subplots and characters mesh together in the grand finale, the *Floating Opera*'s evening program, at once a reflection of everything else in the book and a reminder of the reflexive aspect of authorship that will inform all the rest of Barth's work. *The Floating Opera* is simultaneously the title of the book, the title of the showboat, the title of the showboat's entertainment, the metaphor for life as represented by the novel, and a blueprint for Barth's future fictional work. The surname of the owner/captain, Jacob R. Adam, suggests God's original imitation of his own image, and the given name is shared by Barth's second protagonist/author-surrogate, Jacob Horner, in *The End of the Road*. We have already noted the relationships among Captain Adam's vessel, Andrews's boats, and Barth's literary products.

The reader is also aware that the show has been billed as the climax of the novel, but that the impending but never realized cataclysm Todd has planned for his suicide never comes off—or Todd wouldn't be alive to write the book. As is the case with audiences for the Greek epics, our foreknowledge of the eventual outcome shifts our attention and suspense from what the outcome will be to why and how it came about. This strategy emphasizes the artistic process, the technique and the variety of ways in which the explanation unfolds, rather than any traditionally satisfactory resolution of the plot. The formula serves Barth, whose continuing emphasis will be on narrative method rather than plot. While the closed or ordained ending scheme appealed to the Greeks, who believed in predetermination, it is also

satisfactory to modern existentialists, for whom neither the measure of justice nor the satisfaction produced by an appealing moral conclusion is of great importance.

The comic center of the book is of course the opera or show itself, which recapitulates and caricatures the rest of the book. The entertainment is billed not only as a "High-Water Mark of Mirth," but as a "Great Moral Show . . . Moral and Refined" (FO 77). Todd, an exceptionally moral man, spends years of his life pretending not to have morals, at least in any traditional sense. His other pretenses include bearing no particular love for the woman who has been driving him crazy, and having no particular moral reason for either killing the man in the foxhole or practicing law on behalf of people whose cases he finds interesting (FO 72). He assures us, "I insist upon my basic and ultimate irresponsibility" (FO 83), but we never see him arguing a case on the morally wrong side of the tracks. The bizarre and byzantine courses he chooses to win his cases have little or no inherent justice in them, but are really comic in their intricacies and seeming irrelevance either to reality or to any officially sanctioned standard of justice. Instead they play on the absurdities of human nature and the law to produce a suitably moral outcome. Comedy habitually has eschewed traditional morality, even while producing a morally appealing outcome. Thus, Todd's opinions of how and why he does things may be taken as another absurd aspect of a black comic novel.

The opera advertisement follows the same comic tack, with the vessel billed as "America's Finest & Safest Floating Theatre" when Todd's plans would make it a death trap for hundreds. "The Mary Pickford of the Chesapeake," Miss Clara Mulloy, does not appear in the "Hilarious! . . . Heartwarming! . . . Moral!" act, "The Parachute Girl," but her counterpart does appear in Andrews's parallel text in the person of Betty June Gunter, who introduces the seventeen-year-old Todd to sex. What begins with Betty Jane's recitation of her own teenage romantic pulp story ends in her silently engaging in sexual intercourse with a crying, bleating, roaring, braying and, finally, laughing Todd. In the sequel, which occurs six years later, Betty Jane, now a Baltimore prostitute, silently attacks Todd by pouring alcohol on his genitals and hitting him with a bottle. Unable to articulate her anguish over her lost lover during their first encounter, or her rage during the second, Betty Jane simply goes for the metaphoric jugular.

In the counterpart act from the *Floating Opera* performance, the silent, "trimly corseted" Clara Mulloy has, according to Captain Adam, "caught a germ from someplace—must have been Crisfield, couldn't have been Cambridge—and I swear if she ain't got the laryngitis so bad she can't say a darn word!" (FO 229). And so the heartwarming, hilarious story of the

parachute girl is never told on stage, but replaced by the "Famous Southern Tenor," T. Wallace Whittaker, who instead of singing "Pastoral Lays of the Corn & Cotton Fields," begins to recite "Scenes from the Bard," a collection of somber Shakespearean soliloquies about death. Whittaker's versified miscellany, culminating in Hamlet's "To be or not to be . . .," mirrors Todd's dark ruminations throughout the day. Framed in the lights of the *Floating Opera* stage, before an unsophisticated country audience set for a minstrel show, the portentous Shakespearean grimness is totally out of place, and becomes the object of derision by the crowd, who throw pennies, laugh, and hoot Whittaker off the stage. The irony is that the crowd loves its own derisive participation in what it considers pompous solemnity. There should be a lesson in it for Todd, who throws his change at Whittaker along with the rest. Todd's mental floating opera, featuring his own dark thoughts of the frivolousness of morality, will ultimately be the stuff of black humor, black thoughts garbed in popular comedy, the grim but hilarious formula for many of Barth's works to follow.

Next, the Ethiopian Tidewater Minstrels line up in a row, like the old men of the Explorers' Club, swapping stories, discussing the people and the world passing in front of them, and putting those caricatures into the minstrels' comic/tragic frame of reference. Todd describes the minstrel characters in the racist, sexist terms in which they were seen by the audience, while at the same time revealing the audience's dislike of the assumed education and cultivation of the learned interlocutor, played by the chameleon Todd surrogate, Captain Adam, whose role change from regular good old boy to educated, articulate master of ceremonies is so complete that no one can tell which role is authentic. Todd is, of course, the interlocutor of the Explorers' park bench, and may be defensive about his educated, detached reaction to the things the Explorers and the rest of the town hold sacred.

During the course of the minstrels' cogitations, the crowd on *The Floating Opera* is treated to the popular sentimental ballads of Sweet Sally Starbuck, whose "Melodies of Heart, Hearth, & Home" put the professed domestic bliss of her counterpart, Jane Mack, into a new comic, satiric light. Sweet Sally's offerings are followed by the comic preaching of J. Strudge, the Magnificent Ethiopian Delineator, the Black Demosthenes, whose comically cited text, "*Blessed am dem dat 'specks nuffin', 'caze dey ain't gwine git nuffin!*," is a black comic version of Haecker's argument urging sweet acceptance of life's paltry gifts, followed by his attempt to kill himself.

The last act of the show consists of Burley Joe Wells's imitations. Burley Joe's act portrays some of the same qualities exhibited by burly Harrison Mack Jr., whose feeble, failed, misunderstanding attempts to imitate Todd's own misguided philosophies-in-progress inaugurate the years of pain and

suffering of the *ménage à trois*. Burley Joe's steamboat-explosion imitation, which provides the climax of the show and the novel, is a realistic fabrication of a disaster, from which illusion the gullible audience recovers only after the entire troupe assures them with a final chorus that it was all part of the show. Burley Joe's explosion, which seemed so real, was, after all, only the clever fabrication of a talented performer.

Barth recapitulates the troupe's comforting finale with a denouement accomplishing much the same mollifying purpose. Todd's rationalization about the freedom not to commit suicide, the Explorers' chorus, the Mack family's final trio, and so on, all set the world and the company's decisions to rights—tying the ends together satisfactorily and with more existential consistency than the original printed version allowed it to have. The climactic reiteration of the showboat parallel reminds us that the whole novel and all its ideas are an artifice, a floating opera concocted by a new and highly original showman, who would go on to make even more ingenious use of the old, exhausted artistic forms to bring together audience and artifice into new relationships in new and even better shows.

NOTES

1. Todd claims he has known about his myocardial infarction "since 1919: thirty-five years" (FO 5). The sum of the two would make the time of writing 1954.
2. Charles B. Harris, *Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 17–18, 30n15.
3. Richard Schickel, "The Floating Opera," *Critique* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1963): 58.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
6. The conclusion of all reprinted editions (including the text followed in this study) follows the version Barth had originally intended to print. When Appleton-Century-Crofts agreed to be the original publisher they attached a condition: that Barth change the ending to make Todd appear more humane. David Morrell (*John Barth: An Introduction* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press], p. 7) describes the original Appleton-Century-Crofts ending this way:

Todd went backstage and switched on the gas jets as before, but then he remained backstage waiting to die of asphyxiation. Barth had literally fixed the book so that it ended not with a bang but a whimper: as Todd sat listening to the gas and smelling it, he was distracted by muffled voices in the next room. It seems a little girl who was perhaps his daughter had taken a convulsion while watching the show and was being carried backstage; and in his concern for her safety, Todd found a reason to keep himself alive.

Critics, agreeing with Barth's own assessment of the revision, thought it badly sentimental, and when the reprint rights were sold to Doubleday, Barth returned to his original plan.

2

Mythoscriptotherapy: *The End of the Road* and the Novel of Ideas

What would prompt a new novelist to use the same basic plot situation in his first two published works? According to David Morrell, *The End of the Road* had its repetitive drawbacks for Barth's original publisher, Appleton-Century-Crofts, who at least wanted to hold the manuscript for a while, since it was produced during the last three-month period of 1955, the same year in which Barth wrote *The Floating Opera* during January, February, and March.¹ Clearly, basic plot situations were mostly a vehicle for Barth's discussion of the philosophy and ideas underlying them. He hadn't said enough in his "nihilistic comedy," *The Floating Opera*, and he wanted to add the opposite dimension to his announced series about nihilism in his "nihilistic tragedy," *The End of the Road*.² Not until *Sabbatical* and *Tide-water Tales* would Barth replicate an earlier plot in a second book, although his entire oeuvre makes reference to his earlier works.

The Floating Opera and *The End of the Road* are centered around similar triangles, neither one totally realistic, but each representative of allegorical tableaux depicting ethical positions (rather than characters) in opposition to each other.³ Nearly every principal character in the two novels pays homage to a nihilistic, schizoid vision of the sort that brings Todd to pay his room rent on a daily basis even though longer-term rental is cheaper (he has lived at his hotel for years), and Jake to dream of phoning the weather bureau to learn that there will be no weather the next day.

In *The End of the Road* Jake's philosophical position is set against the equally zany nihilism of Joe Morgan, whose *tabula rasa* wife, Rennie, renounced all claims to an identity before her marriage to Joe. Absolute freedom for Joe constitutes pimping her off to Jake to study their reactions and his own, claiming that the key to the free life is to conduct it unfettered

by tradition, custom, or marital proprietorship. The same situation obtained in *The Floating Opera* with Harrison Mack and his wife. Jake's own philosophical stance has led him further toward the void than Todd's, however, since he is found by his therapist-in-waiting to be totally immobilized by graduate school and life in general, not knowing where to go, and sitting catatonic in a bus station, a victim of what the Doctor describes as "cosmopsis," a nihilistic world view that renders choice or action irrelevant, and therefore impossible.

Characters' names (or the lack of them) play a large role in these early books: Todd, a variant of the Germanic *tod*, or "death," and Jake Horner, calling to mind the nursery rhyme character who sits in a corner and the adulterer of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. Critics have also seen in Jacob's name the pragmatic and dissembling thief of Isaac's blessing. The most enigmatic character in *The End of the Road*, the Doctor, is, however, never named, in keeping with his mysterious, trickster-figure nature. To accentuate the Doctor's otherness, Barth made him a black man and refused, after some public-relations reluctance by publishers fearing charges of racism, to change him into a Caucasian.⁴ A combination of parodies of God, Sartre, and Heidegger,⁵ the Doctor makes a living curing the angst of a set of jealous but nearly immobilized patients who inhabit his probably illegal premises. Like the other principal male characters in the book, the Doctor too is a nihilist, but a pragmatic one. Having long since given up the idea, at least with Jake, that there is a right or even reasonable way to act in any given set of circumstances, he counsels the arbitrary, just so a decision is made. His Farm is, after all, a place of Remobilization, the title itself expressing action. Practicing what he preaches, the Doctor is alone in the local medical community in his willingness to perform an abortion on Rennie. It is the pragmatic choice, and seems to be the result of a good deal he made in exchange for Jake's indefinite service to the Farm.

The description of the Doctor's Progress and Advice Room and its furniture arrangement is a comic parody of a situation designed to force positional and spatial responses from the patient. Jake is advised to take a job teaching prescriptive grammar at Wicomico State Teachers College, the name suggesting a combination of the comic aspect of the Wye River (Wye/comic), which will figure prominently in the later novels, the comic side of the Y or crotch (Y/comic—again a pun in later books), and, finally, the question of why nihilism has to be represented only in the comic manner of *The Floating Opera* (Why comic, O[pera]?).

The Doctor prescribes impulsive action, admonishing Jake:

Don't get stuck between alternatives, or you're lost. . . . If the alternatives are side by side, choose the one on the left; if they're consecutive in time, choose the earlier. If neither of these applies, choose the alternative whose name begins with the earlier letter of the alphabet. (ER 85)

Jake's indecision is to be assuaged by teaching the most rigorous form of articulation, prescriptive grammar, and inventing an equally arbitrary set of masks as models for living, roles he can change at will, the adoption of which is called mythotherapy. The therapies the Doctor orders are all extreme, near comic in nature. Invent your personality and change it at will, the Doctor orders, implying that Jake possesses no predesignated or even evolving dominant mental predisposition; and if that therapy doesn't work, make your decisions arbitrarily. When all that fails, try scriptotherapy—set down something resembling your experiences in an arbitrary, grammar-dominated language, forcing experience into an unreal artistic mold. It is presumably scriptotherapy that prompts Jake to write the book two years after the events he narrates purportedly took place.

The relationship of the novel Jake eventually produces to the action is a major factor in any attempt to understand what *The End of the Road* is all about. Is the book merely a scriptotherapeutic artifice? Is it really believable, since many of the events and opinions seem so bizarre as to defy credibility? Yet other scenes, such as the death of Rennie, choking on her regurgitated supper under anesthesia, seem frighteningly real. The principal characters themselves seem otherworldly, dominated by abstract philosophical principles, like Joe Morgan, or lack of conviction, like Jake Horner. These two avatars of conflicting existential philosophies represent completely reasoned activism on Joe's part and a kind of nihilism on Jake's.

Joe Morgan, who seeks a rational answer for everything, is governed solely by his drive to understand completely his own actions as well as those of his wife and the people around him. He is driven by his zany logic to the point of putting Rennie in sexual jeopardy by throwing her into an extra-marital situation with Jake Horner. Joe tests the will, actions, and morality of all three in engineering the means of Rennie and Jake's infidelity, so that he can have the perverted pleasure of mentally dissecting their responses and his own. The least believable part of his action is that he seems mystified that adultery could occur at all. Outwardly Joe is a model teacher and faculty colleague, intelligent, apparently honest, and hard working. The weakest link in his twisted psyche is his irrational other. He is caught by Rennie and Jake executing military commands "cavorting about the room," wildly gyrating and making faces at himself in the mirror, babbling, and picking his nose while masturbating. The discovery is a crucial moment for Rennie,

who had always viewed her husband as a paragon. Joe's arrested development is foreshadowed by his association with the Boy Scouts, his seeming inability to complete his dissertation, and his lack of insight into his own subconscious motivations. The image of masturbating Boy Scout executing military commands sums up his antirational side, which can't be stifled by the higher abstractions of reason. Presumably even Jake believes in Joe's zany facade as cuckolded Boy Scout when Jake confesses, "He never looked finer or stronger to me than at that moment when I thought of him at the Boy Scout meeting" (ER 103). Anyone on an English faculty for any length of time will recognize this sort of damaging, berserk brilliance, only a breath removed from burlesque behavior.

Jake's position on practically every issue is to see both sides of any situation, and to avoid either making judgments or being paralyzed by having to make decisions. With no overweening certainty about anything or any mode of conduct, Jake is, from the first line of the book ("IN A SENSE, I AM JACOB HORNER"), not totally certain of his own identity. The Doctor's therapy of having Jake choose any arbitrary set of standards devalues every value system into meaninglessness. Even the scriptotherapy of writing the book, certainly an arduous enough task, is an assigned exercise, just as running on a treadmill is an arbitrary exercise: It merely keeps you going. Jake has an affinity for the arbitrary, however. His pursuit of a job teaching prescriptive grammar in an age when descriptive grammar is the fad of preference appeals to his sense of the worthlessness of everything which might be arbitrary. A grammar based on Latin applied to a Teutonic language doesn't begin to come to grips with the reality of a dynamic, evolving, live language, as Jake well knows. Prescriptive grammar is like Joe's pure reason: It can't fully comprehend human verbalization, and skews the reality of spontaneous speech. Jake demonstrates the hopeless rationality of prescriptive grammar in his class discussion. His dislike of its very falsity and arbitrariness is clear from his prescriptive responses to a student who objects. Like any sophist/teacher, he can lay waste the unwashed undergraduate, but the discipline is only Jake's method of controlling the subliminal forces that continually threaten to overwhelm him.

Jake, like Joe, has a sexual Achilles' heel. The description of the first day of class is a dramatic, hilarious departure in style and reserve from the rest of the book:

The boys, too, lean and green, smooth-chinned and resilient, shivered and stretched at the mere nearness of young breasts and buttocks as hard as new pears. In a classroom on the first day of a new term the air's electric with sex like ozone after a summer storm, and all sensed it, if all couldn't name it; the rubby sweet friskies

twitched in their seats and tugged their skirts down dimpled white knees . . . little's to be done but nod to Freud on such a day. (ER 94)

It is temptation enough for Jake to seek out Peggy Rankin. When he finds her still amenable to his advances, he plays a Joe to Peggy's Rennie as he socks Peggy in the Morgan fashion and gives Peggy essentially the same line Joe has been dishing out to his wife. After spending an entire day at school in libidinous heat, Jake hypocritically tells Peggy he is "*just not that interested in laying women*" (ER 97), and then his ultimate ploy of hitting her to prove he takes her seriously finally brings her to bed. He cynically admits, "I made a mental salute to Joseph Morgan, *il mio maestro*, and another to Dr. Freud, caller of the whole comic hoedown" (ER 97).

Charles Harris finds Jake's posture of narrator/author a schizoid tendency, with Jake stepping outside himself to observe his own actions, just as Joe has essentially stepped outside his marriage to afford himself a detached understanding of how he reacted to his wife's adultery. Jake's reliance on language in art (fiction) is for Harris⁶ an arbitrary attempt to simplify and freeze human nature into stable reason, assimilate it into a rational framework, and then reintroduce it to the outside world in the form of a chronicle. Joe's failure to finish his dissertation is an admission of his own inability to do the same thing.

In *The End of the Road* Barth begins to define a technique he uses throughout his entire canon: exploring philosophical positions by carrying them to their extreme but logical conclusions—taking them to the end of the road—and in the process expanding them into satiric parodies. One of his consistent topics is the act of writing a fiction that discusses its own creation. Joe attempts to live as if he were scripting a fiction based on existentialist reason, and in the process involves an impressionable, reborn wife who will participate in his experiment without prior intellectual defenses, and a colleague who can't seem to make up his mind about anything. Little they do makes rational sense. Jake, who isn't even sure of his own existence and knows little or nothing about what enervates as well as motivates him, finds himself forced into purposeful action by the circumstances of Rennie's threatened suicide. In the end it is not reason, choice, or creative planning that dictates the tragedy of her death, but arbitrary circumstance and the Doctor's ineptitude and lack of precautions.

Since the main characters' mind-sets, reasoning, and circumstances often defy credibility as realism, the story lends itself to an allegorical cast, and one of the most popular with critics is the Garden of Eden motif. Several Barth scholars, including Herbert Smith, see Joe as a reasoning Godlike figure⁷ or an Adam figure, while Rennie, or Eve, is tempted by the serpent,