

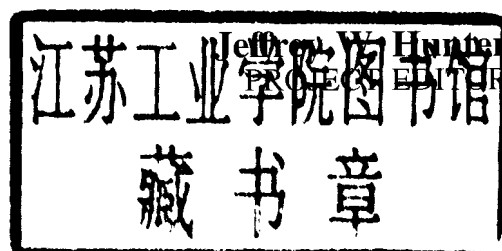
☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 214**

Volume 214

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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## Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

### Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

### Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990. 73-82. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witlec. Vol. 169. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 3-8.

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# John Barth

## 1930-

(Full name John Simmons Barth) American novelist, short fiction writer, essayist, and nonfiction writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Barth's life and works through 2004. For discussion of the short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), see *CLC*, Volume 89; for additional information on his career, see *CLC*, Volumes 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 14, 27, and 51.

### INTRODUCTION

Barth is recognized as one of America's most significant postmodern authors. His work scrutinizes the interaction between reader and text, while emphasizing the philosophical, historical, and literary context of mankind's urge to tell stories. Barth has frequently utilized dark humor and extravagant wordplay to address such themes as the nature of personal identity and the absurdity of existence. By establishing the premise that the possibilities of traditional narrative have become exhausted, Barth has challenged himself and his readers to examine the conventions of storytelling in a new light.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Barth and his twin sister, Jill, were born on May 27, 1930, in Cambridge, Maryland. As a young man, he played drums and wrote for the newspaper at Cambridge High School. After graduating in 1947, Barth briefly studied orchestration and harmony at the Juilliard School of Music before accepting an academic scholarship to pursue creative writing and journalism at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. While working in the library at Johns Hopkins, Barth filed books in the Oriental Seminary collection. This position exposed him to such seminal works as *The Arabian Nights*, prompting a lifelong interest in the possibilities of intricate plot construction and narrative framing. In 1950 Barth published his first short stories, and he received a B.A. in 1951. He then took an assistantship in the graduate writing program at Johns Hopkins, graduating with an M.A. in 1952. The following year, while working on his doctorate in literary aesthetics, Barth accepted a position as professor of freshman English at Pennsylvania State University and began work on the "Dorchester Tales," named after his home



county in Maryland. Barth originally intended for the project to mimic the structure of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which consists of one hundred stories. Although he abandoned the project after only fifty tales, one of the stories, "The Song of Algol," was published in 1960, and another, "The Invulnerable Castle," was incorporated into his novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960). In 1965 Barth became a professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and received the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award as well as a Rockefeller Foundation grant. In 1997 he received the F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for outstanding achievement in American literature and the Lannan Literary Award for lifetime achievement in 1998.

### MAJOR WORKS

Barth's first two novels, *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958), represent the author's self-proclaimed examination of the "problem of nihil-

ism." Both works feature a male protagonist responding to the seemingly arbitrary nature of a world that lacks absolute meaning. While the suicidal lawyer in *The Floating Opera* resigns himself to living only after he fails to kill himself, the emotionally paralyzed professor in *The End of the Road* unwittingly facilitates his lover's horrific death by taking a stand for the first time in his life. In *The Sot-Weed Factor* Barth incorporates fantasy, myth, history, and legend to detail the spiritual corruption of the seventeenth-century Poet Laureate of Maryland, Ebenezer Cooke. *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Barth's first commercial success, introduces a modern messiah who must discern the secrets of a mystical computer and then redeem the world through his Revised New Syllabus. The bizarre plot stems from Barth's interest in comparative mythology, and displays the characteristics of the archetypal heroic quest viewed from an absurdist perspective.

The sequence of fourteen short stories titled *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), is frequently cited as an illustration of the argument posited by Barth in his 1967 article entitled "The Literature of Exhaustion." This essay, reprinted in the nonfiction collection *The Friday Book* (1984) with "The Literature of Replenishment," points to the Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges as a model for the invention of new literary forms and techniques. Loosely centered on a character named Ambrose, *Lost in the Funhouse* presents several highly experimental variations on the nature of storytelling, such as the thinly veiled account of a sperm's struggle toward life in "Night-Sea Journey." The three novellas which comprise *Chimera* (1972) are reconsiderations of figures from classical mythology. In these stories Greek, Roman, and Arabic legends undergo a philosophical reorientation that strengthens their relevance to the modern world. Barth received the 1973 National Book Award for *Chimera*. Viewed by many as a summation of Barth's early career, *LETTERS* (1979) consists of a series of written exchanges between Barth and characters from his previous works. Allusions to politics, literature, and history fill the novel as the author questions the difference between objective reality and fiction.

Purported to be the final novel of a fictional character named John Barth, *Once upon a Time* (1994) is both a memoir and a commentary on autobiographical narrative. Barth concentrates on the relationship between mortality and storytelling in *On with the Story* (1996), as a middle-aged couple swaps a series of loosely related tales during a vacation. *Coming Soon!!!* (2001) ponders the future of the publishing industry as well as the role of the writer in a changing society. The story centers on a retired novelist's struggle over his final book, and his young student's aspiration to merge the written word with modern computer technology. Barth modeled his short story collection *The Book of Ten*

*Nights and a Night* (2004) on *The Arabian Nights*. Although the stories are set between September 11 and 21, 2001, some were actually composed as early as the 1960s. Framed by a writer's conversation with his muse, the collection explores the representational qualities of language and reflects on the relevance of such considerations during turbulent times. In 2005 Barth published *Where Three Roads Meet*, a collection of three novellas exploring sex, innocence, and the art of storytelling.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Barth's challenging and complex fiction has been the subject of numerous critical studies. Hailed as a primary example of the art of metafiction, his work has been favorably compared to that of James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, and the late nineteenth-century Brazilian author Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. Barth's keen insight into world religions and mythology is also widely acknowledged by critics. Though Barth's labyrinthine plot structures are occasionally faulted for being too exotic for the common reader, reviewers have praised the accessibility and universality of his thematic concerns. Scholars frequently deem his later writing repetitive and weak in relation to such early works as *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera*, which have come to be regarded as modern classics. For example, *Coming Soon!!!* has been dismissed by some reviewers as a waste of the reader's time, and *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* has been criticized for lacking the dynamics of authentic literature. Despite the generally unfavorable reviews of his more recent works, Barth is still identified as one of the most cerebral and demanding novelists in contemporary American fiction.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Floating Opera* (novel) 1956; revised edition, 1967
- The End of the Road* (novel) 1958; revised edition, 1967
- The Sot-Weed Factor* (novel) 1960; revised edition, 1967
- Giles Goat-Boy; or, The Revised New Syllabus* (novel) 1966
- The Literature of Exhaustion* (essay) 1967; published in journal *Atlantic Monthly*
- Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (short stories) 1968
- Chimera* (novellas) 1972
- LETTERS: A Novel* (novel) 1979
- The Literature of Replenishment* (essay) 1980; published in journal *Atlantic Monthly*
- Sabbatical: A Romance* (novel) 1982

- The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (essays) 1984  
*The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* (novel) 1987  
*The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (novel) 1991  
*Once upon a Time: A Floating Opera* (novel) 1994  
*Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction, 1984-1994* (nonfiction) 1995  
*On with the Story: Stories* (short stories) 1996  
*Coming Soon!!!: A Narrative* (novel) 2001  
*The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories* (short stories) 2004  
*Where Three Roads Meet: Novellas* (novellas) 2005

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## CRITICISM

### Lee Lemon (essay date summer 1990)

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[In the following essay, Lemon stresses the general appeal of Barth's work despite his reputation as an author of complex, esoteric literature.]

I am concerned for John Barth's literary reputation. As the works of Barth and his contemporaries age and critical acceptance of their exuberance is replaced by a demand for aesthetic restraint—a traditional changing of the literary avant-garde—Barth's reputation will all too likely wane, especially among ordinary readers and the semicommitted (students and nonprofessionals), those who fill out the numbers of readers who keep reputations alive. More than that of most writers of fiction, Barth's reputation, like Joyce's, is likely to be left in the hands of the eager professional, the reader who reads less for enjoyment than for an unsolved problem or an unanswered question that can be converted into a publishable paper.

In the following pages, then, I shall make what to some may seem to be a rather strange argument—that along with the dazzling brilliance of Barth's work, a brilliance that appeals to professionals, is a core of subject matter and themes and techniques that, if not obscured by those of us who instinctively hunt sources and simplify complexities, will appeal to the general reader of good fiction. I shall be stating the obvious because, in our zeal to explain the more esoteric elements of Barth's fictions, we too often lose sight of the fact that he does quite well the things that lesser but more popular novelists do, that he deals in matters of interest to us as human beings as well as professionals, and that

he is a skilled practitioner of those techniques of fiction that regularly win popular rather than critical support. It is necessary to make such an argument, I believe, because on one level the novels and stories of John Barth seem so ideally suited to the purposes of the professional who needs to squeeze out another article before the next tenure hearing that we sometimes forget that they are also good stories with significant humanistic, thematic values.

Tracking Barth's erudition from India through Asia Minor, the Mediterranean, up through central Europe, to England, and then to the shores of Maryland will keep many a conference of scholars occupied. Barth has borrowed techniques and subject matter from the oldest of recorded stories, the wonderfully intricate *Ocean of Story*, and has written material for that modern device, the tape recorder. He has created settings that predate our epics and postdate our present; his landscapes range from painstaking recreations of the Chesapeake to an alternate universe in which East and West campuses vie for supremacy. His characters are equally as varied. Most of us would not be surprised to find Todd Andrews as our neighbor or Ambrose Mensch teaching alongside us. And does any sizable university lack a Jack Horner? But he has also written of Menelaus and Scheherazade and Lord Baltimore and, at the extreme, Jerome Bray. We even find a variety of versions of the Author himself.

The curious scholar can, in preparing to write about Barth's works, study the mathematics of the spiral, East Indian narratives and American Indian sexual customs, epistolary novels, satire, bragging contests, Colonial history, oceanography, Barth's professional and personal relationships as reflected in his fiction, and on and on and on. The prospect is frightening, even without considering the number of learned studies that will probably continue to deal with the interrelation of characters and events among his works. **LETTERS** and its ramifications alone could spur an industry comparable to the great Joyce factories.

I am belaboring this because it points to an important aspect of Barth's reputation even as it obscures an equally important aspect of his work. Barth's assimilation of such diverse technical and thematic materials invites the kind of detective ability scholars love to display; his intricate and inventive use of the borrowings invites the kind of ingenuity that makes critical reputations.

The problem is that his work invites the kind of commentary that attracts the professional but often repels the general reader. Barth is often perceived as a writer's writer, one of those artists who has mastered the subtleties of the craft but forgot its heart, one of the passionless virtuosos.

It seems worthwhile to remind ourselves occasionally that Barth does the commonplace things of fiction quite well, that his more successful works do in fact attain Ambrose Mensch's ambition to be both wonderful and ordinary—and to achieve that combination is, perhaps, the most wonderful achievement of all. The story lines of *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* are, as in other Barth novels, built around conventional love triangles. The lady involved in each is the ever-fair heroine so beloved by popular fiction; the rival males are the traditional opposites—the superficially successful man of action versus the introspective male.

Like many a popular fiction, both *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* quickly place their central characters in situations that compel all but the most hardened of readers to ask that most basic question of fictions—"And what happens next?" Each is propelled by the main charge of concern for the fate of either Todd Andrews or Jacob Horner. What keeps Todd from his suicide? Will Jacob recover from his totally debilitating inability to decide? Will either hold the lady of his choice? Like boosters on the rocket, lesser questions temporarily push our attention in this or that direction. Who will inherit the Mack estate? Whose child is Jeanine? What is "Mythotherapy"? Is Jacob Horner's doctor a charlatan? How long will Joe Morgan tolerate Jacob's affair with Rennie?

*The End of the Road* is especially instructive in attempting to assess Barth's impact on the common reader because, if several classes in which I have used the novel are representative, it invites emotionally charged argument. Upholders of either side of the argument tend to agree that they did not like the novel and that they found its humor objectionable; but they also agree that it is difficult to put down. In short, Barth got his narrative hooks solidly under their skins, and they were uncomfortable.

One faction, usually mostly men, is repelled by Jacob Horner and Joe Morgan. They see Jacob and Joe as overdrawn, as—a favorite critical term of students—"unrealistic." The former is a caricature of weakness, the latter of authoritarian strength. The discussion gets interesting and even a bit uncomfortable when it turns to the question of why they object to these particular characters being overdrawn but not, say, James Bond or Mr. Spock or some other popular hero. Is there, perhaps, a bit of that recognition of ourselves and others that distinguishes so-called serious fiction from its popular counterpart? A recognition that we are to think rather than to daydream?

Members of the other faction, usually mostly women, have a more overtly visceral reaction. They generally have little trouble recognizing the reality behind the overdrawn males, but are horrified by the abortion scene and the death of Rennie.

What interests me about both reactions is their intensity, a kind of intensity generated only when an author has directly and successfully involved the passions of readers. Stripped of what Marc Alyn (in a letter to Lawrence Durrell) once called the "aesthetics of enlargement," the predicaments in which the trio of lovers finds itself are a commonplace of both fiction and life. Joe Morgan is a man who cannot tolerate the outcome of what he believes are his own strongly held values. Who among us does not extol the value of free choice, yet feel betrayed when others do not act as we would choose for them to act? I suspect it is a contradiction felt by almost all parents, teachers, lovers, and even politicians in democracies. Rennie is the typical victim of such a character—a person torn both by the fact that her desires do not always match those of her husband and by the very mixed signals he sends.

And poor Jacob, trapped among even the simplest and least consequential alternatives. If this were an orthodox essay on Barth, I would here begin a discussion of existentialism and invoke Camus's *L'Étranger*. I might harry the theme through *The Floating Opera* with Todd's equally weighted arguments for suicide and life; then into *The Sot-Weed Factor* with Ebenezer Cooke's discovery that existence precedes essence and Burlingame's constantly changing realities; through *Giles Goat-Boy* as the budding prophet separates tick from tock and, like Perseus and the alternating generations of Burlingames, must undo or redo everything he has done; and finally, into some of the resolutions and the new problems raised by *LETTERS* and continued in *The Tidewater Tales*.

What Barth has done in *The End of the Road*, and a part of what any novelist must do to deserve both critical and popular support, is to humanize a major intellectual preoccupation. Jacob Horner's indecisiveness, like Todd Andrews's balanced inquiry into the merits of suicide and life, is solidly based on both the contemporary intellectual certainty of the impossibility of certainty—derived variously from a host of contemporary philosophical positions, modern physics, existentialism, and a variety of other influences—and also upon our very unphilosophical awareness that, even in everyday matters, the rational grounds for choice are elusive.

Alongside Horner's "cosmopsis"—his inability to appreciate the universe—is a set of problems that are the stuff of which popular novels are made. He is troubled that he does not measure up to other men, especially the decisive Joe Morgan, that he lacks something that will forever debar him from what he conceives to be even ordinary success and satisfaction. Barth's dramatization of the affair with Rennie, complete with an insanely jealous husband who will not admit his jealousy, is both comic and moving. The starkly told



abortion scene—from the search for a quack who will perform the abortion, through the horrors of the abortion itself to Rennie's death—is a passionate statement of our society's need for a safe way of handling unwanted pregnancies.

*The Floating Opera*, despite its comedy and the reasoned detachment of Todd Andrews, is also a very moving story. In considering Andrews's coolness as he contemplates his suicide, we can too easily forget that it is a coolness chilled by desperation—a desperation that he has lived with for so long that he has learned to view it with a kind of clinical impersonality. He has lived with death, we must remember, since childhood. His father's suicide motivates the compilation of his *Inquiry*; he is fully aware that the German soldier he killed could have just as easily killed him, and his daily routine is based on the knowledge that his heart condition could kill him at any moment.

His problem is simply an enforced, acute awareness of the most basic of all human problems—mortality. Given the inevitability of death, why should one prolong life? Given the finality of death, aren't decisions about who inherits an estate or even who loves whom and whether it actually is love—aren't all such decisions trivial?

As Barth has Todd develop his answers to these questions, he also provides the reader with a host of other reasons for turning pages—which, we must not forget, is the novelist's first responsibility. Not only is much of the novel just good, plain, comic fun, it is also designed to pose questions the reader wants answered.

In "The Psychology of Form," Kenneth Burke argues, contrary to most of us who take literature seriously, that the success of *Hamlet* is due less to what Shakespeare knows about his subject than to what he knows about his audience. As scholars and critics, generations of us have felt compelled to write about Elizabethan political theory, revenge as a part of the code of honor, the humors, tragic flaws, and such. Each of those is important, but, Burke argues persuasively, the intellectual burden of the tragedy would not reach its destination were it not for Shakespeare's ability to play upon the expectations of the audience.

To summarize Burke's argument—*Hamlet* begins quickly, before any tedious exposition, with one of the most reliable of audience-grabbers: a ghost who has been murdered and wants revenge. After Shakespeare has whetted our appetite so crudely, he hones it even more sharply by delaying the meeting between the living and dead Hamlets, filling the interim with exposition. Occasional references to Old Hamlet and the queen's marriage are strategically placed to keep alive our interest in the ghost. Finally, all is set for the ghost to appear. Young Hamlet is alone on the parapet await-

ing the ghost, the tower clock strikes midnight (the traditional hour for ghostly visitations), and we, the audience, are on the edge of our seats. The ghost does not appear. Hamlet, apparently tired of waiting for the ghost, launches into what up to that point is the most interesting speech of the play. Just as we have given up the ghost, it appears. Shakespeare has concluded a virtuoso performance on our emotions: he has managed to surprise us and, almost simultaneously, to give us exactly what we have been waiting for.

I mention this technique of building expectations, delaying, then satisfying not because it is unusual in any way but because it is so basic to our interest in narrative, so *common* in both senses of that word, that we tend to overlook it. And we tend to overlook it especially when dealing with a writer like Barth who offers so much else, so many rarer and finer treasures.

The first paragraph of *The Floating Opera* is a model of audience manipulation. It sets up a series of questions, expectations, and promises. About what did the as yet unnamed narrator change his mind? Why was one day in 1937 so crucial? What is so important that a nonwriter has taken up writing?

We are led to expect something out of the ordinary because the writer tells us that others see him as eccentric, but comprehensible because his actions are consistent with principles, albeit changing principles. Moreover, we are led to expect a meandering tale but presumably a frank one because of his lack of reticence. And finally, we are promised that the tale will reach a conclusion because the narrator is the kind of person who finishes things.

I could detail other expectations Barth sets up, but they are more pretentious and, I believe, less the kind of basic elements that keep most of us moving from paragraph to paragraph. The first chapter ends with another set of promises and a challenge to the reader: the tale will be "fraught with curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction, and entertainment"; but "it may require the best efforts of your attention and imagination." What reader can resist such a promise and such a challenge?

Like Shakespeare or Ian Fleming working his audience, Barth knows that after posing the big question—why does Todd not commit suicide?—he must keep the reader diverted (the exact word here) for two hundred pages until he gives the answer. Like Shakespeare's (and to a much lesser extent Fleming's), Barth's ways are varied. There's wordplay, interest in the characters as characters, miscellaneous scraps of information and philosophy—a cornucopia of goodies to keep us satisfied while we await the answer to the main question.

There are also, of course, hosts of minor questions that keep us reading bit by bit. The questions overlap into a complex mosaic. Running alongside each other throughout much of the narrative are such long-term questions as the meaning of Todd's father's suicide and Todd's speculation on his own self-destruction, the precarious fragility of the old men of the Dorchester Club, and the outcome of his relationship with the Macks. These and others are mixed with short-term generators of suspense—how does Todd survive the meeting with the enemy soldier? Why was his first sexual experience so critical for both partners? In what ways was it critical? Where are the jars of excrement? And so on.

What Barth is doing in his first two novels is, among much else, performing the common tricks that seduce the common reader. The works that follow, at least until the comparatively orthodox (for Barth) *Tidewater Tales*, are more difficult and more rewarding. Beginning with *The Sot-Weed Factor* and continuing through *LETTERS*, his work becomes almost demonically clever and often forbiddingly erudite.

Even his short stories—that usually innocent form—play games within games within games. But while being delighted or vexed by the games, we need to remember that although in some of the stories the technical games overwhelm our more normal human concerns, some of the stories are overtly about such basic and ordinary human affairs as being in love and aging. The title story of *Lost in the Funhouse* is a powerful evocation of the uncertainties of a sensitive youth as he confronts his opposing desires to be both like his companions and, at the same time, more individual.

Even some of the gamier stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* are also moving dramatizations of the human predicament. The “*Menelaiad*,” along with its polyphonic prose styles and complexities of narrative voice, captures passionately the anxiety of a lover who cannot believe that anyone wonderful enough to be the object of his love could return that love. “*Night-Sea Journey*” is at once a comic dramatization of post-existential angst and an evocation of the feeling of frustration and peril that bewilders us as we confront our fate in a universe we don't understand.

The stories that make up *Chimera* are, I think, typical of Barth at his most typical best. They play the games we expect in experimental fiction and play them superbly. The “*Dunyazadiad*” is as self-reflexive and as introspectively concerned with analyzing the problems of narrative structure as any postmodern fiction; the “*Bellerophoniad*” carries the self-referential game even further by looking back to Barth's earlier novels and forward to *LETTERS*. Yet the basis of each of the stories, the passion that animates the virtuosity, is

a very basic human concern. Through its contrasting sets of lovers, “*Dunyazadiad*” explores some of the more vexing problems of our relationships—dominance, trust, durability of the relationship, and fidelity and exclusivity. The story of Perseus reminds us that certain problems are perennials—specifically, what does one do after success? How does one live after establishing a reputation and after the reflexes have slowed? After the thrills of the heroic life have placed one in a position that requires the duller managerial skills? And what does it mean, the “*Bellerophoniad*” asks, to live with the knowledge that one is second-rate?

The longer novels also combine experimentation, game playing, and basic humanistic concerns. *The Sot-Weed Factor*, along with providing enough physical excitement to fill several swashbuckling historical novels, is built around Ebenezer Cooke's discovery that all of his certainties—including the certainty that he is a poet and therefore one of the “wonderful”—are uncertain. He learns what is one of Barth's favorite themes, and one that should be a comfort to most of us: that he becomes his own rather solid self only when he surrenders his pretensions.

To a certain extent, *Giles Goat-Boy* works that same theme; the would-be prophet must undo all he has done. But it is also a topical satire of amazing complexity. If Barth is, as some claim, an ivory tower writer, he writes from a tower with an extremely clear and broad view. In following the battle between East and West Campuses, the reader with a minimal knowledge of the 1950s and 1960s has little difficulty recognizing assorted politicians (the Kennedy clan, Eisenhower, Johnson), scientists (Oppenheimer and Teller), and others of more or less importance from other areas. Barth has a keen eye for both the personal uses of political power and the political uses of personal power. On another level, his contrast between Max Spielman and Dr. Eierkopf (Oppenheimer and Teller, the scientist as humanist and the scientist as pure rationalist) dramatizes both hilariously and significantly one of the central issues of the period.

It is possible to make the same claim for *LETTERS* that I have made for Barth's other fictions. It shares both the topical relevance of *Giles Goat-Boy* and the existential relevance of most of his other work. Barth perhaps makes it all too easy for us, in our impatience with a game that has gone on too long or our eagerness to explicate its complexities, to forget that the reprise of the central characters from his other novels is more than a game. It is equally and far more significantly an attempt to explore what may be the most important set of personal questions an individual can ask: What happens to us as we change from youth to middle age to old age? If we are lucky, like Ambrose Mensch, what enables us to tolerate the fall from hope to reality? Is it