

JEROME KLINKOWITZ

# Literary Disruptions

THE MAKING OF A POST-CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICAN FICTION

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

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*Elaine*

## HISTORY OF A MINOR MAKER

His images cohered  
no more than  
hill-slopes  
sun-browned  
& slid down  
by boys on  
cardboard  
sleds.

He failed the meaning of feeling.  
He suffered the scorn of zebras,  
those even  
animals.

His music was  
tensionless as  
the schizophrenic  
singing  
in his ice-bath.

His lines bent  
from sentiment  
the way bright  
moths veer off  
the 70 mile  
an hour windshield.

Toward the end he was seen  
watering his typewriter,  
gluing grass to paper.

And, though warned against wind,  
he wandered out, sick,  
tearing off bedclothes, bandages—  
found later,  
perfectly still, all  
his wounds calm  
as kites.

—DAVID HILTON

## Preface

"Post-contemporary," someone told me when they read this book in manuscript, means "future," and as applied to fiction would indicate a literature not yet written. In some senses this is the meaning I intend. For even the well and intelligently read, "contemporary American fiction" suggests Ken Kesey, Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon at best—and at worst Updike, Roth, Bellow, and Malamud. My thesis is that the most contemporary of this lot, Barth and Pynchon, are in fact regressive parodists, who by the Literature of Exhaustion theory have confused the course of American fiction and held back the critical (although not the popular) appreciation of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Donald Barthelme, Jerzy Kosinski, and the other writers surveyed in this book. Vonnegut and company, however, have performed a radical disruption, far different from the ironies and burlesques of Barth and Pynchon and their imitators who follow in such polite thematic (and not formal) revolt from what has gone before. Hence the prologue, "The Death of the Death of the Novel," would sort out the funereal from the re-creative in recent fiction. The writers discussed after Barth and Pynchon are indeed post-contemporary; while their critical appreciation has until just recently lagged behind, their theories and techniques are vivid proof of the direction which fiction will take, and is taking, as the future unfolds before us.

Although the prologue studies fiction of the Sixties in general, my real concern begins with the publishing season of 1967–68, when for the first time in a long time a clear trend in literary history became evident. In that year all the fictionists of the new disruptive school published major works; the public discovered Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and the publishing industry acknowledged the new movement by giving the National Book Award to Jerzy Kosinski for his extremely disruptive novel, *Steps*. Many other fictionists were

writing in 1967–68, of course; but then, in 1916 three generations of novelists—those of James, Dreiser, and Hemingway—were writing in one form or other, so some critical and historical discrimination is appropriate. The authors studied in *Literary Disruptions* are of a definite style and school: given to formal experimentation, a thematic interest in the imaginative transformation of reality, and a sometimes painful but often hilarious self-conscious artistry, they stand apart from the Updike group, and especially from Barth and his circle, as clearly as do Hemingway and Fitzgerald from their two generations of elders writing as they began their own careers.

Several persons share the credit for helping this study to evolve and see light. Foremost to be thanked are the writers themselves. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Donald Barthelme, and Jerzy Kosinski each submitted to formal interviews as I was completing this book. Jim Sloan, Ron Sukenick, Raymond Federman, and Gil Sorrentino all contributed an undue amount of time and understanding in their correspondence, conversation, and friendship. My student John O'Brien introduced me to the work of virtually all the writers studied in Chapter Six and thereafter; his book *Interviews with Black Writers* stands as an important part of my own education. The editors of *Partisan Review*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *North American Review*, *Fiction International*, and *Chicago Review* were kind enough to let me think out loud in the pages of their magazines; for the use of some of my material first printed there, in much different form, I am very grateful. Keith McKean, Joseph Schwartz, Charles Newman, Jonathan Baumbach, and Ann Lowry Weir read the manuscript in its entirety, as did Elaine Klinkowitz; Kathie Hinton, Joe David Bellamy, Loree Rackstraw, Dan Cahill, and John Somer read parts, and for all their help I owe a substantial debt of gratitude. Finally, the Committee on Research of the University of Northern Iowa provided a summer grant and much continuing support, which allowed me to complete this work.

—Jerome Klinkowitz  
Cedar Falls, Iowa

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## PROLOGUE

# The Death of the Death of the Novel

Fiction breeds its own continuity. Because it is the most public of the literary arts and the most immediately responsive to social life, developments of form in the American novel have been clear-cut and at times even monumental. The year 1851 marked the publication of *The House of the Seven Gables* and *Moby-Dick*; 1885, the ascendancy of Realism with Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and the first collected edition of Henry James. The last commonly accepted milestone in the development of American fiction has been 1925, when F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* resolved the dichotomy of Romanticism and Realism in favor of well-crafted fiction and the novel of selection.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Twenties there have been variations in theme of course, but for the most part the American novel has been marked by a conservative stability of form. For nearly fifty years, when in other countries such exotic talents as Gide, Hesse, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Cortazar, Borges, and Gombrowicz flourished, American fiction rested content with novels of manners or of social politics, while the innovations of a Patchen, a Hawkes, a Miller, or a Burroughs were kept—in some cases by court order—decisively underground.

By the late 1960's an uneasiness had come to the criticism of fiction. "At the moment," Stephen Koch wrote in 1967, "our literature is idling in a period of hiatus: the few important writers of the earlier generations are dead, silent, or in their decline, while the younger generation has not yet produced a writer of unmistakable importance or even of very great interest."<sup>2</sup> Criticism itself fared

<sup>1</sup> The best analysis of this last transition is James E. Miller, Jr., *F. Scott Fitzgerald: His Art and His Technique* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), especially the chapters "Saturation" and "Selection."

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Koch, "Premature Speculations on the Perpetual Renaissance," *Tri-Quarterly* #10 (Fall, 1967), p. 5.

no better; by that time no less than four studies of the ranking contemporary novelist, Saul Bellow, had appeared, but a typical review found them "inflated and tiresome exercises in the art of trivia."<sup>3</sup> The novel itself was said to be suffering a "curious death," chroniclers of its demise including Louis Rubin, Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, and Norman Podhoretz.<sup>4</sup> "Even though there is a large body of new work," Koch concluded, "nothing thus far has been heard at the highest levels except an eerie silence."

It must feel strange indeed to be an emerging novelist when the novel has just died. Stranger still to write books which nobody buys, when book companies' stock falls two hundred points in eighteen months; when the returns keep flooding in, when your publisher remainders your first printing. During the 1967-68 publishing season there were many signs to suggest that fiction was in trouble, but Fiedler, Sontag, Podhoretz, and their colleagues were proclaiming the genre's decline even before the review copies were out, which turned out to contain an amazingly rich harvest: Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, Ronald Sukenick's *Up, In the Heart of the Country* by William H. Gass, *Tales* by LeRoi Jones, major novels by Richard Brautigan, Ishmael Reed, Steve Katz, and others—a season climaxing with the belated discovery of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., through his retrospective collection *Welcome to the Monkey House*, and the National Book Award for Jerzy Kosinski's *Steps*. The point at issue between this critical despair and such a flurry of new, substantial work marks another division in the history of the novel, greater than the ones before because the nature of fiction itself was being challenged in a radical disruption of the genre's development. Ronald Sukenick described the phenomenon in a *Chicago Review* interview with Joe David Bellamy: "One of the reasons people have lost faith in the novel is that they don't believe it tells the truth any more, which is another way of saying that they don't believe in the conventions of the novel. They pick up a novel and they know it's

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Fossum, "Review Essay: Four Studies of Saul Bellow," *Studies in the Novel*, 1 (Spring, 1970), 104.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Rubin, "The Curious Death of the Novel: Or, What to Do about Tired Literary Critics," in *The Curious Death of the Novel: Essays in American Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967); Leslie Fiedler, "Cross the Border, Close the Gap," *Playboy*, 16 (December, 1969), 151, 230, 252, 254, 256-258; Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp. 3-14; Norman Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964).

make believe. So, who needs it—go listen to the television news, right? Or read a biography.”<sup>5</sup>

“People no longer believe in the novel as a medium that gets at the truth of their lives,” Sukenick wrote again in 1973. Conventional novels had presented data, but in terms of fraudulent ideals, and sophisticated readers began despising these works for the lies they presented as real-life stories. Persistent story-tellers would have us believe as fact that life has leading characters, plots, morals to be pointed, lessons to be learned, and most of all beginnings, middles, and ends. In his novel published the same year, *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., played with the cynical farce of all this when he pondered the abominable behavior of his countrymen and concluded that “They were doing their best to live like people invented in story books. This was the reason Americans shot each other so often: It was a convenient literary device for ending short stories and books.”<sup>6</sup> Vonnegut added that others suffered disappointing lives which failed to be perfect fictions, as year by year we were learning that still more readers were despairing of the whole mess and abandoning fiction altogether for history, biography, or even television. The more instant and accurate the replay, the more truthful seem the facts, although in the process the organizing and clarifying power of art was forgone, and fiction was at the point of no longer existing.

“The great advantage of fiction over history, journalism, or any supposedly ‘factual’ kind of writing,” Sukenick countered, “is that it is an expressive medium. It transmits feeling, energy, excitement. Television can give us the news, fiction can best express our response to the news. No other medium—especially not film—can so well deal with our strongest and often most intimate responses to the large and small facts of our daily lives. No other medium, in other words, can so well keep track of the reality of our experience.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Joe David Bellamy, “Imagination as Perception: An Interview with Ronald Sukenick,” *Chicago Review*, 23 (Winter, 1972), 60. Reprinted in Joe David Bellamy, *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1973), pp. 209–210.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Sukenick, “About Fiction in General and OUT in Particular,” publicity release distributed to reviewers by Swallow Press, February, 1973. Expanded as “Innovative Fiction, Innovative Criteria,” *Fiction International* #2–3 (Spring/Fall, 1974), p. 133.

Nevertheless, by the 1960's writers had abandoned the Great American Novel, and had turned fiction instead—like poetry before it—into an elitist, academic diversion. Although several critics had comments on the subject, the key document in defining and endorsing this new aesthetic for the novel was John Barth's essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion." Given prominent publication in the *Atlantic Monthly* of August, 1967, following by a year the wide success of Barth's novel *Giles Goat-Boy* and the prestigious republication of his earlier works, it influenced discussion of fiction in much the same way that social and political essays by LeRoi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, Julius Lester, and others were affecting their own fields about the same time. Barth's seemingly radical aesthetic was that in the novel writers faced "the used-upness of certain forms of exhaustion of certain possibilities."<sup>8</sup> From then on writers could only parody older stories and earlier forms—but at no great loss, since the crucial matter was "the difference between the *fact* of aesthetic ultimacies and their artistic *use*."<sup>9</sup> Barth's discovery and momentary triumph in his fiction was the issue of "how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our own time into material and means for his own work."<sup>10</sup>

Three months after his seminal essay, one of the few on literary theory the *Atlantic* had published since the editorship of William Dean Howells, the same magazine featured Barth's contribution, "Lost in the Funhouse," a major story from his forthcoming collection of the same name. "So far there's been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a *theme*," the narrator admits after the piece is well underway. "And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder. We haven't even reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse."<sup>11</sup> And so his protagonist Ambrose doesn't, never getting into it in the first place. But in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) Barth had pushed on into the realm of fiction which his *Atlantic* essay alleged was "new," the Literature of Exhaustion. "The final possibility," his story "Title" insists, "is to turn ul-

<sup>8</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, 220 (August, 1967), 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), p. 77.

timacy, exhaustion, paralyzing self-consciousness and the adjective weight of accumulated history. . . . Go on. Go on. To turn ultimacy against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new.”<sup>12</sup> In some of his stories Barth brought American fiction to the level of innovation and self-conscious artifice practiced by Julio Cortazar in such tales as “Continuity of Parks” and “The Night Face Up” (from *End of the Game and Other Stories*) and by Jorge Luis Borges in “The Circular Ruins” (collected in *Ficciones*). “I try to write simple, straight-forward stories,” reported Borges;<sup>13</sup> for his part, Barth confessed to being “less and less interested in working with tapes and graphics and things of that sort—and more and more interested in story telling.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, in comparison with his Argentine models, Barth’s attempts were hardly sustained; coming when it did (as he finished *Lost in the Funhouse*), “The Literature of Exhaustion” read as a literary suicide note.

Or else as an equivocation, since for the one story about Ambrose which demands a parody of the conventional (“Lost in the Funhouse”), the collection offers two others, “Ambrose His Mark” and “Water Message,” which do quite well within the older, apparently unexhausted forms. Moreover, the uses Barth finds in the title story for his new aesthetic are for the most part gratuitous—a musing with italic script, obvious references to unexceptional techniques, and as its principal innovation the simple use of suspense as a structural device: “At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever.”<sup>15</sup> The story’s ineffectualness can be seen by contrasting it with Gilbert Sorrentino’s “The Moon in Its Flight.” In formalistic terms, the latter story is a carefully plotted exercise in literary hysteria, as the author tries to guide his characters through a romance in the historically lost year of 1948, all the time knowing how conventional fiction invites itself to be misread. “Isn’t there anyone,” he pleads, “any magazine writer or avant-garde filmmaker, any lover of life or dedicated op-

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Norman Thomas di Giovanni et al., eds., *Borges on Writing* (New York: Dutton, 1973), p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Joe David Bellamy, “Algebra and Fire: An Interview with John Barth,” *The Falcon* #4 (Spring, 1972), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 78.

timist out there who will move them toward a cottage, already closed for the season, in whose split log exterior they will find an unlocked door? Inside there will be a bed, whiskey, an electric heater. Or better, a fireplace, white lamps, soft lights. Sweet music." Or, "All you modern lovers, freed by Mick Jagger and the orgasm, give them, for Christ's sake, for an hour, the use of your really terrific little apartment. They won't smoke your marijuana nor disturb your Indiana graphics. They won't borrow your Fanon or Cleaver or Barthelme or Vonnegut. They'll make the bed before they leave. They whisper good night and dance in the dark." <sup>16</sup> But all of that is impossible, for "This was in America, in 1948. Not even fake art or the wearisome tricks of movies can assist them." Even worse, fears the narrator, how can the contemporary reader of his paperback magazine piece appreciate the meaning of this ancient world? "Who remembers the clarity of Claude Thornhill and Sarah Vaughan, their exquisite irrelevance? They are gone where the useless chrome doughnuts on the buick's hood have gone." <sup>17</sup> Sorrentino uses the same correlative in his novel, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971), as itself one of those imaginative qualities of actual things, when "Leo saw her standing in the sun. Just like Dick Haymes in the old movie. She was something to see, etc." Therefore the narrator tells us at once, to keep the experience one of art and not just history, that "The value of the popular song is that it deals in superficialities that release the emotions. Scratch the veneer of those pedestrian lyrics and you look into a crystal ball of the past." <sup>18</sup> Or as we are asked in the story, "She was crying and stroking his hair. Ah God, the leaves of brown came tumbling down, remember?" <sup>19</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino finds by Barth's own definition a point of true exhaustion in narrative art, and seizes it to more effectively tell his story. Here technique is more than simple discovery—it becomes an integral part of the fiction itself.

But the critical reaction to Sorrentino's work—along with that to a whole artistic generation, including Vonnegut, Barthelme, Suken-

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino, "The Moon in Its Flight," *New American Review* #13 (1971), p. 157.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert Sorrentino, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Sorrentino, "Moon in Its Flight," p. 157.

ick, and others—was for a time aborted, because of the depressing effect of Barth's essay and the even greater impression made by his continuing work. That a newer style of fiction did become popular in the late 1960's was beside the point, since anything designed in the wake of Barth's parody and subversion seemed a hopeless or even reprehensible cause. That right within our dispensation of "the death of the novel" tight, snappy little books by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Richard Brautigan were selling like mad, competing with TV and sometimes winning, was irrelevant. Other writers such as Sorrentino, Barthelme, Sukenick, and Rudolph Wurlitzer were extending these forms, finding a new life for fiction, only to be described by Pearl Kazin Bell (in a review typical of the period) as "celebrants of unreason, chaos, and inexorable decay . . . a horde of mini-Jeremiahs crying havoc in the Western world."<sup>20</sup> The more social and cultural issue, as Nathan Scott let slip in his major essay on contemporary fiction, was that the "inward liberation" of the imagination which these writers used as a counter to transcend Barth "offers us an effective release from the bullying of all the vexations of history"—and, incidentally, that this aesthetic had been so demonstrably adopted "by the hordes of those young long-haired, jean-clad, pot-smoking bohemians who have entered the world of psychedelia."<sup>21</sup>

*Chimera*, John Barth's trilogy of retold classical myths which followed *Lost in the Funhouse* in 1972, stands as an allegory of his own exhaustion. As with "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction" and the funhouse story in the earlier collection, *Chimera* confuses the product of art with the conditions of its inception, a process which obviously fascinates Barth (leading to such pieces as "Night-Sea Journey") but which often results in simple bad writing, as when the story admits "I must compose myself."<sup>22</sup> *Chimera* is even more indulgent, renaming Dunyazade, sister of Scheherazade; "Doony," and in another place allowing a character on the death of a parent to impel herself "dead dadward."<sup>23</sup> Relocat-

<sup>20</sup> Pearl Kazin Bell, "American Fiction: Forgetting Ordinary Truths," *Dissent*, Winter, 1973, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "'New Heav'ns, New Earth'—the Landscape of Contemporary Apocalypse," *Journal of Religion*, 53 (January, 1973), 12–13.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> John Barth, *Chimera* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 103.

ing the determinants of race, moment, and milieu from the subject one is writing about to the writing itself, from topic to technique or from ethic to aesthetic, is hardly an innovation; evidence suggests that the same was attempted in the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> A figure in most of Barth's work is the writer seeking immortality. "Fair as the country was and the goatboy life my fellow's lot," his narrator of "Anonymiad" confesses, "if I could not've imagined my music's one day whisking me Orionlike to the stars, I'd have as well flung myself into the sea."<sup>25</sup> Hence the door closing to new literary activity would be a death sentence: "I had begun to run out of world and material. . . . I imagined my *opera* sinking."<sup>26</sup>

Despite his recourse to technique (in parody, burlesque, and ironic commentary) as a way of sustaining his role as fictionist, Barth has received little attention as a purely formal innovator. Rather, the major studies of his work prefer to discuss his themes. Both Charles B. Harris and Raymond Olderman find a complete explication within myth and draw neat correlations to the work of Joseph Campbell.<sup>27</sup> Thematically, Barth is read as an example that "the symbolic affirmation that transcends conflicts without offering a program of action is just about the only affirmative ending the novel of the sixties can have without running into sociology or romanticism."<sup>28</sup> From his own parameters of the decade Olderman excludes consideration of Barthelme, Kosinski, Sukenick, Sorrentino, and most other fictionists who moved formally beyond Barth. So does Harris, who prefers to let that decade close with a facile thematic imperative: "So Barth, like most other absurdist novelists, sees human commitment to other human beings—in short, love—as one of the few relative values available in an otherwise valueless universe."<sup>29</sup>

Barth's narrator in "Title" speaks otherwise: "In this dehuman,

<sup>24</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, "Ethic and Aesthetic: The Basil and Isabel March Stories of William Dean Howells," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 16 (Autumn, 1970), 303-322.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 172.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>27</sup> Charles B. Harris, *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (New Haven: College & University Press, 1971), pp. 110-115; Raymond Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 76-81.

<sup>28</sup> Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>29</sup> Harris, *Contemporary American Novelists*, p. 120.



exhausted, ultimate adjective hour, when every humane value has become untenable, and not only love, decency, and beauty but even compassion and intelligibility are no more than one or two subjective complements to complete the sentence. . . .”<sup>30</sup> Nor can he complete the sentence. In the “Bellerophoniad” (published almost coincidentally with Harris’s and Olderman’s theses) Barth speaks more directly:

“My general interest in the wandering-hero myth dates from my thirtieth year, when reviewers of my novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) remarked that the vicissitudes of its hero—Ebenezer Cooke, Gentleman, Poet and Laureate of Maryland—follow in some detail the pattern of mythical heroic adventure as described by Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, and other comparative mythologists. The suggestion was that I had used this pattern as the basis for the novel’s plot. In fact I had been unaware of the pattern’s existence; once appraised of it I was struck enough by the coincidence (which I later came to regard as more inevitable than remarkable) to examine those works by which I’d allegedly been influenced, and my next novel, *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), was for better or for worse the conscious and ironic orchestration of the *Ur-Myth* which its predecessor had been represented as being. Several of my subsequent fictions—the long short-story *Menelaid* and the novella *Perseid*, for example—deal directly with particular manifestations of the myth of the wandering hero and address as well a number of their author’s more current thematic concerns: the mortal desire for immortality, for instance, and its ironically qualified fulfillment—especially by the mythic hero’s transformation, in the latter stages of his career, into the sound of his own voice, or the story of his life, or both. I am forty.”<sup>31</sup>

“He was a writer of tales,” a Barth look-alike explains himself to Scheherazade and her sister in the “*Dunyazadiad*,” “anyhow a former writer of tales in a land on the other side of the world.” He confesses that as a popular vehicle the novel had died, and that

His own pen (that magic wand, in fact a magic quill with a fountain of ink inside) had just about run dry. . . . His career, too, had reached a hiatus which he would have been pleased to call a turning-point if he could have espied any way to turn: he wished neither

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *Chimera*, pp. 198–199.