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"John Barth's *Once Upon a Time*: Fiction or Autobiography?"

With his latest narrative work, entitled *Once Upon a Time* (1994), John Barth creates a very particular type of autobiography, or perhaps we should say a very particular type of novel, which is perfectly in line with his previous books and the development of his literary aesthetic.¹

In his two famous essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment," the author expressed his point of view about the present state of literature and its possible future.² In the belief that the aesthetic of the great modernist writers had been exhausted, but wanting just the same to work within literary tradition, he thought that a worthy program for postmodernism would be to reach a synthesis between the characteristics of Nineteenth Century literature (or more generally premodernist literature)—"linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naive illusionism, transparent language . . . and middle-class moral conventions"—and those of the literature of the first half of our century: "disjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism, anti-illusionism, self-reflexiveness . . . and moral pluralism approaching moral entropy" (Barth 1984, 203). One way to overcome the "used-upness" of certain forms of art, Barth suggested, was to resort to parody, to write "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" (72), convinced, as he was, that "artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" (205).

Having revisited, beginning with *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the

historical novel, the allegorical novel, the short story, the novella, the epistolary novel, the voyage-tale genre, and even the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, thus revitalizing stories already told by new narrative forms and from a contemporary point of view, in *Once Upon a Time* he turns his attention to the autobiographical genre.

With his usual meticulousness for structure, yet with a sense of playfulness, he constructs a very entertaining book, whose central subject is his vocation as a writer, and which offers precious insights into his life from childhood to the present with a reorchestration in a new key of the inspirational motifs of his work.

Author, narrator and protagonist coincide, but some of the conventions of the autobiographical genre are purposely subverted to the point of contradicting even its most basic features. For example, some characters are pure invention, like his friend and alter ego Jerome Schreiber/ Jay Wordsworth Scribner, while those who really exist, like his wife, his twin sister and himself are expressly declared to be fictionalized. Moreover, the retrospective prose account, which in an autobiography generally serves to reconstruct the writer's past and describe the formation of his personality, does not, in this case, form the main body of the narrative, but is encapsulated within a fictitious story whose protagonist is the author, who, on Columbus Day 1992 decides to begin an "open-ended" cruise with his wife along the Chesapeake Bay.

This story too has autobiographical elements in that Mr. and Mrs. Barth do have a cottage on the Maryland coast and love sailing along the Bay. However, everything that happens to the couple, and particularly to the protagonist, takes place in a hallucinatory spacial and temporal zone which can be compared to that presented in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Although at the beginning the story is quite plausible, to dispel any doubts about its presumed adherence to reality, the author immediately reveals the artifice upon which the entire work is based: «Fiction most of all, this, in that I draw the sentences in late 1990, two years before the imaginary events recounted and the

quingentenary of Columbus's landing in the West Indies" (*OUT* 9), repeating again later on: "Not only fiction, then, this, but in its peculiar way futuristic, time-travel fiction: a journey into the unknown like all our journeys" (*OUT* 18-19).

The reader, in the meantime, has been given hints starting right from the unnumbered pages which precede the text, the so called "paratexte,"³ which, as Genette says, is "une zone non seulement de transition, mais de *transaction*: lieu privilegie d'une pragmatique et d'une strategie" (Genette 8) which often has a determining function for the reception and comprehension of the work. Barth, as we know, has always paid particular attention to the paratext, both in his artistic production⁴ and in his criticism. Suffice it to quote, as an example of the latter, his volume of essays called *The Friday Book*, which has, as a subtitle, a provocative and contradictory "*or, Booktitles Should Be Straightforward and Subtitles Avoided*," followed in its turn by the generic indication "*Essays and Other Nonfiction*." The first twenty pages, moreover, numbered with roman numerals that make them seem to be outside the text proper, are dedicated to the various elements of the paratext in the same order in which they usually appear in books (and therefore in the place in which they should appear in the book this author is writing). The paradox is that, while he talks about and explicitly uses subtitles, dedications, notes, introduction etc., Barth asserts that they "should be avoided," adding however "except where they are quite necessary or very useful" (Barth 1984, XX). In fact, he even goes so far as to write two epigraphs to his own book against the use of epigraphs.⁵ It is obvious then that Barth is extremely conscious of these "bordering elements" which, as Genette notes, serve not only to present the text, but also "pour le *rendre present*, pour assurer sa presence au monde, sa 'reception' et sa consommation, sous la forme, aujourd'hui du moins, d'un livre . . . 'Zone indecise' entre le dedans et le dehors . . . ou, comme disait Philippe Lejeune, 'frange du texte imprime qui, en realite, commande toute la lecture'" (Genette 7-8).

Let us, therefore, proceed with a brief analysis of the paratext of *Once Upon a Time* to see what effect the author wishes it to

have upon the reader and why he is seeking this effect. It is my belief that, in spite of a series of factors which encourage us to consider it fiction, the work must be seen as an autobiography more than a novel, or more precisely, the only type of autobiography possible for a writer like Barth, who believes the things he believes and tells the stories he tells the way he tells them rather than telling other stories in some other way.⁶

The front cover book-sleeve shows a blue background with a bright yellow sun, underneath which a fountain pen sails on a sea of paper currency, in which one can distinguish Columbus's face and an emblem with the picture of a palm and caravel and the inscription "Bahamas, first land fall 1492." At the top of the page, the author's name is written with *Once Upon a Time*, in italics, underneath. At the bottom right, camouflaged as part of a banknote, there is written "A FLOATING OPERA," which we will discover later on to be the book's actual subtitle.

The title is identical to the famous fairy tale *incipit* and we are invited therefore to enter the atmosphere typical to this genre. It reminds us of another of Barth's works, *Lost in the Funhouse*, a series of short stories enclosed within a "Frame-Tale," written upon a Moebius strip that the reader himself is invited to construct, in which the words "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN" (Barth 1988, 1-2) repeat themselves incessantly indicating, in this way, the self-referentiality of the stories recounted and the chain of symbolic and thematic references that bind them to each other in a kind of circularity characteristic of Barth's narrative.

On the inside cover the word FICTION is printed, followed by a presentation of the book which, using the definition given by the author himself about which we will talk later, mentions the double nature of this work as a memoir and a novel. The comment, however, is based upon the fact that it is an imaginary skipper who recounts the story of his life and there is no indication whatever that this narrator, characterized generically as "a middle-aged writer of some repute," is identifiable with the author himself. Barth's three previous books present voyagers who are also writers and protagonists. All of them have something in

common with their author and function as his "masks," but each has his own name and his own story to tell which relegates him to the realm of fiction. As Lejeune says, the autobiographical pact can only be based on the identification of the author's name with that of the narrator/protagonist. Otherwise, whatever resemblance there may be between character and author, we have to consider the work as being based on a "*pacte romanesque*" (Lejeune 25-27).

On the fourth page there is a list of Barth's other books, ten works of fiction and a volume of essays. On the fifth page, the title is repeated, having already appeared on the third page, but this time with the addition printed underneath of the words "A Floating Opera." If one glances at the list of works on the left, one notices that this subtitle is almost identical to the name of Barth's first book, *The Floating Opera*. Those who happen to have read it will remember that it is a work of pure fiction, inspired by its narrator/protagonist's belief that life *is* a floating opera performed on a showboat which, instead of being anchored, goes up and down the river according to the tide. The spectators on the river bank cannot fully grasp the meaning of the show which is endlessly performed. To know more they have to wait for the boat to return, trying to fill in the blanks in their understanding by word of mouth or through the use of their own imagination.

The "*contexte auctorial*," that is, the whole of Barth's literary production, induces the reader who has a certain familiarity with these works to think that this is another novel.

The word "fiction" is then repeated on the sixth page, both in the bibliographical description which accompanies the Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data, and in the warning certainly written by the author: "This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously."

But even those who have not read Barth, nor paid attention to the inside cover, or, for that matter, the sixth page, cannot escape the author's preface, which is entitled "Program Note" and which for its importance, efficacy and brevity, I quote here in full:

Once Upon a Time—a memoir bottled in a novel and here floated off to whom it may concern—is not the story of my life, but it is most certainly a story thereof. Its theme is Vocation. The better to sing it, I have passed over or scarcely sounded other themes, and have reorchestrated freely to my purpose. Of my children, for example, as of real friends and colleagues past and current, there is scarcely a mention. My twin sister makes a fictionalized cameo appearance. My ship- and lifemate, this opera's dedicatee, takes a larger role, likewise fictionalized, in its opening and closing scenes. My thanks to both for their permission to be thus imagined. I have been careful of all hands' privacy except my own, and even that has scarcely been trespassed upon. Every life has a Scheherazadesworth of stories.

-Langford Creek and Baltimore,

12 October 1990 - 12 October 1992

We are finally in possession of the key information. The author declares that he will speak about his life, although he takes the trouble to inform us that it is *a* story and not *the* story and so certain elements will be neglected in favour of others and real characters will be fictionalized.

There is no signature, not even initials, but we know that Langford Creek and Baltimore are the places where John Barth lives and works. Viceversa, the presence of two dates that both correspond to Columbus Day suggests that each is imaginary and at the same time has a particular meaning. As we have already noted, 12 October 1990 corresponds to the period in which the author says he began writing, while 12 October 1992 marks the beginning of the adventure he recounts.

When we turn to the next page, instead of a table of contents, we find a "Program" which says that this book has the structure of an opera, being composed of an overture, an interlude, three acts, two entr'acts, entitled "In the Dark" and "Light," and an epilogue.

While in autobiography the validity of the facts narrated is presupposed, opera, as Zack Bowen writes when commenting on Barth's first novel, makes use of conventions which oblige the audience to accept implausible things as true: "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" (Bowen 1). In

fact, in the "Program Note" the author reveals the hybrid nature of his work, "a memoir bottled in a novel," implicitly asking of the reader that "suspension of disbelief" which will allow him to tell, in the way most suitable to him, not the story of his life, but "most certainly a story thereof."

It seems that the author, setting himself the difficult task of recounting the most significant things in his past, and of "singing" his vocation as a writer, wants to defend himself from the pedantic accusation of inverisimilitude, and he therefore employs the strategy of inserting his memories into a story which, since it is set in the future, cannot certainly be considered as reality. A story which, being "no more than a knock-on-wood projection from our situation of Columbus Day 1990" (*OUT 9*), can easily have as its title "that magical invocation" (*OUT 18*) with which fairy stories begin: "Once upon a time . . ."

In fact, all this corresponds to a precise vision of the world, to a conception of collective history and individual life, whose meaning, although never completely understood, is however, for Barth, more accessible if reality is interspersed with imagination. If the events Barth imagines happening in the future are merely projections of his situation in 1990, then the scenes which in the course of the book he reevokes from his past are also of the same nature:

Without asking or experimenting, I understand that the people and objects in these scenes are, from our point of view at least, mere images, projections insubstantial as light—although something tells me it's *words* they are made of. (*OUT 143-44*)

For Barth, there is no substantial difference between past and future, fact and fiction, so much so that every event, once transformed into language, is automatically deformed and, in a certain sense, fictionalized. As Jacob Horner, the narrator/protagonist of *The End of the Road* puts it:

To turn experience into speech—that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it—is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. (Barth 1988, 112) ⁷

Even if life in itself is without meaning, as the writer suggests, man's need to provide a meaning in any case obliges him to find it in the form of a story: "Of what one cannot make sense, one can make art" (*OUT 171*). And in a story, fact and fiction, as we have already said, become inextricable and complementary. As another Barth character, Lady Amherst, affirms in *LETTERS*: "the relation between fact and fiction, life and art, is not imitation of either by the other, but a sort of reciprocity, an ongoing collaboration or reverberation" (Barth 1979, 233).

It is exactly on the basis of this conviction that the generative project of this floating opera comes to life, a project which unfolds itself in the continuous alternation of the fictitious story with the certainly more realistic one, sung by the writer's voice in the frequent "arias" that interrupt the story of the imaginary voyage. A very well planned project, defined by the author as "'coaxial esemplasy': the ongoing, reciprocal shaping of our story (in this case, a story of our life) by our imagination, and of our imagination by our story thus far" (*OUT20*).

Just as in an opera, taking his cue from a particular object, word or situation, Barth, the "tenor," breaks into an aria, sometimes commenting on the present action, explaining some of his habits, stating why he holds certain things dear, recalling memories from the past, recounting his love for the places in which he was born and lives and which have so inspired him, sometimes wondering about the meaning of this voyage which, as it progresses, assumes more and more clearly the symbolic value of a rite of passage. Sometimes he comments on the process of writing to underline the fact that this is a work in progress which he can modify whenever he wants. Other times, he brings us back abruptly to the real time of writing reminding us that, although it is different from the time of the adventure, it gets nearer and nearer and will eventually surpass it, having already predicted from the beginning that, when the book is published, the quincentenary of the discovery of America will already be history. It is as if there were two writers; one who writes during the voyage, the other who writes comfortably at home imagining he is the protagonist of the voyage.

Even at a first reading, thanks to italicised subtitles which indicate a return to the fictitious story or the rendering of yet another aria, the reader never loses sight of his points of reference. He enjoys the artifice of the narrative which emphasizes the artistic process and he becomes involved in the development of that voyage which, hovering between experience and imagination, will lead him gradually to the end along the path the author chooses.

Speaking about the criteria which will guide his composition, the writer says:

"Controlled indeterminacy," "self-organized criticality," "weak chaos"—such paradigmatic notions come to mind. They go some way toward describing how our real lives are really lived, as well as a way of telling our life-stories. (*OUT 20*)

And one soon realizes the importance and significance of the three oxymorons: the matter of which the story is made is effectively under control, the chaos only apparent to express all the more the uncertainty and fragmentation of human life.

"'My project' . . . 'is to learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been'", the Genie told Scheherazade in *Chimera*, quoting as an example a certain kind of Maryland snail which constructs its shell as it goes along, instinctively following the path which will provide the most suitable material. In this way, therefore, the snail "carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows" (Barth 1972, 10). So too in *Once Upon a Time*, the writer "grows," that is learns, by going where he has to go. To Roethke's line "I learn by going where I have to go," he adds: "And like prudent navigators we may reckon our course by deducing where we are from our running plot of where we've been" (*OUT 20*).

This then is how the metaphor of life as a voyage becomes interchangeable with the metaphor of a voyage as life. "If life is like a voyage, reader, a voyage may be like life," warns the narrator in *Sabbatical* (Barth 1982, 200). Barth's ability resides in his knowing exactly how to create the story of an imaginary itinerary that allows him to touch upon and enlarge all the

fundamental themes of his poetic. A voyage in which, just like a navigator, if the word "where" is substituted by the word "who," he will be able to find the right direction only after having understood "who in the fluxing world he is," by remembering "who" he was. Present, past and future are therefore indissolubly linked, existing in symbiosis both in the fictitious story and in the personal, intimate one, made up of the writer's memory and reflections. So too the future time of the adventure steadily approaches the actual time of writing until the "telling" overtakes the "tale."

At this point it is perhaps worthwhile to briefly summarize the story of this voyage back and forth in time in order to appreciate the definition of "bravura performance" applied to this work on the back sleeve.

At dawn on 12 October 1992, the writer and his wife are awakened by the three conch-calls of a departing boat. Their neighbours, Jay Scribner and Beth Duer, have probably left Langford Creek for good on board their ketch, *American Century*, with the idea of retracing Columbus's first voyage backwards, as if to annul in this way the devastating consequences of his discovery. Our couple decides instead to begin a brief cruise along the Chesapeake Bay in their boat called *US* ("us", but also "United States").

Getting ready to leave, the writer considers doing something completely out of character for him. He toys with the idea of taking with him an old binder, which he bought when he was seventeen and on whose leaves he has always written the first drafts of his works. He notices that, like his body, it too has aged and carries the scars of time (including the stain of coffee cups from the Truman period) and like his body, although requiring regular exercise, it has to avoid strenuous exertion. For this reason, in the end, he decides to leave it at home, taking with him, however, his beloved Parker, the fountain pen which, since 1963, has flowed forth its contents upon the pages of the old binder with the same ease and naturalness with which one breathes. His dwelling on these two objects is certainly not casual. They are the instruments of the writer, the distinctive signs of his profession and

his identity, his means of creating and earning a living. If, on the one hand, the binder is similar to his body, on the other, *pen* and *penis*, as the author reflects, have the same root confirming again the association of sex with storytelling, which for Barth is personified by Scheherazade and which is, in fact, a leit-motif of his narrative.⁸

While manoeuvring out of Langford Creek, they spot a cask in the nearby marsh; they pick it up and decide to open it later on, during their first stop along the Chester River. The surrounding marsh affords the author the opportunity of remembering certain themes dear to his poetic: "Neither dry land nor sea, as the Chesapeake is neither salt nor fresh; emblematic equally of stagnation and regeneration, of death and new life—these inbetweenlands are my imagination's *mise-en-scène*" (*OUT* 35). And this consideration is linked to his idiosyncratic dislike of clear cut distinctions, and his preference for the unstable, the temporary and the ambiguous, inspired by his birthplace, Maryland, a tidewater-land whose boundaries constantly change.

Being below sea-level, the marsh produces all manner of interesting "fruits", in particular the so called "water-messages." During his childhood in the coastal town of Cambridge, the writer tells us, a favourite pastime was going to the Choptank River with the intention of sending, or in the hope of finding, a message in a bottle. This theme runs through all of Barth's books. One of the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* is explicitly entitled "Water-Message" and, according to the writer, describes something that really happened to him. In his early teens he found one of these bottles with the enigmatic caption *It was Bill Bell*, about which, fifty years later, he still wonders. In the short story the writing becomes TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, followed only by YOURS TRULY. And Barth, quoting himself, explains: "'The lines between were blank,' reports the narrator, 'as was the space beneath the complimentary close'—a blank, it might be said, that my life's labor has aspired to fill. All my books, it goes without saying, are water-messages, posted to whom they may concern . . ." (*OUT* 46), adding a little further on a consideration which is the basis of his vocation as a writer although he tempers it with a self-ironic tone:

Let's get cosmic: Our lives are messages, brethren, by our bodies embottled, afloat in the great sea of the world. We wash up on other folk's shorelines, they on ours. Many go unread, some are unreadable, many are misread, some are read to death, and a lucky few meet their ideal readers. Our Earth is an intricate, lovely message, bottled in its fragile biosphere as in fine crystal and adrift in eddies within eddies of the black universal sea. (*OUT 47-48*)

The cask, however, is empty and the writer immediately understands its symbolic significance ("the medium is the message" is one of his recurrent sentences, like "the key to the treasure is the treasure"), defining it as a "floating metaphor" (*OUT 54*) for the *kenosis* (emptiness) that he feels, having recently finished *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* and therefore finding himself in that interval "between imagination's exhaustion and replenishment, between delivery and reimpregnation" (*OUT 12*).

During the night, while using his pen to write down his thoughts, "astray in Time's funhouse" (*OUT 56*), he feels the wind rise and gets out of bed to slacken the rope of the dinghy. When he returns to his cabin, he realizes to his dismay that his pen is no longer in his pyjama breast pocket and has probably fallen into the sea. The following day, despite the storm predicted by the weather forecast, the writer decides not to go home, but to travel along the Bay as far as the so called Chesapeake Triangle.

This is very unusual for the couple who, unlike their friends Beth and Scribner, are generally extremely prudent. The writer, however, is wrestling with his work-in-progress and realizes that, if some element is not added to disturb the quiet of the initial situation, two people on a boat are certainly not sufficient to set the story in motion, and the overture will never become an opera. Therefore a storm breaks, and this is the third element of the triangle, which, as Barth explains, is the figure that exemplifies the structure of every story and gets the plot going:

Story-plots are triangular in at least two ways: The "curve" of dramatic action is classically a nonequilateral triangle, **a b c**, where *ab* represents the "rising action," or incremental complication of some conflict; *b* the climactic "epiphany" or reversal of fortune; and *bc* the denouement, or resolution of dramatic tension. But the dramatical conflict, sine qua non,

itself most often involves a triangle of forces: not just x versus y (Jack v. Giant, Oedipus v. Fate, Hamlet v. Hamlet), but x versus y catalyzed and potentiated by some z (the magic beans, Tiresias the prophet, Gertrude/Ophelia), as crucial to plot-combustion as is the third log in a fireplace to successful ignition of the other two. (*OUT 78*)

Because of the fog and the rain, they lose their way and their patience (a sort of coaxial esemplasy with the storm) and end up running aground in the shallow waters of the Dorchester County marshes, the author's birthplace. He begins exploring the area in the dinghy, hoping that his wife will be able to follow him in the boat. But he soon gets lost among the by-ways of the marsh and realizes that he cannot find his way back to her. He makes out in the distance a loblolly-pine grove, where he thinks there might be a house and decides to proceed on foot. Thus he arrives in a place which strangely resembles settings described in his other novels: "the mise-en-scène for critical disorientations of the main characters" (*OUT 113*) and feels himself in fact to be on the point of crossing a threshold. He carries on until he arrives, as if by magic, in a leafy green clearing where, seated at a picnic table, his twin sister and his friend Scribner are chatting easily. The latter, whom Barth describes as "my other self, lost at sea and then washed up in the marsh of my stranding like an interrogative water-message" (*OUT 243*), takes him to one side, gives him back his pen, which he has evidently found in the sea, but wants in exchange his watch to symbolically deprive him of the sense of chronological time.⁹ Then he informs him that his sister is waiting for him on the other side of a covered-footbridge nearby; once he has crossed it, she will be his guide while he reviews by means of the pen his past, from their birth (in 1930) to college.

The pen functions as a remote control device that is able to quickly go back in time, freeze-framing the most important scenes of his childhood. We have, therefore, the image of the twins at two and four years of age, a description of their aunt and uncle, the family history beginning in 1881 when their grandfather left Germany, at fifteen years of age, to move to Baltimore. We are given a physical and psychological portrait of their parents; an account of their elder brother's jealousy; their being nicknamed

Jack and Jill, like the protagonists of the famous nursery rhyme, whose innocent words their friends jokingly changed to imply incest between them; the birthmark on his face which, like the water-message discovered near the Choptank River, validated his conviction that he was different and would become somebody.¹⁰

From the age of seventeen, when the twins's lives took completely different paths, up to 1963—the year he broke the pen which his first wife had probably given him as a present—it is Scribner's turn to be the writer's guide. Barth describes this figure as his alter ego, his opposite and complementary half, who initiates him to sex, jazz, literature and life. With Scribner's help he remembers how he realized one day, listening to a "real" concert, that jazz was for him simply a hobby and certainly not a vocation. He mentions the literary works he read at University, the seminars he attended, some of his professors.¹¹ He describes his first date and how he could not have sex as he suffered from phimosis; his marriage at nineteen with the girl who first explained his little problem to him and convinced him to undergo circumcision; the three children born immediately afterwards along with his first two novels, stressing yet again the close link between sex and writing. Then his decision to be sterilized, which he considered to be "the surest route to capping our production" (*OUT* 281), and notice the use of the same verb for the action of putting the top back on the pen, showing once again the analogy between pen and penis and implying by extension the analogy between children and books. And in fact the writer also reevokes his subsequent inspiration to write in a new way, freeing himself from the "constraints of the classic-modern short-story mode," and planning "something extravagant, sprawling, farcical, intricated, and brimming with the narrative energy wherewith I brimmed" (*OUT* 287). It was not just a coincidence, the writer believes, but the "serial impregnations thenceforward of the muse, rather than of one's mate—in short, the sublimation of biological into literary fertility" (*OUT* 288).

And so the complex and witty *Sot-Weed Factor* was conceived, and later *Giles Goat-Boy*, which made him famous and stayed in the best-sellers list for some weeks, and which, like the last stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera*, still found its

basis in the myth of the wandering hero, which Scribner had advised him to study. He also remembers the difficulty he encountered in publishing his first novel, the various publishers who accepted his works, and makes reference to them, one by one, up to the very last.

Tired and fed up, the writer would like to return to the boat and rejoin his wife whom he calls his "Reality principle," but his friend explains that the only way to get out of "Time's funhouse" is the one he used to get in, that is by writing. He will know *where* he is if he knows *who* he is, and he will know that only by knowing who he was (*OUT 321*).

From around the middle of the 60s, when his first marriage ran into difficulty and finally ended in divorce, the writer moves forward in his past up to 1973 giving "a self-guided solo tour" and describing the "tempestuous night-sea journey" which wrecked his domestic life at the same time in which America was experiencing what the author defines as its most turbulent and "divisive" period since the Civil War.

"End of 1960s; turn of decade; end of tunnel but not of road" (*OUT385*), the writer comments. In fact not only does he continue to write but—as he recounts in "Between Acts. Light" (the moment when "the telling overtakes the tale")—he sees his life take a new turn thanks to the fortuitous meeting in 1969 with an ex-student who had gone to Boston for one of his conferences and who in 1971 became his wife. Although her name is never mentioned in the story, the book is dedicated to her, to Shelley. From *LETTERS* onwards she is the "dedicatee" of all his works. In fact, in *Once Upon a Time* the author calls her his "Beatrice-in-the-works" hoping that, having been for so many years his inspirational Muse, she can now lead him through the final phase of his "floating-opera-in-progress." So the writer arrives at Act III, in which he thinks he has finally been reunited with his wife, who, however, is only an incorporeal presence, a verbal virtuality. He explains to her that he has written what he believes to be his "Last Book" and, in order to finish it, he has to recount the last twenty years spent with her. His wife, however, does not want to act as a guide, nor does she want him to speak about their private life; moreover she

says she is fed up with finding herself in a fictional work and tells her husband in no uncertain terms to return her to reality immediately.

The writer—who does not know how to satisfy the contrasting demands of both his wife and Scribner (who reappears like a *deus ex machina* reminding him that he cannot take shortcuts or leave loose ends)—says that, before the imaginary adventure had begun, he had already written the story of the 70s and 80s and had safely stored it in a cask he had found near his home on 27/5/1991, the day of his sixty-first birthday. Scribner, still not convinced, subjects his friend to a series of pressing questions to make sense of even the smallest details of the story told. In this playing of roles, the author, whose imagination has created the whole story, obviously wins, and Scribner, satisfied at last, disappears letting the writer grab his watch just in the nick of time.

In the epising the writer recalls Dante's voyage and wittily alludes to a certain resemblance it has with his own experience: "Dante's Dante, in the *Commedia*, sojourns three days in the otherworld, learning by going where he has to go: not the first such lost-and-found weekender, nor the last" (*OUT* 397).

His journey too has been a type of interior voyage: "Really, [*pet name*]," the author had said a little earlier to his wife, trying to convince her to break their rule of preserving their privacy "it's not autobiography, it's a kind of ship's log of the Inside Passage" (*OUT* 384).

But what is an autobiography if it does not retrospectively recount the maturation of the author, which necessarily implies a ritual of passage from one stage to another? At least for Barth the two things are not very different. In the aria "*This is a story I've told before*," for example, the writer, on the point of crossing the threshold into "another country," underlines the exact relation between his story and the pattern of the archetypal wandering hero. After *The Sot-Weed Factor* was published, some critics pointed out the similarity between Ebenezer Cooke's adventure and that of every mythic hero which scholars like Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell and Otto Rank had shown in their studies of comparative mythology. Barth, who had never read their works,

felt at first enormously reassured by what he thought was his natural gift for storytelling, but then realized that every maturation story cannot but echo "the literal or metaphorical rituals of passage," because it is exactly what happens in everybody's life:

Don't we all then have thresholds to cross, monsters and ogres to battle . . . Mustn't we all lose our way and ourselves, go down into darkness, return transfigured to the daylight world . . . proclaim and establish our administration, beget and minister for a time—and then inevitably fall from favor, put our house behind us, and confront the terminal mystery? It is this ubiquitous correspondence to our ordinary lives (among other correspondences) that validates the myth, I came to understand, even as the myth validates our ordinary lives. (*OUT 116*)

The "coaxial esemplasy" which, according to the author, exists between the story of the mythical hero and the life of all men—and in particular his own which has by now reached "the cycle's final quadrant: the wandering protagonist's 'reign' and death" (*OUT 120*)—might in itself justify the definition of this book as the only autobiography possible for a writer like John Barth.

If we reflect then that, by the author's own admission, this story of his life has as its central subject his vocation as a writer, we can only admire the way in which he has managed not simply to narrate the fundamental themes of his poetic, but also to make them coincide with the formulating elements of the plot and structure of his "opera."

The writer confesses that he wrote this book "to wrap up riffs that I've been noodling for forty years. Like, you know, floating operas, water-messages and night-sea journeys, lost paths and last voyages . . ." (*OUT 382*). To these "riffs" which, as we have seen, become an integral part of the plot, we can add the theme of the double, or better, of the lost half, which is another typical image of his narrative. The three acts of the opera represent the three "islands of time" in which the author has chosen to divide the story of his life. Embracing about twenty years apiece, in each one the writer imagines he has an accompanying guide. His twin sister, Scribner and his wife are the three figures who represent his complementary self in the three different stages of his existence,

each equally indispensable to his sense of completion as a human being and as a writer.

As Barth himself writes in the essay in which he explains why he writes the stories he writes:

Once upon a time, in myth, twins signified whatever dualism a culture entertained: mortal/immortal, good/evil, creation/destruction, what had they. In western literature since the Romantic period, twins (and doubles, shadows, mirrors) usually signify the "divided self", our secret sharer or inner adversary—even the schizophrenia some neo-Freudians maintain lies near the dark heart of writing. Aristophanes, in Plato's *Symposium*, declares we are all of us twins, indeed a kind of Siamese twins, who have lost and who seek eternally our missing half. The loss accounts for alienation, our felt distance from man and god; the search accounts for both erotic love and the mystic's goal of divine atonement . . .

I am the least psychological of storytellers; yet even to me it is apparent that I write these words, and all the others, in part because I no longer have my twin to be wordless with, even when I'm with her. (Barth 1984, 3)

The sense of loss, the feeling "that he once was more than one person and somehow now is less" (Barth 1984, 3) explain his need to fill that void with words, to continually compare himself to his "lost half" with whom he has a running dialogue in order to understand himself better. In this way, before our eyes, "virtual" characters come to life illuminating by contrast the writer's factual self so much so that we can legitimately question up to what point they can be considered imaginary.

The transient distinction between reality and imagination—which, as we have said, is the pivot upon which the whole opera turns—is in this way dramatized at more than one level. For example, the voyage backwards in time which, as if by magic, takes place thanks to the writer's pen is paradoxically more real than the external story which is called "reality," but which we know to be a fiction. When then, in Act III, the author imagines he is back in his boat with his wife, she explicitly says that it is mere fiction and longs to return to normal reality. But the reader may ask, which reality? Everything that has been written is real. Everything that counts for the writer is included in his pen. In fact, the only real difference between him and his counterself—who

knows more than he does, who first coined the term "postmodernism," who advised him what to read, who initiated him to life—is that he has written and continues writing, he keeps on "making sentences":

These sentences get written (as Jay's do not), and like molecules into complex organic compounds, they aggregate into narrative passages, paragraphs, pages, chapters, books books books, which hang together like the acts and stages of a meaningful life and are in fact mine's [sic] meaning, anyhow its most tangible expression. (*OUT323*)

Such is his identification with his works that he overtly says: "till I see what I say, I can't tell *who I am*" (*OUT324*). Therefore, unlike his counterself, who has left the United States because he "can't make peace with either his country's failings or his own," the writer stays there. "With sigh and shrug" he accepts his nation's faults as he accepts his own trying at least "to moderate, ameliorate them" (*OUT72*). Just as he does not turn his back on his country's legacy neither does he deny his personal story whose labyrinth he continues to embroider into "scripted speech." And this maze is no longer the obstacle which impedes him from finding the treasure but is itself the treasure: "No adversary, this labyrinth, but a resplendent arabesque, a chaos most artfully structured" (*OUT324*). Although he knows he can return to the boat whenever he wants to and bring the story to its denouement, he is aware that the only shortcut he must take is "the rightly taken long way *home*" (*OUT325*), just as Scribner had admonished: "No shortcuts through the labyrinth" (*OUT321*).

Also in the episodg, thanks to a fortuitous error in calculating the day the adventure began (Columbus Day in 1992 would fall on a Monday and not the preceding Saturday as he had thought), the writer and his wife have not yet left, and are still sleeping in hypertime until they hear, or dream that they hear, the same three conch-calls which signal a boat's departure: "Time in. Rebegin," an author's note appropriately warns (*OUT397*).

"Gone."
What?

"... Dream, I guess." [and no longer Century as was written at the beginning]

Ah.

But this is no dream: I'm I, and (Muse be praised!) you're you. We're here. We're now. (OUT398)

The whole thing was a dream, perhaps, and it is finished, but it is not as if it had never happened. "If good stories partake of dreams, some dreams may be like stories," remarks the narrator in *Sabbatical* (Barth 1982, 200). Dreams, being a strange combination of reality and imagination, can create a truer representation of one's life than a mere list of facts recorded. How would Chagall paint a self-portrait? Could we expect him to follow the realistic/naturalistic canon only because, in spite of everything, this is a technique we can understand more easily? If we need to identify somebody physically, but not necessarily artistically, can we not use a photograph? Aren't there already many biographies of our author which can furnish us with the names, addresses, professions etc. of his family and friends? Therefore why write an autobiography, if not to reveal what does not appear in public documents and which better explains the meaning of your life?

To prove that this is John Barth's point of view, too, we have only to quote the discussion which he imagines to have taken place with his sister about an episode from their childhood. Our Jack has just said that Schreiber, described at the beginning as "a brawlbrot boy" of their age, had stolen their tricycle when they were five or six years old. Jill, on the contrary, remembers clearly that two bicycles had been stolen when they were about seven or eight and that, at that time, they did not even know Jerry Schreiber. "For the record," she insists, "it was Travers Bradley that took our bikes—*both* bikes—and Patsy Bradley brought them back and apologized ... Why not show the real thing?" And her brother replies:

The "facts" you mean. Because there's no end to them, Jill. Because their nature and status are arguable, not to mention their meaning. Because they are not my stock-in-trade, except by the way. Because they are fine-grained to the point of quicksand. I don't know what 'Travers Bradley' is *for*—was *for*—in our lives. He played no part in them, that I can remember, after the

bicycle episode. But I'm getting a sense of what Jerome Schreiber is for. (*OUT 168-69*)

It is obvious that every author who decides to write an autobiography has to pick from the countless events of his life those which he believes to be the most meaningful for the message he wants to communicate. It is also true that it is up to him to choose the way to narrate them, because form and content in a work of art are inseparable and both serve to transmit its message. All writers of autobiographies would share Barth's view that "the story of our life is not our life; it is our story" (*OUT 169*), but not everyone would agree with giving imagination such a primary role, and thereby sacrificing the concept of truth conceived as an exact correspondence between an event which has really taken place and its enunciation.

The fact is that John Barth's *Once Upon a Time*—we can define it on the basis of the distinctive traits of "postmodernity" identified by Richard E. Palmer—is a "postmodern" autobiography, which tries to transcend the limits of modern objectivized thought so as to bring back the magic and visionary element. It is a heterogenous, hybrid text, which in its refutation of constraints reflects the author's will not to transmit the unity of an ordered world, but the sense of dispersion and chaos in a universe in which man has no longer a well-defined place and events are not connected by cause and effect links.

Exactly as Palmer points out in his list of "postmodern modalities of consciousness" which seem to coincide with the fundamental characteristics of our text: "Time may not be abstract and linear, but round and whole—an essential dimension of being. . . . Intensive rather than extensive, it may hold both past and future in a unity that adds depth to a now that always is. . . . Language might become a medium of ontological disclosure in which things take on being through words. . . . As Heidegger has noted, a deeper dimension of the word 'truth' is '*Treue*' or loyalty. In postrnodern thinking, truth might transcend the merely pragmatic dimension; it might become the loyal articulation, in language, of what *is*." The emphasis might be more on "'trueness'

to being" than on verifiable truth. "... Postmodern truth," says Palmer, "may recover the depth of mystery, even of 'untruth'" (Palmer 27-30).

Why then is it so important for Barth to convince the reader that this story is more a fiction than an autobiography? Certainly not merely so as to justify the presence of that external adventure, which being so obviously fictitious can easily be differentiated from the rest and accepted in its function of "coaxial esemplasy." A more plausible reason could be that the author, in so totally identifying himself with his works, knows that this story of his life is the story of the life of his works, the how and why they were written the way they were written, and that the autobiography of fiction can be nothing but fictional itself.¹²

We know that what is important is the text and not its label; however, were we to feel the necessity to find a definition less poetic than "a memoir bottled in a novel," we might invent a compound term like "autobiografiction" or "autofictiography," as one of my ex-students cleverly and jokingly suggested to me.¹³ And in effect, as we have already observed, the episodes reevoked from the writer's more or less recent past, the objects described, the people he chose to present, all serve to reveal the formation of his personality *as a writer* and the genesis *of his novels*. Furthermore, in emphasizing the fictitious nature of his narrative through the invention of that imaginary story, Barth succeeds in focusing the reader's attention on the act of writing. In this way, words, to use Klinkowitz's suggestive image, do not function, as in traditional fiction, like "transparent windows upon the world their stories represent," but become "more opaque, forcing the reader to attend to the form of transmission" until the work reaches a degree of "self-apparency" which *screens* the author's private life (Klinkowitz *ix*).¹⁴ And this is not due to a sense of modesty or reserve, but rather derives from Barth's conviction that the real subject of his work is not himself but his language.

According to one of the *topoi* of postmodern literature, the work does not pretend to refer to any particular external reality but to that represented by other written texts and their interaction (see Nash 231-32). "The stability of distinction between 'writing' (as an

object) and 'writing' (as an act) disintegrates, and the writer-figure and the configuration of what is written emerge out of and dissolve into one another" (Nash 236).

Even the writer's "I," as he constantly reminds us, is a fictional "I": "... not *me*," he says, "but 'me': the small-time Dante character, lost in Time's funhouse" (*OUT* 384). The reader, however, is not permitted to wonder if another "I" exists because the "I" the author presents is the only one that is considered "sayable" and therefore the only existing one.

Writing is living and living is writing. The simple fact that we cannot be certain that this is Barth's "Last Book" (on the contrary, everything leads us to suspect that, one day or another, we will find, washed up on our shore, the cask containing his story of the 70s and 80s) reveals another aspect common to postmodern works and those of John Barth in particular. As in the case of the Maryland snail, the life-blood of all his fiction is made up of the continuous regeneration of stories born from other stories, often composed of tales within tales within tales, in one great narrative flux which tends to return to its starting point. Its end, however, is not soldered to the beginning to form a ring, but, continuing the circular motion, it bypasses it so that the narration can go on in never ending spirals (see Bartocci).¹⁵ Each story already told contains the seeds of yet another.

Barth uses the same technique in his autobiography. By resisting closure, he creates an open autobiography, that is, a postmodern autobiography.

When our couple awakens and "real" time seems to have returned, the writer refuses to finish the story in any definitive way and alludes to its possible continuation. The story goes on, just like life. When his beloved partner who, still half asleep, asks him if he can see his watch to tell the time, the writer answers with an ambiguous phrase which leaves the end open to our (and his) imagination: "No need, Pet Name: The time is once upon" (*OUT* 398).

1 Quotations from *Once Upon a Time* (Barth 1994) will be identified as *OUT*

2 "The Literature of Exhaustion" was first published in 1967 and "The Literature of Replenishment" in 1980 both in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In 1984, they were included in Barth's volume of essays, *The Friday Book* (62-76 and 193-206 respectively). Quotations refer to this edition.

3 Within the more general definition of "paratexte," Genette distinguishes the "péritexte" (which includes the messages placed around the text but within the volume itself) from the "épitexte" (which includes all the messages outside the book), clarifying it with this formula *paratexte = peritexte + épitexte*, and stating, moreover, that "tout contexte fait paratexte" (Genette 10-13). As our analysis takes into consideration both *Once Upon a Time's* peritext and its context, I preferred to use the more general term paratext rather than overload the discussion with technical subtleties.

4 He provocatively affirmed, more than once, that planning *The Sot-Weed Factor* he intended to write a novel "fat enough to wear its title right-side up across its spine" (*OUT* 115); *Giles Goat-Boy* contains the "publisher's disclaimer" and the "cover-letter to the editors and publisher" which precede the text of "The Revised New Syllabus"; in the title of *LETTERS*, the capital letters are formed by small letters which make up the subtitle; *Sabbatical's* logo represents a Y with a central point which has an essential symbolic meaning for understanding the text; the title of *Tidewater Tales* appears not only at the beginning of the book, but also on the last page to stress the novel's circularity etc.

5 The example of these unusual "auto-épigraphes" which are also "rigoureuseusement autoréférentielles et circulaires" is also quoted by Genette 141.

6 This sentence clearly echoes the title of Barth's essay "Some Reasons Why I Tell the Stories I Tell the Way I Tell Them Rather Than Some Other Sort of Stories Some Other Way" (Barth 1984, 1-12)

7 The only stories which do not begin with "once upon a time" are those which are outside time and language, like the ones told inside the womb by Somebody to his twin sister: "In our liquid world we slid and turned like a brace of young otters. We even told stories—I did, anyhow—about what we imagined was going on: what was out there, who we were, who they were. In these tales of adventure, love, and mystery there was no *Once upon a time*. Our language had no tenses" (Barth 1991, 27).

8 To understand how important these factors are for Barth and how intimately linked, one need only read his definition of Paradise: "I am confident that no heaven of mine would be heavenly without this present volume's dedicator and dedicatee conjoined in the pleasurable exercise of mind and body and the registration of life-experience into language—not excluding imagined experience (such as the afterlife), the experience of imagining, and the experience of language—into this old binder, with this old pen, amen" (*OUT* 30).

9 Quite ironically, the writer confesses to the reader that he too has used this device for the protagonist's "time-tripping" in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* as if Scribner were now copying him

10 This physical defect also inspired another story in *Lost in the Funhouse*, entitled "Ambrose His Mark."

11 In an "extended footnote" (*OUT258*) the author describes also the circumstances in which Jerome Schreiber changed his name to Jay Wordsworth Scribner. However it would take another essay to investigate the complex relationship between the writer and this character, who is a kind of trickster, a figure found in lots of Barth's novels, beginning with Burlingame in *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

12 Barth is not alien to experiments like this. Suffice to remember "Autobiography" in *Lost in the Funhouse* where a story tries to recount its own composition, that is its autobiography, on a tape recorder.

13 Her name is Paola Bartocci, but she is neither a relation of mine nor my counterself, even if instead of writing criticism she tries her hand at writing poems and stories. After reading my essay, she sent me an amusing poem entitled "Doubts about genre (what genre of doubts!)" containing the aforementioned definitions.

14 The screening of his privacy may correspond, at a linguistic level, to the use of the expression "pet name" which the writer adopts when talking to his wife. While he seems to introduce us to a confidential and intimate atmosphere, he cuts us out because neither her real name nor her pet name are actually mentioned.

15 A more technical description of this pattern, which reflects a desire to escape total circularity and entropy, was given to me by Barth himself when I met him in March 1995: "Plot = the incremental perturbation of an unstable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified, negentropic equilibrium." Barth's new volume of essays, *Further Fridays*, which has just been published, contains this definition and its explanation (see Barth 1995, 239-40).

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* For the most recent selected bibliography on John Barth, see Bowen 139-46.

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