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# *THE COMPLEX GAME OF JOHN BARTH'S* LETTERS

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**Abstract:**

*A brilliant instance of parody put to work, John Barth's novel LETTERS targets a 19th century novelistic sub-genre that was pretty influential at the time, although it was subsequently felt as highly artificial and abandoned. Moreover, the author subtly plays with his readers from a character position, as the novel exhibits one of the most salient forms of self-fictionalization (via the literary technique la mise-en-abyme): the writer projected in the fictional text, with his entire identity, as one of the characters, who are deliberately placed on the same ontological level with him. In this essay, these aspects shall be analyzed in more detail.*

**Key-words:**

self-fictionalization, parody, mise-en-abyme, influence

Another instance of parody put to work, the novel *LETTERS* targets a 19th century novelistic sub-genre that was pretty influential at the time, although it was subsequently felt as highly artificial and abandoned. The other important thread that unites Barth's novels, the use of the literary technique *la mise-en-abyme*, is also present. This time, the author more subtly plays with us from a character position, as the novel exhibits one of the most salient forms of self-fictionalization: the writer projected in the fictional text, with his entire identity, as a main character. Characters are deliberately placed on the same ontological level with him, a tendency also of previous novels, the best known of which is *Chimera*. Critics have

noted that the novel *LETTERS* delimits two important periods in Barth's writing career: it is here where he "established his own authorial character" (Thorne 56), present in all his subsequent writing in one form or another. In this essay we shall look into these aspects in more detail.

After having parodied the picaresque story, as well as Greek mythology and even the archetypal storyteller herself, Scheherazade, the author is still keen on recycling, rewriting old conventions, this time "old time epistolary novels". That this subgenre is indeed parodied is immediately apparent from examples such as the letters to a dead man (*LETTERS* 12), to oneself (18, etc.), to the Author (3, 29, etc.), or author's letters to the reader (42, etc.); the last two types also contribute to the strengthening of the metanarrative function of the novel, that points, self-reflexively, to its writing context. Self-reflexiveness is, together with irony and parody, one of the elements that do not allow one to read *LETTERS* in a traditional epistolary key.

Barth's choice of the epistolary novel is not accidental, Kim McMullen argues (McMullen 406), due to its "structural conceit": "with it, he turns his reflexive scrutiny not simply upon his own authorship nor upon traditional belles-letters, but upon the processes by which generations of people have 'lettered' their experience." This choice of form does take the novel back to its "mimetic origins", but it also "draws the text forward to a poststructuralist revelation of the persistent and necessary textualization of the past" (McMullen 406). Interestingly, the author himself had admitted to the significance of his choice in an interview quoted by McMullen:

> "I am fascinated with the fact that so many of the adventures of the novels in Europe and Britain were documentary novels, that is epistolary novels, novels in the form of journals, diaries, etc. (...) These early novels seemed to have this lively sense that what they are imitating, what they are dealing with finally, are words on a page, are visual symbols on a page, and not life experienced directly, that what they chose to imitate was not life directly but its documentary phenomenon, journals, diaries, etc." (Glaser-Wöhrer 231).

Consequently, what Barth appreciates this form for is its "self-revealing 'textual' quality" which outweighs its mimetic power, the letters' value "over 'direct' narration",

> "precisely because they disclose themselves as words on a page, as conscious textualizations. The letter is no longer valued as a document - a mimetic textual substitute for an absent past. Rather it becomes the site and mechanism of encodement and containment with which each writer has organized and made coherent past experience through a particular discourse, and its clearly 'textual' status" (id.)

The novel brings together seven characters, that is, letter-writers, five of which are directly imported from Barth's earlier novels – a migration that does not seem unnatural in this hybrid fictional universe: Todd Andrews and Jacob Horner, the protagonists of Barth's first two novels, A. B. Cook IV, descendant of the Cookes, Jerome Bray, and Ambrose Mensch.

It is not only the five above-mentioned characters that migrate from Barth's previous novels into the present one. Such migration, as well as the insertion of letters in the novel, antecede this book: for instance, Jerome Bray had written to Todd Andrews, Executive Secretary of the Tidewater Foundation, back in "Bellerophoniad" (*Chimera* 246). In addition, numerous quotations and allusions to these novels help build the intertextuality of *LETTERS*. On various occasions, the Author mentions his previous writing:

> "my ancient wish to write the comic epic that Ebenezer Cooke, 17th-Century Laureate of Maryland, put aside to write his *Sot-Weed Factor*, and which I myself put aside for the novel *LETTERS*: a *Marylandiad*…" (47)

and so do other characters, with more legitimacy, since they basically recollect their *own* or their families' lives. For instance, Todd Andrews remembers the beginning of his affair with Jane Mack, who "was just about to slip in from the kitchen and take me by the sweetest surprise of my life…" (12); Jacob Horner recalls his own story, in a letter to himself,

> "In a sense, you Remain Jacob Horner. It was on the advice of the Doctor that in 1953 you Left the Teaching Profession […] you'd Exceeded his prescriptions by perhaps Impregnating your Only Friend's Wife, Arranging an illegal abortion which Mrs. Morgan did not survive, and Impersonating several bona fide human beings in the process…" (18);

A. B. Cook IV writes to his unborn child about the genealogical tree of the Cookes:

> "Of the 1st Andrew Cooke we know nothing, save that he and someone begot Andrew II, of the Parish of St. Giles in the Fields, London. Andrew II was a tobacco factor in the Maryland plantations, who in the middle 17th Century acquired from Lord Baltimore patemt to 'Malden on the Chesapeake', now call'd Cooke's Point. Upon his wife Anne Bowyer he got twins, Anna and Ebenezer, of whom more anon. […] Thus Andrew II. His son Ebenezer Cooke is of no great interest to us, despite his claim to have been Poet laureate of Maryland. He seems to have lost the family estate thro bumbling innocence, & to have regain'd it in some fashion by marrying a prostitute." (22)

and of the "Protean Burlingames":

> "whose operations have been at once so multifarious and so covert, that while 'tis certain they have alter'd & realter'd the course of history, 'tis devilish difficult to say just how, or whether their intrigues & counter-intrigues do not cancel one another across the generations." (23)

The group is complemented by two new heroes, Germaine Pitt, Lady Amherst and, not surprisingly at all by now, the author, "John Barth". As all seven are labeled, right from the title page, and again and again, throughout the novel, "seven fictitious drolls and dreamers each of which imagines himself actual" (*LETTERS* 49, 769), it follows that the author, who is part of this cast, is fictitious, too. So he would like to imply, in his never-ending game with the reader. The result is once more a self-fictionalizing novel.

The effect of this placing of characters and author on the same ontological level is quite disconcerting, though. Here is only one example: Lady Amherst, one of the characters, not only writes to the author, but she mentions one of her acquaintances as a character of Barth's:

> "Ambrose informs me, grimly, that there is a 'Dr Schott' in some novel of yours, too closely resembling ours for coincidence, and not flatteringly drawn: should he get wind of this fact (Can it be true? Too delicious!) before your acceptance has been made public…" (11)

Despite some literary critics' arguing the contrary, it is clear that Barth would like to create the illusion that the Author, one of the seven characters, is himself, the *real* author trapped in the text, once more with the aid of *la mise-en-abyme*, as long as Barth's text is scattered with more or less subtle allusions to Gide's *Paludes*, which cannot be accidental[1]: Jerome Bray's *The Shoals of Love, or, Drifting and Dreaming* is published by Wetlands Press, as well as his *Backwater Ballads*; the same Bray mentions a bit further his working on a novel, *The Seeker*, "whose hero reposes in a sort of hibernation in a certain tower" (34); even much more interestingly, Germaine repeatedly mentions a certain *André*, as most certainly the one who impregnated her, despite their failed romance:

> "I was, André was gratified to observe, in my own clothes again: might he take that to mean that Ambrose and I had worked out our difficulties and were happy? Things had indeed been troubled, I replied, but sees less so presently. And I loved Ambrose, yes. *Eh bien*. And he me? In his way. As *you* did, André. My fate." (455).

If we agree to read Lady Amherst as the author's alter ego, as some literary critics do, and her conceiving a child as an equivalent to literary creation, based on a plethora of examples as the following:

> "my inventive faculty was considerable, my powers of execution slight. I had no gift for storytelling" (76), or
> "I couldn't write, couldn't even read. Our alphabet looked alien as Arabic; the strings of letters were a code I'd lost the key to; I found more sense in the empty spaces, in the margins, between the lines" (74)

[1] We could quote Zack Bowen, who acknowledged the difficulty in influence studies, difficulty which should not prevent one from attempting to establish an obvious connection: "Because many similarities between two writers' works may be the result of coincidence, ingenious critical interpretations, historical enculturation, and a host of other reasons, the only confidence that we can glean regarding influence would come by way of a statement from the later writer that the putative counterpart indeed provided a model." However, with authors like Barth "whose parodic thinking and work are steeped in literary tradition, claims of overweening influence have to be examined through jaundiced eyes, especially when such claims exist in the parodic works themselves." ("Barth and Joyce", 261).
Additionally, Barth has always done his best to reject and resist the influence of great writers (although avoiding influence is an impossible enterprise). In "Can It Be Taught?", starting from Brancusi's rejection of Auguste Rodin's invitation to be his mentor "Nothing grows well in the shade of a great tree", he claimed that "If I'd had had Nabokov for my teacher, I fear I'd have been speechless" (*Further Fridays*, 31); while in "Borges and I: a mini-memoir", he speaks of "coming to terms with this extraordinary artist" (*Further Fridays* 169).

- in which the confessing voice is Germaine's, but it sounds all too familiar to those accustomed to Barth's similar complaints - then we can also read all this as an allusion to *André* Gide's contribution to the literary formation of Barth. Of course the latter hides these allusions well behind a fully-drawn character, though he mixes up elements that conceal and elements that reveal this link at the same time:

> "André's parents were obscure figures in the Canadian foreign service, freewheeling and nomadic Bohemians. They never married; André was raised ad libitum all over North America and Europe […] He had been writing poems and stories since he was five, had abandoned both two years younger than Rimbaud, was already bored with the cinema as an alternative to literature and was provoking Miss Stein […] with the idea of putting these 'traditional' genres behind him entirely, in favor of what he called (and this was 1939/40!) 'action historiography'; the *making* of history as if it were an avant-garde species of narrative." (72-3)

but one familiar with Barth's playful style cannot help making the connection.

Moreover, at a certain point, clear reference is made to the originator of the literary technique: Ambrose is compared to Tityrus of Gide's *Paludes*, "like a pallid Tityrus of André Gide's *Marshlands* novel, which Ambrose has not read, he lives a near-hermit life in a sort of tower on the Choptank shore" (61). The novel *Paludes* itself is a good example of *la mise-en-abyme* put to work: the character/narrator writes a novel "Paludes", about Tityrus, a contemplative character, who does nothing. It is true that reference is also made in the text to other famous novelists, like Gertrude Stein or Herman Hesse, but in no other case do they abound as in the case of Gide.

Indeed, *la mise-en-abyme* is quite extensively used, abused rather, in *LETTERS*. Examples abound in the text, right from the beginning. For instance, in the letter of A. B. Cook IV to his unborn child, about "the origins of the Castines, Cookes, and Burlingames", we read that

> "there is too much more to the story for this letter – enough to make a novelsworth of letters, Richardson-fashion!" (24),

a paragraph which self-reflexively points back to the novel.

Further on, in an Author's letter to Lady Amherst, we get more details about this "project", about the literary traditions it exploits, and about the writing process, in a passage reminiscent more of Barth's lectures on novel writing, than of novel writing itself:

> "For as long as I can remember I've been enamored of the old tale-cycles, especially of the frame-tale sort: *The Ocean Story*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, the *Pent-*, *Hept-*, and *Decamerons*. With the help of a research assistant I recently reviewed the corpus of frame-tale literature to see what I could learn from it, and started making notes toward a frame-tale novel. By 1968 I'd decided to use documents instead of told stories: texts-within-texts instead of tales-within-tales. Rereading the early English novelists, I was impressed with their characteristic awareness that they're *writing* – that their fictions exist in the form, not of sounds in the ear, but of signs on the page, imitative not of life 'directly', but of its documents – and I considered marrying one venerable tradition to another: the frame-tale and the 'documentary' novel." (52-3)

Therefore, we have access to the gestation and birth of the novel, as presented, as encased *in* the novel: this is maybe the biggest benefit, to the reader, of employing *la mise-en-abyme*.

The author plays with us by mixing up hints related to the authorship connection between his novels and some of these "fictitious" characters, at the same time as he acknowledges the same novels as his own: Ambrose Mensch (*Lost in the Funhouse* 1968) is alluded to as author of *Chimera*, in a letter from 1969 which speaks of his "next" novel (*Chimera* 1972):

> "I here take as first rule of my next fiction: its plot shall be the hero's recapitulation, at the midpoint of his life, of his Story Thus Far, the exposition and its complications of its first half, to the end of directing his course through the climax and dénouement of its second. My hero Perseus (or whoever), like a good navigator, will decide where to go by determining where he is by reviewing where he's been." (38-9)

and later on he is openly identified as such: "notes on Ambrose Mensch's story about Perseus, Andromeda, Medusa" (48). As a result, the reader is reinforced the illusion that life is itself a sort of fiction, since that who passes for the author of one of Barth's novels is a character in some of these novels (*Lost in the Funhouse* and *LETTERS*).

The effect is even more dazzling, as the letter goes on about "my obscure, tentative, maverick 'writings'", "keyless codes", in the unmistakable style in which Barth enjoys describing his novels, about "my chain-letter narratives with missing links, my edible anecdotes, my action-fictions, my *récits concrets*, my tapes and slides and assemblages and *histoires trouvées*" (39), thus expanding the writings of this "fictitious" author to the novel *LETTERS* itself, not so well hidden behind his character.

If to this we add that there is an Author, "John Barth", of *LETTERS*, as well as of *Chimera*:

> "I put aside, in 1968, in Buffalo, a *Marylandiad* of my own in favor of the novel *LETTERS*, whereof Mensch's *Perseid* and Bray's *Bellerophoniad* were to be tales-within-the-tale. The, in '69, '70 and '71, I put by *LETTERS* in pursuit of a new chimera called *Chimera*: serial novellas about Perseus, Bellerophon, and Scheherazade's younger sister. Now (having put by Buffalo for Baltimore) it's back to *LETTERS*, to history, to "realism"… and to the revisitation of a certain marsh where once I wandered, dozed, dreamed." (49)

who also addresses the reader on various occasions, adding to the self-reflexiveness of the novel, we shall have the complete picture.

Moreover, when he does so, technical comments about the nature of writing in general and about epistolary novels in particular are made, though maybe half-mock comments, as in the following example:

> "every letter has two times, that of its writing and that of its reading, which may be so separated, even when the post office does its job, that very little of what obtained when the writer wrote will still when the reader reads. And to the units of epistolary fictions yet a third time is added: the actual date of composition, which will not likely correspond to the letterhead date, a function more of plot or form than of history" (44).

Such observations may be combined with genuine *mise-en-abyme* instances, as in this case:

> "It is *not* March 2, 1969: when I began this letter it was October 30, 1973: an inclement Tuesday morning in Baltimore, Maryland" (44).

With his constant concern for symmetry, Barth announces the reader that this letter, written at the beginning of the novel's making, must be followed by another, "at the end of the manuscript", with a similar function: "the plan of *LETTERS* calls for a second Letter to the Reader at the end of the manuscript, by when what I've 'now' recorded will seem already as remote as 'March 2, 1969'." (45). However, this last letter is not what we might expect. It no longer contains narratological theory / comments, it only plays with the idea of time (various times of writing and time of reading) in the ways anticipated in the first letter, and it fills the reader up with the latest news in U.S. politics and domestic affairs (up to October 5, 1978, of course, not September 14, 1969, as stated in the letterhead), only to go back to 1814, in another dazzling spiraling, though TV news-like, movement:

> "(…Further U.S. troop withdrawals from Southeast Asia scheduled for the fall; South Vietnamese army desertion rate continues at 10,000 per month. Exxon oil tanker *Manhattan* completes first successful Northwest passage to Alaska. U.S. Attorney General's office receives without disapproval 'more reasonable schedule' of court sentences for illegal drug use. Happy birthday Jan Masaryk, Ivan Pavlov, Alexander von Humboldt, Luigi Cherubini. *On this date in history*: 1901: President McKinley dies from assassin's bullet in Buffalo, New York. 1862: General McClellan drives back General Lee in Battle of South Mountain, Maryland. 1814: Fort McHenry bombardment ceases; F. S. Key reports flag still there) the end." (772)

The overall effect of this accumulation of candidates to the role of "Author" in this, and other, novels is, indeed, dizzying for an unaware reader, leading him to further generalize Ambrose Mensch's conclusion about "life here in the Lighthouse": life in general "is itself a species of fiction" (39) – the necessary premise for any self-fictionalizing effort, for it presupposes that life, and individuals, can be altered, (re)created, that one can and does have some control over it.

The "life is fiction" thesis is supported throughout the narrative, as different characters come to acknowledge and also support it. Lady Amherst, for instance, warns the Author in one of her letters that writing has the power to alter the writer, not only vice versa, as one might expect, offering herself as an example:

> "Take warning, sir: to put things into words works changes, not only upon the events narrated, but upon their narrator. She who saluted you pages past is not the same who closes now, though the name we share remains, As ever, Germaine" (80).

Jerome Bray is another character who acknowledges this equivalence life-fiction, though he adds another correspondence which abuses and undermines the first: truth-fiction,

> "Inasmuch as concepts, including the concepts *Fiction* and *Necessity*, are more or less necessary fictions, fiction is more or less necessary. *Butterf_ies* exist in our imaginations, along with *Existence*, *Imagination*, and the rest. Archimedeses, we lever reality by conceiving ourselves apart from its other things, them from one another, the whole from unreality. Thus Art is as natural an artifice as Nature; the truth of fiction is that Fact is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world" (33).

As for the Author, and contrary to what we might expect of the same person who did away with the life-fiction distinction in his novels, he declares himself startled at the possibility of such trespassing of the border between life and art in general:

> "what's involved here strikes me […] as a muddling of the distinction between Art and Life, a boundary as historically notorious as Mason and Dixon's line. That life sometimes imitates art is a mere Oscar Wilde-ish curiosity; that it should set about to do so in such unseemly haste that between notes and novel (not to mention between the drafted and the printed page) what had been fiction becomes idle fact, invention history – disconcerting! Especially to a fictionist who, like yours truly, had long since turned his professional back on literary realism in favor of the fabulous irreal" (51-2).

The author image as projected into the text via *la mise-en-abyme* is complemented by virtually countless insertions of characters-authors, some of whom interact with him in most unusual ways: for instance, in a letter to Todd Andrews, Jerome Bray requests counsel, as he holds the Author responsible for plagiarism:

> "Our principal complaint, set forth in the attached, is the Defendant's perversion (into his 'novel' *Giles Goat-Boy*, 1966) of our *Revised New Syllabus* of the Grand Tutor

Harold Bray. But that is merely the chiefest of his crimes against us, which extend the length of our bibliography…" (28)

and again, in a third enclosure:

"This episode is recounted in the 'Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher' of the 'novel' *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966): an account accurate enough in its particulars, since the text was lifted outright from our *Revised New Syllabus*; yet wholly perverted…" (34)

Interestingly, the style and the secrecy of most of these letters remind us of the gossip quality of the 19th-century epistolary, though peculiarly combined with neologisms or different jargons, like the legal jargon, in the following example:

"Yet we cannot leave this topic without presuming to warn you against Ambrose M., that person who chauffeured you to Mr. Mack's funeral and is so bent on ingratiating himself in our circle. […] our information is that A. M. is the tool and creature of the Defendant hereinafter named: we say no more." (27)

To the already mentioned comments on narratological issues, we should also add the heavy load of observations on writing in general, on authorship, on epistolary novels – that the reader has to cope with. The story, already difficult to retrieve because of the preferred novelistic sub-genre, is even more occulted by this never-ending thread of theoretical commentary.

Some of the most attention-grabbing comments are those on literature and the novel, their decline and their replacement by computer generated fiction, a theme which will re-occur both in later novels (*Coming Soon!!!*) and in theoretical writing proper (*Further Fridays*). Author Jerome Bonaparte Bray writes to one of the University's sponsors (also mentioned by Lady Amherst to the Author) about a new, "scientific" (!) type of novel:

" 'There will be no innovations in my time,' Your Majesty declared to Chancellor Eldon. But the truly revolutionary nature of *our* project, as examination of the 'Bellerophonic' prospectus (en route to you under separate cover) will show, is that, as the 1st genuinely scientific model of the genre, it will of necessity contain *nothing*

> *original whatever*, but the quintessence, the absolute type, as it were the Platonic Form expressed." (32)

However "scientific", this type of computer writing is hinted at as a pretty disappointing one, failing at times (actually, failing pretty often, if we count the "RESET" signs in Bray's letters, which basically cover missing parts):

> "The plan is audacious but certain of RESET Nothing now is wanting for immediate implementation of its 1st phase save sufficient funding for construction of a more versatile computer facility at our Lily Dale base" (32).

Lady Amherst had also decried the decline of the novel, though she actually feared much worse, the decline of literature itself, or even of Word:

> "Nor shall I with my passage from the friendship – more than friendship! – of several of the greatest novelists of our century, to the supervisal of their desecration in Modern Novel 101-102: a decline the sadder for its paralleling that of the genre itself; perhaps (God forfend) of Literature as a whole; perhaps even […] of the precious Word." (5)

Further on in his letter, Bray details what the new revolutionary type of novel that he mentioned entangles:

> "So successful was our circuitry and program design (despite the modest, even primitive, facility that is LILYVAC I), the 1st printouts, we are happy to report, transcended these petty possibilities […] It did indeed produce a few pages of mimicry, in the format of letters written by our enemies and others […] But the burden of its message to us was, not to abandon these enterprises, but to incorporate them into the grander project herewith set forth, to be code-named NOVEL." (36)

in a paragraph that self-reflexively refers to the novel, and in which "novel" disappears completely, as it remains a simple code name for a project that has little to do with novel and fiction writing as we know them.

Luckily for the reader, he is spared the duty to take this seriously, as the letter grows into its own self-mockery and annulment:

> "But bear in mind that we are not an *homme de letters*; that *The Shoals of Love*, *The Was_*, and *Backwater Ballads* were *not mere novels*, but documents disguised in novel format for the purpose of publicly broadcasting private messages to our parents – who, we now have reason to believe, have not been deaf to those cunning, painful ciphers, and may be replying to us in kind through LILYVAC." (36)

Even so, every now and then we are reinforced the worries about the endangered genre that seems to be the novel: the same author had written a few pages before,

> "Yet the empire of the novel, vaster once than those combined of France and England, is shrunk now to a Luxembourg, a San Marino! Its popular base usurped, fiction has become a pleasure for special tastes, like poetry, archery, churchgoing. What is wanted to restore its ancient dominion is nothing less than a revolution." (33)

And can any of the readers of *LETTERS* question the second part of this statement after – or rather, during – reading Barth's novel?

Cultural allusions are also intertwined with the narrative, not only reference to those literary traditions that Barth is indebted to and that the novel is tributary to (acknowledged by the Author, as we have seen), but also a remarkable amount of cultural hints ranging from references to Greek mythology up to America-Europe culture clash, as in the following example:

> "For one thing, I *touched* you – even embraced you for the first time, under pretext of consoling a bereft colleague. You were startled! But for all you knew, such unwonted familiarity might be customary among Americans: another manifestation of our aggressive informality, like my suddenly addressing you as 'Germaine' instead of 'Lady Amherst' […] Yet it's an English proverb, not an American, that the time to pay court to a widow is en route home from the funeral" (40-1).

Once more resorting to his impressive baggage of information in the field of literary theory and history, the author does not miss the chance to mock Russian formalsists and later French Structuralists, with their pretense to a more "scientific" approach to literature:

> "Attempts to classify 'scientifically' the themes of existing fiction (e.g. Professor Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*) or even its dramatical morphology (e.g. the admirable reduction, by Professors Propp and Rosenberg, of the 'Swan-Geese' folktale formula
>
> $$\gamma\beta\delta ABC\uparrow\ [DE\ Neg\ F\ Neg]\ GHIK\downarrow\ Pr[DEF]^{3}Rs$$
>
> $$\frac{\qquad\qquad\qquad}{DEF}$$
>
> – these are steps in the right direction…" (33)

It has been observed that the recycling of characters from older novels contributes to the general impression that they can be placed on the same level with the author, as they cannot be contained in one book or another: "the recurrence of characters across a number of discrete fictional texts creates a strange and paradoxical effect" (Stonehill 160). Brian Stonehill goes on to detail what this strange effect entangles: "On the one hand, characters seem more like real people when they cannot be contained between the covers of a single book", reminding us of the main effect of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*. On the other hand, the critic notices, "the recycling of characters from previous fictions ineluctably reminds us that they are, after all, fictional". In other words, the fictional universe that results due to intertextuality and the use of *la mise-en-abyme* is a hybrid, heterotopian space, neither entirely 'real', nor fictional.

Although he does not equal John Barth the real author and "John Barth" in the novel, Brian Stonehill underlines the very complex relationship between the world of the author and the fictional one of the characters, as they determine, they alter each other, in turn:

> "by reducing the representation of 'John Barth' inside the novel to a level of fictional reality and *vraisemblance* equal to that of the characters, the Barth who wrote *LETTERS* thereby seems to boost the implied reality of those characters to equivalence with his own" (161).

As a result of this "blurring" of the line between fact and fiction, Barth reinforces "the believability of what happens in his pages" (161)[2].

The story is not, according to Stonehill, neglected in *LETTERS*, but simultaneously the novel generates a very strong self-reflexive effect, due to its meta-narrative function: "The stories of the characters' lives", the critic maintains, "manage both to be engaging, engrossing, suspenseful, funny, and rewarding on their own, and to function as fully realized parables of their own problematic ontology" (162). The result is a revolutionary novel able to bridge the gap between tradition and postmodernism, between story-telling and self-reflexiveness or, to use Stonehill's beautiful anagram of the title *LETTERS*:

> "a TRESTLE between 'postmodern' sophistication and 'old-fashioned' springs of narrative […], between the word as explanatory tool and the word as reflexive toy; a TRESTLE between History and Fiction […]; a TRESTLE between tradition and experiment, as between earnest and game" (167).

Another peculiar effect of this placing of both author and characters on the same ontological level is what Ann Bower called an author with "no authorial authority" (Bower, *Epistolary Responses*). Bower observed that the novel's design questions the place of an author as a structuring mechanism within the text. Although her observation is limited to *LETTERS*, it actually holds true in relation to all the novels in which Barth uses *la mise-en-abyme*.

However, this impotent-author image is a mere illusion, I would add, part of the complex game Barth chooses to play with the reader, as quite the opposite can be argued: this type of postmodern author, self-projected in the foreground of his texts, is as visible as he gets, actually finds himself in a very privileged place, one that had been denied the author for at least a century and a half.

It has also been noticed that this fiction contains "an enormous amount of History" (*The Self-Conscious* Novel 164). However, history (both 'real' history and what should pass

[2] Nevertheless, it is surprising that characters come to be treated *as if real people*. In 1988 the novel was in need of defense against allegations of immorality Brian Stonehill (Stonehill 159) is the one who defends Barth against DeMott's accusation that *Letters* is immoral because of the toleration of incest (reference to Todd Andrews's sexual abuse of his probable daughter Jeannine, which drives him to despair and to considering suicide for a second time). This kind of "judging" a novel for its content reminds us of the famous case of Flaubert, also accused of immorality for having used an objective narrator in *Madame Bovary*, hence for not blaming the protagonist's behavior. However, if in Flaubert's time this type of judgments may still have been taken for granted, it is awkward that Barth's late 20th-century novel was read from this perspective as well.

for history in the novel) is once more presented as fictionalized, as 'story', for instance, the history of Marshyhope State University (note the gossipy style):

> "The original college was endowed by a local philanthropist, now deceased: an excellent gentleman whose fortune, marvelous to tell, derived from *pickles*… and whose politics were so Tory that, going quite crackers in his final years, the dear fellow fancied himself to be, not Napoleon, but *George III*, still fighting the American Revolution…" (6)

or of individual families, as the Castines, Cookes and Burlingames, "whose histories, more intricate than History, are interlaced as capillaries" (21).

In fact, all the individual stories presented in the novel are scattered with reference to 'real' history, to 'real' events or people. Most of it is reference to contemporary America, as in the following example:

> "On the 61st day of the 70th year of the 20th century of the Christian calendar" – that is, on March 2, 1969, the date of the letter – "the human world and its American neighborhood, having survived, in the main, the shocks of '1968' and its predecessors, stood such-a-way: Clay Shaw was acquitted on a charge of involvement in the assassination of President John Kennedy […] and James Earl Ray was about to be convicted of assassinating the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Ex-President Dwight Eisenhower was weakening toward death after abdominal surgery in February; ex-President Lyndon Johnson, brought down by the Viet Nam War, had retired to Texas…" (42)

The reverse movement is that American history (colonial period in the following example) is, as we have seen, fictionalized, combined with fictional detail, which makes the whole a fiction in itself:

> "The 1st Henry Burlingame (a fair copy of whose *Privie Jornall* I found last week among the family papers) was one of the gentlemen who came to make their fortunes in Virginia with the 1st plantation in 1607, and, disaffected by the hardships of pioneering, made trouble for Captain John Smith – whose *Secret Historie of the Voiage up the Bay of Chesapeake* we also possess. The two documents together tell

> this story: In 1608, thinking to divert the mutinous gentlemen, Smith led them on a voyage of exploration from Jamestown to the head of Chesapeake Bay, to find whether it might prove the long-sought Northwest Passage to the Pacific. After a scurrilous adventure amongst the Accomack Indians on the Eastern Shore (detail'd in Smith's history), Burlingame became a kind of leader of the anti-Smith faction, to whom he threaten'd to tell 'the true story of Pocahontas' if Smith did not leave off harassing him & return the party to Jamestown." (23),

and so on and so forth. Just as the characters of the novel are placed on the same ontological level with the author, 'real', historical persons and writings are placed on the same level with fictional ones, as we could see in the example above. This is a constant tendency throughout the novel. Similarly, historical fact is intertwined with fiction. One more example, an excerpt from a letter signed by "N.":

> "Our maroonment on that desolated rock, under the boorish Cockburn and his more boorish successors, we need not describe to 1 so long and even more ignobly gaoled. We, at least, had the consolation that our exile was both temporary and as it were voluntary: we needed no Perseus to save us; we could have escaped at any time, and waited 7 years only because that period was needed for us to exploit to best advantage our martyrdom…" (31)

The importance of history in the novel has concentrated many critics' attention. Kim McMullen, for instance, focused on the implications of rewriting history quite extensively, as she regarded it as the pervasive thread to be followed in *LETTERS*. She noted that each of Barth's "autoplagiarized" characters "meditates upon the significance of his life to date – his history", the author included, as the latter "participates in a similar review by composing *LETTERS* - a narrative that seeks 'neither to repeat nor to repudiate [his] career thus far' (767)" (McMullen 405). Moreover, the novel, in the author's words,

> "will preoccupy itself with, among other things, the role of epistles - real letters, forged and doctored letters - in the history of History. It will also be concerned with, and of course constituted of, alphabetical letters: the atoms of which the written universe is made ..." (654).

Mc Mullen goes on to point out that Barth's novel "takes great and wide-ranging pleasure in exposing the 'lettered' quality of the American past" (McMullen 406). The analyzed example is the Cook-Burlingame dynasty, originated in *The Sot-Weed Factor*:

> "In *LETTERS*' version of American history, the interfamilial rivalries of seven generations of these revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries have fueled nearly every American conflict from the French and Indian Wars and the 'Second Revolution' […] to the antiwar protests and Quebeçois separatist movements of the late 1960s. The clan instigates political transformation through textual manipulation - or what they call 'action historiography', 'the *making* of history as if it were an avant-garde species of narrative' (73). Often such sabotage means simply posting a doctored letter." (id.)

Interestingly, McMullen sees in this a "sly suggestion" of the author that "the power of a Cook-Burlingame text to manipulate phenomenal circumstance derives from its reader's naïve faith in mimesis", in other words, faith in mimesis can only be naïve. Moreover, history itself is no longer understood as agency of truth, but rather as "a locus of power that may enter into correspondence *with* the world of experience but does not correspond *to* it" (id.); history does not reproduce past, it creates it, it creates that world.

As a result, it is letters what circumscribes the characters' struggle for social and political power, not at all accidentally: they are to demonstrate "how particular discursive practices inscribe institutions, behaviors, values, and histories", while simultaneously revisiting the past, and the present: the decade of social turmoil in which the characters write. The letters may, hence, be read as "attempts at both personal and national self-authorization", as "efforts to translate the motto shared significantly by Marshyhope State University, Mack Enterprises, and, one might argue, *LETTERS* itself: '*Praeteritas futuras stercorant*'." (McMullen 409) – a motto which ultimately reads: a unique translation of the past remains an "impossible and self-deluding" enterprise.

Moreover, Barth is equally, if not more, preoccupied with the consequences of the "lettering" of each individual correspondent's past. Each character in turn constitutes, (re)creates his or her past, "text, self, and world". As McMullen notes, "just as the novel never allows us to forget that history is a function of letters, it continually reminds us that its characters are composed of characters" (McMullen 410), namely, of letters, or, in Barth's words, that what we "are dealing with finally, are words on a page" (Glaser-Wöhrer 231).

To conclude, we should also keep in mind the important self-reflexive component of the novel, discussed above, and also noted by McMullen, who concluded that, in Barth's novel, "history (like literature and language) is seldom simply, but always also, about itself", while "the dialogue between 'history' and 'story' [is] simultaneously reflexive and referential" (McMullen 419). Consequently, "the made-up story is a model of the world" (33), to quote Jerome Bray once more.

To go even further, we could add that fiction is a model of life as well as life is a model of fiction, as we could see above. Should the reader go along with the illusion, then, that the author himself has turned into an entity free to wander in and out of his own fictions, in a border-land universe in which reality and fiction engulf one another and generate one another? In this context, Barth would probably like us to answer: yes. Indeed, real John Barth has one very good reason to hide behind fictional "John Barth": the possibility to cope with, by recreating, his own reality, his own life, in his never-ending effort to produce what we could label as self-fictionalizing novels.

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