

# JOHN BARTH: HIS FICTIONS, REALITIES AND HISTORIES

STIPE GRGAS  
Filozofski fakultet u Zadru  
Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar

UDK/UDC: 820(73).09:929 Barth, J.  
Izvorni znanstveni članak  
Original scientific paper

Primljeno : 1992-05-11  
Received

A reading of *The Tidewater Tales* (1987) allows the author to focus upon a twofold movement in John Barth's writing, one of which is liable to be overlooked in those critical approaches that make it their main purpose to present and analyse Barth as a metafictionalist writer. Acknowledging this side of his novels, what the article argues are Barth's strategies of immaterialization, the author proceeds to chronologically review Barth's works from *The Floating Opera* (1956) to *Chimera* (1972). The author concentrates on *Letters* (1979) to substantiate his claims. This extraordinary text gives ample evidence for the metafictionalist procedures in Barth's writing but, interestingly enough, these are coupled with the gravitational pull of the earth and the impingements of a recognizable reality. A common locality serving as background for all of Barth's fiction and the presence of specific historical positivities are isolated as evidence counterbalancing Barth's strategies of immaterialization. In concluding this article, the author generalizes his findings and shows how these relate to the perennial question of fiction and reality.

But in your father's opinion, the end  
whereto one is fetched into the  
parlous world is neither more nor less than  
this: to hear or make up stories, and to pass  
them on. Night, now.

(John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*, 423)

Whatever else it is about, great literature  
is almost always about itself. On rare  
occasions it may even be mainly about  
itself, though it is almost never exclusively  
about itself, even when it seems to be.

(John Barth, *The Friday Book*, 192)

"But that's Castene," you concluded. "Do  
you know who *he* really is?"  
The Doctor twitched his nose. "No idle  
ontologies, Jacob Homer."

(John Barth, *Letters*, 107)

## I.

When critics speak of contemporary innovative fiction-making, it has become a cliché to talk of its self-conscious narrativity, the writer's incorporation into his text of the act of telling a story. John Barth is widely known as a master of this narrative praxis, and no reading can do him justice if it overlooks this aspect of his work. In the present paper I will consider this feature of his writings, but I will also venture a supplementary approach where, interestingly enough, Barth's texts will be shown to be anchored in an extra-textual reality, which will, it is hoped, shed new light on his novels. My remarks will be centered on Barth's novel *Letters* because, in addition to being an exemplary case study, it brings together, in masterful fashion, the strands of his earlier books. As an introduction, I will give a short reading of his 1987 novel, *The Tidewater Tales* because it brings to our attention the issues to be dealt with in the following analysis.

On the surface, *The Tidewater Tales* tells of Peter's and his pregnant wife Katherine Sagamore's fourteen days sailing journey on their sloop "Story" prior to the time of her delivery. Peter is experiencing a writer's block, and Katherine sets him the task of taking to the water so as to deliver him from the clutches of "Less is More" minimalism that has eroded his writing. The double meaning of the word "delivery" aptly contains the double meaning of the action, both as birth-giving and book-writing, so that the conjugal enterprise not only, at the end, brings forth children but the novel we have been reading "T-H-I-S B-double-Okay".<sup>1</sup> During "O Day" of their narrative life, the multi-significance of the cruise as a "narrative scavenger hunt" is stated as follows: "What are we doing here? Says Katherine at the helm. We're taking us sailing and telling a story to these postmodern children of ours: Show and Kiss and Tell" (TT, 90). On the same page, Barth continues and speaks of the "comfortable", yet, nevertheless, disquieting nature of storytelling. One of the intentions behind what Barth is doing with the novel is to face and tackle, as a writer of fictions, those disquieting moments of making up stories.

A disturbing characteristic of narrative is that in order to narrate, the storyteller has to select, leave out a great deal: his enterprise is guilt-ridden by the knowledge that it cannot vouchsafe reliable representation. Peter Sagamore, in one of his ruminations on the art of fiction, acknowledges the importance of what is left out when reality is ordered into story, what the novelist, relying on his subjective judgement, pronounces dispensible:

Peter Sagamore used to wish that he could know and render them *all*, despite his understanding that if he did, no story would get told. Leaving them incompletely said still feels to him like describing a fine champagne as

<sup>1</sup>John B a r t h, *The Tidewater Tales*, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, p. 81. All further quotations from this novel will be followed by the abbreviation *TT* and page number, and included in the article itself. The second quotation heading this paper is taken from Barth's book *The Friday Book, Essays and other Nonfiction*, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons.

merely alcohol, water, and carbonic acid in solution. Better sip in silence than thus falsify! Not to mention...

(TT, 49)

This is the dilemma Peter has to face and the reason why his art eroded into a minimalism dangerously bordering on silence. The bulk and number of Barth's publications testify that he does not choose to "sip in silence" but, rather, tries to tell it all. He is a writer with a "savvy knack" for noticing the interdependence of events and characters, the expansive possibilities of tales and the enriching proliferation of their contexts. In his playful engagement with tradition, the reader is taken out of routinized stories into their appended after-climaxes (Odysseus, Don Quixote, and his favorite, Scheherazade) while his adventure of narrative wakes a readership "lulled by ubiquitous narrative convention" (TT, 142).

Nevertheless, and here I anticipate my later argument, it cannot be said that the cruise is pure fiction, allegorical (sailing=storytelling), but the sloop leaves a wake on real waters, on the Chesapeake Bay of Maryland of which Barth provides the reader with a real map to follow the voyage of his heroes. Although it might sound self-contradictory, this arch-metafictionalist has a strong regionalist strain.

Like the fictional Peter Sagamore, John Barth, on the evidence of his books, "the more he travelled, the more his imagination fixed fruitfully upon the lower Dorchester marshes" (TT, 311). The flashback on page 230 of Peter's background in Hoopersville, Maryland itemizes small town Tidewater America of the 1950ies: its seclusion, its strong religious sense, its bigotry: "Everybody was of English or Scotch-Irish extraction":

Nor had he ever met e.g. an Italian-American (not to mention an Italian Italian), an Asiatic, a Jew. In those Dixiecrat days he had scarcely known even a Republican, and had never to his knowledge encountered an atheist, a political radical either left- or right-wing, or anyone who could speak a tongue other than down-country English except his high school Spanish teacher and a couple of Holy Rollers.

I believe it is safe to state that these beginnings are not only relevant to the characterization of Peter but that Barth is alluding here to the beginnings of a nation: "These waters upon which we yarn and float, reader, are our birthwaters: Katherine's, Peter's, Franklin's, America's" (TT, 441). On one level of abstraction, Barth provides an account of the Chesapeake Bay area as the cradle of American civilization.

The tonality of *The Tidewater Tales*, the sense of lush well-being and shelteredness (the bights and coves offering snug protection from inclement nature and threatening history), has to do with Barth's rootedness and intimate knowledge of a particular locality. Although its function in the text is ironic, the excerpt that follows points to what I mean by place in Barth and ties Barth to a distinctive group within American literature:

P's going back to his roots, et cet! Peter could do excerpts voice-over from his fiction and talk about Regionalism versus Internationalism, or the Sense of Place in American Lit, blah Blah blah, while they sail on camera from Melville and and Hawthorne country down past Whitman's Long Island and right by Manhattan, work in a little Thomas Wolfe *You Can't Go Home Again*, Hart Crane and the Brooklyn Bridge et cet,...

(TT, 110)

This touches upon a basic assumption behind this article: the paradoxical fact that, although a virtuoso innovator, subverting the naiveté of realistic representation, Barth is, nevertheless, anchored to an extra-textual locality which does not evaporate in the narrative play of his novels.

Besides being the disappearing land of the felicity and simplicity of bygone days, the Chesapeake Bay area serves Barth in relation to two additional issues. Being in the immediate neighbourhood of state institutions and agencies, the inhabitants of the Bay - represented by the boatpeople of the novel - seem more attentive and sensitive to the affects of politics: "Cried Kath Our whole freaking *government* is freaking out!" (TT, 264). One part of Barth's narrative is entwined with the snooping activities, CIA's covert operations that have turned the Bay area into "a fucking moral cesspool" (TT, 264). A complementary concern that revolves around the motif of the Bay is the ecological theme, the pollution and dumping that are clandestinely making the Chesapeake a literal cesspool. A protest is voiced against the Allied Chemical Corporation "for knowingly and intentionally polluting, despoiling, and otherwise contributing to our Chesapeake's ruin in the interest of higher profit" (TT, 441). The ecological concern would have no weight, would not be intended to engage a particular ethical concern, if Barth's Chesapeake was no more than a sequence of letters on the page, an empty sign without an anchorage in a geographical reality.

Obviously, Barth uses the imminent doom of global politics and the ecological apocalypse not only to emphasize the endangered preciousness of his narrated journey of love and life affirmation, but to call attention, as well, to the odds against which the writer has to ply his trade. The qualms voiced about childbearing in a world on the brink of annihilation also apply to the precarious business of making stories. Therefore, it is no accident that the arch-storyteller, invoked throughout *The Tidewater Tales*, is Scheherazade who, as we know, puts off death by inventing stories. I am tempted to conclude that this is what Barth perceives stories to be: a momentary stay against oblivion. Bombarded by communiqués from an imperilled world - "On the doomsday front, K reports, the House of Representatives is expected to approve funding today for the MX missile" (TT, 543) - Barth knows his purpose to be no more nor less than: "to hear or make up stories, and to pass them on" (TT, 423). As readers we listen to him, retell them and make up our own.

## II.

My reading of Barth targets three issues which have been adumbrated by this reading of *The Tidewater Tales*. As a preliminary step, I will go back to Barth's novels that preceded the publication of *Letters* (1979) and glean from them those moments that endorse their metafictionalist standing. Secondly, focusing on *Letters* as a kind of summary of Barth's career up to 1979, I look at these strategies of, what I call, immaterialization, but show them to be unable to erase an extra-textual reality which makes its presence felt in the guise of a spatial identity and a localized history. These are my findings:

Although quite conventional, a case could be made for metafictionalist traces in Barth's first work *The Floating Opera* (1956) by isolating the narrative voice. Throughout the text, the narrator, Todd Andrews makes apologies for his lack of experience as a writer: "Not being a writer by trade, I sometimes neglect these details."<sup>2</sup> Basically, his chagrin stems from the essential problem of rendering into artistic form the fullness of experience: "I think that to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute, requires the understanding of every other thing in the world."<sup>3</sup>

A similar plight is described in *The End of the Road* (1958) where Jacob Horner attempts with "mythoplastic razors... to have at reality",<sup>4</sup> i.e. to make sense of it. However, Barth's awareness of the tentativeness of this project comes to the surface in the following passage: "To turn experience into speech - that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it - it is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it."<sup>5</sup>

Barth's gargantuan mock-historical novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), represents a more complex case and demands a different approach. As will be mentioned below, the novel foregrounds the difficulties of representing historical facts and transcribing the same into the written medium. On a more immediate level, the language the novel is written in and the plot structure return the reader to 18th century precedents and, while laughing one's way through, the question that lurks in the mind is what to make of this anachronism. *The Sot-Weed Factor* can be considered, primarily, as a quotation from the linguo-stylistic resources and narrative strategies of 18th century fiction, so that it only tangentially has to do with the world of facts. The parodic effects intended by the author is only possible if the reader recognizes the novel as a late-day reduplication and ironical reemployment of a former mode of fiction-making. Although primarily concerned with an intra-generic dialogue, the case of *The Sot-Weed Factor* shows how real time intrudes at the level of reception because it is only the recognition of our

---

<sup>2</sup>John B a r t h, *The Floating Opera and The End of the Road*, New York, Anchor Press, 1988, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112.

belatedness that enables us to appreciate the ironic play between the text and the earlier models.

In his next novel, *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) Barth takes an additional step in the direction of self-conscious fictionality. The prevarications introducing (publisher's disclaimers, cover letters) and supplementing (posttape and two postscripts) the "reels" and "tapes" that reconstruct the life and times of the Grand Tutor put the tale under a disturbing and uncertain light. Simply put, the presented story is questioned, its authenticity vitiated by the enframing comments which, in addition, play against each other. In his cover-letter, "J.B." informs the reader that he was unable to locate Stoker Giles after Stoker had handed to him a transcript of the tapes that had, supposedly, been filed in the West Campus Automatic Computer. Searching for the authorship of the script, "J.B." further discovers that no computer exists capable of "narrative composition and stylistics".<sup>6</sup> What Barth achieves is to withhold the originating authority that would attribute to the narrative a stable perspective. The reader meets with similar procedures at the end of the novel when, for example, the editor's final note hints that the two previous postscripts are spurious. All of this contributes to the unreliability of the text and instigates a series of hesitations, cancelling each other out, and a state of being unable to decide between the various utterances wrangling for trustworthiness.<sup>7</sup>

Barth's 1968 assemblage of texts, *Lost in the Funhouse*, (I hesitate to give the book a more precise appellation), has the apparent aim of tackling the differences of medium and of enacting, within the individual short "fictions", fiction's generic modalities, the difficulties of its genesis, its development and completion. The items gathered here entertain the hesitancies and doubts of venturing into story, make manifest the mores of storytelling, how an author is hindered by these and how he can demarcate his originality in the face of conventions. The piece "Life-story" becomes paralysed by its ballast metacommentary and, near its end, Barth mockingly chides the reader for having followed him this far, despite the obstacles planted against the "readability" (Barthes) of his text:

The reader! You, dogged, unsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, theh? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis?<sup>8</sup>

The title piece deals with the same problem. In a contrapuntal-like text, Barth juxtaposes two realities of which one, Ambrose's visit to Ocean City,

<sup>6</sup>John B a r t h, *Giles Goat-Boy*, New York, Doubleday, 1966, p. xxx.

<sup>7</sup>The logical and habitual reaction would be to locate this center in the author. However, besides the qualms that "J.B." express, what right do we have to recognize the living person behind the initials. In *Letters*, where there is a character named John Barth who is the author who writes and receives letters in the novel, the "author's note" warns us that all the characters "are entirely fictitious (including the Author)". The quandary in this case is unresolvable.

<sup>8</sup>John B a r t h, *Lost in the Funhouse*, New York, Bantam Books, 1981, p. 123.

figures the other, Barth's throes of composition and his sense of being lost in the house of fiction. Although an exciting book, flamboyantly dissecting the very process of writing, some of the pieces are in danger of metafictional mannerism, of a kind endemic to Barth's work.

A passage in *Chimera* (1972) might be said to give away Barth's reason for writing this text: "my name's just a jumble of letters; so's the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I've lost the key to."<sup>9</sup> *Chimera*, made up of three novellas that, in searching for this key, plays upon three intertexts (Scheherazade's frame story and the myths of Perseus and Bellerophon) and brings together spin-offs of these famous precedents, which Barth supplements and revises in his phantastical yarns. What this amounts to is an act of recuperation where the author, in order to go "forward", feels compelled to go "back, to the very roots and springs of story."<sup>10</sup> He feels justified in doing so because a classical myth is "infinitely retellable, and the connoisseur's pleasure is in those small variations, discrepancies, and lacunae that invariably yawn obtain among renditions."<sup>11</sup> The exuberance and joy of narrative freedom that the reader recognizes in this trilogy and that he can be exasperated by, invalidate any easy analysis. Having decided to publish it separately and prior to *Letters*, the exercises in this text prepare the reader for the bag of narrative tricks spilled out in Barth's next novel.

My reading of Barth's novels makes no pretence to originality and seeks no more than to rehearse and, perhaps, contribute to the body of evidence corroborating the metafictionalist traits of his work. However, what I first found tantalizing in these texts is that, although each can be summarized away as an exercise in narrative self-indulgence, yet all of them show a definite topography, pay homage to a particular place. Even amidst his most ethereal flight of narrative self-reflexivity, Barth gestures to and describes a particular locality. It is these, logically, opposite strands of Barth's work, the realm of textuality and the pressures of reality, that I make the subject of my discussion. To do so and to gather together the different procedures mentioned above, it is necessary to make a few remarks about Barth's 1979 publication *Letters*.

### III.

Even by Barth's voluminous standards a "longie",<sup>12</sup> *Letters*, from the author's note disclaiming semblance to real people (even the author is fictitious), to its closing pages, jocularly plies the interface between fact and fiction and, in

<sup>9</sup>John Barth, *Chimera*, New York, Fawcett Crest, 1989, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>12</sup>John Barth, *Letters*, New York, Granada Publishing, 1981, p. 250. For the sake of convenience, all further references to *Letters* will be followed by the capital letter *L* and the page number.

doing so, shows them intermingling and destabilizing each other. Those familiar with his earlier writing will not be surprised that Fiction-making itself is his uppermost concern, but the manner he executes this in *Letters* is of particular interest, invalidates pat solutions and implicates issues of general critical weight.

Barth does not conceal what he is after in the novel. On the contrary, in numerous metacommentaries he divulges his strategies and aims. Out of the array of explicit statements, I choose a passage from the author's letters to Jacob Horner:

Currently I find myself involved in a longish epistolary novel, of which I know so far only that it will be regressively traditional in manner: that it will *not* be obscure, difficult, or dense in the Modernist fashion; that its action will occur mainly in the historical present, in tidewater Maryland and on the Niagara Frontier; that it will hazard the resurrection of characters from my previous fiction... but will not presume, on the reader's part, familiarity with those fictions, which I cannot myself remember in detail.

(L. 339)

One has to have reservations about the trustworthiness of this self-description of *Letters*. In support of this, it must be noted that metacomments reappear throughout the text, revised and supplemented as the novel develops. However, it would be understating the matter to say that *Letters* cannot qualify as a novel "traditional in manner". Furthermore, although Barth states that its action takes place mainly in the historical present, this allegation fails to do justice to the reverberations and contexts of the historical past that underpin so much of the novel's structure. Thirdly, it is a moot point whether and in what measure an appreciative reading of *Letters* is dependent on a familiarity with Barth's earlier fictions. Experience informs me that *Letters* intrigues the reader to go back to the earlier works, and that these can hardly be reread, after an acquaintance with *Letters*, as self-standing, independent wholes, but are affected by, as Barth puts it "the Sequel, molt fallible of genres" (L, 429). In a sense, gesturing as it does towards the earlier novels, *Letters* inevitably establishes and reaches out to two reading communities: those with a knowledge of the fictions of earlier date and those who approach the novel as a discrete, self-sufficient entity. This attributes to the text a sort of double reality. The dualism and interplay between fact and fiction is restaged in the relationship between *Letters* and its antecedent texts.

*Letters* function as a summation of a portion of Barth's writing career. What he does is to create an epistolary situation, soliciting characters from his previous fictions to participate in his latest project (the book we are reading), receiving various responses to this proposed reemployment, eventually "entwining" (L, 42) the earlier story lines so as to get *Letters* under way. In this flamboyant reenactment of prior texts, in places repeating, developing, intermixing or filling in the earlier tales, Barth brings his characters up to 1969, conveying them through that "grand, protracted opus of Action Historiography - call it the 1960's!" (L, 748).

Such a mode of characterization sets one thinking about the ontology of Barth's fictional existants. For the sake of argument, it can be said that novelists make free of demiurgic powers when creating characters. However, Barth's characters in *Letters* have a kind of double-life; being spill-overs from other fictional worlds they problematize the foundation and buildup of the novel. This limits Barth's freedom of characterization and imposes the restriction to follow already existing models. Obviously, the novelist is misleading us when he disavows the interdependence of *Letters* and his other fictions. The earlier works provide prehistories that, seemingly, authenticate the existence of characters assembled in *Letters*, however, the fact that these antecedents are fictitious gives the lie to any simple procedure of identification.

All of these elements provoke the reader with a dizzying number of regressals that undermine the easy assumptions one brings to the appreciation of character and representation. The following excerpt from Jacob Horner's letter is indicative of what I have in mind and epitomizes the problem under discussion:

This account became the basis of a slight novel called *The End of the Road* (1958), which ten years later inspired a film, same title, as false to the novel as was the novel to your Account and your Account to the actual Horner-Morgan-Morgan triangle as it might have been observed from either other vortex.

(L, 19)

A warning: it is necessary to reflect upon the fact that the above "account" itself appears in a letter which is further enframed within the novel *Letters*, displacing the "actual" to an additional degree.

These are only the most apparent aspects contributing to what I choose to call Barth's strategies of immaterialization. A rudimentary definition would speak of those authorial manoeuvres aimed to convince the reader that everything making up the novel has an existence *only* as constituents of a written artefact. A strong formulation of this immaterialization comes in the "author's" note to Ambrose Mensch: "and never mind that in a sense this 'dialogue' is a monologue: that we capital-A Authors are ultimately, ineluctably, and forever talking to ourselves" (L, 653). With this move the correspondents of his *Letters* evaporate and the choice of the epistolary form is confessed as a gesture honouring 18th century novelists who impress the author "with their characteristic awareness that they're *writing*" (L, 52-3). It would be mincing the matter to say that Barth also knows he is writing. In sum, I have thrown a brief glance at the "literariness", "the specifically literary (non-referential) aspect"<sup>13</sup> of Barth's novel. But this only tells one part of the story.

If there is an undeniable momentum in Barth's writings, centripetal indicators warning the reader not to mistake the novel for the world, there is also

<sup>13</sup>Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 115.

an antithetical, gravitational pull, a series of prompts that remind the reader that he is world-bound. Todd Andrews, in one of his letters to his long-dead father, makes an apposite remark: "Remarkable, that the bridge between fact and fiction, like that between Talbot and Dorchester is a two-way street" (L, 96). It cannot be disputed that - like other metafictionalists - Barth focuses on the "literariness" of fiction, yet, as I hope to make clear, his work shows the inability of literature to sever ties with the world of fact. Among Ambrose Mensch's comments on fiction-making, there appears the following item:

If one imagines an artist less enamored of the world than of the language we signify it with, yet less enamored of the language than of the signifying narration, and yet less enamored of the narration than of its formal arrangement, one need *not* necessarily imagine that artist therefore forsaking the world for language, language for the processes of narration, and those processes for the abstract possibilities of form.

(L, 648)

Both as background, a strong identification with a locale, and as process, a localized history, the world looms large in Barth's fiction. As he remarks in one of the ongoing comments on the process of composition: "Now... it's back to LETTERS, to history, to "realism" and to the revisitation of a certain marsh where once I wandered, dozed, dreamed" (L, 49). To paraphrase Marianne Moore, Barth's novels are imaginary constructs with real marshes in them.

For a word-agile metafictionalist, Barth sets his novels, surprisingly, all in a particular locality, prompting us to think of them as revisits to the marshy county Dorchester on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. In doing this, Barth joins the company of those American writers (Faulkner, Wolfe, Kernac and others) who have given life to geographical names, creating in their readers a homesickness for an imaginative home defined by real parallels of latitude and longitude. If regions of the vast North American continent could be allocated to the writers who have given them a voice, the "geographical backwaters" (L, 41) of Maryland would be the property of John Barth. In a sense, each of his novels, in varying degrees of explicitness, represents a kind of pietistic homage to this territory of the heart, "the smug and easy, memory-drenched Eastern Shore" (L, 272).

At one point in *Letters*, Lady Amherst, having read all of Barth's publications, cannot understand why Reg Prinz's company, supposedly making a film based on Barth's works, will recommence shooting on Niagara and queries the author: "Where do the Falls figure in your fiction? I had thought it all set in Maryland or in Nowhere" (L, 347). Of course she is right. What is less obvious is the fact that having set his previous fictions all in one place helped Barth to write the "sequel"; he was in a position to "entwine" their stories with greater plausability than would have been possible if this were not the case. The locality serves as a kind of common denominator of the various texts, providing the author with an enabling condition for crisscrossing the different story lines.

This poetics of space, evident throughout Barth's writings, is reinforced, especially in *Letters*, by considerations of time and duration. Seeking a connecting thread between the two interests, one can wager a guess that Barth's recycling of the Atlantic littoral has to do with its symbolic import, its flux and flow, the deposits of life and death accumulating on its changing water-line. Geography becomes a constant reminder of transience:

To her the Choptank itself was a passing feature of the landscape; the very peninsula (which I had informed her was slowly sinking) ephemeral: alone among Dorseters she shrugged her shoulders at the broken wall. "Six years or six hundred; it's soon over". Schopenhauer was supplanted by Spengler, Spengler by Ecclesiasticus, Ecclesiasticus by Magda.

(L, 184)

The transversal of geograhpy by duration introduces the other element that resists the immaterialization I have drawn attention to in Barth. Namely, as was hinted at in the review of *The Tidewater Tales*, the location of Maryland makes it an important site for the "players of the Game of Government" (L, 614), who stalk the arena of history:

These placid Maryland waters, these mild English-looking swards and copses, are too close to Our Nation's Capital not to have been the secret *mise en scène* of fearsome hugger-mugger since well before C.I.A. and O.S.S. - back at least to 1812.

(L, 711)

The Eastern Shore is not only drenched, as we see, in an individual memory but Barth, in *Letters*, shows it to figure promptly in the memory of a nation.

The historical substructure of *Letters* is divided into two time periods: the "now" of the contemporary world (1960ies) and the synoptic account of US history. Although it is difficult to speak of a "first narrative"<sup>14</sup> because of the epistolary form, the present of the narrative includes the events that befall Barth's up-dated characters and the historical context signaled by actual historical happenings that Barth culled from the heydays of the sixties. In like fashion, the analepses it providing past information, intertwine historical data with the shady, fictitious dealings of the Castines, Cookes and Burligames. The script of fluctuating tidemarks on the Atlantic littoral is analogous to this interplay between history and fiction.

<sup>14</sup>The term is Genette's. I use a number of other terms which Rimmon-Kennan defines in the following manner: "*analepsis* is a narration of story-event or a point in the text after later events have been told... *prolepsis* is a narration of a story-event at a point before earlier events have been mentioned... The 'first narrative', then, is... 'the temporal level of narrative with respect to which an anachrony is defined as such'". *Ibid.*, p. 46-7.

The motivation of the characters participating in historical projects, including those who epitomize the spirit of the sixties, is to carry through "a Second Revolution in North America, against economic royalism" (L, 416). The rallying point for the grand schemers of the Cooke/Burlingame family is to establish "a free state for Indians and manumitted or escaped African slaves" (L, 302). As the American republic moves westward, and the chronology of the book takes us to the present, the chances of achieving this aim diminish. On one level, Barth is giving voice to those silenced, vanquished and elided by official historical lore. The engagement with the lost causes of American history castigates the injustices of American policy; however, in many instances, the tonality of presentation undercuts the seriousness of Barth's pronouncements. The way that the sixties are depicted brings this out. Reality falls short of the prophecies that envision the fulfillment of those hopes inscribed in the alternative history Barth is giving in the novel:

The 2nd Revolution, he decides, in America anyway, will be a social and cultural revolution in the decade to come (i.e., the 1960's); the radical transformation of political and economic institutions will either follow it in the 1970's or become irrelevant.

But "the times" are a far cry from this project and Barth unsparingly lampoons the decade's less appealing, at times, lunatic goings-on. The operetta-styled implementation of revolutionary politics either betokens the futility of political action or might evidence Barth's retrospective insight that "the much-touted Counterculture would in a very few years become just another subculture, of which the more the merrier, with perhaps a decade's half-life in the media" (L, 718).

But my account is too straightforward and fails to broach the complex strategies Barth employs when incorporating history into his text. For example, speaking of his parents, A.B. Cook writes that they had money enough to carry on their subversive activities but, on second thought, continues: "At least for *ostensibly* so organizing, infiltrating, supporting" (L, 421). This recognition of complications behind ostensibly ordered narratives, provides the impetus of Barth's historical stories. To simplify the argument, what Barth does is to rewrite history as conspiracy. Working the analogy of history as the "grandest fiction", Barth has Cooke note "that its eloquentest authors, like those of the ancient ballads and Eastern tales, are anonymous" (L, 317). Supposedly being in the know, the author proceeds to identify these anonymous agents: "No good my advising him, from my rich experience of Them, that there is no They, only a He" (L, 356-7).

The tales of this remarkable lineage are not only entwined with the momentous events of history but history itself is, in large part, shown to be occasioned by their clandestine activities. However, the activities of these grand intriguers are not as clear-intentioned as my account makes them out to be. On one level, the events of history become a function or an arena wherein the conflicts and tensions of the Oedipal-styled ("fly from husband - and parenthood" /L, 584/)

relationship between the different generations of this clan are staged. To further complicate the matter, Barth has each intriguer, mover behind political events, experience a kind of mid-life crisis at which time he undertakes to undo his earlier accomplishments: "the rectification, in /his/ life's 2nd cycle, or its 1st" (L, 521).

This excursion into Barth's method of dealing with history had a twofold purpose. In the first place, it shows that, according to Barth, history is not an objective collection of facts/realities but a problem area of ambiguity and duplicity. Back in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth engaged history by revising it, questioning what had been handed down, writing a kind of alternative genesis of America. The following quotation states what Barth is about in a nutshell: "viewed through the lens of this knowledge, the entire history of the Province takes on a different aspect".<sup>15</sup> In *Chimera*, an explicit statement corroborates our assumption: "the very concept of objective truth, especially as regards the historical past, is problematical".<sup>16</sup> In *Letters*, these ruminations on history come to a head. Suspicious of handed-down historical knowledge, Barth's revisionary project is intended to subvert the oft-repeated, ossified, narratives of explanation and meaning: "His eyes were open'd to thitherto-unsuspected dimensions of a history he had largely taken for granted" (L, 116). Barth admonishes those who too readily accept the objectivity of historical knowledge: "there is no non-disturbing historiography" (L, 80). The upshot of this suspension of referentiality in the accounts of history is that their purported knowledge turns into an imaginative construct, immaterializes.

And yet this is, again, only one part of the story, because no matter how Barth fictionalizes and works to dematerialize the factual substratum of history, most of us decode his allusions to historical events and personages as having positive referents. This touches upon my second reason for foregrounding the historical substructures of *Letters*. Barring hypothetical readers who would be wholly ignorant of American and European history or, for that matter, who have no inkling that behind Barth's toponymy lies a particular locality, I cannot imagine how to escape identification, the looming presence of world behind the word. On a trivial level, though Barth's intentions are to "administer artificial resuscitation to" (L, 652) obsolete narrative forms, it is obviously true that Richardson could not have written *Letters*. What has intervened is the passage of history, both as it has affected the novel but, more significantly, the history against which Barth plays his fiction. Barth's techniques, his trickster narratives and the suspicion of representation that permeates his text, systematically balk the move to an antecedent reality, and yet, other elements, a deployment of indicators, point to things known, things that have an existence outside the covers of his books.

<sup>15</sup>John B a r t h, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, New York, Doubleday, 1967, p. 486.

<sup>16</sup>John B a r t h, *Chimera*, p. 203.

#### IV.

The feeling that there are two tension-creating movements in Barth's fiction, one undercutting referentiality and the other inscribing the return of factuality, the way the world resists the negating stratagems of self-conscious narrativity, was the initial spark behind the account I have given. The sifting of Barth's writings through the sieve of metafictionalist procedures wears them threadbare and suppresses the contrary evidence that gives the lie to these procedures. An inflation of critical readings focusing on "literariness" might have created a blind spot for those aspects of texts that mount a challenge to what I have termed the strategies of immaterialization.

The dilemmas that the reader brings from Barth's novels are why does this arch-metafictionalist unfailingly stage his stories and his stories of storytelling in a particular locality? What has he to do with a history that is, surely, textualized, but a history that, nevertheless, touches extra-textual realities? To resolve the dilemma by the ruse of saying that both the geographical site and the historical data are intratextual begs the question and fails to do justice to the perplexities encountered in reading Barth. The blanket of "literariness" levels out the eruptions of the extra-textual, but somehow, or at least to some readers, it seems capable of a disturbing tenacity. In conclusion, a few points will be made that are of general import and that merit more than the cursory mention the present occasion allows.

The reader harbours the suspicion that literature or, more to the point, the novel, regardless to what extent its practitioners seek to make it self-referential, is contextualized and that it, inevitably, at some tangent, touches upon an independent reality. This assertion entails a set of corollaries of relevance to different aspects of the novel. From this standpoint, no matter what kind of fictional setting is delineated, the novelist cannot but be involved or, at least, related, in whatever manner, to the furniture of our common world. In similar fashion, the temporal structuring of narrative is analogous to the various ways man experiences objective time. On the level of characterization, it holds that the novelist can hardly create or the reader perceive characters in fiction without sounding their knowledge of human personalities and actions.

These observations become even more pertinent and persuasive when we are dealing with than author, like Barth for instance, who avails himself of recognizable proper names for localities, events or historical figures. Although a text may incessantly warn against easy identifications, yet, the proper name inevitably brings to mind a specific referent; whether the Great Choptank or James Earl Ray or Mao's Cultural Revolution, all of which appear in *Letters*, each of these signify actualities that have an existence outside the covers of the novel. It would be foolish not to detect a sort of "ontological instability" (L, 340) at work here, however, what I warn against is the brazen move whereby all such entities are reduced to intra-story indicators. This gesture hoodwinks their tenacious rootedness

in the world of fact. In general, the links between fiction and reality seem to depend on the agenda of *knowns* that readers bring with them when taking up a book.

Finally, my reading of Barth's works acknowledges the conditions where and when it took place. I wonder whether the perspective I bring to Barth is not, in large part, the product of a cross-cultural transaction. Is it not possible that the alterity of Barth's territory, the marshes of Eastern Maryland, makes it all the more conspicuous, all the more beckoning to a trans-Atlantic reader? To be more particular, can it be that a Croatian reader whose country's place-names have become stations of a national Golgotha, who mutters them in prayer, will have a heightened sense of land and be more receptive to the resonance of geographical names? On another level, can a Croatian reader, participating in Eastern Europe's reawakening to history but, in addition, being victimized by its all-too-real happenings, be blind to the tug of historical events that work against the strategies of immaterialization in Barth's writings? This paper recognizes itself as a cross-cultural gesture, voicing a claim against those elements in an American text - Barth's metafictionalist bag of tricks - with which, in the midst of historical exigencies, it could establish no or a very weak rapport. No secret is made of the fact that the realities, histories and fictions I have reported upon bear witness to "the times" and territories that have been drenched but not merely in memories.

**Stipe Grgas: JOHN BARTH: NJEGOVE FIKCIJE, ZBILJE I POVIJESTI****S a ž e t a k**

Čitanje *Priobalnih priča* (1987) omogućuje autoru članka da se usredotoči na dvostruko kretanje u djelima Johna Bartha, za jedno od kojih je vjerojatno da će se predvidjeti u kritičkim osvrtima čija je glavna nakana da Bartha predstave kao metafikcionalista. Uvažavajući tu stranu njegovih romana, ono što bismo mogli nazvati strategijama imaterijalizacije, autor se osvrće na Barthovo djelo od *Ploveće opere* (1956) do *Himere* (1972). Nalazi se potkrepljuju osvrtom na *Pisma* (1979), roman koji u izobilju nudi dokaze metafikcionalnosti Barthova djela ali u kojemu se istodobno osjeća i oprečna kretnja, sile zemljine teže i pritisci zbilje. Izdvajaju se zajednička geografska pozadina njegovih romana i činjenična povijest nazočna u njima kao dokazni materijal koji ide usuprot Barthovim strategijama imaterijalizacije. U zaključnim opaskama, autor uopćava svoje nalaze i pokazuje kako se oni tiču vječnog pitanja fikcije i zbiljnosti.