



Lost in the Funhouse: Barth's Use of the Recent Past

Author(s): Michael Hinden

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Michael Hinden

Lost in the Funhouse: **Barth's Use of the Recent Past**

"Historicity and self-awareness, he asseverated, while ineluctable and even greatly to be prized, are always fatal to innocence and spontaneity. Perhaps adjective period Whether in a people, an art, a love affair, on a fourth term added not impossibly to make the third less than ultimate."¹ Arriving at this judgment, the narrator of "Title" in Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* concludes that today's writers, schooled in criticism, burdened with self-consciousness, laboring in vineyards harvested by their recent predecessors, have been reduced to pushing each other literally "to fill in the blank," (p. 109). The "blank," he suggests, is what remains (or what does not remain) of our recent literary past. "Love affairs, literary genres, third item in exemplary series, fourth—everything blossoms and decays, does it not, from the primitive and classical through the mannered and baroque to the abstract, stylized, dehumanized, unintelligible blank." (p. 105). Discounting irony, the mood recalls that darkest of all passages in *Ecclesiastes*. Vanity of vanity, says the Preacher: "For in much wisdom is much vexation, / and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."

The plight of Barth's monologist reflects not merely a crisis in *belles lettres* but the predicament of the age itself which, like its counterpart, prose fiction, appears to be "about played out" (p. 105). Too much is known, too much has been tried, too much is now over with, yet nothing has been settled, Barth intimates, striking a tone peculiarly appropriate for the seventies. Certainly it seems painfully clear that for all our striving after systematic truth (especially in moral philosophy

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and aesthetics) we do seem to have lost our capacity for zest to the extent that our thought processes have become self-conscious and historical. Familiarity denatures insight; what can be analyzed in terms of origin or motive soon loses its power to enthrall us.

These observations are neither startling nor new, yet in one sense the dilemma of the contemporary writer is unique. In the compressed space of several generations a dozen literary movements have flourished and been catalogued, manifestos studied, techniques codified and perfected, ranks assigned, order imposed. Sheer volume is reason in itself to explain Barth's observation that literature by now has exhausted the vast seed bag of potentialities that were brought to flower in the recent past. In his essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth specifies: "By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities—by no means necessarily a cause for despair."² The "real technical question," he elaborates, "seems to me how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who've *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka," namely, Beckett and Borges.³ In Barth's evaluation of Borges's work there can be found a suggestion of the direction he himself has embarked upon as a means of transforming art's paralysis. Borges's "artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work."⁴ As the narrator of "Anonymiad" remarks in *Lost in the Funhouse*, the point is that "one can't pretend to an innocence outgrown or in other wise retrace one's steps, unless by coming full circle." (p. 174). Borges is willing to make this voyage, employing as method a unique conception of the Baroque, which he defines as "that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders upon its own caricature."⁵ Moreover, in fiction the possibilities opened by such procedure suggest "how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work—*paradoxically* because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation. . . ."⁶ The final possibility (adds the narrator of "Title") might then be for the artist to "turn ultimacy against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new." (p. 106).

In *Lost in the Funhouse* Barth brings these conceptions to realization. Based on his notion of ultimacy turned against itself by means of a style that is self-exhausting and yet comically triumphant, the book reveals a dazzling display of modernist techniques even while it examines the depletion of certain forms of modernist expression and the unbearable self-consciousness of intellectual life. Myths, symbolism, interior monolog, time shifts, varieties of point of view, mixed media, esoteric word play—all are employed, parodied, and refreshed as Barth's vision of the funhouse is defined.

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Like Borges, Barth is convinced that his artistic victory can be gained only by confronting the recent past and “employ[ing] it against itself to accomplish new human work.” Therefore, in an attempt to exhaust the possibilities of its own tradition, *Lost in the Funhouse* begins as an elaborate parody, revival, and refutation of Joyce’s masterpiece, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. That Barth consciously is engaged in this endeavor there can be no doubt. Joyce himself is mentioned twice in the title story as an originator and authority on techniques of modern fiction (p. 71, p. 85), and the recycling of Joycean/Homeric materials, especially the Daedalus-labyrinth motif (“Night-Sea Journey,” “Lost in the Funhouse,” “Echo,” “Menelaid”) is intentional. In the true spirit of caricature, Barth’s attitude toward his model is both respectful and subversive. This, unlike Joyce’s Stephen who at the conclusion of *A Portrait of the Artist* escapes (at least temporarily) the nets of his imprisonment, young Ambrose in Barth’s story wanders deeper into the funhouse labyrinth “wherein he lingers yet.” (p. 91). While Stephen’s soul prepares to soar in the final passage of *A Portrait of the Artist*—“Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead”⁷—the narrator of “Autobiography” mocks: “Father, have mercy, I dare you! Wretched old fabricator, where’s your shame? Put an end to this, for pity’s sake! Now! Now!” (p. 36). And the speaker in “Night-Sea Journey,” a sperm caught up in the surge of life against his will, undoes Stephen’s affirming cry—“Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race”⁸—with a life-negating moan: “Whoever echoes these reflections: be more courageous than their author! An end to night-sea journeys! Make no more!” (p. 12).

Joycean patterns dominate *Lost in the Funhouse* and may be found in the determinative structural elements of the work as well as in minute intricacies of style. For instance, Stephen’s advocacy of an Olympian artist who “like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails,”⁹ is adopted as a basis for Barth’s narrative point of view, but is driven beyond logical limits in “Echo,” “Autobiography,” “Life Story,” “Title,” and “Anonymiad.”

Echo says Tiresias is not to be trusted in this matter . . . none can tell teller from told. Narcissus would appear to be the opposite from Echo: he perished by denying all except himself; she persists by effacing herself absolutely. Yet they come to the same . . . the voice persists, persists. (“Echo,” p. 99)

Repetitions of various special phrases and psychological perceptions from *A Portrait of the Artist* also are conspicuous in Barth’s stories, additionally strengthening the connection between the works. Two examples may suffice. Both Stephen and Ambrose are fascinated by the sounds of words and the denotative meaning of colloquial phrases. Thus, Stephen:

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Suck was a queer word. . . . Once he had washed his hands in the lavatory of the Wicklow Hotel and his father pulled the stopper up by the chain after and the dirty water went down through the hole in the basin. And when it had all gone down slowly the hole in the basin had made a sound like that: suck. Only louder.¹⁰

Ambrose in "Lost in the Funhouse":

Funhouses need men's and ladies' rooms at intervals. Others perhaps have also vomited in corners and corridors; may even have had bowel movements liable to be stepped in in the dark. The word *fuck* suggests suction and/or flatulence. Mother and Father; grandmothers and grandfathers on both sides. . . . (p. 76)

Stephen:

And when Dante made that noise after dinner and then put up her hand to her mouth: that was heartburn.¹¹

Ambrose:

By looking at his arm a certain way he could see droplets standing in the pores. It was what they meant when they spoke of *breaking out in a cold sweat*: very like what one felt in school assemblies, when one was waiting in the wings for the signal to step out onto the stage. ("Water Message," p. 49)

But Barth's most significant use of Joycean materials concerns the collapse of credibility of the artist-as-hero theme in modern literature and the question raised as to whether there is "anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents" ("Lost in the Funhouse," p. 89). In this regard the key story is "Ambrose His Mark," a mock-heroic portrait of the artist's birth and infancy with an account of the derivation of his name. In memory of the baby's painful encounter with a hive of swarming bees, his uncle suggests that he be named after St. Ambrose, who "had the same thing happen when he was a baby. All these bees swarmed on his mouth while he was asleep in his father's yard, and everybody said he'd grow up to be a great speaker" (p. 31). Grandfather counters that, "the bees was more on this baby's eyes and ears than on his mouth," whereupon Uncle Konrad adds, "So he'll grow up to see things clear" (p. 31). But the fact of the matter is that Ambrose grows up to lose himself in his own reflection. Perhaps, then, the ultimate significance of the story lies in the outrageous pun implicit in its action—a portrait of the artist as a "stung" man. (The pun, I venture to submit, is Barth's, not mine.)

Yet Barth's resources in *Lost in the Funhouse* extend far beyond the limited form of parody. According to Barth's conception of the Baroque, a work eventually must serve as model to *itself*, defining and exhausting its own possibilities of invention and procedure as if to caricature its own emerging form. *Lost in the Funhouse* clearly attains this end. Barth announces in the "Author's Note" that

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the stories here should be approached as “neither a collection nor a selection, but a series” (p. ix), and viewed in this light, they do reveal a pattern of progressive unity. The particular sequence of the stories itself suggests an aesthetic circularity which is of major thematic significance, beginning with “Frame Tale,” a Moebius strip (to be cut out and fastened) on which is printed: “Once upon a time there/ Was a story that began” (repeating itself in perpetuity band to band), and ending with “Anonymiad,” a fanciful slice from Homer’s banquet that pretends to be the world’s first instance of autobiographical prose fiction. The interim tales are connected in various ways, the most important being the treatment of the growth of consciousness in a given mind (the artist) and the confusion resulting from hyper-consciousness transmuted into art. Four of the stories, appropriately, are specifically about the difficulties of writing stories.

“Night-Sea Journey,” following “Frame Tale,” is a delightful *tour de force* which at a blow appears to exhaust the possibilities of first person point of view and autobiographical fiction as a whole, while simultaneously opening up new areas for narrative experiment. The artist carries us back to a journey prior to his own conception, speaking as a cell endowed (to his chagrin) with the collective wisdom of the human race. From this perspective Barth scrupulously examines the major details of the ancient archetypal pattern of the “Night Journey” as described by Arthur Koestler (even to the point of suggesting a direct borrowing from Koestler’s model):

Under the effect of some overwhelming experience, the hero is made to realize the shallowness of his life, the futility and frivolity of the daily pursuits of man in the trivial routines of existence. This realization may come to him as a sudden shock caused by some catastrophic event, or as the cumulative effect of a slow inner development, or through the trigger action of some apparently banal experience which assumes an unexpected significance. The hero then suffers a crisis which involves the very foundations of his being; he embarks on the Night Journey, is suddenly transferred to the Tragic Plane—from which he emerges purified, enriched by new insight, regenerated on a higher level of integration.¹²

Barth’s narrator concludes that the night-sea journey he has undertaken (the cause of life itself) appears to have no meaning, that the struggle “onward and upward” is absurd. His last moments of awareness are addressed to “You who I may be about to become”; his advice is to “terminate this aimless, brutal business! Stop your hearing against Her song! Hate Love!” (pp. 11-12). Yet even at this instant of refusal the speaker is propelled toward an unwilling union and reintegration with the “She,” a transfiguration and renewal of the endless cycle.

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Since it occurs to the narrator that “Makers and swimmers *each generate the other*” (p. 8), the story suggests a biological parallel to the fictional circularity of “Frame Tale.” The similarity is intentional, for in this early story Barth establishes a complicated pattern of allusions to be developed later stressing the inter-relatedness of bungled life and art. Thus, “Ambrose His Mark,” which follows “Night-Sea Journey,” takes as its subject the artist’s birth, weaning, and belated christening. “Autobiography,” the fourth story in sequence, is “Night-Sea Journey’s” companion piece, exploring the self-recorded birth pangs of a piece of fiction “still in utero, hung up in my delivery” (p. 36). Here too the argument is posed for an “interrupted pregnancy,” but with as little success as the plea for contraception in “Night-Sea Journey.” Two other Ambrose stories follow, concerning identity crises and the growing sensitivity of the artist and his problems. These are separated by a tale intended to shed light on both, “Petition,” Barth’s central parable of the incompatibility of instinct and self-scrutiny. This witty fable takes the form of a plea for severance by the self-loathing partner in a Siamese twin relationship, a literal over-the-shoulder observer whose entire life has been “a painful schooling in detachment” (p. 61). “To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither, unspeakable.” (p. 68).

In “Water Message” (which obviously is indebted to Joyce’s “Araby”) Ambrose, fascinated by words and already isolated from his playmates, experiences the pre-adolescent confusion of lost innocence centered around the mysteries of a secret boys’ club and the seduction of an idolized older girl by her “moustachioed boyfriend.” The story is one of both initiation and exclusion, and the “sea-wreathed” bottle which washes ashore at the conclusion with its effaced message and blank signature is a perfect emblem of the boy’s wonder at his own blurred image of identity. Indeed, the boy’s discovery harks back to the ending of “Ambrose His Mark”: “Yet years were to pass before anyone troubled to have me christened or to correct my birth certificate, whereon my surname was preceded by a blank” (p. 32). But it also anticipates the driving theme of “Title”: “The story of our life. This is the final test. Try to fill the blank. Only hope is to fill the blank. Efface what can’t be faced or else fill the blank” (p. 102).

It is the function of the artist to find means of filling in the blank: thus, in order to create a self, to discover meaning and identity, Ambrose determines in the pivotal seventh story, “Lost in the Funhouse,” to become an artist. Yet the central image of the book reveals our hero in the funhouse maze frustratingly thrown back upon “the endless repetition of his image in the mirrors . . . as he *lost himself in the reflection* [Barth’s italics] that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible” (p. 90). In “The Literature of Exhaustion” Barth has written that, “a labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice . . . are embodied, and—barring special dispensation like Theseus’—must be exhausted before one reaches the heart.”¹³ At length, then, Ambrose contemplates exhaustion.

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How long will it last? He envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ. Nobody had enough imagination. He could design such a place himself, wiring and all, and he's only thirteen years old. He would be its operator: panel lights would show what was up in every cranny of its cunning of its multifarious vastness; a switchflick would ease this fellow's way, complicate that's, to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened, all the operator had to do was.

He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed. (pp. 93-94)

It is particularly ironic that Ambrose loses himself in the funhouse after pursuing big-busted Magda, whose sex appeal entices him, ignoring the warning of the narrator of "Night-Sea Journey" to hate love, but also failing to duplicate his self-transforming discovery of union. "Can spermatozoa properly be thought of as male animalcules when there are no female spermatozoa? They grope through hot, dark windings, past Love's Tunnel's fearsome obstacles. Some perhaps lose their way" (p. 77). At this point the first sequence in the book's cycle of stories is complete.

The next seven stories turn increasingly from a perspective on the problems of the artist as an individual to a perspective on the problems of his art, though both themes, of course, are closely intertwined. In "Echo" a mythic frame enlarges Ambrose's dilemma through the inverted image of Narcissus, prisoner of his own reflection, lost in a cavern where *he* has fled to avoid his female (and male) admirers. In the cave he finds Tiresias, who with foresight prophesied to Narcissus' mother that her son would lead a long and happy life only if "he never came to know himself" (p. 90). Like Ambrose, Narcissus is destroyed by self-observation, and linked to hapless Echo and Tiresias, he symbolizes passion turned to impotence, the exhaustion of the artist's voice and prophet's vision. This theme is taken up again briefly in "Two Meditations" and again in "Glossolalia," which features six speakers who prophesy and who share the common experience of being misunderstood by their respective audiences.

"Title," spaced between "Two Meditations" and "Glossolalia," is the most forthright of the stories in its analysis of the bankruptcy of modern fiction. "The narrator has written himself into a corner" (p. 108), and his most plausible alternative (a forecast of literature's future?) is: "General anesthesia. Self-extinction. Silence" (p. 106). Here Barth acknowledges the view of Beckett, who, "weary of [art's] puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road," prefers "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing

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with which to express, no desire to express"—and yet who still admits some "obligation to express."¹⁴ "Life Story" continues this mood. The "writer of these lines" (as the narrator identifies himself) toys with the idea that his own life might be a fictional account and begins work on a tale in which an author "comes to suspect that the world is a novel, himself a fictional personage" (p. 113). The story frames soon multiply out of hand until the author silences himself, complaining that "in his heart of hearts he disliked literature of an experimental, self-despising, or overtly metaphysical character, like Samuel Beckett's Marian Cutler's, Jorge Borges's" (p. 114). The enterprise of fiction now is on the brink of suicide.

To what conclusion will he come? He'd been about to append to his own tale inasmuch as the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed unless deliberately as a false analogy, certain things follow: 1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question and deny its relevance or 3) establish some other, acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader. (p. 125)

One course lies open. The words of "Frame Tale" curl round again with their infinite repetition, and literature begins anew. Barth returns to Homer.

"Menelaid" and "Anonymiad" are the true masterpieces of *Lost in the Funhouse*, each tale obviously deserving more detailed analysis than would be practicable here. Suffice it to say that "Anonymiad" brilliantly recapitulates the thematic materials of the previous stories. Its premise of the stranded minstrel who single-handedly invents and exhausts the major categories of literature, then sets his works adrift in the wine jugs which inspired them, is a perfect symbol of modern art's dilemma of narcissism and estrangement.

Amphora's my muse:
When I finish off the booze,
I hump the jug and fill her up with fiction. (p. 164)

(The story also brings full circle the thematic strands begun in "Night-Sea Journey" and "Water Message.") But perhaps the achievement of greatest significance in *Lost in the Funhouse* is "Menelaid," as remarkable in its structure as in its vision of the Trojan War.¹⁵ (The title pun, of course, suggests both Helen's promiscuity and the varied layers of the story.) Constructed as a labyrinth to disguise yet at the same time enhance the simple proclamation at its heart, "Menelaid" is the complicated rhetorical mechanism foreshadowed by the narrator of "Life Story," an interminable narrative "whose drama lies always in the next frame out" (p. 117). The truth at the heart of things which it asserts is "the absurd, unending possibility of love" (p. 162); its premise is that it was Menelaus' mistrust of instinct, his self-scrutiny and hyper-consciousness, that drove Helen into

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the arms of Paris and issued in the Trojan War; its mechanism is the tale within a tale extended to infinity as Proteus threatens to dissolve all frames through his capacity to change his shape and voice at will.¹⁶ The chief significance to Barth of the story's final image is suggested by his comments on the subject in "The Literature of Exhaustion." Menelaus on the beach at Pharos, he declares,

is genuinely Baroque in the Borgesian spirit, and illustrates a positive artistic morality in the literature of exhaustion. He is not there, after all, for kicks (any more than Borges and Beckett are in the fiction racket for their health): Menelaus is *lost*, in the larger labyrinth of the world, and has got to hold fast while the Old Man of the Sea exhausts reality's frightening guises so that he may extort direction from him when Proteus returns to his 'true' self. It's a heroic enterprise, with salvation as its object—one recalls that the aim of the *Histriones* is to get history done with so that Jesus may come again the sooner, and that Shakespeare's heroic metamorphoses culminate not merely in a theophany but in an apotheosis.¹⁷

Like Camus's redoubtable hero of the absurd (though rather more comic than Promethean in guise), Menelaus discovers that he may *multiply* what he cannot unify and that (in Camus's words again) his "nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together,"¹⁸ in other words, his experience of the absurd, is the only bond uniting him to reality. The image further suggests Barth's own conception of his relation to past literary tradition which, despite his grasp (or because of it), continues to deny him substance yet remains for him an indissoluble bond. As Camus asserts: "The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle."¹⁹ Tension, the vitality of combat, is for Camus that sole element which ennobles man and fortifies him to repudiate suicide which itself is a negation. In contrast, the absurd man "can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance."²⁰

However, Barth's characters in *Lost in the Funhouse* are neither capable nor desirous of maintaining a posture of heroic defiance; for them suicide proffers a continual seduction. As noted earlier, the sperm cell in "Night-Sea Journey" abjures and rejects his swift-running course toward life. Similarly, the story telling itself in "Autobiography" begs, "if anyone hears me . . . and has the means to my end, I pray him do us both a kindness" (p. 37). The narrator of "Petition" discloses that his soul "lusts only for disjunction" (p. 62), and in "Lost in the Funhouse" Ambrose remarks that if there were "a button you could push to end

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your life absolutely without pain . . . he would push it instantly" (p. 86). Narcissus, too, we are told, "desired himself defunct before his own conception" ("Echo," p. 100). Menelaus alone, through his "peculiar immortality" (p. 124), knows he cannot die and refuses the false solace of the death wish. Yet impulse, not conviction, drives him on, habit, not determination. And, indeed, impulse, not determination, drives the sperm toward union with the egg; only against his better judgment does Narcissus finally grow fond. Impulse and habit, too, are the forces which continue to animate art, but no rational justification for prolonging it seems possible. The writer finds his sentences stringing themselves out as though he were a "recidivist" engaging in a nasty habit he cannot manage to suppress. "Or a chronic forger, let's say; committed to the pen for life. Which is to say, death. The point, for pity's sake. Not yet. Forge on" ("Title," p. 103). One recalls Vladimir's observation in *Waiting For Godot* that "habit is a great deadener." When Estragon complains, "I can't go on like this," the answer he receives is: "That's what you think."²¹

Against unreasonable demands, through impulse, habit, dread of stopping, sheer perversity, perhaps, and no doubt, also, through the joy of making labyrinths, Barth does go on—or has gone on, at least until now. What more remains for him to do? Put another way, what edifice will Barth attempt (with Theseus' dispensation) to raise atop this labyrinthine cavern? He has prepared us for the dazzling and the bizarre, yet it would not be surprising if in the future Barth's literary design began to take a more traditional, familiar form—for only to a limited extent does Camus's evaluation of Nietzsche's position in modern philosophy seem applicable to Barth's relationship to contemporary fiction and aesthetics. Of Nietzsche Camus writes that, "with a kind of frightful joy [he] rushes toward the impasse into which he methodically drives his nihilism. His avowed aim is to render the situation untenable to his contemporaries. His only hope seems to be to arrive at the extremity of contradiction. Then if man does not wish to perish in the coils that strangle him, he will have to cut them at a single blow and create his own values."²² In like manner Barth challenges the writers and critics of contemporary fiction to cut the coils that bind them to the recent past. But that same past, as *Lost in the Funhouse* paradoxically demonstrates, already has furnished Barth with new materials for art, providing thereby for a Prodigal Son's circuitous return.

The University of Wisconsin, Madison

¹John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Bantam, 1969), p. 106. Future page references to *Lost in the Funhouse* are drawn from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text along with individual story titles when the text reference is not otherwise clear.

²John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," reprinted in *On Contemporary Literature*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Avon Books, 1969), pp. 662-675. The article originally was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 220, No. 2 (August, 1967), pp. 29-34.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 664-665.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 668.

⁵Barth quoting Borges, "The Literature of Exhaustion," p. 672.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 669.

⁷James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York: The Viking Critical Library, 1968), p. 253.

⁸Joyce, pp. 252-253.

⁹Joyce, p. 215.

¹⁰Joyce, p. 11.

¹¹Joyce, p. 11.

¹²Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Dell, 1964), p. 358. The hero as embryo motif, of course, is derived from *The Oxen of the Sun* episode in *Ulysses*. Joyce discussed his intention in that section in a letter to Frank Budgen dated March, 1920: "Am working hard at *Oxen of the Sun*, the idea being the crime committed against fecundity by sterilizing the act of coition. . . . Bloom is the spermatozoon, the hospital the womb, the nurse the ovium, Stephen the embryo." Stuart Gilbert, ed., *James Joyce: Letters, Vol. I* (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), pp. 139-140.

¹³"The Literature of Exhaustion," p. 674.

¹⁴From "Three Dialogues by Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit," *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 16-22, p. 17.

¹⁵Throughout *Lost in the Funhouse* Barth's use of Greek materials is discerning. In "Menelaid" he draws upon the tradition which holds that Aeschylus wrote a satyr play called *Proteus* (now lost) in comic counterpoint to Agamemnon's tragedy. In the words of the Greek scholar, George Thomson, "the *Proteus*, which followed the trilogy of the *Oresteia*, dealt with the adventures of Menelaos after the Trojan War as a *scherzo* to his brother's tragic homecoming; and it is not difficult to imagine a *Proteus* charged with the romantic atmosphere of the *Odyssey* which would round off in a whirl of irresponsible gaiety the liturgical grandeur of the *Oresteia*." *Aeschylus and Athens* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1968), p. 228. Barth also draws on Euripides' *Helen*, which follows the legend that a phantom was sent to Troy in Helen's place while the real Helen spent the war years in Egypt under the protection of Proteus. The circumstances in "Anonymiad" also seem based upon a little known Greek tradition, again recounted by Thomson, "of a minstrel at Mycenae, to whom Agamemnon had entrusted the guardianship of his Queen—evidently a vassal of high standing." *Aeschylus and Athens*, p. 60.

¹⁶The narrative frames in "Menelaid" are inspired by Menelaus' digressions in Book IV of the *Odyssey* describing his encounter with Proteus on the beach at Pharos. In Barth's version Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive at Menelaus' palace (as in the *Odyssey*) to obtain information about Odysseus. Their arrival is recounted in frame II. (In frame I Menelaus addresses the reader.) Menelaus begins by telling them the tale of his reunion with Helen (frame III), who postponed their coupling by demanding the story (frame IV) of how Menelaus managed to capture Proteus. In that tale Proteus in turn demands to know Menelaus' reasons for capturing him—which entails (frame V) the story of Menelaus' encounter with Proteus' daughter, Eidothea, and the story she elicited from him concerning the ending of the Trojan War (frame VI). At this stage Barth's Menelaus simultaneously is telling the story of his repossession of Helen to Eidothea, the Eidothea story to Proteus, the Proteus story to Helen, the Helen story to Telemachus and Peisistratus, the story of that story to the reader. One further coil: the subject matter of frame VI (the ending of the Trojan War) necessitates frame VII, the reasons for the Trojan War: but Menelaus demands that story of himself. Just as the centerpiece of *Lost in the Funhouse* is the title story placed seventh in a sequence of fourteen, so the seventh frame here is the centerpiece of "Menelaid," the heart of the

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labyrinth, and the remaining frames in sequence work their way back out again from VII to I.

¹⁷“The Literature of Exhaustion,” p. 674.

¹⁸Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 37.

¹⁹Camus, p. 23.

²⁰Camus, p. 41.

²¹Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 60.

²²Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 71.