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THE AUTHOR IN SEARCH OF THE CONTROLLING IMAGE:  
JOHN BARTH'S *THE TIDEWATER TALES*

John Barth's career epitomizes the "life-cycle" of postmodernism, with its symptomatic shift from the avant-gardist to neoconservative position in the sixties and in the eighties respectively. *The Tidewater Tales* (1987) offers a good insight into the postmodern paradox, since in this book Barth approaches his own ideal of postmodernist fiction as "the synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry" (*Literature* 71). Everything in Barth's novel — from the narrative and thematic to tropological and even generic perspectives — is governed and controlled by the idea of synthesis. The ultimate image of such synthesis, the image doubled and repeated on the literal and metaphoric levels of the text, is the coupling of the male and female. Surprisingly, a closer look at Barth's holistic rhetoric reveals that in his pursuit of the absolute postmodernist synthesis, symbolized for him by the apparently democratic union of man and woman, he actually validates once more the traditional, patriarchal order of culture.

The synthesis of the realist and formalist concerns in *The Tidewater Tales* can be accomplished thanks to the same device Barth has already exploited in *Sabbatical* (1982), namely "a coupled point of view"<sup>1</sup>. His narrators/protagonists are again two sailors/storytellers, one male and one female, cruising Chesapeake Bay in their boat *Story*, entertaining themselves and others with numerous stories and, at the same time, spinning out the narrative we are reading. Barth invests this double authorial persona with his own narrative principles, which allows him to fuse the representational and the textual aspects of the story.

The narrative is thus doubly-coded as a text and a life-story, and it continually transgresses these two levels in the performative mode reminiscent of *Sabbatical*. Still, the narrators' position in *The Tidewater Tales* seems to be

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<sup>1</sup> John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* (New York: Putnam, 1987), p. 29. All subsequent references to this novel are cited parenthetically.



exactly the reverse of Fenwick and Susan's in *Sabbatical*. Peter Sagamore, a writer experienced in the craft of fiction, and Katherine Sherritt Sagamore, an eight-and-a-half months pregnant library scientist, have already solved for themselves the questions concerning personal career and procreation, and can enjoy the leisure and privileges of secure middle-class life. In contrast to Barth's earlier novel, where the procreative possibility is exhausted and compensated for by the creative potency, *The Tidewater Tales*, faithful to the spirit of synthesis, stages the replenishment of both life and art, proposing a complementary as opposed to compensatory order. If the nine-month metaphorical journey aboard Pokey in *Sabbatical* could give birth only to a story, Peter and Kathy's cruise is expected to end with a double delivery of their progeny and their story.

What in *Sabbatical* is presented as the problem of forks and confluences, the existential and textual dilemma of how to proceed, is here replaced by a more general question of why to proceed, in Barth's own words, "why set a course at all, whether toward graduation or procreation or distinguished career or hurther fiction" (*Friday* 140). The answer is provided by the book's hedonistic message: "You need not love the world... you need not even approve of it... but relish it you must" (567). The affirmation and enjoyment of life are made possible by a continuous exchange of stories, for after all, as Peter puts it, "the end whereto one is fetched forth into the parlous world is neither more or less than this: to hear or make up stories, and to pass them on" (423). The understanding of the reciprocity between narrating and living, of storytelling as not only a panaceum for but also a way of life, enables the protagonists successfully to overcome the writer's block and to fulfil the prophesy of their names: to say more (Sagamore) and to share it (Sherritt).

It seems that Barth has come a long way in his exploration of the relationship between fiction and life, starting from the negative assessment of man's construction of reality through fictionalization in his early novels, through the celebration of fiction-making as the equivalent of existence and identity (from *Chimera* on), to his latest attempts at reconciling art and life. However, while *Sabbatical* as a romance still feeds on certain disregard for reality, in that it opts for aesthetic rather than experiential choices, *The Tidewater Tales*, significantly subtitled "A Novel", marks Barth's further assent to reality. It develops and modifies his earlier insight that the possibility of experiencing the world is inextricably bound up with the possibility of storytelling, so as to show how both these activities can become mutually, though non-hierarchically, resonant.

It is in the "real world" of Maryland Tidewater where Barth finds a new metaphor for fiction which is riding the tides between life and art. The movement of the tides paces off the rhythm of Peter and Kathy's narrative, washing them up and down between the past and the future. In a tide-like manner, their story transcends the borderlines between the land and the sea, respectively suggesting a repository of material facts and a residue of material



facts and a residue of imagination. It aspires to the realization of the narrative possibility adumbrated by Scheherazade — Barth's model figure of a storyteller — who at one point in the novel explains that „past and future are like the world above the sea's surface and the world beneath it, or like fact and fiction: really different, but not really opposite, and both of them really real in their very different ways, as is their... meeting place" (603). Thus originating on the threshold between fantasy and reality, Peter and Kathy's "tidewater tales" nourish themselves on both.

Chesapeake Bay, which provides the historical and geographical background for the novel, is real — the reader is reminded. In 1980, when the book's action is taking place, the Bay area is turned into the arena of ecological disaster and political crime. It is used as a dumping ground for toxic waste; it houses the arsenals of chemical and biological weapon; it is the site of the CIA espionage stations as well as the U.S. Army training centres and military bases. A long list of such dangerous spots has been chronicled in *The Tidewater Tales* and juxtaposed with the region's bucolic past. In its progressive deterioration into "a moral cesspool", Barth's beloved Chesapeake becomes the epitome of the world at large, the world on the verge of ultimate extinction, facing the atomic threat or the ecological self-annihilation. This is the scene — shared by the real author and his imaginary storytellers — against which they are trying to confer value on human existence and their writing.

As in *Sabbatical*, contemporary history presses upon the characters via their direct or indirect involvement in clandestine plotting, such as the operation BONAPARTE or the project KEPONE. The Sagamores speculate about the Paisley case, the same case the Turners were worried about before. In fact, the two couples meet on the pages of *The Tidewater Tales*, where "Fenn" and "Susan" reappear under their "real" names, along with a host of other characters from the previous novel.

Although this literal transfer of the historical and fictitious material from one story to another reinforces Barth's point that history is only ever textually available to us, he nevertheless tries to convince the reader that it is also a real force exerting its influence on men and stories alike. The extent to which history is, in Fredric Jameson's words, "what hurts... what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis" (qtd. in Eagleton 172) is best visualized in the case of Peter's "dwarfed art." Among the "seven several dwarves upon their narrative back," by which Peter and Kathy mean everything that impinges upon and obstructs their storytelling, there are a few referring to the immediate impact of history on the possibility of writing: the apocalyptic climate of the times; the burden of the writer's personal past; the obsession with political conspiracies; or the emergence of postmodernism as a new literary trend. Together with the weight of their pregnancy, the threat of death/miscarriage and the writer's block, these are the factors whose negative determinism endangers the humanistic project of the book that would transform despair and paralysis into the expression of human hope and perseverance.



Hardly managing to avoid the slip into sentimentality, the narrators invite the reader to savour the transitory moments of beauty and peacefulness brought by everyday life: they appreciate the simple pleasures of good food and wine, sex and stories; they admire whatever has remained of the Bay's natural scenery; they cherish love and friendship. All this is to convey a little simplistic message that pleasure and pain may occur in life side by side:

... when it's sweet, life is so sweet, and it is so miserable for so many so most of the time. A third of us, is it, more or less starving? Half?... And then the corruption, brethren; the pollution, poverty, crime, disease; the betrayal, deception, torture, derangement, and what else. Well, mere melancholy, which poisons even the rare ripe fruits of comfort and serenity. Pain pain pain! Plus, oh, the twined blade of consciousness, which lets us know, as those eight waterfowl presumably do not, how privileged is an interlude like this — our floating lunch-break, our pregnant idle woyage — and thus at once keens its pleasure all but unbearably and makes us weep for the sorrows of, you know, the outraged world. (369)

Passages like the one quoted above seem to confirm Alan Wilde's thesis that the postmodernist easthetics included also what he calls "midfiction", that is fiction that apart from being "experimental" concedes to reality and allows the reader to rediscover the values "based on a continuing sense of the nature of *la vie quotidienne*" (183). As he notices — and this observation seems well to illustrate the effect achieved by Barth in *The Tidewater Tales* — the coexistence in a single work of the extremities of contemporary experience with the middle range of experience can paradoxically serve "to render extremity more ordinary — to deny it, and not the middle range of experience, a solidity of specification and response" (Wilde 168).

The fact that Barth's novel is, among other things "about" reality does not, however, imply his retreat to the positions of mimetic realism. What his text always reveals, and what mimetic texts strive to hide, is the laboratory of fiction-making, the processes of mediation which implicate such texts as a representation of representation. The problem of inventing the form of discourse that would reconcile the traditional sense of "aboutness" with the modern awareness of textuality is signalled by Peter's entrapment in minimalist art. His desire for essence is incompatible with his acute perception of the ontological gap between words and things. Consequently, he refuses to *transform* his experience into literature; he refuses to *represent* it in language. His art is gradually approaching silence, at least as long as he is unable to transcend the dilemma of the world's non-interpretability, whose classic expression is given by Domna Stanton: "either we name and become entrapped in the structures of the already named; or else we do not name and remain entrapped in passivity, powerlessness" (185). As Barth's solution of his character's quandary clearly shows, it is possible to speak in a different voice, to find a perspective that "*discloses* rather than *represents* the world" (Harris 185). To use Barth's own words, what he adopts vis-à-vis reality is the rhetoric of "different ways to be *not about*" (262), which in fact exposes what it denies doing.



Barth's image of "a pregnant couple swapping stories" (427) is a convenient vehicle for him to acknowledge his indebtedness to the tradition of early narratives that exemplify his ideal of "having it both ways" precisely because they manage to preserve "the immediacy of the human voice and the intimacy of storytelling" together with "some of the virtues of print, such as referability and repeatability" (*Friday* 78). As he points out, using the example of *The Thousand and One Nights*, "while it typically and sometimes elaborately acknowledges its condition as *writing*... such fiction is usually about people *telling* one another stories, interspersed with poems, songs, and dances" (*Friday* 82).

Barth adopts a similar perspective for *The Tidewater Tales* in order to suggest the mutual interrelatedness of oral and written literature. Again, the symbolic coupling of the male and female voices reinforces the idea of synthesis. The figure of Kathy, one of the founding mothers of the American Society for the Preservation of Storytelling, is associated with "speech" and thus with the mimetic (reproductive) function, traditionally assigned to woman; whereas Peter, who borrows printed symbols as his medium, comes to represent "writing" and is largely responsible for the diegetic shape of their story. Their union in a paradoxical way fulfils the postulate of immediacy while foregrounding the importance and inevitability of mediation. Taken as a parental couple, they can be seen as encoding the possibility of transcending the apposite claims of Realism and Formalism, respectively suggested by the maternal (metonymical) and the paternal (metaphorical) relation to a child/story. I want to discuss further significance of the parental metaphor later; suffice it for the moment to recall Julia Kristeva's remark that the maternal coupled with the paternal represents "a theoretical bisexuality... a metaphor designating the possibility of exploring all aspects of signification" (qtd. in Stanton 161).

However, Barth's characters are aware that both Realism and Formalism have their legitimate place only in the province of fiction. Art and life exist in different "place and time and order of reality" (509), which makes neither of them less real. It is to be remembered that fictional narratives and real-life narratives are governed by their own laws, which are not always compatible. Thinking of life and art in oppositional, binary terms is exactly what can lead to the paradoxes of representation. The reader is given the explicit reminder of the ontological difference between "life" and "story" when Peter insists that „a story is not a child, and vice versa“, except metaphorically (410). This distinction is furthermore enhanced by the split ontological status of the teller, who himself is identified as the site of contradictions, inhabiting and inhabited by both worlds: „so far as we can tell, we are not characters in a story. Thanks be then for our story, in which we are!“ (143). Impersonating the authorial agency, the couple bring together fact and fantasy, floated by the tides of „life“ and „story“.



In a way, then, *The Tidewater Tales* replenishes the exhausted conventions of realistic writing by accommodating into its own structural/thematic perspective the act of storytelling itself and by turning the process of representation into the representation of process. To use Heide Ziegler's term, the "suprarealistic" quality of this novel consists of an attempt to write a book that would be not immediately about Peter and Kathy but about a book called *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel*, which is about Peter and Kathy and their stories (83). After all, Barth's novel reflects his fascination with the book as the "final signified" of the story, which is detectable from his ever-present references to *The Thousand and One Nights*. The same fascination can also account for the novel's circularity: the narrators' present position is defined as a confluence of their past (their life or the-already-lived) and their future (the book into which the story of their life is being transformed). Within the overlapping layers of the narrative time and the narrated time, the past is gradually made to overtake the present, just as the present is turned into the future of their book. This temporal paradox can be best illustrated by the use of the novel's frames, which forces the story to come around on itself: the end of the story time coincides with the commencement of writing and thus sends the reader back to the moment of the story's beginning as a text.

The effect of doubling and repetition, produced by the system of embedded narratives, is what Barth admires about *frametale* literature because, as he says, it "reflects, simply or complexly, at least two formal properties not only of syntax but of much ordinary experience and activity, namely regression (or digression) and return, and theme and variation" (*Friday* 237). In *The Tidewater Tales*, he investigates complex modes of interior containment by problematizing the relationship between the *frametale*, that is the story of the novel's writing and composition, and the main tale that it actually tells. The two mirror each other and become indistinguishable: what happens in the *frametale* is also recorded by the main tale and vice versa. Whenever the frames are manipulated, which always involves the awareness of the change in reality status, the reader is forced to reevaluate the conventional assumptions as to the functioning of fictional representation. In the traditional realistic novel, "the aim of the whole exercise is to focus the reader's attention upon the fictional realm"; in the postmodernist text, frame-breaks frequently cause "a shift in focus from the realm contained to the framing act itself" (D'Haen 20–21).

The most obvious case of Barth's manipulation of the external frame is his use of the title-page as part of his story: the frontpiece with John Barth's name on it frames the entire fiction; the title reprint on page 83, following the exposition, activates the internal play of the *frametale* and the main tale; finally, the title at the novel's end — its tailpiece — suggests the repetition of the whole cycle. The "tail" can become the "tale" because as the "title" it starts off the story.

The transgression of narrative levels, which occurs throughout in the novel, is also visualized by means of other diegetic framing. There are, for example,



internal frames, such as the *Story's* log in which Peter and Kathy register their dreams and tales by their title and which later becomes the table of contents in the novel. Besides, there are a number of interpolated tales which get told during their "cruise through the Ocean of Story" (90). From Day Zero to Day Fourteen, their inventory grows into a book "more rich and strange than everyday realism ordinarily permits" (22). In its exploitation of the convention of a serial temporal frame, Barth's novel seems to be modelled on such famous specimens of frametale literature as *Decameron*, *Canterbury Tales* or his favourite *The Thousand and One Nights*, where each consecutive day marks the resumption of storytelling. Actually, the framework of *The Tidewater Tales* much resembles the Arabian masterpiece, in that it similarly comprises three or more degrees of narrative development: the metadiegetic story of the novel's writing, which frames the extradiegetic story of the couple's voyage, which in turn frames their several stories (the diegetic) inside which different characters tell stories of their own (the intradiegetic).

The function these interpolated narratives serve in relation to the framework is not only to foreground the act of storytelling, but also to point to the intertextual sources of all narrative. Since Barth's stories are often retellings of other fictions, they invoke the necessity of revisting the past as crucial to the writer's self-definition. If "past reality and past fiction cannot be distinguished ontologically" (Ziegler 79) because they are both "real" only as the texts we inherit, no wonder that Huckleberry Finn, Homer's heroes, Don Quixote or Scheherazade are all likely to appear in the "tidewater tales", brought back to life by the author's tireless imagination. And indeed, they do so, except that in their "reincarnated" versions, under disguised names. Their stories, as well as those of their "real" prototypes, always pertain to what is going on in the frametale or the main tale, often offering solutions to the narrative problems faced by the protagonists.

It might be added that the theme of theme and variation in *The Tidewater Tales* recurs on the level of language which mirrors the content of its representation. The coupled point of view of the pair of storytellers expecting delivery of twins is reflected by a continually proliferating linguistic series of everything that goes in twos, from Blam and Blooey, Night and Day, Either/Or, Gin and Tonic, Toil and Trouble, etc., to Adam and Eve — a conventional repertoire of brace-names.

However, the most remarkable internal mirror to the text appears in the form of an inserted script of *SEX EDUCATION: Play*, whose first two acts are floated in by the tide inside the canisters dropped by the Talbotts (that is, the *Sabbatical* couple) whereas the third is composed by Peter. This "feminist undergraduate menstrual television comedy" (153), as Peter refers to it, involves two eggs coming down the fallopian tubes on their way to meet a spermatazoa. The version completed by Peter shows a successful union of the male and the female, the moment of conception in the womb, stylized as the archetypal encounter between Adam and Eve in Paradise. The clue to the



allergorical meaning of the play is given by Kathy's dream, in which she envisions herself and Peter — Penelope and Odysseus — as sperm and ova merging into something that is at once the Container and the Thing Contained (167). Thus Barth has done two things at one stroke: he has written a longwished-for "egg's reply" to the plight of the exhausted spermatazoa from his "Night-Sea Journey", and he has managed to extract the simplest image that could designate and support the new conceptual framework for his fiction<sup>2</sup>.

The sperm-egg conceit, with which he has already played in *Sabbatical*, is "about as basic as a conceit can get", and it is full of what Barth calls "mythopoetic voltage" (Reilly 23). It might be interesting to quote here what he says about the controlling power of some images:

there are images in fiction that haunt my imagination, so much so that I even keep a little list of them. Foremost among them are: Odysseus trying to get home; Scheherazade telling hest stories; Don Quixote riding with Sancho across La Mancha; and Huckleberry Finn floating down that river. I would love one day, without aspiring to include myself in that biggest of leagues, to come up with a similar image, one that was much larger than the book in which it appeared as those images are larger than the stories in which they appeared. (Reilly 23)

That Barth in *The Tidewater Tales* might be trying to execute precisely this idea is textually evidenced by the fact that the same four images pervade Peter's imagination (472); that Peter's favourite books are also *The Odyssey*, *The Arabian Nights*, *Don Quixote* and *Huckleberry Finn* (311); and that some of the "tidewater tales" are reorchestrations of the motifs derived from these stories. Moreover, Barth equips his writerly double with a similar ambition "to conjure up an image larger and richer than any booksworth of sentences that sets it forth" (317). Indeed, what emerges from the conjoined point of view of the author, Peter and Kathy is the image of the procreative couple aboard a small sailboat cruising the Ocean of Story, an image whose "shorthand" version is put forward by the sperm-and-ova conceit. Apart from this basis conceit which suggests the conjunction of the maternal and the paternal, the tropological perspective of the novel is consistently filled by a related kind of imagery, such as the metaphor of the pregnant body (Kathy's "fabulous bellyful"), the association of mother and water or of moons and tides with "menstruation stories" (525). The presence of these images encourages the reader to view Barth's text in terms of "bodily writing", *écriture corporelle*<sup>3</sup>, which in poststructuralist and especially feminist criticism refers to a "recodings of the human body, presented by the discourse" (Barthes, *S/Z* 121). As Barth is fond of saying, his work represents his "affair" with the Muse. From the stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*, where the anonymous minstrel is emptying

<sup>2</sup> Cf. His remarks in Reilly 22.

<sup>3</sup> The term is used by Philippe Sollers; here quoted after Susan Suleiman, "Pornography, Transgression, and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's *Story of Eve*", in: Miller, p. 119.



out his seed into the seven amphorae, through the "isomorphic" view of sex and writing, elaborated in *Chimera*, to Ambrose's attempts to conceive a child with Lady Amherst in *LETTERS*, and the concept of the story as a zygote in *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*, the projected locus of this fiction is in the female body.

In the last novel, we find explicit allusions to the female role in the process of creation/reproduction, when the woman's body is equated with "the theatre of [the] Aeschylean play" (35) or even with a book itself: "something with heft to it, that you can take in two hands and spread" (330). Thus the female body is persistently coded as the body of the story or the body of literature, the locus of the confrontation between the author and his writing. This takes us very close to Freud's Oedipal narrative or Harold Bloom's theories of literary continuity as the "anxiety of influence". The female body, the intertextual body of literature, functions as mediator in the Oedipal drama, whose subjects are the son and the father, the writer and Tradition. As Susan Suleiman writes, "the female body, in its duplicity as asexual maternal and sexual feminine, is the very emblem of the contradictory coexistence of transgression and prohibition", of breaking from the Law of an all-powerful father or maintaining it (131). One of the central dilemmas in Barth's fiction seems to lie precisely between the subversive desire for freedom and the corrective impulse toward control. His literary experiments are always accompanied by the recognition of the limits wherein change is possible and desirable.

In the end, Barth's discourse does not go beyond the traditional rhetoric of male-centered culture, which "constructs the object" (de Lauretis 45). I would like to signal a characteristic shift from the "erotic" images of writing (Barth's identification of "pen" with "penis" or writing with sexual intercourse in *Chimera*) to more "procreative" images (the story as a zygote in *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*), a shift parallel to Barth's gradual assent to what, after Alan Wilde, was already labelled the "midfictional" mode. Barth's relation to the "body of literature", which is first viewed as an "erotic" transgression or rebellion, changes into a "reproductive" function, which means assuming the role of the father — the condition governed by "ideological imperatives of agency, duty, autonomy, authority, responsibility" (Eagleton 145). Even the married couple from *Sabbatical*, in the reenacted version of their story in *The Tidewater Tales*, are shown to assent to the reproductive order and conceive a child.

A similar revalorization of images can be seen in the motif of Scheherazade in Barth's fiction. In *Chimera*, where sex and storytelling alternate, Scheherazade's plight reflected by her younger sister Dunyazade is that of a lover who has to invent new positions for both sex and storytelling. *The Tidewater Tales* focuses on the procreative aspect of her dilemma, showing her primarily as a mother. This significant foregrounding of the metaphor of the mother's pregnant body invokes, in Domna Stanton's words, not only "an expansive writing fertile with possibilities", but also "a maternal connection



with the material things of nature”, which allows the writer to resurrect the bond between words and things (Stanton 168). Thus the story of Barth’s career, like the metanarrative of postmodernist literature itself, seems to have reached a point of reconciliation with the father-figure of tradition, completing the process succinctly described by Roland Barthes: “the avant-garde rarely pursues its career as a prodigal son *all the way*; sooner or later it returns to the bosom which had given it, with life, a freedom of pure postponement” (*Critical* 68).

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#### AUTOR W POSZUKIWANIU DOMINANTY OBRAZOWEJ – THE TIDEWATER TALES JOHNA BARTHA

#### STRESZCZENIE

*The Tidewater Tales*, powieść Barth’a z 1987 roku, stanowi ilustrację stylistyki „późnego” postmodernizmu, którą krytyk amerykański Alan Wilde nazywa „prozą środka”. Idealem narracyjnym w tej fazie twórczości Barth’a staje się synteza naturalności i sztuczności; realizmu, magii i mitu; fabulacji i krytycznej samoświadomości; gry powieściowej i zaangażowania w problemy współczesnego świata. W perspektywie tropologicznej, odzwierciedlenie dążenia ku równouprawnieniu różnych porządków ontologicznych fikcji i rzeczywistości znaleźć można w obrazie połączenia pierwiastka męskiego i żeńskiego. Artykuł analizuje sposoby kodowania tego dominującego obrazu syntezy w płaszczyźnie narracyjnej i tematycznej powieści. Spojrzenie na obrazowanie Barth’a poprzez pryzmat krytyki feministycznej pozwala ujawnić jego pogłębiający się konserwatyzm i powiązania z patriarchalną tradycją gatunku.

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