

An Interview With John Barth

Conducted by
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John Barth is widely acknowledged to be one of America's leading contemporary novelists; noted critics like Leslie Fiedler and Robert Scholes have not stopped short of calling him one of America's great novelists. Though he had done fine, even brilliant work in the 50's, he first achieved the financially-rewarding-but-little-meaningful status of public renown in the summer of 1966 with the publication of *Giles Goat-Boy*. Before *Giles* he was known to a relatively small group of connoisseurs of current fiction for *The Floating Opera* (1956), *End of the Road* (1958), and principally for *The Sot-Weed Factor*, (1960), a sprawling, gloriously complicated, hugely comic neo-18th century novel set in Maryland. His first two novels are fairly straightforward and realistic, and if grotesque elements creep in, it is always in a low-key matter-of-fact way. Perhaps one should view these books as apprentice work, preliminary explorations into ways of handling certain technical and thematic problems — suicide, the possibility of free and significant choice, the limits of relationship are chief themes; finding a way to control the narrative line and at the same time to harmonize it with a line of pure thematic development is a major technical concern of Barth's. But for this reader anyway they stand as strong minor novels, most especially *The Floating Opera*. With *The Sot-Weed Factor* Barth burst out of the confines of realism and into a new world evidently far more congenial to his individual (and gigantic) talents. By adopting a kind of Fielding-esque style for his tale of the 17th-18th century poet Ebenezer Cooke, he is able to give his baroquely fecund imagination and outrageously energetic wit the

widest play. The novel is long (806 pp.), the plot complicated beyond description — I couldn't begin to summarize it — but it is continuously interesting and communicative, at times overwhelmingly funny, and ultimately the master statement of a serious and comic vision. His latest work, the well-known *Giles Goat-Boy*, is an even broader and more ambitious synthesis of literary techniques and world-view. Based on the conceit of the world-as-university — or rather, the university-as-world, the novel might be called a huge satirical allegory of everything. Once again Barth chose a synthetic style — slightly strange, removed from the expected and known, yet never difficult and oddly eloquent — and once again he was able to exploit his great (and unusual) verbal powers. *Giles* is too large, too brilliant for any accurate and immediate evaluation; it is certain, however, that it is somewhat less accessible than *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and perhaps less fully realized.

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1967

It was a grey, drizzly morning in early June when we stumbled out of the grim, sooty Buffalo YMCA, trying vainly to keep the rain out of our tape recorder. About noon we met Barth in the English Department building of the State University of New York at Buffalo — he had been delayed in a flight from Washington, D.C. — and he took us to lunch at a pleasant little restaurant inside the Student Union. Conversation rambled over various topics: a program of novlists at the university, which Barth had organized — Norman Mailer bored the students, Barth said, with a reading from his latest effort (*Why Are We In Vietnam?*), Joseph Heller shocked them by claiming he wrote for money, Leonard Cohen sang "Suzanne"; Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (Barth expressed appreciation of the way Cohen handled the "AC-DC" theme); Leslie Fiedler; Leslie Fiedler's pot bust; and so on. Walking back to his office in the dripping wet, Barth told us about the one significant event in Buffalo's history — the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, sang a bit of a song about it, then whistled a bit of "Shuffle-Off-to-Buffalo", illustrating the old soft-shoe steps for us. His office was modest, undecorated, a number of books stood on a shelf; there was a coffee pot, piles of student papers (he teaches creative writing), one of which had the note, "Dear Sir, I'm sorry this paper is late, but . . ."

Barth himself is a tall man, with a large, bald oddly cubical head. He has a small mustache and limpid eyes that peer almost shyly through his thick glasses.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell us a little bit about your educational history, the things you studied in college?

BARTH

I went to Johns Hopkins University just after the Second World war. Because my parents had not the benefit of a great deal of education I didn't really find out what literature was until college and had thought, as a matter of fact, that I wanted to be a musician. I got into Johns Hopkins rather by accident. I took a scholarship examination, forgot I'd taken it, found out I'd won a scholarship, and went there. I didn't know what I wanted to major in, so I took journalism because it sounded easy. I didn't know what a journalist was, really.

Then I crossed paths, luckily, with some fellow students who were passionately interested in writing and with some very inspiring teachers of literature and of philosophy, and by a route that's lost to me now, discovered in about my junior year, when I was nineteen or so, that I had, almost without realizing it, become committed to the idea of literature and of writing serious fiction.

So then I spent a year writing very badly, making all the mistakes you have to make at one level before you can begin to make mistakes on the next. I had some good teachers of writing down there: men who were not writers themselves, but who made a great many of us feel as though we were talented and should persist. With their help I began to make a higher class of mistakes after a year or so.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Sot-Weed Factor* you're able to assemble a convincing array of quotes in Latin and able to call up the verb "eimi" in Greek when you need it. Do you have any training in the classics?

BARTH

My knowledge of the classics is just about the opposite of the iceberg business; nine-tenths of it is in the novels and that about wipes it. While I was at Johns Hopkins I worked in the Classics Library for a couple of years, filing books to help pay off my fees, and became absorbed not so much in Western classical literature as in the old Oriental Tale cycles. They fascinated me enormously then; they do yet. The tale-cycle is a notion that haunts me, as it seems to have haunted the narrative imagination historically. Not

just Scheherezade's stories, but that huge Sanskrit thing called *The Ocean of Story* which goes on forever; *The Panchatantra*, all the old cycles which involve stories within stories within stories.

I read these almost obsessively for a couple of years, and I think I probably absorbed by simple osmosis a good deal of sense about narrative education: certainly it's left me with a great admiration for simple plot, unfashionable as that is nowadays.

INTERVIEWER

Did your experience in the Hopkins classical library provide a model for Henry Burlingame at Oxford?

BARTH

Devouring the books, you mean? Indeed it did. It's a common experience among imaginative undergraduates — that terrible notion that you're never going to be able to read all the books there are, because they're printing them and adding them to the stacks faster than you can absorb them. I can remember resolving once, when I was a freshman and had just discovered that literature existed — resolving I was going to read it all. I was going to read absolutely everything. Another year I was determined to read every short story that had ever been written. I must have read three thousand short stories that year, and that didn't scratch the surface.

INTERVIEWER

Another specialized field that enters your books is music: you mentioned earlier that you had thought of becoming a musician. There's some musical detail in both *The Floating Opera* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and, of course there is music, I assume of your own composition, written out in *Giles Goat-Boy*.

BARTH

That's a musical joke in *Giles*: it's supposed to hurt the ears. In fact it's a kind of musical travesty — which of course fits the novel. I think of both the *Sot Weed* novel and the *Goat Boy* novel as novels which imitate the form of the novel, by an author who is imitating the role of Author; it's appropriate to have music in them that imitates music.

I played jazz all through high school and believed at the time that I wanted to study orchestration. Sometimes I think of my writing as a kind of orchestration, really; I like to take old literary conventions and re-score them for contemporary purposes.

But to the extent that there's any musical influence on my

books, I would think it would come in two ways. I'm interested in the sound of what I write to the ear and have most lately been trying to compose things, literary pieces, strictly for the oral medium, not to be printed at all. I think I can be allowed the statement that whatever the faults of my writing, it usually reads pretty well out loud, to the ear, you know.

The other musical thing is structure. I like very carefully structured plots. Both *The Sot-Weed Factor* and the *Goat-Boy* book have rather intricate structures which remind me a little of musical forms.

INTERVIEWER

Is your interest in the spoken word as a literary medium influenced at all by the work of Marshall McLuhan?

BARTH

I'm sure it is, but with this reservation: I've never read McLuhan. These ideas are in the air, you know, and you gather what certain people are talking about without having read them. A motto like "the medium is the message" like any good motto, can mean any damn thing you want it to mean. I've been concerned recently with the endowment of form with metaphorical value, or the medium itself with some kind of metaphorical or symbolical point. That makes the medium the message in a special sense — in a very old sense, really. When Shakespeare, for example, makes puns or metaphysical sport out of the fact that it's a play we're watching and all the world's a stage and you can go around the globe in so many minutes — he's making the medium the message.

INTERVIEWER

Shakespeare says that all the world's a stage; you seem to be saying all the world's a university.

BARTH

In the one novel, yes —

INTERVIEWER

Is this a sort of starting point with you? You get the idea of a university as it accumulates—

BARTH

A controlling metaphor, yes. Of course, only one of my books uses a controlling metaphor, that last one; in that case it almost

ceases to be a metaphor. Campuses are getting so enormous, you know, they'll touch some day and the world will be a university indeed.

To get back to your question about McLuhan and the possible obsolescence of the printed page. That's a notion that intrigues me — it doesn't dismay me, I don't especially believe it, but I know what he means, and while I finally think of myself as being what McLuhanites call "a print-oriented bastard", nevertheless the notion that other media are replacing the printed page for the narrative art is piquant. We could talk about that a little bit later, I think.

INTERVIEWER

To take off from this point, one thing that strikes me about all your work — from the very beginning — there's a certain influence of 18th century forms and practices. Certainly this business of the author imitating an Author and the careful attention to the sonal rhythm of the written word seems to take a very important place in 18th century literature. Swift's *A Tale of A Tub* seems to be much the same sort of thing you do in *Giles* and certainly in *Tristram Shandy* there are certain forms and techniques which reappear in *The Floating Opera*.

BARTH

Yes, that's right; although Sterne, for example, comes to me in *The Floating Opera* indirectly. I've never been a great admirer of Sterne, although he's certainly an interesting figure. But when I wrote *The Floating Opera* and its companion piece *The End of the Road*, I was very much under the influence of a Brazilian novelist whom I'd just come across, Machado de Assis — who in turn, though he wrote at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, was very much under the influence of *Tristram Shandy*; the same kind of technical playfulness and similar view of the world. So I got my Sterne by way of Brazil.

There are none of these eighteenth century characteristics in *The End of the Road*, but in *The Sot-Weed Factor* they appear for the obvious reason that the setting is back there. I was interested by that time in various ways of coming to terms with and getting beyond the realistic tradition: ways to come to terms with all the problems of the novel as Robbe-Grillet, for example, diagnoses them in that fine little book of his, *For a New Novel*. What one needs to do is to find ways to free one's hands, so one can do all kinds of

things that novelists used to do, but which now are obsolete ideas, or metaphors for obsolete ideas.

One of the famous ways to free your hands is through the mode of comedy, which immediately uncashes you, in a respect, from certain structures of the realistic tradition, particularly if the comedy is combined with farce or fantasy in some way. Another way is to use in a half-farceful, half-passionate spirit, materials or literary modes from the historical fore-time.

You can write a book, it seems to me — this is what I was thinking when I was planning *The Sot-Weed Factor* — whose final relevance is strictly contemporary, a book which is passionate, after all, and not just a farce or travesty, but which is liberated from all the conventions of realism by elements of farce and historical imitation in the fictional premises. Another way to do it is by working in fantasy or non-temporal settings. The Goat-Boy book, for example, isn't futuristic; its time is more or less contemporary. Yet because it's a fantasy or fantastical conceit, it's removed from the *literal* contemporary and therefore in another way beats the realistic thing.

INTERVIEWER

And so, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, you created an imitation that rings like the eighteenth century, but doesn't exactly ring true.

BARTH

Yes, it's not eighteenth century prose — it's an imitation, exactly. In a language, though it changes its fashions and its locutions and so forth, nothing's ever finally lost. I was interested to notice that after my long experience of a kind of eighteenth century-ish prose in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, my prose style in some ways was marked for good, and in the Goat Boy book — which has nothing to do with the eighteenth century — certain kinds of locutions and cadences simply were there forever.

The business of the accented last syllable on the past participle, for example, has now become a matter of fitting the rhythm of a particular sentence; I don't do it regularly — it would be an insufferable affectation then — but there are times when that particular old locution becomes invaluable to the cadence. I don't hesitate to use it anymore, even if the setting has nothing to do with earlier centuries.

INTERVIEWER

In *Giles Goat-Boy* you use anglicisms and colloquials of British speech which are perhaps unusual in the sense that the book is not English or American as such.

BARTH

It's quite American in its flavour, I think. Yes, one finally forges one's own — forges in both senses here — one finally forges one's style and finds one's voice, and though it's likely to change somewhat from novel to novel, there will be common elements as one's voice becomes clearer. If this didn't become the case, if there were no evolutions of one's literary voice from book to book, one would become, as has been the case with many writers, a parody of one-self.

INTERVIEWER

Where did you pick up all these colloquials? You have all sorts of "in" English terms like 'hot-chocolate' for Negro, which I gather one doesn't find in America.

BARTH

Oh, I suppose from reading; or from the fact that where I grew up, down on the eastern shore of Maryland, a number of British locutions are still preserved in the speech.

The idea of writing a novel which imitates the form of the Novel, or which imitates some other form of document, is not so decadent as it sounds at first blush. In fact, that's where the genre began — with Cervantes pretending that he's Homete Benengeli, Alonzo Quijano pretending that he's Don Quixote; Fielding parodying Richardson, Richardson imitating letters, and so forth. The novel seems to have its origins in documental imitation, really. So when we get people like Nabokov, writing a novel which is a poem-plus-commentary — in other words imitating another genre — one feels simply that the novel is coming to a full circle.

INTERVIEWER

And in your own work — apparently there was some sort of discontinuity between *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, which are more or less in the realistic mode, and *The Sot-Weed Factor* which utterly breaks out of it —

BARTH

That's right —

INTERVIEWER

And seems to go back to tap the eighteenth century quite fully.

BARTH

Yes, you're right, there is a change there in attack and in mode,

which I'd attribute to the passing of some years and the accumulation of some literary experience. Those first two, as I said a while ago, were written both in the same year, when I was about twenty-four. I was still trying to find out who I was, muse-wise, and of course learned from the experience of writing those two novels.

It was almost coincidental that at the time I was using past historical materials I began to feel in a clearer way than I had hitherto that realism itself was not my 'cup of tea' — reality isn't, as far as that goes — and I understood that I wasn't likely to write anything else with a straight forwardly realistic setting. I've broken that rule since — some of the pieces I've been working on lately are a bit more realistic than either of the two big novels — but in general I'd hold the principle yet.

INTERVIEWER

Could you discuss the use of historical researches in *The Sot-Weed Factor*? What sort of alterations your imagination worked upon factual material to transform them into an artistic whole.

BARTH

I studied a year or so, very carefully, what they call *The Archives of Maryland*. This is a series of bound volumes, the records of the colonial Assembly and the Governor's Council from the time the Province was chartered until it became a state in 1776. I found colonial history so fantastic that the work of the imagination consisted mainly of toning things down so they'd be believable in a farcical novel.

In fact, most of the truly preposterous incidents in *The Sot-Weed Factor* are based on fact. It was not unheard of, for example, in the very first colonial courts for the plaintiff to be convicted. I mean, they were in the woods, there was no statute book yet, and they were trying to remember English common law as best as they could. They had to improvise.

There was a marvelous case, for example, which I can't remember whether I used in the novel or not: the first murder in the Province of Maryland. They arrested the man and found they had no court to try him in — they'd just gotten off the boats — so they convened the Governor's Council. By a rap of the gavel they turned the Governor's Council into an inquest, decided there was a True Bill, rapped the gavel and became a court, tried the case, convicted the man, found that they had no law to sentence him under — murder wasn't against the law yet — so they reconvened themselves into a legislature, passed a law against murder, punish-

able by death, convened themselves back into a court, condemned the man to death — and suspended the sentence lest justice be miscarried. That story would sound outrageous even in a farcical novel; nobody would believe it.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to have a certain facility in handling legal technicalities — legal tangles are important in *The Floating Opera* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Have you ever had any formal training in law?

BARTH

No, though I've a brother who is a counselor at law. I've been interested in the law as a kind of philosophical phenomenon since student days; though I'm not knowledgeable in that area at all. One can shark up enough law to do a chapter in a novel without much trouble. And in fact, you know, while it's true in one respect that a novelist needs to know everything, it's also true that he doesn't have to know anything until he needs to know it, and he can learn it at that point. It's not difficult to be encyclopedic in a work of fiction; it's damned difficult to be encyclopedic, I suppose, in truth.

INTERVIEWER

A historian friend informs me, however, that he was amazed at the way you had managed to render factual history so accurately and weave your tale around it in *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

BARTH

Well, you find out, as a matter of fact, that history and biography easily suggest plots, and you wonder sometimes if you're not filling in actual historical gaps. You know, whether your improvisations won't turn out to be true. In the case, for example, of the homosexual affair between Henry More and Isaac Newton in *The Sot-Weed Factor*; I honestly can't remember anymore how much evidence if any, there really was for it. But when I read biographies and papers of both men, it seemed to me that just on philosophical grounds there should have been a love affair there. Perhaps I invented something that scholars will one day find out was the case.

INTERVIEWER

How did you happen upon the poem "The Sot-Weed Factor", a work which does languish in considerable obscurity.

BARTH

It does indeed; nobody know the poem — except PhD candidates in American literature. Ebenezer Cooke is a terrible poet. The town where I was born and grew up, Cambridge, Maryland, is in the Chesapeake area, on the Choptank River, and about fifteen miles down river from it is Cooke's point. So, growing up, one heard about this fellow who had claimed to be the Poet Laureate of Maryland. I had, in fact, not read his poem or visited the Cooke estate — which is still on Cooke's Point — until after college when I was doing some research for another project I had in mind, a fictional project having to do with the tide-water area.

I came across the poem, and, of course, as you read it, a plot suggests itself immediately. Since I was already by that time looking for ways to work from unrealistic premises, these things all coalesced. It was perfectly obvious: here was one way to write a novel, which would free me from the strictures of realism, deal with material that I wanted to write about anyway, and also correspond to other concerns of mine.

INTERVIEWER

Which for one thing seems to lead me back to the eighteenth century: because you have the same way of working out passion through the intellect. You use "tricks" much like Pope used the footnotes to the *Dunciad* and like Swift used the paraphernalia surrounding *A Tale of A Tub*: comic in style but with the same serious purpose behind it — the same passionate tricksiness.

BARTH

I would hope so. I could never be personally interested in a writer who didn't also move me, and I'm not *moved* much by simple technical virtuosity, mere metaphysical or structural tricksiness. One of the reasons why, it seems to me, a writer like Samuel Beckett, or the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, is a giant and a master, is that he — they — both manage to be formally artful and yet deeply moving — Borges, particularly, speaks to your heart. He's not just a metaphysician or a formal gamesman.

INTERVIEWER

Could you list a few of his books?

BARTH

One doesn't list his books really, because his production's been

very small. In the U.S. three volumes of translation are available, but they overlap a bit. One is called *Labyrinths*, one is called *Ficciones*, and there's a collection of his essays called *Other Inquisitions*. His product is very small, but seminal; I think that like Beckett, Borges will have an enormous influence on the next generation of writers. A surprising number of bright students, student writers, are turned on by Borges, as indeed I am.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Floating, Opera* your first book, there is a concern with author-reader relationship. Under a mask of ineptitude Todd Andrews addresses the world and, of course, devices like that were perfected several centuries ago. Through your books this concern is extended to the point where the whole novel addresses the reader — which seems to be what you're working in now.

BARTH

That's right. In one sense it's a parody of an old literary convention, but to the extent that there's any serious purpose behind it, and there is finally, it would be simply an alternative way of coming to terms with the difference between art and life. One way to address that discrepancy is the way the French New Novelists, particularly Robbe-Grillet, go at it: to try to eliminate from the artifice all kinds of conventions like authorial interpretation. This is what you might call an attempt to get sort of a higher and higher fidelity to human consciousness by using more sophisticated literary woofers and tweeters.

The other way to go at the same problem, the discrepancy between art and life, is to acknowledge continually the artificial aspect of art; to acknowledge right off the bat 'this is an artifice' — which, of course, is among other things a sly way of getting around the artifice. It's an old gambit, you know, particularly popular in Renaissance drama: life is a play, the world's a theatre, existence is a dream, etc., etc.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to proceed from this meta-theatrical tradition, in which, in the theatre, the author acknowledges that he has to treat life as a dramatic experience, simply because he's doing a drama. In your novels you seem to acknowledge that you're treating life as a novelistic — a narrative experience.

BARTH

That's right. And yet acknowledging all the time that this device is a device. Now, that's always sly, nothing's ever done ingenuously in this line. So when a writer like Shakespeare keeps saying 'don't forget this is a play', and then says a moment later, "all the world's a stage", what he's really doing is making it impossible to distinguish between the artifice and the reality. So, in that way, you know, by continually rubbing the audience's nose in the artificial aspect of what you're doing, you're really deliberately confusing the issue you're pretending to clarify, transcending the artifice by insisting on it.

Somehow that strikes me finally as being more effective than the attempt to make the artifact less and less obviously an artifact — which seems to be the motive behind the French New Novel. After all, when you refuse, for example, to characterize in conventional ways some kind of epistemological grounds, what you instead try to present, as Robbe-Grillet does, the object without any lens of authorial interpretation between you and it. Well, what he's after there is a fancier kind of realism, isn't it? Not psychological realism, but epistemological realism.

Now, another way to go at the problem is to define fiction as a kind of true representation of the distortion we all make of life. In other words, it's a representation of a distortion; not a representation of life itself, but a representation of a representation of life. If you acknowledge that premise to begin with, there's no reason in the world why you can't do all sorts of things that otherwise could be objected to on philosophical or other grounds. Like an old-fashioned characterization, for example. If you acknowledge that you're doing it as an imitation of the way we in fact characterize each other in life, then you're not pretending to an illegitimate omniscience — you're not pretending that the novel is something it isn't. Art *is* artificial, after all.

INTERVIEWER

You also manipulate the most fundamental artifice of the novel: the fact that it's written, it interposes language between the reader and the events in which he somehow participates. A great deal of the comedy in *Giles* is generated just by this tension between style and what is happening. The most essential example is, of course, the play of *Taliped Decanus*, where what is happening is, of course, the archetypal tragedy, and is of course strangely moving, even though under this hilarious burlesque of language.

BARTH

It could be moving *only* under that kind of burlesque. In fact, one of the reasons why people who have very serious and passionate things on their minds, may want an element of farce in their fictional premises, is precisely so that they can address themselves to matters which they feel would be simply impossible to do in a long-faced, unironic spirit. Mann, for example, used to like to write in the grand old style. Well, one way to write in the grand style, if you want to, is with your tongue halfway in your cheek. Then you're free to do things that would be sentimental and unbearable if your tracks weren't covered by a certain degree of irony. Farce and burlesque can cover your tracks in a similar fashion; no one nowadays can write Greek drama, but if you want to get at some of the Sophoclean tragic spirit, one way to approach it, perhaps, is by throwing up a masquerade of burlesque.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to question you on a few motifs and themes found throughout your novels. The motif of two men involved in some sort of close relationship with a woman between them, seems to run through every single one of your works: from Todd Andrews and the Macks to the situation in the *End of the Road*, then to the intense little trio of Anna, Ebenezer and Henry in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. You find some sort of explosion in *Giles*, where you have Anastasia who more or less mediates between Stoker and Giles, and, of course, the rest of the world. What do you find particularly interesting about this arrangement?

BARTH

The triangle's one of the oldest literary conventions. The reason why it is, is that it has probably more latent dramatic possibility than any other situation between characters that one can dream up. For another thing, I've always been impressed by the multiplicity of people that one has in one. It seems to me that the plurality of selves that Thomas Browne, and others speak of, is a simple psychological fact. I've never been impressed by any unity of identity in myself. This is one aspect, I suppose, of the syndrome of being a fiction writer. And so, one of the images that, as you say, recurs through my novels, is the notion, either on the one hand of the woman who is all women, like Anastasia, or the man who is a cosmophilist. Or the pair of opposites — the two men in the triangle are usually contraries. Well, you know, unless you're awfully single-

minded and simple-minded person, as you go along you get more and more impressed by the contrarities in yourself.

INTERVIEWER

But you also seem to use the notion of the single-minded person, playing him against, in the first two books, someone who's very diffuse. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, you have Ebenezer Cooke, the single-minded poet, a parody of that, against the cosmophilist Burlingame.

BARTH

That's just the old dramatic device of the foil. If you're going to have a conflict between characters, or want to set off an idea, the first thing you do is set it off against its contrary. In fiction this would most likely take the form of characters who are contraries. Then you've got a mainspring for your drama, both your philosophical and emotional dramas. Now that I've said that, I'm reminded of another probable reason for those triangles — it's kind of fun to be Brooks and Warren to one's own books.

Another probable reason for the recurrence in my stories of the triangle, that takes the form of one woman and two men instead of the other way around, is that if you have for thematic reasons a character who represents single-mindedly some position, then the dictates of drama suggest that you're likely to have another character who's his antithesis — these are likely to be male characters if they're embodiments of ideas — then you need a woman between to be the catalyst for the reaction between the two males so that you can work out your dialectic. This is the case of Mack and Todd Andrews with the woman Jane, in the first novel; Jacob Horner and Joe Morgan and the catalyst Rennie in the second novel; Ebenezer and Burlingame and the catalyst Anna; and of course Giles the Goat-Boy and his — he has a number of opposites, but his principal one would be Stoker with Anastasia in the middle. I hadn't realized there was such a pattern before!

INTERVIEWER

In *The Sot-Weed Factor* there's an intense drive for a union of the two chief opposites and this feminine mediator, a drive centered in Henry Burlingame. He's a controlling figure — who, behind all his Protean forms, manipulates the action. He seems to have in his mind some obscure actual physical union of the trio, the only consummation for them.

BARTH

Is this a question? You're quite right, you've described some-

thing that's the case. I suppose that this imagined union is the synthesis at the end of the dramatic dialectic.

INTERVIEWER

But of course you deny them that synthesis. You leave them with the dregs of nothingness at the end of the book.

BARTH

I'm not sure that synthesis is possible. And I'm not terribly interested in it anyhow.

INTERVIEWER

Also at times you seem to point toward the extinction, the extinction of the possibility of intellectual choice. In the first two novels, you develop an intellectual position which one watches extinguished, especially in *The End of the Road* where you have Joe Morgan's intense intellectuality dissolved, crushed, by — essentially your imagination; and in *Giles* it is ruined by circumstance, your imagination again. "Which choice am I to make?, every choice leads to nowhere."

BARTH

You've actually mentioned two different things, both of which have preoccupied me in the past. One is the great difficulty of making choices if you have any imagination. That, I would say, is a kind of autobiographical element in the books. I've often found simple choices terribly difficult. I think I mentioned somewhere the relative ease of buying a book, for example, if you're in a store where there are only a few books, and the terrible job of deciding on a book if you're in a store where there are a great many. That's the story of my life. You imagine so many alternatives to each position that it makes you dissatisfied with any.

The other matter is working out positions in order to contradict them. My writing has finally nothing to do with polemics or the propagandizing of some philosophical position of my own, since my values change with the weather. To the extent that they are novels of ideas — and that's a very limited extent — they are that because they dramatize alternatives to philosophical positions.

INTERVIEWER

Another sexual theme that runs through your books is impotence, or some sort of sexual inability. Todd Andrews has prostrate

trouble which often leads to impotence and there's Henry Burlingame with the Burlingame family defect.

BARTH

That's right. Lest one draw too quick conclusions, though, it ought to be remembered that the impotence is generally paradoxical in the novel. That is to say, the characters who come on in the novels as figures of great apparent potency often turn out to be the final impotents. Burlingame, for example, in some respects, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and the character called Stoker in the Goat-Boy book. Whereas the figure who begins as a kind of naïf and a more or less impotent and ineffectual man, like Ebenezer, turns out to be the one who finally has what potency there is in the novel. The Goat Boy is, of course, a goat, among other things, though he too has troubles translating his goatliness into his human role.

INTERVIEWER

The Goat-Boy seems to be a fruition of the theme that's sort of inherent in the early books — that old problem of what is a man? What is a man distinguished from an animal — another concern of the 18th century.

BARTH

Yes, you do well to mention that that was very much an eighteenth century concern — the limits of rationality and the like. Of course, I'm delighted by the old spurious etymology of the words *tragedy* and *satire*, both of which have been traced back to the root word for goat. Because what I was after in that novel, as in most of my work, is a way to get at some of the passion and power of the tragic view of life, which I share, through the medium of farce and satire. To fuse those elements has been an aspiration of mine from the beginning.

INTERVIEWER

While reading *The Sot-Weed Factor*, I was impressed by all kinds of actions reminiscent of classical mythology. The idea of the journey, the idea of this continuous transformation of identity. You have swine girls and so forth. Yet, in a statement in The New York Times you said that he had no knowledge of myth then —

BARTH

What I meant was that I had not examined the Jungian and Joseph Campbellian studies of the myth of the ritual hero. And it

wasn't until some bright graduate students and correspondents began to point out to me how faithfully Ebenezer Cooke's adventures followed this myth, that I began to be formally interested in it. What I conclude from that fact is not necessarily that Jung is right about the "collective unconscious", but that you can't avoid the pattern if you move your hero around. Anyhow you can get the pattern from your reading without knowing it. It turns out to be almost impossible to write a story about a wandering hero which doesn't fall into Campbell's and Racklin's pattern.

While I'm not the least bit interested in the truth or falsehood of the various explanations of the so-called mono-myth, I'm very much interested in it just as a phenomenon, and it became the deliberate and formal pattern for the Goat-Boy's adventures. The problem then was to be as *aware* as possible of what I was up to without becoming cripplingly self-conscious about it. That distinction between self-awareness and self-consciousness is a crucial one, and writers if they're paying attention to what they're doing always walk a tightrope between the two.

My motive then was to do with the myth of the hero something analogous to what Cervantes does with the genre of the chivalric romance: to begin with a kind of travesty or parody, but then hopefully to escalate it to something more passionate — after all, that myth is one of the most profound notions that the human mind has come up with, and I would be distressed to have done a mere parody or farce of it.

INTERVIEWER

Were you trying to make it work with science-fiction as well, or elements of that sort?

BARTH

I've never been interested in science-fiction. After all, the computer in the novel is hardly an extension of the realities nowadays.

INTERVIEWER

Could you solve for us "the riddle of the sphincter"? That is, the emphasis on anality in all your books.

BARTH

Not in all my books; that's not fair to say.

INTERVIEWER

Okay, then in your book.

BARTH

Well, there is a great deal of excrement in the world and producing it is, excuse the pun, a fundamental human experience. And I've always shared, I guess, the eighteenth century's amusement at basic bodily functions.

INTERVIEWER

Which reminds one that one is after all an animal.

BARTH

I guess so, although I never really bothered my head about the anality. I've become interested in the oral tradition in literature, so I'm out of the anal stage now.

INTERVIEWER

One question relating to self-consciousness. Now that you've achieved a certain status in American letters and now that you're a famous man to whom ardent young students come, with novels and questions —

BARTH

And tape recorders.

INTERVIEWER

And tape recorders. How does it feel? Does it change you in your attitude toward your work? Do you feel any different when you sit down to put pen to paper?

BARTH

No, except in one sense which has nothing to do with critical or popular attention; it has to do really — it's something that would exist with or without that. Writing does become more difficult as you go along. You don't want to repeat yourself; I don't anyhow. One does one kind of thing and do not particularly want to do it again, at least not more than twice, and so you become a hard act for yourself to follow. This is true of one's writing as of other aspects of one's life. So, you have to look for new ways to do what you're doing, new ways to say what you have to say so that you don't become a parody of yourself and simply redundant.

As for the rest, my life has always been rather private and remains so. It's easy to keep one's distance from things. The reviews of my novels have always been at least as often unfavourable as favourable, so one's ego is taken care of in that respect. It's continually being corrected by critics.

INTERVIEWER

But when the front page of the New York Times Book Review declares with no qualification that you have written a great novel and when you attempted something as grand as you did in *Giles* —

BARTH

You turn for solace to the New York Review of Books, where you're panned.

INTERVIEWER

Well, could you tell us a bit about what you're interested in now?

BARTH

I've been interested in other media besides the printed page and other forms besides the novel. I've never found the short story a congenial genre; I just don't think in those terms. But I've written two very long books and I'm not interested in writing another very long book, at least for a while. I've been much concerned personally with the historical moribundity of the novel as an art form. This is an idea that doesn't alarm me — I'm not interested in whether historically it turns out to be the case that the novel is *kaput* as high art form. But I like to work in that *ambiance*, you know; it's pleasant to feel one's in on the end of a genre. If one can't be at the very beginning, it's just as well to be at the end.

And so, while with the left hand I'm still thinking of possibilities for future narratives of a novelistic kind, with the right hand — and immediately — I've been trying to compose pieces which will be quite short, which will have to be published finally in a volume because they'll take some of their resonance from each other — but of which most won't really be designed for the printed page at all. I've composed several, for example, for tapes; this medium that we're working in just now interests me a great deal. It has some of the virtues of the old oral tradition where our literature begins. You've got a live human voice. You've got a kind of intimacy of telling which you never have on the printed page. On the other hand, unlike the old bardic tradition and unlike the film or the drama, you can stop this machine — if you come to a tough passage and want to hear it again, it's repeatable, as the printed word is. You can go back and do a passage over in a hurry, but you can't do it with a stage play or with a film, unless you have your own projector.

There are ways in which the phenomenon of the disembodied authorial voice can be used metaphorically. I'm exploring some of

these ways. When you go to a public reading, you always get an insight into the poem or the prose that the man is reading just from hearing it in the authorial voice. His physical presence becomes a part of the medium too, and this can be explored. I've written a piece, for instance, which is intended exclusively for public readings — not for tape or for the printed page — and part of the point is that it's being delivered at an audience by the author in his own proper person — an author imitating an author. But in a similar fashion the absence of the physical presence of the author can become metaphorically pertinent. I'll give you an example which will make it clearer. A story which I've always wanted to write, and haven't found a way yet, would have to do with Menelaus on the beach at Pharos with Proteus. Homer says in the fourth book of the *Odyssey* that Proteus turns into two or three animals, fire, running water, and a tree — but imagine if Proteus could change into literally anything, including Menelaus holding Proteus, including — and this is where my medium would come in — including the story of Menelaus holding Proteus; he could become the voice of Menelaus telling the story...

Now the idea, which after all is a metaphorical fact of our lives, that we all tend to turn into the sound of our voices as we go along, could be turned into a literal fact, and make, to that extent, the medium become part of the message. Proust dreamed not only that he was certain kinds of people, but that he was the woods between two villages and once that he was the *rivalry* between two towns. Imagine dreaming that you are a rivalry! Well, if that's possible, it seems to me that it is imaginable that a man can turn into the story of his life.

I've written a narrative for tape in which the first-person narrator is the story, telling itself, commenting on itself, living its life, going through its rites of passage, breathing, and finally expiring. These are experimental pieces, and the word 'experimental' has lost its press, it's a pejorative term now. We tend to think of experiments as being cold exercises in technique and this puts us down. My feelings about technique in art is that it has about the same value as technique in love-making. That is to say, on the one hand, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and, on the other hand, so does heartless skill; but what you want is passionate virtuosity. By my personal standards these experiments must be moving and passionate and eloquent and not just tricky. If my writing were no more than an intellectual fun and games that *TIME* magazine makes it out to be, I wouldn't be interested in it myself.

GEORGE BOWERING

Gil

We called him Saint
Johnny Appleseed, beautiful

boy man sprinkling peyote
up & down
the west coast.

I think of
our nine hour walk
thru Stanley Park forest
& sea.

He sat
at the foot of a pine tree
looking west over the ocean,

leaves on his shoulders,
his deerskin shoes brown
on the earth.

Face
with sun on it,
no wrinkles, only brown skin.

Another time
he sat
among saguaro
cactus, four
of them
on a small
knoll, their