The Tale of the Author
or, Scheherazade's Betrayal

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John Barth, the postmodernist American writer, who is now in the second cycle of his middle age, professes to have had only one true love during all of his life. Her name is Scheherazade. This love affair began when the writer, "as an illiterate undergraduate . . . worked off part of my tuition filing books in the Classics Library at Johns Hopkins, which included the stacks of the Oriental Seminary." As in all great love affairs, Barth's infatuation with Scheherazade started as a pure and at the same time clandestine devotion—clandestine, because Barth would get lost in the stacks to read, among other collections of tales, The Thousand and One Nights; pure, because Scheherazade's voice came to him from afar, translated from the Arabic (by Richard Burton in 1885-88), and across the centuries, and it seemed that he would never meet her. Yet, again as in all great love affairs, the writer's infatuation sought a way to manifest itself: Barth needed to meet Scheherazade, and he wanted to do it openly. Finally, as in all great love affairs, he succeeded.

In 1972 Barth published Chimera, which consists of three novellas. The first is entitled "Dunyazadiad," and here the writer for the first time manages not only to meet Scheherazade, but also to endear himself to her. The meeting is intended and planned, yet when it happens, it happens through magic. Barth the writer has accidentally written down the words "The key to the treasure is the treasure," when he is transported back into Scheherazade's times and into her presence, because she has uttered the same words to her little sister Dunyazade at the same moment. Magic indeed! At this point Scheherazade has not yet offered herself to King Shahryar and is still desperate about how to deal with a king who deflowers a virgin every night and kills her in the morning. So she is overwhelmed with gratitude when John Barth, the Genie from the future, offers to tell her one of the stories collected in The Thousand and One Nights every day so that she can then tell it to the King at night. (It should be noted that "Genie" is also German for "genius," and that Barth is of German extraction.) As we all know, the storytelling device worked, and Scheherazade takes heart from this fact which the Genie already knows for a fact. John Barth, Scheherazade's ideal reader, thus helps Scheherazade to become the ideal storyteller. They meet as teller and listener, or writer and reader, meet—through an act of the
imagination. However, they also meet as lovers would, since they agree “that writing and reading, or telling and listening, were literally ways of making love.” Their love is truly mutual (or intertextual), for if Scheherazade is deeply grateful to the Genie for telling her the stories with which to beguile King Shahryar and save her life, it is only because of her having told and then collected them in thirty volumes that Barth is able to write the present novella and thus meet his love in the first place.

At this point the watchful (or jealous) critic might note two things: one, knowing for a fact that her stories will beguile the king relieves Scheherazade of the existential threat her “publish or perish” situation would otherwise have created for her (and did create for her, according to the framing story of *The Thousand and One Nights*); two, perhaps telling and listening can be equated with making love, but writing and reading cannot, at least not literally, since they do not happen at the same time. We can grant the pun to Barth the author (of the novella), but not to Barth the Author (in the text). Fortunately, the Genie and Scheherazade, in the “Dunyazadiad,” refrain from literally making love; they only make love “literally.” Thus, the equation between telling and listening on the one hand, and writing and reading on the other, does not have to be tested. In his 1965 essay entitled “Muse, Spare Me,” Barth does, however, write with regard to Scheherazade: “Consider ... that in the years of her flourishing, her talent is always on the line: not enough to have satisfied the old cynic once, or twice; she’s only as good as her next piece, Scheherazade; night by night it’s publish or perish.”

Here Scheherazade’s ground situation, as depicted in the framing story of her stories, is not only taken for granted, but is seen as decisive in contributing to her greatness as a storyteller. It gives an existential edge to all her stories that they would otherwise lack. Therefore the author of the “Dunyazadiad,” for all his tenderness towards his favorite storyteller, actually belittles her courage and begins to cut her down to—contemporary—size. It is the beginning of Barth’s betrayal of Scheherazade—as yet concealed by their mutual belief in the magic of their encounter.

The magic tryst between Barth and Scheherazade in *Chimera* can therefore serve to demonstrate the value of what the writer would learn to call heartfelt possibilities. But possibilities, even heartfelt ones, are never felt by a lover to suffice. Therefore Barth wants to draw Scheherazade closer into his metaphoric embrace by asking her to visit him in his present twentieth-century Maryland, where all of his novels are set in one way or another. She finally complies in 1987, shortly before the publication of Barth’s *The Tide-water Tales*. Yet perhaps she should have abstained. Their actual embrace has already taken place in Scheherazade’s past, her “place and time and order of reality—PTOR, as we came to call it.” In present Maryland time the author remains true to his wife who becomes rather jealous when Scheherazade makes her appearance—whereas King Shahryar back there in the past has by now become too humane and too wise to care. He is more
interested in listening to a good story from the future than in netting his wife for her infidelity. The catchword phrase in *The Tidewater Tales*—the substitute for “The key to the treasure is the treasure”—is: “What you’ve done is what you’ll do,” rendering Barth and Scheherazade’s encounter in the author’s PTOR a much more sober, disillusioned event—middle-aged, in fact—than their meeting in the past had been. The situation reorchestrates their chaste encounters in the “Dunyazadiad”—with positions reversed, so to speak—but the magic has evaporated. When Scheherazade meets the Genie again, he is called Djean, and she comes upon him and his wife while they are cruising on the Chesapeake Bay. He wears bleached-blue trousers that may account for his change of name, and while he and his wife are pleasant enough, Scheherazade cannot help but feel like an intruder—particularly when it becomes apparent that she can no longer disappear into the past again. (Her former meetings with Djean had only lasted for about an hour each time, before he began to fade again.) Djean admits that he is to blame for her predicament, since he is writing the story of Scheherazade’s visit to the present and he does not know how to continue it. Scheherazade’s rising anxiety is a problem of dramaturgy. She ultimately does disappear, but the exact cause remains a mystery. Magic has been supplanted by a riddle, although it becomes clear that this time it was not a word—as in the past—that spirited her away. Everybody is relieved, not least of all Scheherazade herself, who had been so anxious to embark on a voyage of adventures like Sindbad the Sailor only a little while ago. While in the past, Djean had often assured Scheherazade that “she had embodied the storyteller’s condition in such a way as to become a symbol; she was not sure of what, but gathered it was something hopeful, of positive value” (595).

Something has gone wrong it seems, comparable to the ending of Donald Barthelme’s present-day fairy tale “The Glass Mountain,” where the hero throws the beautiful princess off the skyscraper because she fails to be the symbol he is looking for. Barth has Scheherazade say repeatedly in *The Tidewater Tales* that she too is to blame for not being able to leave the future, since she should have known better than to come and visit him and his wife, but again, even if her admission may exculpate the author, the same is not true for the author of the novel as such. He has betrayed Scheherazade in his fictions by not letting her remain a symbol, although he himself has often called her one of the four great metaphors of the literary imagination. (Whether or not Barth is also betraying his three big brothers, Odysseus, Don Quixote, and Huckleberry Finn, who represent the other three great metaphors in *The Tidewater Tales*, is another story—and worth another essay.) Perhaps this is what William Pritchard felt when he reviewed *The Tidewater Tales* in the *New York Times Book Review*, saying that he had much enjoyed the Odyssey sequence, but had enjoyed much less the Scheherazade one.

Consequently, Barth and Scheherazade’s true love affair seems to have
come to an end. In Barth's forthcoming novel, which is patterned on the voyages of Sindbad the Sailor from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the main character is called Somebody the Sailor. In the course of the novel Somebody, like Ulysses in Polyphemus’ cave, becomes Nobody the Sailor, while Scheherazade makes what seems to be her final appearance. After having outlived King Shahryar, Dunyazade, her children, even some of her grandchildren, and after having accordingly pleaded with Death many a time to take her along, Death (for whom she could not stop) finally stops for her. He tells Scheherazade how she may die: she has to storytell herself out of her life just as she storytold herself into it. She longs to comply; yet although her twentieth-century lover may have gotten tired of her, there is no way in which Scheherazade can or will storytell herself out of literary tradition. And like King Shahryar, Barth should reconsider getting rid of her each morning before he starts writing—until the Destroyer of Delights will fetch him low. For Scheherazade more than anyone else represents the ancient frame-tale tradition, and her and Barth’s tenuous love story frames his fictions just as her and King Shahryar’s love story—tenuous for other reasons—frames *The Thousand and One Nights*. His tales, moreover, are much more closely related to this frame tale than are Scheherazade’s own, since his twentieth-century versions of both very often intersect.

In the essay “Muse, Spare Me” Barth had said about Scheherazade and *The Thousand and One Nights*: “Though the tales she tells aren’t my favorites, she remains my favorite teller, and it is a heady paradox that this persistence, being the figure of her literal aim, thereby generates itself, and becomes the emblem as well of my figurative aspiration.” Barth’s betrayal of Scheherazade consists in taking the frame tale she lives in “literally,” while not taking it literally. The mistake is not really in his visiting her in the past or even in having her visit him in the future, since all their journeys happen in the interstices of the plot of the frame tale of *The Thousand and One Nights* without actually changing it. (Barth had successfully done something comparable with regard to American history in *LETTERS* and even as early as *The Sot-Weed Factor.*) Scheherazade’s journey into the future does indeed involve a more difficult change of PTOR than Barth’s visits to the past, but the problem centers on their making “real” love in *The Tidewater Tales*. This repeated event changes the plot in that it causes a change of attitude in both King Shahryar and the Genie’s wife, who now have every reason to believe that their spouses’ lovers were not fictional. The fact that for both Scheherazade and Barth their love affair happens within a framing story of their stories helps only marginally. For whereas it is true that frame tales traditionally occupy a place between fiction and reality, and that the magic of love might be said to partake of those two realms, this is true only as long as that magic (the narrative maidenhead) remains intact. And whereas, for the contemporary reader, this might still have been the case as long as the PTOR was Scheherazade’s, it is no longer
the case when the PTOR switches to present-day Maryland—complete with showers, frozen food, pseudo-academic conventions, and airplanes. What so radically sets off Scheherazade’s past (as well as every past) from the present and the future is that it contains the things we do not know as if framed by those we do know. In the Genie’s narrated present, the framing device becomes dispensable.

The critic could mourn Barth’s having broken into one of the most beautiful, or self-contained, frame tales in literary history; she could, however, also attempt to understand why and how he thereby parodies the frame tale tradition as such. There are, basically, two types of frame tales: closed frame tales that contain various stories or story cycles, as in Boccaccio’s Decameron or Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (and, of course, The Thousand and One Nights itself); and open-ended frame tales that merely introduce a story or various stories and leave it to the reader to supply the rest of the frame, as in Potocki’s Saragossa Manuscript, Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter or James’s Turn of the Screw. Interestingly enough, all the open-ended frame tales just mentioned use the device of introducing a manuscript, a handwritten text of singular status whose perusal will permit the reader to partake in the revelation of something extraordinary and as yet unknown. Since the advent of Derrida’s Grammatologie we have come to understand that logocentrism and the concomitant obsession with textuality are two of the main features of Western thought. And texts as texts (not as stories) are all closed and their boundaries clearly defined. Let us postulate a dialogic relationship between the framing story and the stories it contains or introduces, in that either one or the other can define the boundaries of that which it relates to: the closed frame tale would define the boundaries of the tales it contains, while the boundaries of the open-ended frame tale are defined by the tales it introduces. Basing the frame tale upon the discovery of a manuscript, however, introduces in addition the notion of closed text into a story that is open-ended. The notion of closure is thus raised to a higher power, so to speak. One could now argue that The Thousand and One Nights, with its closed frame tale connecting potentially innumerable tales (a thousand and one equaling $n+1$), represents the essence of Oriental culture; while Barth’s open-ended frame tale, based on a manuscript (The Thousand and One Nights) that informs his whole body of fiction, is representative of Occidental logocentric culture with its need for closure. It should be noted in this context that far from accepting the thousand and one nights as a random number, Barth (in a chapter in The Tidewater Tales called “The Story of Scheherazade’s First Second Menstruation”) puts forth the theory that after that last night Scheherazade had to ask King Shahryar for her life as well as the formal tenure of marriage: for the first time in almost three years, and after having borne three children, she found herself, not pregnant once more, but menstruating twice in a row for the only time since the king had deflowered her. Her (re)productive phase had come to an end. Thus Barth
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tightens not only the closure of the frame tale, but also the structure of the stories it contains.

That the notion of closure is at the heart of Western logocentrism can be further substantiated by glancing at an earlier work of Western literary history, Poe's story of “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade.” Here Scheherazade, during what will turn out to be her last night, adds new stories to the traditional ones, stories about nineteenth-century scientific discoveries that are true but sound miraculous. The king, outraged at her apparent lies, has Scheherazade beheaded the following morning. Expanding the volume of stories contained in *The Thousand and One Nights* necessitates the—absolute—tightening of the plot of the framing story. Something similar seems to take place in Barth's novel-in-progress, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*: Scheherazade has to die so that the present-day Sindbad can experience a couple of new adventures. The dialogic relationship between the stories told and the framing story, by which their structure becomes mutually dependent, tightens yet again to become absolute closure, or death. Borges, in his short story “Historia de los dos reyes y los dos laberintos” (published in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* in 1946 and later collected in *El Aleph* in 1949), juxtaposes the labyrinth of Western thought to that of Eastern thought. The king of Babel has his architects construct a labyrinth of bronze that is all but impossible to escape for anyone led into it. Into this labyrinth he sends his guest, the king of the Arabs, who would have died had he not stumbled upon the door accidentally. The king of the Arabs subsequently fights and defeats the Babylonians utterly and carries their king off into the desert. There he leaves him to die, letting him know before he rides off that the desert is his labyrinth. With this “better” Oriental labyrinth the king of the Arabs opposes vast expanse to complex design, or—in narrative terms—episodic, hyperbolic structure to intricate self-reflectiveness. Barth's version of the framing story of *The Thousand and One Nights* attempts to “Westernize” Scheherazade, one of the great metaphors of Oriental culture, and lead her into his labyrinth. His betrayal of Scheherazade has to be seen in this larger context. But the Oriental labyrinth of *The Thousand and One Nights* may once more prove to be the better one, and Barth might be well advised to continue to trust it to replenish him before the Destroyer of Delights fetches him low. His frame tale is still open-ended, and his love affair with Scheherazade may not be over after all.

NOTES

1 John Barth, *The Friday Book* (New York: Putnam's, 1984), 57.
2 John Barth, *Chimera* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1973), 32.
3 *The Friday Book*, 58.
4 John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales* (New York: Putnam's, 1987), 590.
6 *The Friday Book*, 57.