

# John Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor* Revisited: The Meaning of Form

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## ABSTRACT

*The Sot-Weed Factor* by John Barth is an expanded parody of the historic Ebenezer Cooke's poem of the same title as well as of the latter's role as colonial Maryland's first poet laureate. But in the course of the novel the dual nature of parody, as defined between the opposite poles of imitation and play, or necessity and freedom, becomes emblematic of the postmodern imagination as such. Just as the novel's content derives its meaning from the ambivalent central symbol of twinhood, which unfolds in the question of identity and role, so the novel's form mirrors an increasing tension between fiction and reality. Parody, for Barth, becomes a means of solving this tension by dissolving recollected and recorded experience into separate segments which the present author may then treat as material for the creative imagination. In *The Sot-Weed Factor* stories become games played by the author. However, as a creator of fictional characters, while resembling the Creator of real mankind, the author nevertheless remains one of His playthings. Thus the freedom which he achieves in entering the realm of the creative imagination can only be enjoyed at the price of evading reality.

In modern literature the contrast between imagination and reality, defined by the contrast between fantasy as the open realm of possibility and experience as the closed realm of necessity, was generally understood as that of opposed, if complementary, principles. John Barth however, like other postmodern writers, attempts to transcend this opposition by transforming complexes of experience into stories. At the heart of this concept does not lie an interest in the single event, real or fictional, but an interest in the process of transformation as such. The fact that fiction can deny causal as well as final connections, which in a reality of conflicting situations call for immediate action, has become for Barth a means of self-realization. Characters, therefore, do not constitute the center of an event or, consequently, of plot, they are not "entangled" in their own stories,<sup>1</sup> but appear as functions of the various concerns of their author. Thus, not the stories as such are of importance, but the possibility of their many combinations. Experience is dissolved into a potentially infinite number of segments. Although they seem to allow of being reduced to a finite number by becoming elements of a very intricate but in the end unravelable plot, they reveal through the conscious artificiality of this plot only the ultimate impossibility of their supposed finiteness.<sup>2</sup> In other words: these segments of experience may recur in so many various forms in the course of a novel, either separately or in any one of their possible combinations, that they increasingly seem to lose the

<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Schapp finds the *tertium comparationis* between real and fictional stories in that meaning of each story which is constituted through the "care" of its central subject. Stories are defined through the "entanglement" of the character, not through their ontological status. (Cf. *In Geschichten verstrickt: Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* [B. Heymann Verlag: Wiesbaden, 1976 (1953)], p. 1 et passim).

<sup>2</sup> At this point it becomes obvious that Barth like Jorge Luis Borges makes use of the fact that "as in Lucretius' universe, the number of elements, and so of combinations, is finite (though very large), and the number of instances of each element and combination of elements is infinite" (John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Atlantic Monthly* CCXX,2 [August, 1967], 29-34; cf. 34).

quality of necessity which adheres to actuality.<sup>3</sup> The increase in freedom, however, which results within the sphere of fiction, must be paid for with the increased existential necessity of story-telling:<sup>4</sup> in order to circumvent the resistance offered by reality the author must submit to imagination's most vital postulate, namely its perpetuation, on pain of his own loss of identity.

It is in this sense that the constitution or the loss of identity becomes the main theme in Barth's work, most clearly in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. The historical context of this novel, which involves its form as well as its content, does not serve merely as a foil for the problem of modern identity, but constitutes a framework of tradition within which the subjectivity and temporality of the self can be overcome by being mirrored repeatedly. The novel's picaresque<sup>5</sup> as well as its parodistic<sup>6</sup> structure serve to achieve this end,<sup>7</sup> the former being a content-oriented, the latter a form-oriented model of repetition. At the same time the distinguishing mark of both the picaresque and parody is an ultimate noncommittal quality pointing to the fact that fiction and not reality guarantees the constitution of the tradition they depict. Already the historic Ebenezer Cooke, following the examples of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, had parodied his own life as knight-errant on the quest for identity in his poem *The Sot-Weed Factor*, first published in 1708: neither by his past-oriented return to Maryland as the country of his origin nor in his future-oriented occupation as a tobacco merchant did he succeed in becoming completely integrated into the colonial tradition, because he was continually hampered by a present which thwarted each of his expectations.<sup>8</sup>

Barth, then, by making Ebenezer Cooke the protagonist of *The Sot-Weed Factor* and the original satire his novel's predecessor, expands the picaresque model of repetition analogously to the tale-within-tale principle and thus universalizes its meaning: the quest for

<sup>3</sup> Barth seems to John O. Stark to be *attacking* reality and, consequently, realism "because he denies the existence of the 'real' world by showing that it is composed of layers related to each other in a way that makes them inseparable from imaginative constructs." (*The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth* [Duke University Press: Durham, N. C., 1974], p. 122) But it is exactly because Barth is aware of this interdependence between reality and imagination that he no longer attacks reality in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, but rather begins to transform it into stories.

<sup>4</sup> The impulse, therefore, behind *The Sot-Weed Factor* is by no means "the repudiation of narrative art," as Beverly Gross maintains ("The Anti-Novels of John Barth," *Chicago Review* XX,3 [November, 1968], 95-109; cf. 95), but, on the contrary, the existentially necessary affirmation of the narrative impulse itself.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Richard W. Noland, "John Barth and the Novel of Comic Nihilism," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* VII,3 (Autumn, 1966), 239-257; cf. 249f: "Barth has combined the eighteenth-century picaresque novel and the eighteenth-century philosophical tale (such as *Candide* or *Rasselas*) with the picaresque form which many twentieth-century existential novels have taken."

<sup>6</sup> Earl Rovit ("The Novel as Parody: John Barth," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* VI,2 [Fall, 1963], 77-85) has called Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor* "an almost pure specimen of that group of novels which I would call 'parodies.'" (79) Cf. Russell H. Miller, "*The Sot-Weed Factor*: A Contemporary Mock-Epic," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* VIII,2 (Winter, 1965/66), 88-100; cf. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. John C. Stubbs who maintains that *The Sot-Weed Factor* "is a parody of history as well as a parody of the picaresque novel." ("John Barth As a Novelist of Ideas: The Themes of Value and Identity," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* VIII,2 [Winter, 1965/66], 101-116; cf. 108).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Edward H. Cohen, *Ebenezer Cooke: The Sot-Weed Canon* (The University of Georgia Press: Athens, 1975), p. 10.

identity.<sup>9</sup> However, by turning a real past author into a fictional present character and thereby implying that he himself – at least theoretically – might become the protagonist of future authors' future fictions,<sup>10</sup> Barth shows that this possibility of universalizing the meaning of the quest for identity is dependent on fiction as such; in other words: it is not independently existent in reality.

It is the indirect manner of parody, then, which for the author Ebenezer Cooke as well as for the author John Barth best mirrors the tension between reality and fiction. For parody in itself contains a corresponding tension: with regard to content as well as form it defines itself between the opposite poles of imitation<sup>11</sup> and play, or necessity and freedom. Thus it is due to the nature of parody that the world in *The Sot-Weed Factor* possesses physically as well as meta-physically a dual nature which, proceeding from the central symbol of twinhood that opposes and unites Ebenezer and Anna, unfolds in the relationship between, say, Ebenezer and Bertrand Burton, or Ebenezer and Joan Toast, but most of all between Ebenezer and Henry Burlingame III.

This implies firstly that the characters mirror one another: with regard to Bertrand and Ebenezer, one a phony man of the world, the other a phony poet laureate, the traditional standards of servant and master are reversed; with regard to Joan and Ebenezer, one an involuntary prostitute, the other a virgin by choice, the traditional standards of female innocence and male experience are reversed; and with regard to Henry and Ebenezer, one protean in forever changing roles, the other forever refusing to accept any role at all, the traditional standards of mentor, whose character is supposed to be static, and pupil, whose character is supposed to be dynamic, are reversed as well.

Secondly, however, this unfolding of the dual nature of the world creates a tension between the characters: thus all the other characters must prove their worth and define themselves in opposition to Ebenezer Cooke and his nonidentity, which derives its force from his clinging to the ideal of his own virginity. It is not until Ebenezer decides to part with this ideal, which, after having been increasingly undermined by reality, gradually loses its meaning for him, that this tension can be dispelled, that the other characters can be saved from the "destruction wrought by his innocence,"<sup>12</sup> and that the story can finally come to an end. Ebenezer, having defined innocence as an inwardly unchanging state, but outwardly a force for change, has come to see at the end of Part III that his supposed inner stasis has been increasingly called into question by the driving force of his existential needs – as is best seen in his behavior on board the *Cyprian* –, while his supposedly outwardly dynamic force has been stifled by circumstances which perpetually mock his intentions and turn his actions against himself – as is best seen in his loss of Malden. The fact, however, that the substitution of

<sup>9</sup> Tony Tanner's statement that "in sum what has happened is that eighteenth-century history has been completely dissolved by Barth's twentieth-century mind" ("The Hoax that Joke Bilked," *Partisan Review* XXXIV,1 [Winter, 1967], 102–109; cf. 105) must, therefore, be modified. Barth does not dissolve history, but carries the problems of the past into the present and vice versa, thereby trying to constitute meaning for both.

<sup>10</sup> This is exactly what Barth himself asserts when he says that *The Sot-Weed Factor* was written "by an author who imitates the role of Author" ("The Literature of Exhaustion," [note 2] 33).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jean E. Kennard, "Imitations of Imitations," *Mosaic* III,2 (Winter, 1970), 116–131; cf. 117f.

<sup>12</sup> John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (Doubleday & Co.: Garden City, N. Y., rev. ed. 1967 [1960]), p. 723. (All further references will be in parentheses.) Cf. Stanley Edgar Hyman, *Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time* (Horizon Press: New York, 1966), p. 207.

experience for innocence coincides with the denouement of the plot not only links up the protagonist with the narrator, but with the implied author and the reader as well. The Epilogue (Part IV) is meant to show that not only has experience been substituted for innocence, but necessity for freedom, reality for fiction. The play of the imagination which had previously prevailed on every level of the novel has come to an end.

But within the limits of the plot this play of the imagination becomes more and more significant, employing parody to turn the picaresque structure of the novel into a series of separate games. In other words: the concept of the *Bildungsroman*, which is connected with the picaresque, is denied and affirmed at the same time. It is denied in that the development of Ebenezer Cooke corresponds neither to an "organic ideal of development" nor to a "traditional humanist ideal which envisions development as a dialectical process through various interlocutors and above all through encountering a series of imaginative models."<sup>13</sup> Ebenezer's single-mindedness does indeed seem to point to an organic ideal of development, while Burlingame, due to his continual change in appearance and attitude, would seem to embody the "various interlocutors" as well as to offer Ebenezer "a series of imaginative models," and might thus be seen as an answer to the humanist ideal of development. Yet Ebenezer's development cannot at the same time be described as a process of growing self-perfection, as implied in the organic ideal, but only as a process of growing disillusionment; nor can the dialectical process between Ebenezer and Burlingame be described as a process of growing communication, as implied in the humanist ideal, but only as a process of growing alienation. Concluding, then, that the novel does indeed trace the development of a character, but shows the ideal being deconstructed rather than constructed, *The Sot-Weed Factor* would even have to be called an anti-*Bildungsroman* were it not for the structure of the novel itself. As an achievement of the narrative imagination, *The Sot-Weed Factor* affirms the concepts of self-perfection and communication in the very act of denying them. Since this narrative imagination is shared not only by author and reader, but, within the novel, by narrator and protagonist as well, it is in a continual state of transcending itself. Thus it does not aim to illuminate the difference between ideal and reality or fact and fiction; within the sphere of imagination and its unlimited possibilities of play, the distinction finally becomes irrelevant.

Ebenezer, for whom "great imagination" and "enthusiasm" blend with "his gay irresolution" (p. 8), places the unlimited possibilities of play in relation to his notion of the self so as to interpret every possible identity as a role, while Burlingame places them in relation to his notion of the world so as to interpret every possible role as identity; he plays "this world like a harpsichord . . . and manipulates its folk like puppeteers" (p. 422). However, because of the tension between identity and role play in the novel must eventually become game and by obeying the rules of game acquire a meaning. Thus the game in which Ebenezer, having invented a set of rules, kills an ant according to these rules, evolves into a metonymy of the world at large, for which God, too, having created it at will and endowed it with certain laws, might shed "tears of compassion, tempered with vast understanding and acceptance of the totality of life" (p. 43). But the freedom of the playful Creator must be paid for with the disorientation of the playthings he creates. And as chance in like manner turns into fate for Ebenezer's ant, Ebenezer himself feels lost in a universe which no longer knows a "celestial navigator:"

<sup>13</sup> Charles Altieri, "Organic and Humanist Models in Some English Bildungsroman," *The Journal of General Education* XXIII,3 (October, 1971), 220-240; cf. 220.

The stars were no longer points on a black hemisphere that hung like a sheltering roof above his head; the relationship between them he saw now in three dimensions, of which the one most deeply felt was depth. The length and breadth of space between the stars seemed trifling by comparison: what struck him now was that some were nearer, others farther out, and others unimaginably remote. Viewed in this manner, the constellations lost their sense entirely; (p. 346)

It is only the author as narrator, in his position between the playful protagonist and the playful Creator, who by transcending his traditional role as intermediary between fiction and reality attains a new rank: as the creator of stories which must likewise be read as games, in which certain characters meet with random resistance and have to prove their worth, his own position is one characterized by a new kind of freedom. Pity for his creatures may result in self-assurance, while his self-pity in relation to *his* Creator can take the form of narrative self-restraint.

Yet story-telling not only indirectly constitutes identity in producing a fiction which can claim to be an existentially significant extension of the self, but directly constitutes identity by its communicative function – that is to say, through recollection and report –; for not everything that might be experienced can each time really be experienced by any one given person. Thus in *The Sot-Weed Factor* it is Anna who realizes, after her brother has been away for a day, that she will never come to understand the events of that day: “‘The awful truth of’t was, *I’d not been there to see!*’” (p. 116) If therefore story-telling must take the place of experience, it necessarily leads not only to a feeling of uncertainty about whether the story corresponds to experience and is therefore true, but to the more far-reaching doubt as to whether experience is more true than the story. And it is this twofold doubt which leads to the impossibility of deciding unequivocally on one course of action in any given situation (Ebenezer), or to the impossibility of abiding by one decision without immediately qualifying it with another (Burlingame).

The tension between identity and role, the expression it finds in game, as well as its attempted resolution into play, is carried over into the dimension of time, on the one hand, and space, on the other hand, by relating it to history and geography respectively. Thus Ebenezer’s bridging the distance between England and America parallels the process of his substituting imagination for reality or of his supposed constitution of identity, which in its turn corresponds to the growing surrealism which marks the incidents of his voyage. And Maryland itself appears as a *terra incognita*, when Ebenezer and Bertrand are first stranded on its unfamiliar shore, which, by the very abundance of possible geographical – and Utopian – misinterpretations, eludes all definition (cf. pp. 277ff), thereby symbolically anticipating Ebenezer’s failure to come to terms with reality. The continuous change of possessory title in the colony – individualized in Ebenezer’s loss and recovery of his estate – reduces the possibility of becoming deeply rooted in the land and of establishing an authentic tradition.<sup>14</sup> Mobil-

<sup>14</sup> Alan Holder, in an article entitled “‘What Marvelous Plot . . . Was Afoot?’ History in Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*,” (*American Quarterly* XX,3 [Fall, 1968], 596–604) maintains that the author’s desire “to embrace simultaneously a variety of possibilities – that the heroes and villains of the orthodox view were indeed such, that the application of these terms should be reversed, that the men did not exist at all” (602) is proof not only of “Barth’s *playing* with history” (600), but of the fact that “Barth appears to stand outside history” (604), and that history therefore does not strongly worry him. But the idea of identity as historical repetition as well as the value that Barth seems to place in fancy necessitate this simultaneous variety of possibilities without diminishing the importance of history as such.

ity becomes the dominating feature of the colonists' character, which again refers the problem of identity and role to the realm of the imagination.

With respect to the dimension of time, the workings of the imagination must be related to the course of history. The conception of history implied in the novel again makes use of the affinity between individual experience and the story by describing colonial politics as a series of plots and counterplots, thereby implicitly diminishing the idea of historical truth by diminishing the idea of political reliability, "especially in Maryland, where friends may change their colors like tree frogs." (p. 120) The uncertainty as to whether someone is to be regarded as a friend or as a traitor can never be completely dissolved: the change of identity and role, as it refers to the mutually exclusive realms of "Fact and Fancy" (p. 743), approaches meaning only in the realm of fancy. The fact, moreover, that at the end the historicity even of Lord Baltimore as well as of his enemy John Coode are called into question, diminishes the value of the alternative as such.<sup>15</sup> The quarrel between Catholics and Protestants over the colony of Maryland consequently appears more like a stage play,<sup>16</sup> in which the different actors lose and win by turns; and by becoming a drama, world history ultimately affirms man's confidence in the power of his imagination and its many possibilities, as opposed to action and its restriction of these very possibilities.

Prerequisite to the constitution of even the most tentative meaning these various possibilities are organized, in accordance with the idea of repetition, by memory rather than by action. Yet they are then called into question by the very nature of memory itself. The past, in its arbitrariness, in its dependence upon the condition of man's memory, upon his determination to keep things in mind, and upon the willingness of others to affirm his own recollections, must become a product of the imagination in the same way as the future. (Cf. pp. 126ff.)<sup>17</sup> Change, therefore, becomes the fundamental human condition which dissolves all moral postulates insofar as their existence presupposes fixed norms, laws, and traditions. As in myth it is due to the immortality of the gods, here it is due to the infinite possibilities of the human imagination that good conduct as well as bad – as shown by Bertrand's betrayal of his master and Ebenezer's forgiving him, or Ebenezer's betrayal of Joan Toast and her forgiving him – become merely comic variants of being; for they are ultimately without consequence.

This is true even of extreme situations, for example that in which Ebenezer nearly drowns. Ebenezer himself sees the necessity of death "from the *story-teller's* point of view." (p. 270) In

<sup>15</sup> Cf. John M. Bradbury, "Absurd Insurrection: The Barth-Percy Affair," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* LXVIII,3 (Summer, 1969), 319–329; cf. 321.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon E. Slethaug argues that "the fourth and final part of *The Sot-Weed Factor* suggests that developments within the story have no 'resolution'. Each character simply goes on with the business of life, never achieving the kind of ultimate success or final tragedy common to fiction and uncommon to life. So the idea of history as drama appears refuted." ("Barth's Refutation of the Idea of Progress," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* XIII,3 [1972], 11–29; cf. 19). But this argument fails to take into account the difference in kind between the story proper and the epilogue. History within the first three parts of the novel, seen as a series of stories, clearly possesses the quality of drama.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara C. Ewell argues that "such an assertion of indeterminacy would seem to directly contradict the novel's other statement, explored through Burlingame, that the past is one's source of identity." ("John Barth: The Artist of History," *The Southern Literary Journal* V,2 [Spring, 1973], 32–46; cf. 39). However, the imagined past is as true as the real past, because both are indistinguishable; therefore the imagined past is likewise a valid source of one's identity, which does not necessarily call for a "leap of faith from fact to opinion" (40).

his imagination he has anticipated every possible form of death because he must admit death's finality as he must admit that stories end in order for another story to begin; "but that the teller himself must live a particular tale and die – Unthinkable! Unthinkable!" (p. 271) Thus, according to an implicit law of compensation, the invention and telling of stories becomes as necessary as their content becomes optional. The distinctive features of imagination and experience are reversed: the process of the imagination becomes irreversible, unique, and coherent, thus acquiring the features which normally define the process of experience. This transvaluation does, however, imply the unacknowledged postulate that reality will ultimately yield to a consciousness which does not accept its premises: all appearances notwithstanding, Ebenezer ultimately need not drown.

Within the scope of this radical transvaluation, life in *The Sot-Weed Factor* can become a dream and fiction can become an action. Thus, it is "heroism in general and martyrdom in particular" (p. 685), the most unnatural of human attitudes, which can acquire a precarious meaning. For although the attempt to constitute an individual value, which distinguishes the hero as well as the martyr, is indeed impossible in a world full of contingencies and is therefore an illusion, it is consequently only an illusion that can acquire any meaning at all. This is an existential, not a logical paradox, the premises of which, though ironic – "*The Dreamer of the World*" (p. 515) must always awake to reality in the end, and fiction as an action ultimately postulates a real, not an ideal reader – must be accepted in spite of this implicit irony if there is to be any authentic humanism at all.

Thus it may be said that by connecting the problem of identity and role with parody as form on the one hand, which in a historical context appears as the tension between imitation and play, and with parody as content on the other hand, which in an existential context appears as the tension between necessity and freedom, *The Sot-Weed Factor* is of special importance for an understanding of Barth's work: it marks his shift in commitment from the realm of reality to the realm of imagination. But this shift is exemplary and should therefore lead to a reconsideration of *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a, or even *the* decisive landmark in the development of postmodern fiction.

The postmodern writer, whether heir of, or opponent to modernism, shares with his literary predecessors a feeling of profound resentment against the cause/effect relation as the dominating principle in ordering 20th century reality. For although apparently able to guarantee the individual's identity, this concept eventually traps man by inducing him to interpret the motives and consequences of his thoughts and actions in terms of either objective or subjective necessity. It was objective necessity which modernism sought to escape by placing its trust in an inflation of the self; while postmodernism discarded this attitude when it realized that the self, instead of gaining freedom from determinism, was, subsequently, being propelled by subjective necessity. Thus, the common resentment against the cause/effect relation led to different reactions on the part of the modern and the postmodern writer: the former recoiled from reality and tried to create his own means of self-realization; the latter tried to shatter reality into unrelated fragments and to treat individual experience as a random series of incoherent data.

Yet even this postmodern attitude of revolt could not, by an inner logic, free itself from that against which it rebelled. Thus, in Barth's earlier novels, for instance, mythotherapy (*The End of the Road*) or the impetus of story-telling (*The Floating Opera*) appear as concepts for dealing with a reality from whose clutches man ultimately cannot escape. The struggle of the imagination against reality must finally lead to an exhaustion on the part of the imagination.

This experience resulted in the notion of postmodern literature as a literature of exhaustion and, eventually, silence.

It seems more than appropriate that Barth himself should have been the first to discover this impasse.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, he undertakes to transcend the contrast between imagination and reality by treating fictional and historical events alike as stories; as such they can all become, for him, precious objects in the treasury of future fictions. This attitude marks a turning point in postmodern writing: the deconstruction of reality is no longer an end in itself but becomes, like the deconstruction of an existing fiction through parody, the mere precondition for its reconstruction on the author's own terms. The story thus becomes an emblem of the postmodern imagination: like the game it grants the freedom to enter it while making necessary its subsequent execution. Necessity for the author comes to lie in the process of story-telling as such: he must pay for the initial freedom of his imagination with self-imposed constraints, which represent the rules of the game.

<sup>18</sup> Thus Barth's essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," has to be read as an account of how he overcame this impasse. He, too, like Borges, "confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work." ("The Literature of Exhaustion," [note 2] 31) The fact that this essay about form started a prolonged and predominantly content-oriented argument among critics amounts to what could be called historic irony: Barth had decided to refute a literary opinion which, at that very moment, he was about to promulgate.