

## SPEAKING OF MYTH. AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BARTH

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John Barth is probably the most important American postmodernist author writing nowadays: The prime maximalist of American Fiction as some critics have called him.<sup>1</sup> Born in Cambridge, Maryland in 1930, he is the author of ten novels – *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) or *Letters* (1980) among them – a series of short fictions (*Lost in the Funhouse*, 1968), a volume of novellas (*Chimera*, 1972), and two collections of non-fiction (*The Friday Book*, 1984 and *Further Fridays*, 1995). His works *The Floating Opera* and *Lost in the Funhouse* were finalist for the National Book Award in fiction, which he won in 1973 with *Chimera*.

Interviews with Barth usually center around his last book, a work in process or his opinion on Postmodernism, a task to which he dedicated his two seminal essays "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment". But in this interview, conducted in León during a visit of the author to our country, Barth discusses his relationship with four literary figures, which he has acknowledged as the "four regnant deities in his personal pantheon."<sup>2</sup> These icons are in literary-historical order Odysseus, Scheherazade, Don Quixote and Huckleberry Finn. For him, there is no fifth, yet. These figures have appeared recurrently in his works: as characters, as surrogates for them, and he has discussed widely their relevance in his work in his numerous essays. The admiration of Barth for these mythological icons, "the four compass-points of my narrative imagination" as he calls them, is not half-hazard. It responds to a specific way of conceiving literature, since they have much in common with the postmodernist aesthetics: the motif of the voyage, the search for identity, the myth of the wandering hero, the power of fiction to grant life or to kill, the infinite deferral of the ending, and the relationship between fact and fiction. All these issues are discussed by our author, as well as his conception of narrative creation. In this interview he demonstrates how important universal literature is for him, and how his work is fundamentally intertextual. He speaks of how he learned to read *Don Quixote* with Pedro Salinas and of the influence of Jorge Luis Borges in his work. This is an interview where John Barth shows that as an author he is, first and foremost, a reader.

**Q.** After reading your work, I have the impression that there are four characters that keep reappearing all the time: Odysseus, Scheherazade, Don Quixote and Huckleberry Finn. And I think you said in "The Limits of Imagination" that you considered these four characters to be the four compass points of your narrative imagination. Could you explain what you mean by that and what is the cause of your admiration for these four literary figures?

**A.** You will agree that except for Scheherazade, who comes in into several works, (Scheherazade is with me all the time) the other ones, Odysseus, Don Quixote and Huckleberry Finn, they do not appear literally very often in any of the works. And yet, they

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1. For instance, Bin Ramke & Donald Revell in "A Conversation with John Barth" in *The Bloomsbury Review*, October/November 1991.

2. "The Limits of Imagination" *Further Fridays. Essays, Lectures and Other Non-Fiction 1984-1994*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995. 61.

are the four points in my literary imagination. They are the four deities in my pantheon. There is really no fifth, no other. If you say, if it is your impression, that they, or surrogates for them, appear in some of the novels, this doesn't surprise me, and it does interest me.

For me, as I wrote in "The Limits of Imagination", the images of Odysseus traveling back home, of Scheherazade telling stories to the king to save her neck, of Don Quixote and Santo Panzer wandering through La Mancha or Huckleberry Finn in the Mississippi, are far more powerful than the works that contain them. They have become transcendental icons. This, I guess, is what Leslie Fiedler meant when he said that what stays with you of a work when you have forgotten all the words, indicates its mythopoetic quality.

**Q.** And one of the images that you have retained from *The Odyssey* is that of Odysseus striving homeward, right? An image that has appeared frequently in your work, I think. But, why Odysseus? Are you interested in him because of your well-known fascination with navigation? Is it for your interest in wandering myths? How do you read him in *The Odyssey*, as someone who is eager to go home, back to his loving wife or, on the contrary, as Dante does in the *Divine Comedy*, as someone eager to travel and to have more knowledge, an adventurer? Or, rather, as both?

**A.** Well, obviously his official motivation is to get home, his *official* motivation. In one respect, Aeneas is more interesting because Odysseus knows where he has to go: he has to go back to Ithaca, whereas Aeneas has to make his way as he goes. Aeneas has to invent his destination, he has to find it, as well as get there. But is Odysseus really eager to go home? I am reminded of the Spanish proverb in *Don Quixote* that the road is better than the end, and we know, of course, that he wants to go home, but it takes him a very long time, many years with Circe and so on. It is not like Aeneas with Dido, when the gods have to remind him that he has to go back home: "Come on, come on, there are things to do, let's get out of here". Nobody pushes Odysseus. It is as if destination is destiny. He forgets now and then, not where he is supposed to go, but that he should get along and leave. He has to be reminded not of his identity, but of his identity in the sense that Odysseus is "the one who is supposed to be going home to Ithaca". Nobody can surpass Homer in this last scene when after many years he reaches Ithaca, not by any effort of his own, but in his sleep, as if in a dream. Then the other work starts.

Now, for parallel situations in my work. I don't think they appear in *The Floating Opera* or *The End of the Road*, but we could say that it starts with *The Sot-Weed Factor*, because of the difficult voyage and the search for his [the protagonist's: Ebenezer Cook] real identity. He is officially a poet, but he isn't a poet. He has to learn it the hard way: he has to learn how to become a poet, and his voyage is one full of tribulations. It is a literal voyage, but it is also a figurative voyage. Like Odysseus, and like the traditional mythical wandering heroes, he has to lose everything, including his identity, in order to arrive to his real destination. In *Giles Goat Boy*, this become much more problematic. In fact, Cristina, as you may know, it was some book-reviewer, some critic writing about *The Sot-Weed Factor*, who said that the author had clearly been heavily influenced by Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. And I had not read it!!!! Then I went on and read it. This introduces the problem of self-consciousness; of handling that material once that you know that this is mythical material. Then I approached it without the innocence that I had in

*The Sot-Weed Factor*, where I had a quite innocent approach: I wasn't even aware of Odysseus, Joseph Campbell, or a wandering hero.

That interested me, because that's where a kind of postmodernism begins to enter the room. It was interesting to recycle that material again in *Giles Goat Boy* in a perfectly self-conscious way, and see whether it still could be made in a sufficiently reliable way. Borges would not approve that. I spoke to Borges, he had not read any of my novels; I didn't expect him to read any of my novels. He didn't like to read novels. *Giles Goat Boy* is, as you may know, my least favorite novel, but I would agree with Borges that it is a novel that would be better to talk about in ten minutes of conversation than write a story with footnotes to it. Then in the subsequent books the myth appears more recurrently.

Q. You even have an Odysseus character that appears in *The Tidewater Tales*.

A. Yes, I figured that it was time, that after all these surrogates for him, why don't I bring the chap on stage? I did the same with Scheherazade and Huckleberry Finn, although Huckleberry Finn has been less important for me. He is less rich an archetype for me. Scheherazade is really my favorite one. She is the one who tells the story, and she is as good as her next story is. It is not enough to have told two hundred and thirty seven stories, if she does not tell a good story then her neck. . . .

Q. You seem to be interested in oriental myths, in the roots of storytelling. How about Simbad the Sailor? In *Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* you seem to combine the myth of Odysseus (the wandering hero) with the Arab tradition of *The One Thousand and One Nights*.

A. Well, of course, Simbad is the Arabic Odysseus and the parallels are interesting; so are the dissimilarities interesting. What they have in common is that most of the trouble arises not while they are at sea, but, as my Simbad says, "islands is where the trouble is." On the sea you get sea monsters and you get storms, but it is when you get ashore that the trouble starts. Now, there's a good analogue with Huckleberry Finn. My problem with Huckleberry Finn is that I grew up in Maryland and my imagination is full of tidewaters, water that comes and goes, and the trouble with the Mississippi as a metaphor is that, like time, it goes only one way, so does Huck. He is always going downstream. There is never any circling back and so forth. For this reason, he is the less interesting mythological figure to me, never mind he is one of the American icons. I mean, he is one of the American essences. Odysseus goes around the Mediterranean, and so does Aeneas, and Simbad wanders all over everywhere off the map, that's what is interesting, he goes off the chart, but Huckleberry Finn never goes off the chart, it is always the left bank or the right bank of the Mississippi, one channel.

Q. Would you say then that Ambrose in *Lost in the Funhouse* could function as a surrogate for Huckleberry Finn in the sense that he seems to be going in one direction, searching for his identity (if it can be considered as a *künstlerroman*). Are they both, as teenagers, discovering their identity and their relation with the external world? You have said that Mark Twain's novel is the very voice of America. Could this also be related to Ambrose's anagnorisis in the Funhouse at Ocean City on the Fourth of July?

A. Well, both have a quality of ingenuousness, a kind of shrewd innocence. Huckleberry Finn is resourceful, but he is unsophisticated. He is utterly, completely unsophisticated. He is in an American Odysseus, in the stereotypical sense of the word. Odysseus is full of stratagems, he is very worldly, he knows how to handle situations and people. Simbad is usually just lucky. He is a canny merchant, but every situation he gets involved in turns out to be a disaster and it's usually by no virtue of his own that he is helped out of his difficulties, he finds the magic something and he is saved. He is a survivor. What makes Huckleberry Finn so comfortingly American is that, despite his unsophistication, he has a certain sympathy and a sort of shrewd countryboy resourcefulness, and finally he will light out for the territory. Of course, the huge difference between him and Scheherazade or Simbad, or Odysseus is that civilization, as he sees it, repels him, it means American nineteenth century close-mindedness.

Q. But he also would like to have a house and a family, don't you think?

A. But he wants to light out for the territory, which is the last line of the novel. He says "I've been there before" and he does not want to go back. Whereas Odysseus wants to go back to his homeland.

Q. But is that all the truth? Aren't they also liars in some respect? Both Odysseus and Huckleberry Finn seem to disguise all the time and to lie about their identities. And the same happens to Ambrose and to several of your characters, especially in *The Sot-Weed Factor* and in *Chimera*, where they have these proteic shape-shifting characters like Burlingame or Polyeidus who keep fooling the protagonists and the readers about their true identity.

A. Indeed Odysseus and Huckleberry Finn are liars, they have to improvise their identities. Scheherazade is a different cup of tea. Scheherazade does not improvise. She also constructs her identity, but she does that by evoking other worlds, other people. She is a fabricator. She does not fool the king; she does not deceive him in any way, that is, except for her grand stratagem. But she does keep taking him narratively into other identities, into other situations, than the one she and he are in. That is not exactly improvising, but it is a course of action, a distraction. She improvises a relation.

Q. Let's talk about Scheherazade, a very familiar character for Spanish people as well, although we have a quite different spelling and pronunciation.

A. Well, in America, we got its pronunciation from the 18<sup>th</sup> c. French translation. If you get me going for Scheherazade you are going to be here for one thousand and one nights.

Q. Your admiration for Scheherazade is well known. As I understand, you are not interested in her as an exotism, since I have read that you said that this infatuation had

nothing to do with the Western "orientalism" deplored by Edward Said and others, but rather one storyteller's professional interest in another.<sup>3</sup> What does she represent for you?

A. She represents the spirit of the "narrador", of the "escritor." Let me tell you a story.

One of my sons is a neuroscientist and he reminded me of the theory of a fellow in Boston who calls himself a neurophilosopher, because he has one foot in neuroscience and one foot in the history of philosophy. He wrote a book called *Consciousness Explained*, which I liked enough, so I wrote him a fan letter; it turned out that he liked *The Sot-Weed Factor* and he wrote me. Anyway, this man, Daniel C. Dennett, seriously proposes that human consciousness is essentially of a narrative character. There are these famous four questions for all the animals: do I fight? do I run? do I eat? do I make love? And the brain evolves to be a sort of scenario making a chain, if this is this, then I will do that.

This is not far from the "As ifs" and "What ifs" of narration. He even calls human consciousness a "Joycean machine", we are a machine. Even as we are sitting here, we are receiving thousand of sensory data: colors, sounds, smell, . . . , and the brain has evolved just for survival reasons, to sort out this from that. So that everything that happens around us, if Cristina says this (and this is not conscious) then I will say this, and if I say this, she will say that. Now, Scheherazade, along with her other virtues, certainly, this essential figure, embodies this equation of narrating, successfully narrating in order to survive, in order to stay alive. What is missing in the metaphor in the figure of Scheherazade is that in life it is a two way process; she is always narrating, she is always telling stories, while the king is always listening. Whereas in life, maybe not in interviews, but in life, you get to tell your story, I get to tell my story. Living is a narrative process, but it is narrative reception as well; it is input as well as output.

I think we would be clinically insane if we ceased to think about life as stories, not in a dramatic sense, like I am a hero, and this is chapter one, and now comes chapter two, but as an ongoing process. What this neuroscientist says, and I love this radical statement, is that *the self* is simply the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories we tell the others about who we are. All that the word "self" comes down to finally is the stories that we make up, the stories that we fabricate. We are the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are and that we edit constantly. We are always editing.

Scheherazade is the analogue of that. Of course, what appeals to any writer is that her professional life is always on the line, she is only as good as her next story is. And what appeals to me, did originally and still does, is that, in addition, there is the erotic element, which I see as an analogue, pleasant analogue, to the relation between reader and writer. If we understand that it is a reciprocal process, that it is not a passive reader and an active writer. There is always collaboration between the two, although the sultan does not help very much with the stories.

Q. Well, maybe not telling stories, but he listens to them and learns from them.

A. Well, with patriarchal cultures, you know.

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3. He said so in "Don't Count on It. A Note on the Number of the 1001 Nights". *The Friday Book*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984. 258-281.

**Q.** Would you say that the technique she uses, the continuous deferral of the ending of the stories. . .

**A.** Yes, when she hasn't finished one story she starts with another one.

**Q.** Would you see that related postmodernist aesthetics?

**A.** That's good. Yes, I think so. Sometimes Scheherazade even stops literally in the middle of a sentence and she says: "And just then, . . . But I will tell you that tomorrow". Indeed I must tell you that it is my own practice too, and many writers work that way. Hemingway used to say that he liked to stop when the writing was going very well so that he could start again at that point. I sometimes, like Scheherazade literally stop in the middle of a sentence because I have come to a subject, I have come to a verb and I know what the rest of the sentence is, but I think I am not going to write that today, because of the emotion of picking up things.

Do you know Ann Tyler [*The Accidental Tourist*]? She was a close neighbor of mine in Baltimore. She spoke once to my students and she used a phrase that I loved. A professor at my university had said "literature changed around 1910 when everybody began composing with a typewriter." I told the anecdote to my students and I said, there are a few of us who still do. And she said she did too, she said that she liked the "muscular cursive". That says it, right? Because there is something about that narrative flow. For others, of course, the typewriter is something out of fashion. But I think that linking the letters on the typewriter they are all separated with this little space. This is something like passengers on the metro, sitting side by side, but not really touching, Scheherazade reminds me of the "muscular cursive" because of the flow of the narrative.

**Q.** So, Scheherazade is a source of inspiration for you as a writer. She represents the ideal storyteller because of her passionate virtuosity, doesn't she?

**A.** That's right. You know, I used that expression in "Dunyazadia, the story of Scheherazade's a little sister. The genie that appeared to tell the stories of *The One Thousand and One Nights to Scheherazade* and her sister said that what you want in a story, and in lovemaking, is passionate virtuosity. I believed that then, and I still do. I took the expression from Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Tlön, Ubquar, Orbis Tertius" about the encyclopedia of an imaginary world. The encyclopedia described everything in that nonexistent world, from its algebra, to its fire. If algebra stands for technique and fire for the writer's passion, there you have it. Good literature requires both algebra and fire, technique and passion. In other words, passionate virtuosity.

**Q.** Well, speaking of good novels, or "exemplary novels". Let's talk about Cervantes and his character Don Quixote who, I believe, is another of your favorite literary images. I would like to know what attracts you to Don Quixote and how you interpret him. You know that traditionally he has been interpreted as a somebody who read too many chivalric novels, became mad and thought he was an errant knight. In your reading of Don Quixote, which is evidenced in his presence as a character in *The Tidewater Tales*, and, in my opinion, in the surrogate you make for him with Ebenezer Cook in *The Sot-Weed Factor*,

do you think he is really mad, do you think he does not distinguish fact from fiction? How do you relate that to postmodernist aesthetics?

A. Pedro Salinas used to say that there are a few books that one should read every ten years to see (it's a Borgesian idea, actually) how the text changes. The *Don Quixote* that you read when you were twenty years old is a different story than the one you read when you are thirty years old. I haven't read *Don Quixote* for some years now, but what attracted my memory of *Don Quixote* over the years is that famous business in part II, the fact that the story in Part I becomes a function in Part II. The people he's meeting, they all know he is the famous *Don Quixote*. This is postmodernism. This is the beginning of postmodernism. This is proto-postmodernism, obviously. The story, what he has done in Part I, becomes part of the dynamic of the plot in Part II, and this amazes me. And, of course, he begins to win illusion; he begins to become victorious over reality, because reality is cooperating a little bit. Reality has accepted the idea of illusion. I have told this before,<sup>4</sup> but when I was a student with Salinas, he asked us once, "What is the first *quixotic* moment in the book and that you would call *quixotic*?" And someone said, it is when he goes out the first time" and he said, "No, it's earlier than that" and I sort of saw it and I suggested "It is before he goes out at all, it is when he is preparing his Armour and he makes the helmet-visor for his Armour out of cardboard and he tries it with his sword and cuts it, and then he makes another one and doesn't try it." And Pedro was just delighted by that, he said that there were only three people who understood that, one was a famous critic on *Don Quixote*, the other was himself, and, he said, "Now we have a third!" That was my most wonderful moment as a student.

And it bears on your question, because then you can begin to ask the question: does he know that if he tries his sword on that thing it won't work and he will not be able to proceed with his adventures? Does he know, when he puts it on, that it is not a real visor, that it is an imitation, a virtual visor? Or not? And I would love to think that he knows but he does not know. Who was it that said that it is the mark of civilization to be able to carry two contradictory ideas at the same time and still function? I think it was James; it sounds more like William James than Henry James. But I think, without getting too psychological about *Don Quixote* (it's a very vigorous story) I think in an example like that, he is not crazy when he tries that thing; he knows better than to try again. But Pedro was right, it is a *quixotic* moment in this interesting way: what does he think when he put that thing on? Does he know or does he not know? He knows it is pasteboard because he has tried it, but he knows better than to try again. Now, in his adventures, over and over, he doesn't learn from experience.

Q. And would you think of your character in *The Sot-Weed Ebenezer Cook* as a *quixotic* character?

A. Not in the rich sense of the word, not as Cervantes imagined it, but he is certainly innocent. He has a kind of foolish intrepidity, and I suppose that somewhere within himself he realizes he is a fool and that he has been deemed foolish. He has to be a poet, but he knows that he is a fool. He is more innocent even that he thinks he is. Even if he takes

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4. He has done so. "The Spanish Connection". *Further Fridays*. 43.

that as his guiding principle. It is like saying: you think you are innocent, well, let me show you how innocent you are. The world has to test him and he has to rub his nose in his innocence. In fact, he has to lose it, in order to accept himself. So, yes, There is something not pseudoquixotic, but cuasiquixotic about Ebenezer Cook. Obviously Quixote is so much a richer figure, he is one that is larger than life, Ebenezer is not.

**Q.** How about his love for Joan Toast? At the beginning of the novel when he decides she is going to be his Dulcinea, do you think he has the same kind of fixation than Don Quixote has; I mean, never mind that she is a prostitute, he sees her as his lady?

**A.** That's worth saying. It is more an official thing. As with the knights and the ladies: they ought to have a lady. If she is a prostitute, she is not a prostitute somehow, etc, etc. I think it is part of the job. It is one of the prerequisite for the job: you are a poet, you must have a lady.

You see, what I did unintentionally in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and self-consciously after that, was to investigate all this mythopoetic character of narration. Something that could be said to start actually with *The End of the Road*, and the mythotherapy that the doctor prescribes Jacob Horner. I was interested in realizing that the myths really are, especially those wandering heroes, just a kind of apparently exaggerated version of the rite of passage. And everybody's, every ordinary person's search for identity.

And yes, there is that other thing that I have been apparently from the beginning very interested in: the process of narration itself. This sounds postmodern, but I think it's just correct. We cannot live, we cannot function without stories: I am doing this, and then I am going to do that, and if all goes well, then I am going to do that, but if not, then I'll do that, etc., that's the way we go through life. And so when I look for the big exemplars or icons for that then these are the famous ones. Surely there are others, but anybody who has Scheherazade, Don Quixote, Odysseus, and maybe Huckleberry Finn, as stars to navigate by can go, I think, where he or she wants to go. But remember that I have said it before,<sup>5</sup> and I want to say it again: one must not confuse the navigation stars with the destination.

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5. In the lecture titled "Cien años de qué?" which he delivered at the conference "La literatura de las Américas: 1898-1998" in León, 12-16 October 1998. This lecture was published in 1999 by the University de León Press in the proceedings of the conference.