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**On John Barth's Postmodernist Refashioning
of the Literary Canon in His Early Works**

论约翰·巴思早期作品对文学经典的后现代重塑

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**On John Barth's Postmodernist Refashioning of
the Literary Canon in His Early Works**

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Abstract in English

In contemporary American literature, John Barth is a prolific writer rich in the spirit of deconstruction. He has refashioned a lot of literary classics. Ever since the publication of his first book, he has become one of the targets of attention for critics, and the labels on him have been continuously changing. He was labelled an American existentialist in the middle of the 1950s. After the appearance of *The End of the Road*, he was called a black humorist. In the 1960s, he was called a fabulist. In the 1970s, Barth found himself called a postmodernist. This label is enduring and has been accepted by Barth up to now. The reason why Barth is called a postmodernist is that he has been exploring in the literary sphere unrelentingly, practising experiments and renovating most ungrudgingly.

This dissertation discusses Barth's postmodernist refashioning of the literary classics. As far as the American literary canon is concerned, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, popular for nearly three hundred years, gives a role model for Americans in their daily behavior. The core of the spirit embodied in the book has been internalized by Americans to become part of their temperament, and is a good explanation for the realization of the American dream. Facts show that in whatever stage of social development, the literary canon is needed. For a long time, writers have been refashioning the literary canon. This activity is so closely linked with Barth's writing career that it is like a red thread running through his novels. The four novels *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*, *Chimera*, and *The Tidewater Tales* published at different stages in Barth's career, that is to say, in 1960, 1966, 1972, and 1982, respectively adapt *Tom Jones*, the Arabic and Greek myths, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Odyssey*. The techniques used are different, and roughly, they can reflect the features of Barth's novels and his attention focus.

Deconstruction holds that a text makes a signature of an author. It is the nature of a signature to call for repetitive countersignatures and this kind of repeatability is irrepressible. Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* closely imitates *Tom Jones* by Henry

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Fielding, an English novelist in the eighteenth century, and it can be considered a countersignature of the latter. Barth adapts rather than adopts. The continuous digressions in *Tom Jones's* narrative are dismissed as an immature stage in the development of the genre. However, this pristine state is popular with many critics. By inheriting the picaresque style in Fielding's era, *The Sot-Weed Factor* signals the prodigal's return. In *Tom Jones*, criticism and fiction exist side by side. But in Barth's novel, criticism is eliminated and fiction is retained. As a novelist good at critifiction, Barth integrates criticism into his other novels such as *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera*, which is an acceptance of Fielding's spirit. The same use of critifiction indicates radically different intentions.

Barth's deconstruction lies in two aspects. The first is the difference between Barth's and Fielding's ideology. Unlike *Tom Jones*, there is no orderly hierarchy in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. The author has injected the twentieth-century wine into the eighteenth-century bottle. In doing this, Barth reflects deconstruction's tendency to render pyramidal hierarchy into horizontal arrangement. The second is the concept of history. Deconstruction doesn't equal destruction. They construct more than they destruct. By questioning hoary concepts, they endow people with fresh thinking and change the singular capital-letter Truth into the multiple small-letter truths. Similar efforts can be seen on Barth's part. Barth presents a world in which the historical figures and fictive figures associate, enriching the connotation of the historical novel. The historical figures that he portrays are radically different from the stereotypes. Barth seems to say that history is changeable and impervious to decipherment, and it can only be looked at, but is incapable of being interpreted. Whatever efforts man has made to explain history, the explanation will prove narrow and limited. In the words of Jameson, history is like the horizon. It can present a perspective through which people can view writings. At the same time, it is constantly receding and forever unapproachable.

With parody as a lever, *Giles Goat-Boy* refashions the Greek myth *Oedipus Rex*. Barth's revision indicates that he refuses to take the wrong end of myth and begins to tackle it squarely. In *Giles Goat-Boy*, Barth imitates Allan Poe in raising the issue of

multiple authors. The intertwining of sex and writing has been Barth's major concern.

Deconstruction is interested in the orphanhood of a text. The origin is difficult to find. This can be testified in the fact that readers can't find who wrote the Arabic and Greek myths. The original author has departed and the meaning of the text is left in the hands of interpreters. *Chimera* provides Barth's interpretation of the Arabic and Greek myths. Deconstructionists think that a text has already had deconstructive elements within it. They are listening carefully for the self-deconstructive information. To borrow a biblical phrase, they show more concern for the lost lamb than the ninety-nine sheep safe in the fold. With this in view, it is observed that *The 1001 Nights* is porous although it is seemingly watertight. Both Allan Poe and Barth have retold *The 1001 Nights*, but their focuses are different. Barth as a deconstructor seizes the number "1001" and the sentence "one child walking, one child crawling, and one child suckling." With this as a departure, he explores the cycle of Scheherazade's menstruation, pregnancy, delivery, and milking, and makes this detail take on a life of its own.

The framework plays an important role in *The 1001 Nights*. As an indispensable part, it unites the inside and the outside, and is rich in philosophical meaning and powerful in narrative function. By transplanting the framework into "Menelaiad" in *Lost in the Funhouse* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth revitalizes a dusty device. Barth's refashioning the literary canon, such as *The 1001 Nights*, also indicates that the world of literature is not a self-contained system. It is open and the web of texts forms a supertext where it is always being rewritten and this process shows no sign of coming to a halt. An individual text is but a node in this intertextuality.

Barth also refashions the Greek myth already ridden with loopholes. He has preserved the mythic skeleton and added farcicality to the mythic heroes. He limns the way Chimera came into being, gives a palinode of the flooding of the royal palace, the seduction of Anteia, and provides a new interpretation regarding the petrification of Pheneus. He challenges Medusa's ability to turn things into stones and supplies a sequel to the killing of Medusa. The result is that any text is open-ended and remains to be invigorated. The refashioning can effectively prevent dogmatism. By absorbing

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the cultural heritage adapted by Barth, readers are in a better position to face the future. Barth says clearly that he has no political intention. What he cares about is artistry. However, "political perspective [is] the absolute of all reading and all interpretation" (Jameson 17). The independent and aggressive women in *Chimera* are a manifestation of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s.

The Tidewater Tales can be viewed as a variation of *Odyssey* and other literary books. As far as Barth's refashioning is concerned, political plague is emphasized. Readers are made aware of the shadow of Jameson's "ideologeme." Barthian sense of humor characterizes Barth's *Odyssey*. By means of Grice's four principles, Barth's violation of these rules is analyzed.

Another feature of Barth's refashioning is that he is also adept at revisiting his own books, which have indisputably become part of the canon. This dissertation attempts to interpret this phenomenon by means of the coastline measurement theory. When this principle applies to story-telling, it means that based on the same literary classic, by selecting a different focus, by changing characters, perspective, tone or style, totally different and countless stories can be created. Barth's rewriting practice proves the inexhaustibility of a source text and its amazing amenability to different refashioning strategies.

Besides, Barth has reconstructed and reinvented languages. This endeavor is his war against the linguistic dictator in people's mind. Creating a language is an epitome of reshuffling the literary canon. These two activities, in parallel, are complementary and not exclusive.

On the level of words, Barth plays verbal games, including coinages, abbreviations, and loan words. In theory, Barth's coinages have the property of randomness and differences, therefore meeting the principles put forward by Saussure. Some abbreviations are crystallizations of people's wisdom after the vicissitude of time. Generally speaking, their meaning is fixed. They are concise, convenient and extremely functional. Barth imparts totally different meanings to many abbreviations, enlarges their application and permits them to assume recognizably Barthian nuances. Barth borrows synchronically from other languages. This seems to imply that there is

some inadequacy in the expressive power of English, which has failed to represent an author's idea and the writer needs other languages to make up for the pitiable lack. At the same time, Barth borrows diachronically from other epochs. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, he rejects modern English and invokes the eighteenth-century English. In *LETTERS*, he uses languages of the future. This technique becomes a way to add to the vitality of the contemporary English. On the level above words, Barth uses many figures of speech, such as simile, metaphor, ambiguity, paradox, understatement, exaggeration, bathos, and palindrome. In this way, language elements are rearranged in a kaleidoscopic fashion and possess a unique characteristic. Barth seems to force people to look at the literary canon from a new perspective and reconsider its legacy. Reading Barth's books gives readers a pair of special glasses, and allows them to question numerous suppositions in life.

This dissertation maintains that three possible elements account for Barth's adaptational attitude: Barth's musical background is one factor. The ability of an arranger is transferred to the activity of canon refashioning. The next one is the anxiety of influence. "Bloom's anxiety-ridden and aggressive young poet destined for greatness, whose quest for literary authority, like the child's quest for unique identity, can proceed only through resilient protestation against influence" (Tobin 6). Barth doesn't dodge this psychological distress. Instead, he embraces it, puts it to a good use, and by exploiting the literary resources, promotes literature to a new phase. The third is the element of milieu. Hippolyte Taine views surroundings as one of the influences on literature (Adams 639). This is a suitable description of Barth's work. In Barth's Chesapeake Bay, the landscape is constantly changing. Borders are always blurred and distinctions are unfailingly smeared. This is reflected in Barth's writing. Boundaries and distinctions are arbitrary, fluid, and negotiable: form versus content, realism versus irrealism, fact versus fiction, life versus art.

Barth's canon refashioning is of great significance. It is Barth's contribution to contemporary American literature, especially to postmodernist fiction. Barth has been systematically revamping the literary canon. To some degree, this is the key to reading Barth. On the other hand, Barth's fascination with verbal games and his experimental

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writing not only alienate him from the great masses, but also make the small masses that have been studying him feel confused. The weakness of Barth's refashioning suggests things new writers should guard against. A comparison between Barth and other postmodernist writers is conducive to an objective and fair assessment of Barth.

Key Words: Barth; Deconstruction; Postmodernism; Refashioning the Literary Canon

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Abstract in Chinese

在美国文学创作领域，约翰·巴思是一位具有解构主义精神，对经典文本重塑的多产作家。自第一部作品问世后，他就成为评论家关注的对象，贴在他身上的标签也不断发生变化。二十世纪五十年代中，莱斯利·费德勒称他为“美国存在主义者”；《路之终点》出版后，评论家认为他是黑色幽默小说家；六十年代，他成了寓言家；七十年代，巴思被叫做后现代主义者。这个界定比较持久，时至今日仍然得到巴思本人的认可。巴思之所以成为公认的后现代主义作家，与他始终一贯在文学园地中探索、实践、实验和革新有关。

巴思对文学经典的后现代解构性重塑情有独钟。就美国文学经典而言，本杰明·富兰克林的自传为美国人提供了日常行为典范，风行至今近三百年，其精神内核已经内化为美国人气质，是许多人美国梦圆的合理诠释。事实证明，不管时代发展到何种地步，人们都需要文学经典。长期以来，包括巴思在内的不同作家对文学经典进行了重塑。重塑文学经典与巴思的作品关系密切，滑稽化重塑如同一根红线贯穿巴思作品。按时序分别产生于巴思创作的不同年代，即 1960 年、1966 年、1972 年和 1982 年的《烟草商》、《羊孩子贾尔斯》、《茨默拉》和《水边故事集》分别重塑了《汤姆·琼斯》、《俄狄浦斯王》、阿拉伯与希腊神话和《奥德赛》等，技巧各不相同，能够大致反映巴思小说的特征和关注重点的变化。

解构主义认为，一部作品构成了作者的签名，而签名召唤重复即会签，这种重复性会签的冲动是不可压制的。巴思的《烟草商》对 18 世纪英国小说家菲尔丁的《汤姆·琼斯》进行了模仿，可以认为是对后者的会签。巴思对以《汤姆·琼斯》为代表的 18 世纪英国小说进行了扬弃。《汤姆·琼斯》的叙事枝节蔓生，虽然被许多评论家批评为其小说不成熟阶段的标志，但其原始状态也受到一些批评家的喜爱。菲尔丁的风格是英语小说叙事中的一个重要支流。巴思继承了菲尔丁时代流浪汉小说特点、框架故事结构和评论小说等传统，体现了这一传统的浪子回归。《汤姆·琼斯》中评论和小说共存。巴思重建文本《烟草商》时，将批评剔除，只余下小说，将评论融入自己随后的《迷失在开心馆》和《茨默拉》等小说。菲尔丁和巴思都使用小说评论，却大异其趣。巴思的小说对菲尔丁的小说世

界进行了解构。首先，巴思重塑作品中没有井然有序的等级制度。作者向 18 世纪的旧瓶里装入了蕴含 20 世纪精神的新酒。这反映了德里达将金字塔结构变为水平结构的精神。其次是历史概念。以德里达为代表的解构主义并非是破坏一切。与其说他们“破坏，”不如说他们“建立”得更多。他们质疑根深蒂固的概念，赋予人以崭新思维，将单数的大写的真理变为小写的复数的真理。巴思作品也做了类似的努力。他书中的历史人物形象与人们头脑中平素的概念相去甚远。作者似乎提醒人们，还原历史的努力和追寻历史的意义极其困难。历史可以远观，不能参透。按詹姆逊的说法，历史是一条渐近线，人们无论付出何等努力解读，都不过是管中窥豹，以蠡测海。它又是一条地平线，给予文本分析的视角，但不断隐退，永远无法到达。

《羊孩子贾尔斯》以戏仿为主要形式，对希腊神话《俄狄浦斯王》进行了重塑。巴思改写神话，显示出他对原型和英雄模式的态度变化，说明他开始与这两者正面交锋。作品中，巴思模仿爱伦·坡，提出了多重作者这个问题。写作与性的交织一向是巴思关注的重点。戏仿中，巴思利用了“元小说”的短路技巧，不断利用“间离效果”拉远读者和故事的心理距离，仿佛唯有如此写作，文学创作才能不落俗套，革故鼎新。

解构主义认为文本有明显的孤儿身份：本源很难找到。这一点可以在阿拉伯和希腊神话中得到印证：它们的确切作者很难锁定。文本作者已经隐遁，留下文本意义任人评说。《茨默拉》提供了巴思对神话的见解。解构主义者认为文本自身已经内嵌了解构的因素。他们不断地倾听并且捕捉文本自我解构的信息和声音。借用《圣经》的比喻，他们不关心羊圈的九十九只羊，而是牵挂失踪的一只羔羊。《一千零一夜》看似完美，但并非无懈可击。爱伦·坡和巴思都曾对《一千零一夜》进行过改写，但侧重点不同。作为解构主义者的巴思以“1001”这个数字及“三个孩子一个会走、一个会爬、一个正在吃奶”这个句子为出发点，就山鲁佐德的月经、受孕、分娩、和哺乳大做文章，使一个不被注意的细节意外地焕发了生命。框架故事在《一千零一夜》中占有重要地位。作为内容的有机组成部分，框架故事内接外联，极具哲学意义和叙事功能。巴思将《一千零一夜》的框架故事移植进《烟草商》和《迷失在开心馆》中的《梅内莱厄斯》，使陈旧的技巧焕发出新的生命力。巴思对《一千零一夜》的重塑还说明，世界是个不断

被重写的大文本，所有单个文本都是这个大文本的一个节点，因为《汤姆·琼斯》、《一千零一夜》和《堂·吉珂德》等文学经典本身也是对其他文本重塑的结果。文学是敞开的，并非是一个封闭自给的系统。所有的文本交织在一起构成了一个还在不断被书写的大文本。

巴思对漏洞百出的希腊神话进行了重塑。他保留了原神话的骨架，将神话人物滑稽化处理。其技巧包括对茨默拉之由来进行空白填补、对水淹皇宫、安忒亚的诱惑、菲纽斯被石化翻案，并提供新解、就美杜莎的石化能力问题提出质疑，同时对美杜莎被杀之后的事情加以续写。使文本开放，可以保持原作万古常新，引入他者，可以避免成见，有利于更好地吸收文化遗产，以更积极的姿态应对未来。这也是解构主义的精髓。

巴思否认《茨默拉》中的政治倾向，强调自己的艺术归依，但“政治视角构成一切阅读和解释的绝对视域。”巴思小说中的独立自主的女性可以被认为是六十年代风起云涌的妇女解放运动的体现。

《水边故事集》是《奥德赛》等经典的一个衍变。文本的出版是一次事件，可以激发其他文本事件。巴思《水边故事集》是由文本引发的事件。就巴思的重塑而言，他强调了政治上的瘟疫，读者似乎看到了詹姆逊的“意识形态素”的影子。巴思的改写以幽默为主要特征。文本对格里斯四原则的违构成了巴思文本的幽默之源。巴思对《奥德赛》重塑的另一个特色是他既改写经典，又改写自己的作品，而他的作品已经无可争议地成为经典的一部分。巴思一次次返回同一文本，是使原文本资源更新还是枯竭？海岸线测量理论可以对此给予解读。基于同一经典故事，作者可以选择不同的侧重点，变换人物、视角、语气和风格重写，从而得出无穷无尽、完全不同的文本。巴思以改写文本的实践生动地说明，原文本可以用不同方式重写而万世不竭。

此外，巴思对构成文学经典基本材料的语言进行了重塑，对人们意识中的语言霸主发起了挑战。重塑语言是巴思重塑文学经典的缩影，两者相互补充，并行不悖。从词的层面讲，巴思游刃有余地做语言游戏，主要体现在新词、缩略语、外来语等。从理论上讲，巴思生造的单词满足了索绪尔语言的要求，既具备任意性，又兼有差异性。巴思还炉火纯青地利用缩略语和外来语。缩略语是经过时间拣选沉淀下人类智慧的结晶。一般来说，缩略语意义固定，简洁实用，得到人们

的认可。巴思赋予自己文本中许多缩略语以完全不同的含义，拓展了它们的使用范围，给它们带上浓重的巴思色彩。大量使用外来语意味着文本的混杂，体现了巴思的国际意识。这一事实似乎说明，英语表达力存在欠缺，在一定程度上已无法表达作家的思想，需要借助其他语言来拯救。巴思不但共时性地借用各个民族的语言，而且抛弃当代英语，历时性地乞灵于十七世纪和十八世纪英语以及未来时代的英语，使文本呈现混沌之美。

从高于单词的层面讲，巴思使用了诸多修辞手法，包括明喻、暗喻、歧义、佯谬、弱陈、夸张、突降、和回文等，使语言要素如同万花筒般分化组合，呈现奇特景观。巴思将经典纵横联系，得出貌似荒谬的结论，迫使人们以新眼光看待经典，思考经典给我们留下的遗产。经过巴思作品洗礼的读者，如同戴上一副特殊眼镜，开始以全新的视角打量他们原来习以为常的语言，重新认识以语言为原材料的文学经典。

三个可能因素促成了巴思对经典改写的态度：巴思的音乐教育背景，使他改编乐曲的能力迁移到了文学经典改编；布鲁姆影响的焦虑。“注定会晋升到伟人行列的年轻诗人，咄咄逼人，他们像孩子追求独特身份一样，对文学权威孜孜以求。他们注视着前辈，既与他们不可比拟的成就认同，又加以排斥，为自己出生太晚而痛苦，又想催生自己。他们只能通过富有活力地反抗影响而前进”（Tobin: 6）。巴思没有回避焦虑，而是正视焦虑，这对于文化薪火相传意义重大；泰纳的环境论也可解释巴思对经典的重写。巴思生活的马里兰州切萨皮克湾水陆相接，地形时常变换，使地貌变动不居。巴思文本中小说与其他体裁界限模糊是环境在文本中的曲折反映。

文学经典为人类共有的宝贵财富。生活在历史长河的人们从文学经典中汲取乳汁，哺育思想成长，如何对待文学经典是个大问题。只有不断地重温经典，重塑经典，才能保有经典，向其注入活力，文学才能成为有本之木，有源之水。巴思重塑经典对美国当代文学尤其是后现代派小说做出了贡献，具有极大意义。巴思的重塑持之以恒，极具系统性。从某种程度上说，了解巴思的经典重塑就是解读巴思作品的关键。从另一方面讲，巴思过分注重文字游戏，一味实验，不仅使自己的有些小说远离大众，而且有时使研究他的“小众”也感到晦涩艰深。这不必要地拉大了他的作品和读者的距离，不利于其作品的评介和鉴赏。这些问题和

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