

Aesthetic Self-Regard and Artful Self-Delusions: Some Political Implications of John Barth's Aesthetics

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Critics have long been divided over the merits of John Barth's later fiction and its accompanying apologies in the fictions themselves and in numerous essays.¹ Barth has famously declared that original work is no longer possible except as allusion to and ironic transformation of defunct themes and subjects. Narrative literature, most especially the novel, 'has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt' (*FB*, p. 71). Barth saw no cause for despair in 'the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities' and proposed to turn this impasse into a site for creative renewal (*FB*, p. 64). Jorge Luis Borges is Barth's favoured model for this reorchestration of spent themes; Borges' *ficciones* 'are not just footnotes to imaginary texts, but postscripts to the real corpus of literature' (*FB*, p. 74). Despite repeated insistence that by 'exhaustion' he really meant 'replenishment', however, Barth's remarks seemed to confine all ambitions for original creative work to citation and artful repetition.² With all stories having been told, literature could only hope to live on in Baroque allusion and irony — in practical terms, self-parody — and only those capable of 'passionate virtuosity' were likely to survive the apocalypse of literature (*FB*, p. 79). The novel's birth in 'self-transcendent parody' was an example of the self-generative powers of literature which, Barth never tired of asserting, could only be replenished at the springs of literature (*FB*, p. 205).

Barth's antipathy to the question of commitment in art is made in defence of the 'serenity' required to compose and apprehend art works.³ Because (self-regarding) art cannot

redeem the barbarities of history, it must turn its gaze from contemporary crises — the sight of which causes a distress inimical to its production and reception — and content itself with diverting its audience with delightful entertainments. In short, Barth can see no way for art to respond effectively to the crises of the day, and in his own practice of parody seeks to preserve literature from all that might disrupt its dialogue with itself.

In what follows I hope to join two related criticisms of Barth's counter-realistic aesthetic in a reading that shows how these criticisms are anticipated in Barth's second realistic novel, *The End of the Road*. The first criticism (section I below) concerns Barth's metaphysical conception of narrative and the paralysis that ensues from the post-mythical hero's recognition of his own empty formalism. The second criticism (section II) concerns the political implications of a formalism that freely concedes the (political) impotence of art. The formal resolution of Barth's metafictional parody is designed to deflect attention from the contradictions of the social order that threaten to implicate the art that flourishes under it. Barth's art cannot even gaze on the horrors of contemporary history for fear of forfeiting the pleasures of the text, a text which can only enjoy its fruits by turning away from the political sphere. These criticisms do not apply to Barth's first two realistic novels,⁴ and I hope to show (section III) how the critique of formalism implicit in the moral fable of *The End of the Road* evades and anticipates the political criticism that has been levelled at the work of Barth's mature formalism. That ground, if properly secured, leads to the conclusion that the dilemmas of the post-mythical hero are more fully considered in their implications in *The End of the Road* than in the metafictional work; and that what Barth comes to think of as an ontological condition is rather the neurasthenic experience of modernity (section IV).

I

The same life lends itself to any number of stories — parallel, concentric, mutually habitant, or what you will.

Barth, *The End of the Road*

If early criticism of *The End of the Road* extrapolated an absurdist paradigm from the novel's treatment of nihilism and value-thinking, later criticism extrapolated a linguistic paradigm from the narrator's aestheticism and relativism. The satirical material of the novel, however, suggests the source of the irrationality governing the fate of the novel's characters is not that of Camus or Derrida but a fractured social totality. Still, the drama of the novel concerns legitimizing narratives of action and displays an awareness of what today would be called 'an incredulity towards metanarratives'. The paralysis of the narrator, Jacob Horner, results from an inability to value one course of action over another, 'like the donkey between two piles of straw', or Buridan's Ass (p. 325). His mercurial therapist, known only as 'the Doctor', puts Horner's nihilistic imagination to work by encouraging the belief in an arbitrary, amoral, and plastic self as a means to his 'remobilization': 'it doesn't matter to the case whether your character is admirable or not, so long as you think you have one' (p. 332). Horner meets his philosophical opposite when befriended by fellow college teacher Joe Morgan, who demands a reason for even the most trivial actions and often bullies one out of his wife Rennie. After Horner and Rennie find themselves unable to explain to Joe their apparently motiveless adultery, and Rennie dies during an illegal abortion organized by Horner, choices suddenly take on dramatic ethical meaning for the erstwhile nihilist.

The End of the Road coincides with the shift to a post-industrial economy and the decentering of the role of work in social life. With the declining conviction that the sphere of work determined social consciousness and action, sociologists

since the Fifties have turned their attention to the defence of the lifeworld against the rationalizing encroachments of the economy and the bureaucracy.⁷ This decentring of the role of work in personal and social life is registered in the novel's satire on a therapeutic culture that arose as a second-order service to the problems created by the mobilization of wage labour. The therapeutic 'remobilization' or Mythotherapy practised by the Doctor, however, turns out to be a heightened mode of instrumental rationality and not a defence against it. In this novel the aesthetic domain, however self-referential or ironic, provides no haven from reification but is rather implicated in its most distorting psychological effects.

Indeed, for readers of early Barth, the frequent rejection of the demands of social commitment in his later self-referential aesthetics stirs the ghost of Rennie Morgan. The later Barth hopes the postmodern artist can make a subject out his or her own apocalyptic sense of belatedness, and 'paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into materials and means for work — *paradoxically*, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world' (*FB*, p. 71). But it is the finite world Barth's heroes have so much trouble inhabiting, none more so than the narrators of Barth's first two novels, Todd Andrews in *The Floating Opera* and Jacob Horner. Both narrators manipulate aesthetic 'ultimacies' to order the experience of an often disruptive social world, and to retreat from the contingency of history into the timeless certainties of aesthetic and linguistic structures. Language constitutes reality for all of Barth's narrators, and often comes to function as a substitute for it. Todd Andrews' mortal fears are sublimated in the elaborate literary preparations of his thirteen year *Inquiry* into his father's suicide, an endeavour he boasts has become an end in itself and an unfinishable, infinite task. Horner's narrative, too, is a potentially infinite exercise in 'scriptotherapy' that symbolizes his inability to integrate the contingent ends of experience, as well as his failure to assume his role in the death of Rennie Morgan. 'Articulation' is Horner's aesthetic

'ultimacy', a finally debilitating awareness that experience can only be betrayed in language, even though 'only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all' (p. 366). Horner's 'adroit myth-making', an ironic psychic strategy designed for self-preservation, is revealed as an artful evasion of responsibility with disastrous consequences (p. 376).

Barth's description of his creative activity after *The End of the Road* oddly resembles the conversations between Horner and the Doctor, as if Barth were doctoring an identity for the post-novelist who, as 'an author who imitates the role of the Author', writes 'novels which imitate the form of the Novel' (*FB*, p. 72). Barth suspects the Author and the Novel are fictions required by the postmodern imagination, and though hoping new work will come from scepticism about the novel's future, never seems fully convinced that the result is new *work*. Barth's mature aesthetics are often set out in terms similar to the dramaturgical model of action, or Mythotherapy, described in *The End of the Road*:

'In life', said the Doctor, 'there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. . . . Or suppose you're an usher in a wedding. From the groom's point of view he's the major character; the others play supporting roles, even the bride. . . . What you've done is choose to *play the part* of a minor character . . . every member of the congregation sees himself as the major character, condescending to witness the spectacle. So in this sense fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion everyone makes of life' (p. 337).

Barth here delimits his future subject matter — representation about representation — and the therapeutic pretext for abandoning an essentially inaccessible socio-political world for the stability of the aesthetic and narrative structures that frame and inevitably distort it; an abandonment that proves something of a return of the repressed for Barth's metafictional narrators, as we will see shortly.

In this dramaturgical model of action we can already see the paralyzing awareness the post-hero must combat metaphysically in order to keep 'faithful to the script he's

written himself': the knowledge that at the empty heart of the hero is the hero-role (p. 338).⁶ The Doctor's account of Horner's paralysis (after finding him paralyzed on a railway bench) is also an account of the social void beneath the role-playing of egos alienated by the psychodramatic needs of self-preservation: 'an immobility such as you experienced . . . is possible only to a person who for some reason or other has ceased to participate in Mythotherapy'. The Doctor tells Horner that when paralyzed he was 'neither a major nor a minor character: you were no character at all' (pp. 337-8). Conflict or cognitive dissonance, indeed anything inconsistent with one's chosen role, must be rationalized away to survive in an age of anxiety:

It's extremely important that you learn to assume these masks wholeheartedly. Don't think there's anything behind them: *ego* means *I*, and *I* means *ego*, and the *ego* by definition is a mask. Where there's no *ego* — this is you on the bench — there's no *I* . . . conflict between masks, like absence of masks, is a source of immobility. The more sharply you can dramatize your situation, and define your own role and everybody else's, the safer you'll be (p. 339).

All of Barth's belated narrators do battle with the apparently insuperable priority of narrative structures. Just as no original work is really possible, so too no experience is really possible without the formal fiction of personal identity. Horner's various pathologies are signalled in the novel's first sentence: 'In a sense, I am Jacob Horner'. And there is a sense in which Horner is Barth's first post-hero, too. Horner's heightened sense of role playing is a pathological understanding of personal identity as *nothing more* than a formal feature of narrative and the outcome of a confidence trick.

The reflexive turns of the novel's *theatrum mundi* motif are subordinated to satirical and dramatic ends missing from the aesthetic cycles, reflecting mirrors, and Möbius strips of Barth's later work. Indeed, what has so perplexed Barth commentators is the fact that the nihilism satirized so provocatively in *The End of the Road* is formally revived in

the metafiction and declared the horizon of narrative fiction in postmodern times. How far an incorrigibly ironic sense of one's narrative unoriginality — that signature of the Barthian narrator — can travel before paralysis ensues is the subject of *Lost in the Funhouse*.⁷

The final possibility . . . this self-styled narrator of this so-called story went on to admit, ignoring the hostile impatience of his audience . . . is to turn ultimacy, exhaustion, paralyzing self-consciousness and the adjective weight of accumulated history. . . . Go on. Go on. To turn ultimacy against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new. What a nauseating notion (*LF*, p. 109).

An *abject* sense of belatedness, hinted at in the last sentence, is never fully explored by Barth in his metafiction, perhaps because it cannot be sublimated into a purely aesthetic concern. Formalism tends to empty narrative structure of any historical or experiential content, and after *The End of the Road* Barth seems exclusively concerned with the technical and abstract features of narrative. Barth grounds his metaphysical conception of narrative in Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer:

our reality . . . is our representation, as it were *our* fiction: that relations, categories, concepts such as differentiation, time and space, being and not-being — all are ours, not seamless nature's. . . . Reality — to a greater or lesser extent, but strictly speaking — is our shared fantasy (*FB*, p. 221).

All structures — linguistic, cognitive, conceptual, religious — are necessary distortions of reality, though Barth (like the Doctor) never ranks these distortions. As arbitrary human impositions on 'seamless nature', all representing structures are considered distortions in equal measure. The vertiginous awareness of the fictitious and factitious nature of all human structures explains Barth's interest in the *mise en abîme* and the post-hero's paralysis in the face of it. The beginning-middle-end structure of narrative cannot be experienced by the post-hero as belonging to a human reality, for it is

ultimately a fraudulent imposition on 'seamless nature'. The experience of temporal ends is denied the post-hero by his own sense of the arbitrary — hence fraudulent — structure his story imposes on an indifferent universe. The post-hero is always rehearsing his story but is separated from experiencing it, like the silenced voice at the centre of the multiple narrative frames of 'Menelaid', by a cosmic relativism (*LF*, p. 158).

The aesthetic distance between author and hero shortens in Barth's post-heroic narratives until they become indistinguishable. The post-hero and the post-author labour under the same burden of unoriginality: an exhausted narrative pattern precedes and displaces their experience and leaves them unable to convince themselves of their narrative worth. Barth's post-heroes concede the *a priori* unoriginality of everything they encounter, most especially themselves. Their quest is always the same: not to find themselves but to find cause for affirming their necessarily fraudulent selves. The post-hero refuses from the outset his own heroism because of an incorrigible doubt about the fictitiousness of the role of hero. All historiography is a forgery of history; all narrative is a forgery of biography; all language a forgery of experience. Though Horner draws from this scepticism a licence to act as he pleases (when, that is, he can act at all), by reducing morality to just another fraudulent structure, the retreat into an aesthetic world is repudiated by *The End of the Road*, as we shall see, as a moral forgery.

II

Turning our eyes, for the purposes of this episode, from the sustained ordeal of most of the Earth's human population.

Barth, *Sabbatical* ⁸

Barth's study in the late Sixties of the framing devices of tale cycles like *The Thousand and One Nights*, devices found

in all his work, led him to conclude that the true province of literature was literature: 'not only is all fiction fiction about fiction, but all fiction about fiction is in fact fiction about life'; indeed, 'the eschewing of contemporaneous, "original" material' is so basic to literature as to make realism 'an occasional anomaly and fad of the last couple of centuries' (*FB*, pp. 236, 58).

The formal resolution of Barth's metafictional texts has ideological implications, however, for no amount of aesthetic self-regard can erase the historical experience at the base of any aesthetic act. John Matthews' parasitic model of parody shows how Barth's use of framing betrays the effort to ensure just such an erasure.⁹ The framing devices that keep Barth's metafictional texts pure of contemporaneous material function like mechanisms of repression that keep an unmanageable history out of the text. The Möbius strip framing *Lost in the Funhouse* is an emblem for Barth's self-generating, enclosed, and infinite fictions, but is also an indication of the way Barth attempts to keep politics forever facing away from his metafictional universe.

The idea that literature can only be replenished in 'self-transcendent parody' already points to the withdrawal of the artist from the political public sphere, a withdrawal that makes the Barthian text possible and a journey his metafictional narrators have had to make before partaking of their own narrative and carnal pleasures (*FB*, p. 205). The pleasures of tale-telling and sex are thought of in reciprocal terms in these stories, but both can only begin in the uninterrupted 'serenity' of the private sphere (*C*, p. 10). The political context for Barth's luxuriant fictions and narrative feasts — 'the fat and bloody' US war economy — must be muted in an avowedly non-political art (*FB*, p. 62).

Barth's interest in recurring aesthetic patterns creates a space for the metafictional imagination to fend off the despair that attends this vision of a politically impotent art; what Barth refers to in different contexts as 'The Tragic View'. Declaring a personal or aesthetic interest in the feminist movement and political revolution does not make

their metafictional treatment (in *Chimera*) innocent of politics (*FB*, p. 97). Rather, personalizing the political is Barth's way of expelling it from his most metafictional story, 'Dunyazadiad', a reprise of an evening from *The Thousand and One Nights* by Scheherazade's belated sister. 'The Tragic View of Sex and Temperament' — women damn their chances in love in the pursuit of feminist ideals and damn their happiness if they don't — might explain the success of 'patriarchy' in 'Dunyazadiad' (*C*, pp. 45, 6), but it tends to rationalize it too, as well as reaffirm art's inability to do anything about it: 'For the present, it's our masters' pleasure to soften their policy; the patriarchy isn't changed: I believe it will persist even to our Genie's time and place' (*C*, p. 37). The primacy of recurring aesthetic structures defeats the prospect of progressive political change. A literature concerned exclusively with literary models cannot perhaps do other than metaphorize the context of its own production. It is difficult *not* to read King Shahryar's 'gynocide' as a reference to the genocide of the Vietnam War, but the taming of disruptive contemporary material like this makes 'Dunyazadiad' read like a presidential bedtime story for the American public.

Matthews' reading of Barth's use of parodic framing in the non-fiction pieces assembled in *The Friday Book* confirms their ideological implications. In the long prefatory notes and epigraphs to these essays Barth gives an account of the political and economic context in which they were written, but the framing of contextual matters in this way works to keep his aesthetic concerns pure of politics. Barth's talent for garlanding narrative frames together and his identification of writing with the pleasures of consumerism lead him to uncomfortable reflections on the economic circumstances of his art (*FB*, p. 238). The US war economy and campus riots are mentioned in several essays, somewhat apologetically, as the revolutionary backdrop for experiments in counter-realism (*FB*, p. 62). Matthews' account of *The Friday Book*, which cannot be reconstructed here, reveals 'a model of artistic production essentially at peace with the ideology of a consumerist capitalism of commodification'.¹⁰

Art replenished only by its return to itself, and by implication its withdrawal from the political public sphere, consents to its own impotence. If 'the treasures of art' cannot 'redeem the barbarities of history' or 'the horrors of living or dying' then they 'enriched our spirits along the painful way' (C, p. 17). Barth's acceptance of this condition produces an anxiety over the relevance of art, its impotence in the face of injustice, and its implication in the often unjust economic and political order under which it flourishes.

If the Barth-like Genie's writer's block in 'Dunyazadiad' is the only obstacle to the production of pure literature, in *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales* that obstacle takes on a more anxiously political shading.¹¹ The narrators of *Sabbatical* struggle to shrug off the guilt they feel their private world of narrative and carnal pleasures has cost others. Susan Seckler wonders how to maintain the belief that 'art and moral values and subject-verb agreement matter, while my husband and my step-father-brother-in-law and their buddies kill Patrice Lumumba and overthrow Mohammed Mossadegh and Salvador Allende' (S, p. 118). The formal ending of these novels — *Sabbatical* and *Chimera* fold seamlessly into their beginnings and *The Tidewater Tales* into prior and impending Barth efforts — suggests that any guilt experienced by their narrators has been successfully shrugged off.

In place of such consolation, *The End of the Road*'s problematic ending offers a fable of the neutered social conscience: Horner doesn't wonder whether 'subject-verb agreement' is an evasion of responsibility, he knowingly evades responsibility from behind a semi-colon (p. 439). Rennie Morgan's corpse is the novel's dramatic image of a contingent historical end that cannot be rationalized away by the protagonist's 'adroit myth-making' (p. 376). The political criticism Matthews makes of Barth's formalism is suggested in embryonic form in the novel's refusal to endorse its own apparent aestheticism, and indeed its implication of aesthetic formalism in the market formalism of universal exchange.

A 'Tragic View of political institutions' (*FB*, p. 110) entailed in an anti-political art leaves Barth's metafictional narrators impotent before the 'reptile house of history' and resigned before the crimes of US foreign policy (*TT*, pp. 144, 261). 'Except for the ephemeral pleasures of sex and a few other satisfactions', concludes one of them, 'the human facts of life and death and history are so dismaying that only some reflexive numbness or self-mesmerism keeps even the most favoured of us from going screaming mad' (*TT*, p. 144). The framing devices that screen politics out of the metafictional parodies are reflected in these narrators' psychological strategies for adapting to a contradictory social order. Barth satirized this 'reflexive numbness or self-mesmerism' at the beginning of his career, in an extended satire of therapeutic culture — Mythotherapy.

III

The apotheosis of the ego and the principle of self-preservation as such culminate in the utter insecurity of the individual, in his complete negation.

Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*¹²

Barth's critical and literary conceptions of the post-heroic never completely overcome Horner's identity crisis — and are in fact condemned to repeating it, as we will see — largely because Barth transfers a diagnosis of a pathology growing out of a reified social order (in the form of existentialist-Marxist satire) to the abstract features of an aesthetic plane (in the form of postmodern parody). The point of contention might be restated as a question: can the pathological exhaustion of Jacob Horner be reclothed as the health of the post-hero?

The inevitable fatigue of the 'narcissistic narrative' in its post-heroic form is not based on the mythic image of Scheherazade, Barth's most treasured symbol of literary

productivity and the story-teller's 'primordial publish or perish ultimatum', but on the neurasthenia of Jacob Horner (*FB*, p. 220). Political and economic questions concerning the production of literature are marginalized by Barth's aesthetic concerns in his postmodern fiction, as we have seen, but in Horner's malady, alternatively, the experience of the commodity character of the world is more discernible. Barth's exhaustion-replenishment model of postmodern fiction takes its initial form in the dubious cures for fatigue offered by the Doctor in *The End of the Road*, and Barth's first funhouse is a funny farm: the Remobilization Farm.

Though the Remobilization Farm — a triage where the psychological casualties of capitalism are refitted with new identities — exists on the margins of legitimacy, it is symbolically central to the novel's satire of personality disorders spawned by instrumental rationality. Horner's physical immobility, a kind of neurasthenic defence against the nervous excitements of social modernity, first attacks him in a railway concourse when he can find no reason for choosing one destination over another. He learns to think of his personal *Sinnsverlust* in existential terms, but describes this first incident as 'simply [running] out of motives, as a car runs out of gas' (p. 323). The metaphor of a human motor suggests Horner's neurasthenic defence begins in a fatigue expressed as resistance to work.

The Doctor's proposal that Horner become a grammar teacher as occupational therapy is suggestive of the postwar transformation of work from the production of material things (in an industrial economy) to the production of signs (in a post-industrial economy). The self-fashioning exercises in the novel, moreover, are a function of psychological and material necessity and not spare leisure time. Horner requires 'remobilization' as much to recover a semblance of identity from the homogenizing effects of the culture industry as to get a job. He whistles to himself a Pepsi Cola advertizing jingle, 'that test-pattern of my consciousness', because he so often finds himself 'without a personality' (pp. 323, 287). And he later returns to line work at the Chevrolet plant as an

alternative therapy, as if a return to 'real' work might fill the void left by the 'the implosion of the category of work' in post-industrial society.¹³

The critique of instrumental rationality implicit in the novel's satirical reduction of the self to role-playing reads like an ironic endorsement of the reification denounced in Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. The Marxist conception of labour as the fulfilment of human essence and the existentialist conception of choice are both satirized in the Doctor's counsel:

Mythotherapy is based on two assumptions: that human existence precedes human essence, if either of the terms really signifies anything; and that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will. These are both good existentialist premises, and whether they're true or false is of no concern to us — they're *useful* in your case (p. 336).

Horner's paralysis in the face of 'a multitude of desirable choices' has its basis in the consumer's disorientation in a market of unlimited choice (p. 256). Similarly, Todd Andrews' suicide note (in *The Floating Opera*), set out in syllogisms contending that 'nothing has intrinsic value', has less to do with the law of an absurd universe than with the law of capitalist exchange (p. 223). Both narrators have internalized the objective order of capitalism: exchange is the source of all value. All choices for Horner are *equally* desirable — even paralysis is an authentic choice — and so equally meaningless.

The comic success of the Doctor's dubious therapy is revealed as the very terms of bourgeois false consciousness (as Sartre himself came to think of his existentialism), though Horner's wilful ignorance is better characterized by Sloterdijk's contradictory formulation 'enlightened false consciousness'.¹⁴ Anticipating postmodern cynicism, Horner's version of 'self-reflexive numbness or self-mesmerism' reflexively insulates him from ethical self-examination (*TT*, p. 144). This cynical disposition requires amnesia to inspire action, and overcomes the complexities of

interpersonal relations by blinding one's eyes to them: 'I had assigned to Miss Rankin the role of Forty-Year-Old Pickup . . . I had no interest whatever in the quite complex human being she might be apart from that role', says Horner of a conquest (p. 279). 'Nobody's authentic', as he later tells Rennie Morgan in a sadistic piece of seduction (p. 319). Horner must ironize everything before acting on anything, though placing everything in quotation marks more often than not results in distorted communication, making teaching, for example, impossible:

My air of scholarly competence, theirs of studious attention (they wrote my name and office number as frowningly as if I'd pronounced the Key to the Mystery) were so clearly feigned, we were all so conscious of playing school, that to attempt a lesson would have been preposterous (p. 342).

If the dandy sees nothing behind the masquerade of social life, and uses aestheticism as a last refuge from the wasteland of reification, the compulsive irony of the postmodern cynic shields from view its own capitulation before the triumph of instrumental rationality. Indeed, Horner's ironic consciousness of everything as a role-play is the reason he cannot assume responsibility for Rennie's death — though 'I craved responsibility' — and for his final entrapment, like his emblem Laocoön, 'by the serpents of Knowledge and Imagination, which, grown great in the fullness of time, no longer tempt but annihilate' (pp. 438, 441).

The Doctor's counter-suggestive cures resemble those of nineteenth-century Swiss physician Paul Dubois, who contradicted his patient's pessimistic self-diagnosis and argued them out of inertia. 'For Dubois', notes Rabinbach, 'suggestion was the cause *and* the cure of neurasthenia'.¹⁵ The Doctor tries to contradict Horner into a personality of his own and out of his mimicry of others: 'I was charged, directly or indirectly, with everything from intellectual dishonesty and vanity to nonexistence' (p. 332). When Horner refuses to comply with therapy at one stage the Doctor physically wrestles him into taking a role (pp. 339–40). Barth's later reprisal of a Don Quixote 'armored in

delusions' and triumphant over a 'reality that yields' and 'cooperates in the sustaining of his fiction' (*TT*, p. 472) is here the enchanted condition of social illusion:

Now many crises in people's lives occur because the hero role that they've assumed for one situation or a set of situations no longer applies to some new situation that comes up, or — the same thing in effect — because they haven't the imagination to distort the situation to fit their old role. This happens to parents, for instance, when their children grow older, and to lovers when one of them begins to dislike the other. If the new situation is too overpowering to ignore, and they can't find a mask to meet it with, they may become schizophrenic — a last-resort mask — or simply shattered. All questions of integrity involve this consideration, because a man's integrity consists in being faithful to the script he's written for himself (p. 338).

Schizophrenia marks the limit of artful self-delusion required by the aggrandizing ego, when an individual can no longer play along ignoring the loss of meaning in social life. Reflection on the deterioration of experience in contemporary life is discouraged by the Doctor as likely to provoke paralysis and another trip to the Remobilization Farm. The search for meaningful ends threatens the bluff of the Doctor's therapeutic system, unless a script for an identity can be improvised out of the search, a Questioner out of the question, that can insulate the fragile personality from the demands of system integration. Meaningful ends can only be mimed in a social life colonized by instrumental rationality.

The unsustainable logic of self-preservation is drawn out in a series of absurd therapies (like household detention) designed to preserve Horner from the contingencies of the social world. His prescribed activities at the Remobilization Farm, designed to 'keep some sort of visible motion going all the time', are parodies of goal-directed behaviour but have no goal other than 'Motion! Motion!' (pp. 332-3). On leaving the farm, religion and television are ruled out of Horner's psychic regimen but masturbation and existentialism heartily recommended. The Doctor's cures

comically restate the senseless automatism that paralyzed Horner in the first place:

Take long walks, but always to a previously determined destination, and when you get there, walk right home again, briskly. . . . Above all, act impulsively: don't let yourself get stuck between alternatives, or you're lost. . . . If the alternatives are side by side, choose the one on the left; if they're consecutive in time, choose the earlier. If neither of these applies, choose the alternative whose name begins with the earlier letter of the alphabet (pp. 333–34).

The Doctor's moronic principles turn means into ends; the monotony of work and the alienation it induces is recommended as a desirable goal in itself.¹⁶ At the historical moment that work is losing its integrating social role, Horner is sent to line work at the Chevrolet plant — bolting leaf springs on the side of car chassis — for therapy.

Horner's paralysis and frequent reports of boredom are responses to the reifying effects of such 'factory time' in social life, a homogenizing of time that disables the self's narrative coherence by reducing experience to its 'meaningless, metabolistic sense' (p. 287). The reduction of time to the identical moments of the clock deprives narrative of form by undermining the human experience of — and need for — meaningful ends with the temporal chaos of a sequential endlessness.¹⁷ Knowing his integrity will not survive 'the limits of a given mood', Horner whistles the Pepsi advertizing jingle to fill these gaps in his narration of 'successive and discontinuous selves', gaps hollowed out by instrumental rationality (pp. 281, 287). Mythotherapy camouflages this disintegration of experience and remobilizes damaged identities with the fiction of a coherent self: 'I'm not very curious about my patients' histories', says the Doctor, refusing to hear Horner's with the oppositional remark: 'No biography, Jacob Horner' (p. 326). Horner's 'vacuum [of] a self' makes him an adaptable creature in a flexible labour market — when he can overcome his own nausea and embrace 'the void' — and the black humour of the novel turns on whether his emotional impotence might

actually be an evolutionary adaptation in the face of social modernization (pp. 334, 323). But those moments of inertia, the only honest moments of a pathological liar, permanently threaten the success of his self-delusion. The final sentence of the novel leaves us in no doubt about the nature of Horner's case: 'Terminal' (p. 442).

IV

For the modern hero is no hero; he acts heroes.

Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*¹⁸

Barth's attempt to 'transcend his refutation' (*FB*, p. 72) in his post-heroic narratives congeals into a metaphor that equates endless self-narration with the postponement of death, a postponement that also suspends the possibility of a meaningful end. In *Chimera*, a middle-aged Perseas asks:

One question alone — whether I felt my post-Medusan years an example of or an exception to the archetypal pattern for heroic adventure — set me to years of comparative study, to learn what that pattern might be and where upon it I currently was. *Thus this endless repetition of my story*: as both protagonist and author, so to speak, I thought to overtake with understanding my present paragraph as it were by examining my paged past, and, thus pointed, proceed serene to future's sentence (*C*, pp. 80–1; my emphasis).

'Future's sentence' is already scripted on the 'paged past' by the recurring pattern of the archetypal hero that Perseas consults on tapestry panels. The pre-scripted hero is denied an ending of his own, and Perseas feels *forced* to 'bore each night a captive audience with the story of my life' — the way Barth feels forced to bore us with tales of post-heroic boredom — in a story 'always ending' but 'never ended' (*C*, pp. 71, 133). The repetition of Perseas's story, symbolized by the constellation in the night sky, suggests endless

sequence not creative transformation, Sisyphean torment not Scheherazadian liberation. Bellerophon rides 'the heroic cycle and is recycled' but in his revolutions never reaches the ground above which he plunges; 'my plot', he complains, 'doesn't rise and fall in meaningful stages but winds upon itself like a whelk-shell or the snakes on Hermes caduceus: digresses, retreats, hesitates, groans from its utter et cetera, collapses, dies' (C, pp. 138, 196).

Because the post-hero cannot accept the notion of 'meaningful stages' unironically, his narrative never develops. Moreover, the homogenized or factory-time revealed as threatening Horner's narrative coherence is here the hidden substratum of the post-hero's formless tale; incapable of meaningful ends, the post-heroic tale repeats itself endlessly. Although Horner has not come to the end of the road in a psychological sense,¹⁹ we are never left in doubt as to the emotional and moral crippling that inspires his narrative invention, nor to the implication of the aesthetic domain in a reified social world, nor to the fact that his narrative has in fact ended. Far from being recommended, the theoretically endless self-narration of scriptotherapy, like Todd Andrews' unfinishable *Inquiry*, is presented as a compromised cure to the damaged identities of each narrator. Horner's reflexive story of fibs and sins *finishes*, in other words, and with a judgement on his failure to accept contingent ends.

If the belated and involuntarily ironic consciousness of the post-hero cannot be transcended, in either postmodern fiction or postmodern life, then this is a far from healthy condition, as anticipated in the mutilated emotional life of Jacob Horner. Though Barth the post-Author intends to rescue fresh narrative possibilities from an exhausted but all-encompassing tradition, the temporal irresolution that 'ends' the circular stories of *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Chimera*, and the novels that follow, confounds the act of doing so. These stories are too open-ended to find any meaningful ending, and consequently are condemned to repetition. The post-heroic dimension is a limbo of narrative (author) and

existential (hero) possibilities held captive by tradition and drained of meaning by repetition.²⁰

Indeed, the recurring post-heroic pattern is a kind of eternal recurrence of the same. As in the aesthetic economy of a literature of exhaustion, Horner's narrative inventiveness is the product of fatigue. Fatigue, both for Barth's post-Author and the Doctor's patients (and *fin-de-siecle* neurasthenia experts), is the mother of invention.²¹ Beneath Horner's narrative inventiveness is the inertia of empty or homogenous time. The post-heroic narrative has lost its temporal shape, its beginning-middle-end, and become something of a hellish repetition. The temporality of modernity for Walter Benjamin is the period of hell: the experience of the new as the ever-same is the experience of the commodity. If mythical patterns recur because they are unreflected in form, then the post-mythical hero's entrapment in repetition is in fact the modern hero's 'neurasthenic' experience of modernity in commodity form.

Barth achieves his most clear-sighted awareness of the limited capacity of aesthetic form to redeem social contradictions in his portrait of the moral failure of Horner's self-referential scriptotherapy. The pathological inventiveness of Horner's narrative efforts reveals the neurasthenic's fragmentary experience of modernity. The myth-maker's rejection of these fragments of meaning constitute the repetitive nature of the post-heroic journey and its vain search for meaningful ends. Barth's rejection of this myth-making technique in *The End of the Road* is an implicit criticism of the formalism that characterizes his later work as well as of the instrumental rationality that fosters therapeutic indifference to a reified social order. Barth exchanges the Remobilization Farm for the infinitely reflecting mirrors of the funhouse and the unending spiral of the Möbius strip, but beneath the mask of the post-hero is the mask of Jacob Horner, and the empty historical time of modernity.

NOTES

- ¹ See *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) and *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Nonfiction, 1984-1994* (Canada: Little, Brown, 1994) [hereafter *FB* and *FF*].
- ² Barth revised the scope of a 'literature of exhaustion', later applying it to the exhaustion of high modernism (*FB*, p. 206), though this does not change his original conception of 'an aesthetic for the making of new and valid work that is yet responsible to the exhaustive, even apocalyptic vastness of what has been done before' (*FF*, p. 169).
- ³ John Barth, *Chimera* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 10 [hereafter *C*].
- ⁴ *The Floating Opera* was originally published in 1956 by Appleton-Century-Crofts and *The End of the Road* in 1958 by Doubleday. Citations herein from John Barth, *The Floating Opera and The End of the Road* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1988).
- ⁵ 'Work no longer plays the central role as a norm which integrates and guides personal existence', Claus Offe, *Disorganised Capitalism: Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics*, ed. John Keane (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), p. 143.
- ⁶ Barth's reading of Joseph Campbell after *The Sot-Weed Factor* (St. Albans: Panther, 1960; 1965) suggests that the post-heroic journey only becomes exhaustively parodic with *Giles Goat-Boy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1966; 1987); see Joseph J. Enck, 'John Barth: An Interview', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 6.1 (1965), p. 12.
- ⁷ John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1968; 1988) [hereafter *LF*].
- ⁸ John Barth, *Sabbatical. A Romance* (New York: Putnam, 1982) [hereafter *S*].
- ⁹ John T. Matthews, 'Intertextual Frameworks: The Ideology of Parody in John Barth', in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnel and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 35-57.
- ¹⁰ Matthews, 'Intertextual Frameworks', p. 50.
- ¹¹ John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales. A Novel* (New York: Putnam, 1987) [hereafter *TT*].

- ¹²Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1974), p. 122.
- ¹³Offe, *Disorganised Capitalism*, p. 134.
- ¹⁴Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (London and New York: Verso, 1988). See also Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1997).
- ¹⁵Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (U of California P: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), p. 161.
- ¹⁶As it was by a certain Professor Heyde in Weimar Germany: 'One must not fail to appreciate . . . that through the monotony of an unchanging activity thoughts are set free for other objects. Then the worker thinks of his class ideals . . . in the meantime, however, his work goes ahead'. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 45.
- ¹⁷David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 89.
- ¹⁸Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. H. Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), p. 97.
- ¹⁹We meet Horner again in *LETTERS* (New York: Putnam, 1979), though *The End of the Road* is only retrospectively absorbed into Barth's loose tale-cycle.
- ²⁰For the difference between Barth's narrators and Scheherazade see Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), pp. 97-119.
- ²¹See Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, pp. 176-77.