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*Once Upon a Time/There was a Story that Began: Novelty, Endings, and Chronotope in John Barth's The
Tidewater Tales*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the use of frame tales, genre blending, multi-voiced narration, and circular structure in John Barth's 1987 novel, *The Tidewater Tales*. It tracks the isomorphy of Barth's general aesthetic project, set forth in his essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion," "The Literature of Replenishment," and "Very Like an Elephant: *Reality Versus Realism*," onto the theoretical aesthetics of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Both Barth and Bakhtin praise the novel its omnivorous capability to accommodate, and juxtaposes conflicting genres against one another; they each see the novelist as an "arranger" or "orchestrator," who reassembles pre-existing forms to make them "sound in new ways." Using Bakhtin's concepts of *novelness*, *heteroglossia*, and *unfinalizability* this essay works to present *The Tidewater Tales* as an active embodiment of the Bakhtinian worldview, which locates truth and knowledge in *dialogue* between two subjects. By aligning Barth's novel with Bakhtin's philosophy, which emphasizes intersubjective dependence between the *I* and the *other*, this essay seeks to work as a corrective rehabilitation of Barth's writing, which has been maligned as solipsistic self-consciousness by critics such as John Gardner, Christopher Lasch, and David Foster Wallace.

Introduction

*“There was a story that began,
Said Fenwick Turner: Susie and Fenn—*

*Oh, tell that story! Tell it again!
Wept Susan Seckler...”*

-John Barth, *Sabbatical*

*“Tell me a story of women and men
Like us: like us in love for ten
Years, lovers for seven, spouses
Two, or two point five. Their House’s
Increase is the tale I wish you’d tell”*

-John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*

John Barth’s twinned novels, *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982) and *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), both open with a self-reflexive invocation set in verse: *Sabbatical* begins as Susan Rachel Alan Seckler, a professor of English literature implores her husband, Fenwick Scott Key Turner, a retired CIA agent, to retell the couple’s life story; *The Tidewater Tales*, like *Sabbatical*, starts as Katherine Shorter Sherritt Sagamore, an academic librarian, sets her husband, Peter Sagamore, a novelist, the task of telling a story of women and men “like” them in order to justify their decision to have children as they near their 40th birthdays.¹ Barth comments on his use of verse in his essay, “The

¹ John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*, (Victoria: Dalkey Archive Press, 2016), First Published 1987 by Putnam, 1

Prose and Poetry of it All, or Dippy Verses,” in which he concedes the contrived nature of the two novels’ opening lines. The essay responds to an unnamed critic’s charge that *Sabbatical* “begins with some dippy verses,” and goes on to acknowledge that, “of course they’re dippy.” However, Barth argues that the poems are not “*simply* dippy.” Rather, the verses serve as a “standing joke” between Fenwick and Susan. He believes that the reviewer fails to take into account that the lines should be “understood by speaker, listener, author, and reader [...] to be...*ironic*.”

Barth is aware of his shortcomings as a poet. He attempts to turn those shortcomings to an ironic end, noting that neither he nor Fenwick aspire to be poets, and that neither he himself nor *Sabbatical*’s protagonist “aspire[s] to poetry.”² They are aspiring (in Fenwick’s case) or practicing (in Barth’s case) *novelists*. “Dippy Verses” then moves on to extoll the novel’s ability to accommodate external forms. He observes that the novel, more so than any other artistic medium is, first, “the most hospitable to amateurs” and second, “the most accommodating to contamination of every sort.” Doggerel and dippy verses, according to Barth, hold an “ancient and honorable place” within the novel.

Barth sees the novel as a “polyglot condominium” that makes space for a broad range of competing styles, genres, and forms.³ It is a malleable omnibus for the full scope of discourse, it is a vehicle for what Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia* or, the use of multiple types of discourse within a given work. One of the traits that Barth sees as characteristic of the novel is its “anarchical flexibility” and its “capacity not only for absorbing but also thriving upon all sorts of extrinsic input.”

Over the course of his career, from the publication of his first novel, *The Floating Opera*, in 1958, to his last, *Every Third Thought*, published in 2012, Barth demonstrates a virtuosic control of

² Ibid. 240

³ Ibid. 246

different types of speech and different formal conventions. Though he never claims that his “polyglot condominium” is directly drawn from Bakhtin’s writing on heteroglossia, his novels present precisely the generic plurality of Bakhtin’s ideal author. The *Opera*, largely a realist, existential comedy, not only makes extensive use of legal procedure, but also incorporates playbill typescripts. *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) is a fictional retelling of the life of Maryland’s first poet, Ebenezer Cooke; it is narrated entirely in a pastiche of seventeenth century prose and it makes direct quotations from Cooke’s satirical poem of the same name. *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) parodies Joseph Campbell’s heroic monomyth pattern as its protagonist, George Giles, strives to self-consciously imitate Campbell’s cycle in order to achieve perfect herohood (however, as Barth notes in an interview, perfect imitation of the cycle leads George to become a “perfect imitation of a mythic hero”).⁴ The novel’s introduction, which is set in the form of a dialogue between imaginary critics, both anticipates a plurality of varied responses regarding its moral and artistic worth, and also satirizes critical and academic jargon.

Chimera (1973), a triptych of three novellas, emulates the language of myth and the Greek epic as Barth offers epilogues to minor mythological figures such as Perseus, Bellerophon, and Scheherazade’s younger sister in the *1001 Nights*, Dunyazade. Along with its reinvigoration of mythic narrative form, Barth also infuses the novel with elements of his theoretical and critical writing; *Chimera* serves not only as carefully crafted work of fiction, but also as a literary-critical manifesto for Barth’s entire literary project. His retrospective 1979 novel, *LETTERS*, imitates the epistolary novels of the eighteenth century as characters from his previous works communicate with each other (and with Barth) through a series of letters. By wrangling a diverse cast of

⁴ Barth, John. *Writer’s Forum Videos*. Interview by Rodney Parshall and Stanley Sanvel Rubin, aired December 12, 1976; Brockport, NY, Brockport Television, SUNY Brockport, https://www.kaltura.com/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner_id/573351/uiconf_id/47202233/entry_id/1_dve816mr/embed/dynamic?

characters from his oeuvre into the same work, *LETTERS* not only mixes *extra*-authorial discourses, but also turns heteroglossia toward self-reflexivity by mixing the *intra*-authorial language of Barth's previous novels. He pushes his use of extrinsic text a step further in *Sabbatical* by recounting the death of real-life CIA agent John Arthur Paisley through a series of directly quoted articles from *The Baltimore Sun*.

Finally, *The Tidewater Tales* acts as Barth's most radically heteroglot work. The novel freely floats between several genres framed within its pastoral Chesapeake setting as 39 ½ year-old, 39 ½ week pregnant Katherine Shorter Sherritt and her husband, Peter Sagamore, exchange stories both between themselves and with characters that they encounter over the course of their fortnight-long journey. Like *LETTERS*, *The Tidewater Tales* makes use of both *extra*- and *intra*-authorial discourse. It includes similar epilogues to the lives of canonical literary figures (Odysseus, Don Quixote, and Scheherazade) to those of *Chimera*. It also re-incorporates key moments from Barth's earlier writing: Pete and Kathy find an amateur screenplay stashed in a floating signal flare canister that rewrites Barth's short story, "Night-Sea Journey;" both the writer's block that Pete hopes to overcome, as well as its solution, are direct echoes of Dunyazade's predicament and resolution in *Chimera*; after Pete and Kathy befriend fellow sailors Frank and Leah Talbott, who bear a sharp resemblance to the Turners of *Sabbatical*, Barth offers several clues that Susan, Fenn, and *Sabbatical* itself are Pete's fictionalized versions of the Talbott's lives.

In addition to its broad scope on the level of *content*, *The Tidewater Tales* also implements a broad range of generic *forms*. Though on its surface, the novel is a conventional romance that tracks Pete and Kathy's marriage at a major turning point in their lives, Barth uses the constant exchange of stories between characters to embed multiple narrative genres within its nautical frame. Its constantly shifting narratorial perspective, which moves from one character to another as they take turns telling tales, grants Barth the flexibility to imbue *The Tidewater Tales* with a diverse array of

literary forms. Pete, grappling with writer's block that drives him to writing ever more terse fiction, works several experimental minimalist short stories into the novel. Frank Talbott, a reformist ex-CIA agent, introduces a subplot that echoes the intelligence agency exposés of the early-1970's, such as Victor Marchetti and David Marks' *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* or Philip Agee's *Inside the Company*. During an evening with the mysterious Greek couple, Ted and Diana Dmitrikakis, Barth uses a gushing discussion of the Sherrit's and Dmitrikakis's mutual love of Homer as a springboard for a parodic treatment of the Greek epic. The novel also makes use of elements of the *bildungsroman* and the *kunstlerroman* through flashbacks to Pete's development as a writer and the domestic tragedy, through flashbacks to Kathy's abusive first marriage. Barth also implements discursive features of news reports (by using parallel current events to anchor the novel's temporality), literary theory and criticism (through Pete and Kathy's commentary on several of the novel's framed stories as they unfold), and travel narrative (through Barth/Pete's meticulous adherence Chesapeake Bay topography and ecology). At no point in the novel does Barth give pride of place to one genre or one discursive style. Rather, he creates an ongoing dialogue between different types of speech and different literary forms to present an accurate representation of heteroglot experience.

On Novelness: Mikhail Bakhtin's Historical Poetics

Like Barth, Mikhail Bakhtin sees such generic and discursive flexibility to be the defining feature and most valuable strength of the novel form. In "Epic and Novel," he argues that it is "the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted" and contrasts it to static, and immobile forms such as the epic, which he believes has "long since completed its development."⁵ For Bakhtin, the novel refuses to settle into a stable harmony; it is a restless, omnivorous form that

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3

remains in a permanent state of becoming as its external contextual horizons shift with the course of history.

Bakhtin sees “novelness” as a reactive part of an ongoing historical process, rather than a fixed literary form. Instead of attempting to trace the origin of the novel to a single, decisive point in literary history, he sees it as a response to the exhaustion of pre-existing, canonical literary forms. “Epic and Novel” investigates the rise of proto-novelistic forms in Classical Greece, when the prevailing epic poetry of the period reached the point of saturation and fell into decline. Through examples such as the period’s Socratic Dialogues, Bakhtin shows that early novelization parodied other genres to “expose the conventionality of their forms and their language.”⁶ He places the novel in an ongoing, continuous dialogue with other styles, and argues that it “squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them.”

Anticipating Barth’s “Dippy Verses,” Bakhtin argues that the novel is a “free and flexible” form that renews language “by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the ‘novelistic’ layers of literary language.”⁷ Canonical genres, such as the epic, tend to hypostatize language through stubborn adherence to strict stylization and unified perspective. Bakhtin believes such inflexibility to be an alienating, static representation of lived experience. The novel, by contrast, brings to these genres “an indeterminacy, a certain open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality.” Barth’s celebration of the “polyglot condominium,” matches Bakhtin’s treatment of the novel as the ideal venue in which to place diverse forms of discourse into dialogue with one another. By refusing to adhere to one genre, one style, or one narratorial perspective, novels such as *LETTERS*, *Sabbatical*, and, most notably, *The Tidewater Tales*, act as domiciles for Bakhtinian heteroglossia. They emulate the concrete, lived experience of language as a multiplicity

⁶ Ibid. 5

⁷ Ibid. 7

of voices. By refusing to close his narrative perspective, and by refusing to rigorously adhere to one specific generic style, Barth's fluid, heteroglot blend of multiple discourses creates an open, rather than closed narrative world. *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*' juxtaposition of (often conflicting) canonical genres undermines unified authorial perspective, represents an unfinished and unfinalizable world in constant flux, and, ultimately serves as a more accurate phenomenological depiction of indeterminate lived experience than that of the conventional realist novel.

“The Literature of Exhaustion” and “The Literature of Replenishment”

Like Bakhtin, Barth also sees the development of art and literature as an ongoing cycle of exhaustion and replenishment. His 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” discusses the “used upness of certain forms” and the “felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” in both literature and the visual arts.⁸ At the start of the essay, Barth is careful to refine his definition of exhaustion, noting that he does “not mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence.”⁹ Rather, he seeks to address the gradual waning of possibility for previously cutting edge artistic experimentation. He acknowledges the superficiality of frantically attempting to keep pace with every technical aesthetic novelty of the day, noting that he sympathizes with Saul Bellow in that “to be technically up-to-date is the least important attribute of a writer.” However, he also believes to be “technically *out* of date” is also detrimental for an artist, pointing out that “Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony or the Chartres cathedral, if executed today, might simply be embarrassing.” In the wake of high modernism, where Ezra Pound’s dictum to “Make it New” treated experimental writing as an end in itself, the exhaustion of such experimentation posed a serious crisis for the succeeding generation of writers.

⁸ John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, (New York: Putnam, 1982), 64

⁹ Ibid.

Barth's essay opens by discussing the inter-media arts, which he sees as indicative of the "felt ultimacies" posed by the extreme experimentation of high modernism such as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or Ezra Pound's cantos. He runs through a catalogue of work that he sees exemplary of such an aesthetic dead end including "a box full of postcards on which are inscribed 'apparently meaningless questions' to be mailed to whomever the purchaser judges them suited for" and Daniel Spoerri's *Anecdoted Typography of Chance*, which consists of a "description of all the objects that happen to be on the author's parlor table" that constitute "a cosmology of Spoerri's existence."¹⁰ Such experiments, writes Barth, "make for interesting conversation in fiction-writing classes where we discuss "[somebody] or other's unbound, unpaginated, randomly assembled novel-in-a-box and the desirability of printing *Finnegan's Wake* on a very long roller towel." Conceptual inter-media art offers the opportunity for critics and artists alike to dig into "more or less valid and interesting" discussion about what constitutes art, the boundaries between forms, and the confining or liberatory potential of generic taxonomy. However, Barth ultimately sees the highly charged theoretical work of the 1960's as a rush into a blind alley; the inter-media arts have a strong tendency to alienate traditional audiences and erase the conventional idea of the *artist*, "the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect."

Against the backdrop of mid-century pop-art, happenings, and be-ins, Barth chooses to "rebel along traditional lines."¹¹ He addresses his lifelong admiration for "passionate virtuosity," conceding that his conception of the artist is ultimately an aristocratic one. Although he admits that much of the critique of traditional representation and mimesis that arose in his contemporary milieu is valid and necessary, his ideal writer remains "one endowed with uncommon talent, who has moreover developed and disciplined that endowment into virtuosity" despite the fact that much of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid

the “democratic West seems eager to have done with” both the “ ‘omniscient author’ and the “controlling artist,” which have “been condemned as politically reactionary, authoritarian, even fascist.”

The major issue that Barth sees with his contemporaries is their blurring of the distinction between “things worth *remarking* and things worth *doing*.”¹² He uses the hypothetical example of a call for a pop-up book form of novel, as an example of an interesting idea to generate conversation that need not be carried out. Though he admires the Albright-Knox collection of Pop-Art, he prefers the jugglers and acrobats of Baltimore’s hippodrome, “genuine *virtuosi*, doing things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do”

Yet, both art and literature remain subject to change; Barth believes that the refusal to adapt and innovate is an equally stagnant dead end to that of unpracticable theoretical conceptualization. He points out that many novelists have continued to write compelling fiction that adheres to conventional ideas of representation espoused by the nineteenth century realists or that continues the project of turn-of-the-century modernists in “more or less mid-twentieth-century language” about contemporary people or topics. However, this work remains “less interesting” than that of “excellent writers who are also *technically* contemporary.”¹³

Despite his critique of the inter-media arts, Barth grants that they serve a valuable *intermediary* function. They act as hinge points between “the traditional realms of aesthetics on the one hand and artistic creation on the other.”¹⁴ Taken seriously, they serve as “shop talk” for practicing artists. One should “listen carefully, if noncommittally” to one’s “intermedia colleagues.” Though the non-existent conceptual works that Barth discusses likely would not produce memorable works of art, their critical import acts does facilitate development of art dynamic and vital.

¹² Ibid. 66

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The eschatological atmosphere of the post-war period drastically raised the stakes in maintaining a lively and growing art world. The dead end that Barth sees in the inter-media arts is the result of a “celebrated dehumanization of society.”¹⁵ It is an age of “ultimacies and ‘final solutions’ – at least *felt* ultimacies, in everything from weaponry to theology.” Faced with the twinned dilemma of looming apocalypse and aesthetic exhaustion, many writers and artists chose to turn to a mute silence as the only possible path forward. Samuel Beckett’s writing “progressed from marvelously constructed English sentences to terser and terser French ones to the unsyntactical prose of *Comment C’est* and ‘ultimately’ to wordless mimes.” John Cage performed his silent *4’33”* in an empty music hall. “Nothing at all,” Barth supposes “is inextricably the background against which Being, et cetera.” Passive acceptance of Barth’s ultimacy suggests consigns the writer to resignation as in Beckett’s final decision to cease writing all together.

However, the reduction of art to nothingness provided a necessary ground clearing. It served as a moment of rest that enabled movement. After Beckett and Cage, Barth sees an opportunity to authentically return to “the artifices of language and literature,” to such “far-out notions as grammar, punctuation...even characterization.”¹⁶ But such a return cannot be one of nostalgic or naïve imitation of the past. It must be done with full consciousness of the previous avant-garde’s critique. Pushing beyond exhaustion and ultimacies means a return to movement with a full awareness of the limits set by one’s predecessors to transcend aesthetic boundaries and dead ends.

“With the century more than two thirds done,” Barth points out that the challenge for he and his contemporaries is no longer to follow up the work of “Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Balzac,” nor is it to figure out where to go after Franz Kafka and James Joyce, but to grapple with “those

¹⁵ Ibid. 67

¹⁶ Ibid.

who succeed Joyce and Kafka who are now in the evenings of their own careers.”¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, who Barth holds up as a paradigmatic successor to high modernism, serves as a key a writer who worked to re-invigorate an exhausted modernism. Borges exemplifies the “difference between a technically old-fashioned artist, a technical up-to-date non-artist, and a technically up-to-date artist.” His work addresses exhaustion on the level of both content *and* form, most notably in his short story, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” which follows a writer’s attempt to compose (not copy or imitate) a word for word iteration of Cervantes’ novel, entirely of his own volition. Where Barth’s inter-media and conceptual contemporaries would likely remain content to pitch the idea of re-composing the Quixote from scratch and discuss such a work’s theoretical implications, he observes that Borges’ innovation lies in the fact that he “doesn’t attribute the Quixote to himself, much less recompose it like Pierre Menard; instead, he writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary of writing original works of literature.” Borges works through “how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work. [...] he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation.” As the possibility of originality ebbed following the radical experimentation that took place in the first half of the twentieth century, Barth sees writers such as Borges, who fold the history of art back upon itself using the exhaustion of their craft as grist for their literary mill as one viable, if labyrinthine path out of the morass posed by Beckett and Cage’s silence.

Twelve years later, Barth wrote “The Literature of Replenishment,” a follow up piece to “The Literature of Exhaustion,” which constructs a cyclical model for the development of aesthetic development similar to that of Bakhtin’s process of “novelization.” He provides a more fully fleshed out reflection on the self-conscious modernist break from an exhausted “nineteenth-century bourgeois social order and its world view” which then worked toward overturning the realist novel

¹⁷ Ibid. 67

“by such tactics and devices as the substitution of a ‘mythical for a ‘realistic’ method” along with the “radical disruption of the linear flow of narrative, the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character” and the “deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical ‘meaning’ of literary action.”¹⁸ “The Literature of Replenishment,” like “The Literature of Exhaustion,” sets out to assess the exhaustion of literary modernism, however, it offers a more tempered and less decadent alternative to Borges’ serpentine self-referentiality.

The essay deals primarily with Barth’s idiosyncratic definition of postmodernism. He is concerned specifically with *literary* postmodernism and discusses it simply as that-which-comes-after-modernism. With the exception of a passing reference to Roland Barthes, the essay steers clear of canonical French structuralism and post-structuralism that serve as ballasts for postmodernism as a *philosophy*. Instead, Barth focusses specifically on the implications of postmodernity upon artistic and critical *practice*. He rejects critics such as Ihab Hassan and Robert Alter’s contention that post-modern fiction is one of “‘performing’ self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy” and their argument that “postmodernist writers write a fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world.”¹⁹ Instead, Barth adopts a pragmatic position by looking not only to literary theory, but also to authorial practice, noting that “critical categories are more or less fishy as they are less or more useful.”

In practice “[actual] artists, actual texts, are seldom more than more or less modernist, postmodernist, formalist, symbolist, realist, surrealist, politically committed, aesthetically ‘pure,’

¹⁸ John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, (New York: Putnam, 1982), 199

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 200

‘experimental,’ regionalist, internationalist, what have you.’²⁰ In contrast to the abstract and neatly defined categories proposed by Hassan and Alter, Barth attempts to concretize postmodern writing in its specific instantiations, arguing that “art lives in human time and history, and general changes in its modes and materials and concerns, even when not obviously related to changes in technology, are doubtless as significant as the changes in a culture’s general attitudes, which its arts may both inspire and reflect.” Rather than laying out a rigid and binding postmodernist manifesto, Barth attempts to thread the needle between theory and practice, ceding a degree of autonomy back to individual writers without stripping them of historical context.

To Barth, Hassan and Alter’s conception of postmodern fiction as an endless, surface level self-referentiality is a “pallid, last-ditch decadence, of no more than minor symptomatic interest.”²¹ He attempts to bridge the gap between critics and novelists by suggesting that a “proper program for postmodernism” is “neither a mere extension of the modernist program [...] nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism, nor on the contrary, a wholesale subversion or repudiation of either modernism or what [he is] calling premodernism: ‘traditional’ bourgeois realism.”

As an alternative to the endless, reflexive hall-of-mirrors approach to fiction that he lays out in his essay on exhaustion, Barth suggests that a synthesis of modernist and pre-modernist sensibilities offers novelists a more democratic path for the latter half of the twentieth century. He lauds James Joyce and other writers who “set very high standards of artistry” but sympathizes with critical accounts of their “famous relative difficulty of access, inherent in their antilinearity, their aversion to conventional characterization and cause-and-effect dramaturgy, their celebration of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 201

private, subjective experience over public experience, their general inclination to ‘metaphoric as against metonymic means’ that leads to what Hassan calls an “aristocratic cultural spirit.”²²

The difficulty and endless scholarly explication of “aristocratic” writers such as Joyce, Pound, Woolf, and Eliot generated a popular backlash which Barth believes to be just. However, consistent with the exhaustion essay, he argues that one can repudiate neither one’s forebears (in the case of the modernists) nor the valid theoretical work of one’s contemporaries (in the case of the inter-media artists). According to Barth, it is impossible to “treat the whole modernist enterprise as an aberration” and then set to work as if it hadn’t happened” by “rushing back into the arms of nineteenth-century middle-class realism as if the first half of the twentieth century hadn’t happened.”²³ However, the modernists were also wrong in their *wholesale* revolt against “linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naïve illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral conventions;” their program of disjunction, simultaneity et. al “are not the whole story either.”

The “worthy program for postmodern fiction” that Barth lays out resides in a “synthesis or transcension” of the antitheses between pre-modernist and modernist approaches to fiction rather than repudiation or imitation of “either [one’s] twentieth century, modernist parents or [one’s] nineteenth-century pre-modernist grandparents.”²⁴ Barth praises Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who synthesizes “straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror” as the ideal writer of replenishment. The postmodernist novel should transcend disputes over formalism and “contentism,” it should negotiate the antitheses between modernist experimentation and premodernist realism, and it should do so without “lapsing into moral or artistic simplism, shoddy

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 202

²⁴ Ibid. 203

craftsmanship, Madison Avenue venality, or either false or real naïveté.” Though unlikely to “reach and move [...] the great mass of television-addicted non-readers,” the literature of replenishment also avoids the hermetic opacity of a Beckett or a Nabokov; it should “hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art.” By writing with “the twentieth-century under [one’s] belt but not on [one’s] back,” writers may work out “not the next-best thing after modernism” but the “*best next* thing”: what Barth hopes “might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment.”

The exhaustion and replenishment essays critique the constant self-questioning and self-critiquing tendencies present in the inter-media arts. Barth places them in an *intermediary* role, arguing that while the bulk of such work may offer useful commentary upon the nature of representation and the gap between text or image and reality, the works themselves run aground as forgettable, myopic, and inaccessible to a popular audience. His call for a return to virtuosity and talent in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” and his democratization of the novel in “The Literature of Replenishment” predicts that in the wake of the aporia drawn by Joyce’s maximalism and Beckett’s minimalism, there may be a return virtuosity that is conscious and aware of the limitations of language and representation. Joyce, Beckett, the inter-media arts, the apocalyptic silence left after World War II, and the French post-structuralist assertion that meaning remains in a constant state of deferral *happened*; the artistic, technological, and metaphysical ultimacies that Barth discusses caused seismic shifts in aesthetic, politically, and epistemological thinking and experience. They are as much a part of the fabric of existence, as much a part of reality the subject matter common to the nineteenth century realist novel such as war, social unrest, and domestic life. As an artist, especially as a writer claiming to traffic in “realism,” to ignore the aesthetic challenges posed by modernism is to ignore reality in favor of a naïve or nostalgic fantasy.

“The Art of a Lonely Solipsist’s Self-Love” -- Barth & His Critics

In “Very Like an Elephant, *Reality versus Realism*,” Barth contends that his self-reflexive incorporation of the inter-media and postmodern movements is, in his late-twentieth century present, more concerned with reality than that of his contemporary realists. Borrowing Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s definition of literature as “the artful rendition of human experience,” Barth argues that there is “more to reality than realism.”²⁵ His critique of realism lies not with the practice of the realist novel, but with criticism that favors the realist novel, and in turn, limits the scope and potential of literature as a whole. Barth takes a pluralist approach to fiction. “Realism” and “irrealism” are “simply different handles” on reality with the same potential for greatness or mediocrity. “If the realist happens to be Anton Checkhov,” Barth writes, “deal me in,” and “if the irrealist happens to be Italo Calvino, deal me in.” He rejects any form of aesthetic orthodoxy, whether it be a traditional adherence to the canon or a dogmatic avant garde.

Citing a talk by James A. Michener to his students at Johns Hopkins, Barth discusses the idea of “transparent” writing. Michener believed that language should remain an invisible, spotless window pane from text to world. Barth calls Michener’s argument a “Windex approach” to the novel.²⁶ It offers the potential for compelling art, as in the case of writers such as Honore Balzac, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain. However, the Windex approach generates “formidable art [...] owing not to artlessness, but to the masterful deployment of the artifice of ‘invisible language.’” However clear or accurate a realist’s depiction of the world “out there” may be, it remains a *mediated* depiction. A novel, realist or otherwise, is not the world. Though such writers may strive for verity, Barth believes that “cunning verisimilitude is their means: not reality, but realism; not ‘truth’ but trompe-l’oeil.”

²⁵ John Barth, “Very Like an Elephant: *Reality ‘Versus Realism’*” *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Non-Fiction, 1985-1994*, (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1995), 140

²⁶ *Ibid.* 141

In contrast to Michener's emphasis on transparent language, Barth proposes a "stained-glass" approach which so foregrounds the medium that "exterior reality may serve mainly to backlight it."²⁷ He concedes that radical examples to this approach, may lead to the contention that all writing is nothing more than words on a page in a similar vein to Kasimir Malevich and Jasper Johns' insistence that painting is nothing more than pigment on canvas. However, Barth insists that experience "centrally includes our experience of language, and thus, the most abstruse, even perverse literary experiments [...] will interest us, if they do, by reason of the light they cast, however odd, upon that experience, as well as human ingenuity, which is also part of that experience."

The stained-glass approach, used artfully, provides insight into an area of experience inaccessible by conventional realist transparency. It serves as a "defamiliarization of the familiar so that we see it afresh."²⁸ Human curiosity extends well beyond ourselves, our society, or the here and now. Strict adherence to transparency forecloses upon meditation on the unreal and the impossible which bear profound importance upon reality itself, "if only [...] for what they tell us about the possible, the real, the here and now."

Despite his critique of circular self-referentiality in "The Literature of Exhaustion," his insistence for a return, however radically qualified, to reality in "The Literature of Replenishment," and his defense of metafictional play in "Very Like an Elephant," critics since the 1970's have charged Barth with what they view as a solipsistic dead end that triumphs the death of the novel. In *On Moral Fiction* John Gardner takes Barth, along with many of his contemporaries including Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, and Donald Barthelme, to task for writing fiction that is not *immoral* but *amoral* – a practice which Gardner believes abandons the author's moral duty. Gardner

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 140

prioritizes what he calls “primary fiction” which analyzes the “way things actually work in the world;” he relegates the metafictional concerns of Barth and his cohort to the status of “secondary fiction” or fiction that talks about fiction, and remains “trivial.”²⁹ Where Barth sees plurality, Gardner sees hierarchy claiming that such trivial art has no meaning or value except in the shadow of more serious art, the kind of art that beats back the monsters, and, if you will, makes the world safe for triviality.”

Historian and social critic Christopher Lasch lays out another critique of metafiction in *The Culture of Narcissism*, in which he argues that ironic self-awareness is a psychological attempt to escape from serious self-reflection. He writes that an “awareness commenting on awareness creates an escalating cycle of self-consciousness that inhibits spontaneity.”³⁰ As novelists “call attention to the artificiality of their own creations and discourage the reader from identifying with characters,” they become “so conscious of these distancing techniques” that it ultimately becomes “more and more difficult to write about anything except the difficulty of writing.”

Lasch takes aim at Barth in particular, citing a passage from *Chimera*, in which Barth’s reimagined Bellerophon asks, “[how] does one write a novella? How find the channel, bewildered in these creeks and crannies? Storytelling isn’t my cup of wine; isn’t somebody’s; my plot doesn’t rise and fall in meaningful stages but...digresses, recreates, hesitates, groans from its utter et cetera, collapses, dies.”³¹ Bellerophon’s paralytic inward turn, to Lasch, is a *regressus ad infinitum* that dodges serious engagement with reality. By giving up “the effort to ‘master reality,’” Lasch believes that authors such as Barth “[retreat] into a superficial self-awareness that blots out not only the external world but the deeper subjectivity ‘that enables the imagination to take wing.’”³² Contrary to Barth’s

²⁹ Tom Nugent, “Two Literary Lions Tangle,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 2, 1978, sec. B.

³⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, (New York: Norton, 1978), 96

³¹ John Barth, “Bellerophoniad,” *Chimera*, (New York: Randomhouse, 1972), 196

³² Lasch, 97

insistence that such self-consciousness is a symptom of the contemporary epistemological condition, and his contention in “Very Like an Elephant” that such an accurate depiction of discursive stagnation is in fact an effort to “master reality,” Lasch sees Barth’s self-referentiality as an “emotional withdrawal” that “threatens to disintegrate into catatonia.”³³

In “The Anti-Novels of John Barth,” critic Beverly Gross argues that over the course of his career, Barth steadily moves “toward the fulfillment of an idea – the idea being the repudiation of narrative art.”³⁴ Like Lasch, Gross sees Barth’s fixation on the issue of paralysis as a nihilistic attack on fiction as whole. She believes that he works in a “[nihilistic] form” that attacks the narrative impulse.³⁵ *Sot-Weed* and *Giles*, according to Gross, each becomes an “anti-novelistic [assault] on itself” in their “hostility” to narrative convention through their “frequent pronouncements from the narrator against the very enterprise he is engaged in.”

The main narrative of *Sot-Weed* neatly ties a massive skein of narrative threads together into an impossibly tidy conclusion – one with such exceedingly clean finality that it is difficult to read this ending as anything other than a foregrounding of narrative tidiness that serves to parody the eighteenth century novels of Henry Fielding or Samuel Richardson. In a brief epilogue, Barth subjects his characters to newly compounded catastrophes and draws the novel’s official conclusion to an indeterminate open-ended conclusion. Gross sees such a resistance to finality as an act of vicious hostility toward storytelling on Barth’s part rather than a pointed critique of the fact that, in reality, lives do not end when stories do. She writes that “*The Sot-Weed Factor* stands as a parody of narrative art with all its assumptions, traditions, prerogatives, and ends.” It is an “ultimate anti-

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Beverly Gross, “The Anti-Novels of John Barth,” *Critical Essays on John Barth*, edited by Joseph J. Waldmeir, (Boston, G.K. Hall & Company, 1980), 30

³⁵ Ibid. 36

novelism,” that Gross believes to be an attack on “the very thing it seems most to be cherishing: the narrative impulse itself.”³⁶

In a 1993 interview for a post at Illinois State University, novelist David Foster Wallace told Barth scholar Charles B. Harris that “Barth is dead.”³⁷ In a similar vein to both Gardner, Gross, and Lasch, David Foster Wallace mounts what is likely the longest and most sustained critique of Barth’s project in his parodic novella, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way.” Wallace, whose novels bear a strong affinity with Barth’s metafiction, described Barth’s best-known short story, “Lost in the Funhouse” as “[self]-indulgent ego masked as revelation of self-indulgent ego – captured by the industry that regulates it”³⁸ in the margin of his personal copy of the collection that contains the story. Wallace lays twin charges at the feet of “Funhouse,” a story which acts as a sort of manifesto for Barth’s larger project: he claims that it is a work of masturbatory self-indulgence; he claims that such self-indulgence is the dead end of a consumer driven society fueled by endless compulsion toward novelty. He seeks egress for fiction from what he sees as a labyrinthine fun-house-turned-prison-house doomed to an endless cycle of ironic, solipsistic navel gazing.

Wallace’s essay, “E Unam Pluribus,” targeted largely at Barth’s contemporary, Don DeLillo, complains that metafiction is the product of an obsessively nihilistic self-consciousness: “metafiction of the American 60’s [...] was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching.”³⁹ Wallace denies metafiction the status of parody; he instead reduces it to blank pastiche by defanging its satirical bite. It is “less a response to televisual culture than to a kind of abiding-in TV;” its authors are “citizens of a culture that said its most important stuff about itself

³⁶ Ibid. 38

³⁷ Mary K. Holland, “Your Head Gets in the Way,” *John Barth: A Body of Words*. Edited by Gabrielle Dean and Charles B. Harris, (Dalkey, 2016). 203

³⁸ Ibid. 210

³⁹ David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2, (1993: Summer): 161. https://jsomers.net/DFW_TV.pdf

through mass media.” They are complicit in furthering a greater social tendency toward paralyzing self-consciousness according to Wallace.

Mary K. Holland points out that in Barth’s case, this critique is to “ignore decades of essays, criticism, essays and interviews articulating Barth’s quite conscious and complex use of myth to demonstrate and reveal itself [...], expose realism as mimetic of narrative and not of the world [...], and, like Homer, to react to old and usher in new narrative methodologies in a new technological age.”⁴⁰ However, the fun house mirror of infinite regress that Wallace accuses Barth of creating is not the only possible future Barth sees for the novel. He does not address the emphasis on plurality or the space that Barth leaves open for conventional realism in “Very Like an Elephant.” Wallace’s critique of metafiction is not without merit in the genre’s worst examples; however, his association of Barth with metafiction’s tendency toward nihilistic indulgence is ultimately a misprision

“Westward” foregrounds its investment in social atomization with an epigram from Anthony Burgess: “As we are all solipsists, and all die, the world dies with us. Only very minor literature aims at apocalypse.”⁴¹ Wallace builds his intertextual novella upon the palimpsest of Barth’s “Funhouse.” He borrows the story’s protagonist, Ambrose, who now holds a teaching position at the East Chesapeake Tradeschool Creative Writing Program. The novella follows two of Ambrose’s creative writing students, the recently common-law married Mark Nechtr and Drew-Lynn Eberhardt, brought together by D.L.’s false claim that Mark impregnated her, as Mark thinks through a bad case of writer’s block in a car enroute to the grand opening for one of Ambrose’s new business ventures: a series of funhouse themed discotheques. D.L. a self-declared postmodernist, and Mark, an aimless writer without aesthetic commitment both begin to see through what Wallace believes to be

⁴⁰ Holland, 203

⁴¹ David Foster Wallace, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” *Girl with Curious Hair*, (Norton, 1989), 232

weaknesses in Barth's project and start to resist the writing curriculum that Ambrose (an allegorical stand-in for Barth himself, who taught creative writing at several universities) teaches.

Mark and D.L.'s relationship begins when Mark watches, and chooses not to report D.L. for writing a critical limerick on Ambrose's blackboard, which charges the metafictionist with building an inhospitable, sterile house of mirrors:

For lovers, the Funhouse is fun.
For phones, the Funhouse is love.
But *for whom*, the proles grouse,
Is the Funhouse a house?
Who lives there when push comes to shove?⁴²

The poem, which echoes the opening question of Barth's story – "For whom is the Funhouse fun?" -- marks the beginning of Wallace's attempt to lay bare the "self-indulgent ego" he sees at work in the story, and question "for whom," apart from the author himself, such self-indulgent fiction "is fun."⁴³ Through parodic caricature of Barthian tropes that range from his fixation on the mid-Atlantic (D.L. and Mark are both Marylanders), the presence of reproductive metaphor (D.L. lies to Mark about being pregnant) to self-consciously overwritten intertitles such as **"I LIED: THREE REASONS WHY THE ABOVE WAS NOT REALLY AN INTERRUPTION, BECAUSE THIS ISN'T THE SORT OF FICTION THAT CAN BE INTERRUPTED, BECAUSE IT'S NOT FICTION BUT REAL AND TRUE AND RIGHT NOW."** Wallace attempts to undermine what he sees as Barth's tendency to try his readers' patience. He centers his polemic attacks most openly through digressive, **"BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE [INTERRUPTIONS]"**⁴⁴ that imitate the self-protective irony that attempts to cancel any and all

⁴² Ibid. 239

⁴³ John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse," *Lost in the Funhouse*. (Anchor, 1967), First Published 1967 by Doubleday, 72

⁴⁴ Ibid., 264

criticism by admitting its possibility, such as the following (quoting at length to emphasize Wallace's excess):

As mentioned before—and if this were a piece of metafiction, which it's NOT, the exact number of typeset lines would very probably be mentioned, which would be a princely pain in the ass, not to mention cocky, since it would assume that a straightforward and anti-embellished account of a slow and hot and sleep-deprived and basically clotted and frustrating day in the lives of three kids, none of whom are all that sympathetic, could actually get published, which these days good luck, but in metafiction it would, nay *need* be mentioned, a required postmodern convection aimed at drawing the poor old reader's emotional attention to the fact that the narrative bought and paid for and ow under time-consuming scrutiny is *not* in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather in fact an “artifact,” an object, a plain old this-worldly thing, composed of emulsified woodpulp and horizontal chorus-lines of dye, and conventions, and tis thus in a “deep” sense just an opaque forgery of a transfiguring window, not a real window, a gag, and thus in a deep (but *intentional*, now) sense artificial, which is to say fabricated, false, a fiction, a pretender-to-status, a straw haired King of Spain—this self-conscious explicitness and deconstructed disclosure supposedly making said metafiction “realer” than a piece of pre-postmodern “Realism” that depends on certain antiquated techniques to create an “illusion” of a windowed access to a “reality” isomorphic with ours but possessed of and yielding up higher truths to which all authentically human persons stand in the relation of applicand [...]⁴⁵

Wallace uses such caricature to support the charge of infinite regress that he sees as the final result of Barth's excessive decadence.

Late in the novella, in what Wallace calls his “**FINAL INTERRUPTION**,” Mark gropes toward a possible way out of the labyrinth Wallace sees in Ambrose's funhouse. During an exhausting car ride with J.D. Steelritter, the advertising executive handling the campaign for Ambrose's new discotheque, Mark sees insight in an otherwise crass and dismissive comment from Steelritter that stories about stories are like “[getting] laid by somebody that keeps saying ‘here I am, laying you.’”⁴⁶ Instead he argues that a “story ought to lead you to bed with both hands.” Through Mark, Wallace argues that while the self-reflexive hall of mirrors in Barth's funhouse *may* work in fiction, it must be done not “by putting the poor characters in one, or by pretending the poor

⁴⁵ Ibid. 265

⁴⁶ Ibid. 330

writer's in one, wandering around" but by putting the "story itself in one." The "exit [must] never be out of sight;" there may be "no labyrinths to thread through" and "[egress must] be clearly marked." Wallace goes on to mount the novella's most open, vocal critique of Barth, distinguishing his hope for a new fiction from Barth's universe:

Except Mark feels in his flat young gut, though, that such a story would NOT be metafiction. Because metafiction is untrue, as a lover. It cannot betray. It can only reveal. Itself is its only object. It's the art of a lonely solipsist's self-love, a night-light on the black fifth wall of being a subject, a face in a crowd. It's lovers not being lovers. Kissing their own spine. Fucking themselves [...] The poor lucky reader's not that scene's target, though he hears the keen whistle and feels the razored breeze and knows that there but for the grace of the Pater of us all lies someone, impaled red as the circle's center, prone and arranged, each limb a direction, on land so borderless there's nothing to hold your eye except food and sky and the shadow of one slow clock....⁴⁷

Mark's masturbatory metaphor, through his indictment of Ambrose's self-awareness, is not simply crude joke to intensify his distaste for his teacher's work. It drives home the *individual, solitary* nature that Wallace attributes to Barth's entire approach to writing.

However, the departure from a catatonic self-reflexivity that serves as the novella's climax, as well as Mark's personal breakthrough, bears a strong resemblance to exactly the "worthy postmodernist program" that Barth proposes in the exhaustion and replenishment essays. Mark, who grapples with his postmodernist forebears in a similar way to Barth's struggles against his modernist predecessors, cannot abandon the critique of fiction set forth by his metafictional ancestors. His initial dilemma in the novella was one of exhaustion; his epiphanic moment of clarity and insight offered by Steelritter's off-handed remark is one of replenishment. Rather than disassembling Barth's project his attempt to restore emotion and vitality to fiction, through Mark, Wallace enacts the cyclical process of exhaustion and replenishment from the generation succeeding Barth. Like Barth's ideal postmodernist, Mark sets forth to write with his literary precursors "under

⁴⁷ Ibid. 332

his belt but not on his back.” It is the same search for a “synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and non-political artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror” that Barth values above all else in fiction. Wallace’s novella unwittingly serves as an example of the ongoing dialogue between exhaustion and replenishment.

Barth and Bakhtin: *The Tidewater Tales* and Replenishment

Though critics such as Gardner, Gross, Lasch, and Wallace are incorrect in their wholehearted dismissal of Barth’s reflexive metafiction, they are not entirely wrong in pointing out the obtuse obscurantism and excessive self-referentiality occasionally present in his early work. Several stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*, such as “Night Sea Journey,” told from the perspective of a single spermatozoan as it considers, then discards several major strains of western philosophy by pushing each to their logical limits, or “Menelaid,” in which King Menelaus recounts his life story through a series of layered quotations-within-quotations that culminates at a seven-degree remove from its original frame, seem to lead to a similar aesthetic dead end to that of the inter-media arts that Barth critiques in the exhaustion essay. Despite its insightful meditation both on Joseph Campbell’s monomyth as well as on the human tendency to filter one’s life through a narrative lens *Chimera* is so forbiddingly difficult that a reader who is not already well versed in its conceits is likely to reach the same dismissive conclusion as Lasch.

However, both *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales* work toward the program for postmodern fiction that Barth lays out in the replenishment essay. They keep the concerns that Barth presents in “The Literature of Exhaustion” in the foreground, but also turn his earlier reflexivity to a newly generative end by examining the consequences of his earlier experimentation on more thoroughly fleshed-out characters. While Barth makes a strong *theoretical* case for his “stained-glass” approach in “Very Like an Elephant,” his later novels offer compelling *practical* examples against Gardner’s

polemic against metafiction by bringing its implications to bear on “how things actually work in the world.” Though challenging, both novels are a far cry from the impenetrable difficulty of Barth’s modernist predecessors, such as Beckett and Joyce, his contemporaries of the 1950’s and 1960’s, such as William Gaddis or Thomas Pynchon, or even Barth’s own early work, such as *Giles* or *Chimera*. Where Barth’s fiction published around the time of “The Literature of Exhaustion,” such as the short stories of *Lost in the Funhouse*, takes the practice of writing as its primary thematic material and makes use of metafictional techniques toward a similar end to that of Borges’ “Pierre Menard,” his later novels return to the more conventional literary material such as plot and characterization that Barth predicted toward the end of the exhaustion essay. Neither novel makes this return through the backward-looking naivety against which Barth cautions in “The Literature of Replenishment.” He does not wholly discard the self-referentiality of his early career, but rather brings the implications of his metafictional play to bear on a more traditional approach to the novel. The experimentation of Barth’s early career, which grappled with exhaustion, worked, in Bakhtin’s terms, to “reformulate and re-accentuate” Barth’s approach to fiction, which he brings to the table as a replenished approach to realism in *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*.

This thesis offers a reading of *The Tidewater Tales* that pushes back against charges of frivolity and solipsism levelled by Barth’s critics using concepts Bakhtin’s theoretical framework as an interpretive methodology and as a grounding worldview. Although Barth only makes one brief reference to Bakhtin in his non-fiction writing, his overall literary project is isomorphic with both with Bakhtin’s philosophical outlook as well as the ideal role he sets forth for the author; Barth’s writing is a practical example of Bakhtin’s ideas. Chapter 1 takes a closer look at Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia and his praise for the novel’s unique ability to juxtapose conflicting types of discourse. It then works through several ways in which Barth juxtaposes different types of speech against one another in *The Tidewater Tales* to offer a more pluralistic representation of language than

that of a more conventionally unified homogeneous authorial approach. Chapter 2 introduces Bakhtin's concept of *unfinalizability* – his emphasis on lived experience as an unfinished and open-ended present. Bakhtin is careful to emphasize that one's own internal perspective always remains incomplete; one always relies on an ongoing dialogue with the outside perspective of another for consummation. The chapter then examines the Sagamores' joint narration in *The Tidewater Tales* as an example of Bakhtin's unfinalized dialogue between the *I* and the *other*. Chapter 3 continues to address challenges that Bakhtin sets for the narration of endings in his study of *chronotopes* or, how different literary forms handle *time* and *space*. It then moves on to a case study Barth's play with time and space in the Greek epic during of one of the novel's major set-piece episodes, a parodic epilogue to Homer's *Odyssey*, which questions Odysseus's seamless return to domestic life with Penelope following their twenty-year separation. The essay concludes by addressing *The Tidewater Tales*'s cyclical structure. Though the novel ends with the delivery of the Sagamores' children, Barth refuses to draw their story to a close; he circles back to its beginning by repeating its title page at the novel's end.

Chapter 1

Mikhail Bakhtin: Genre, Heteroglossia, and The Novel

Heteroglossia and the Novel

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin provides an extended discussion of the aesthetics of prose writing, in general, and the novel, in particular. Artistically rendered prose in the novel is “multiform in style and variform in speech and voice.”⁴⁸ For Bakhtin, the novel is the ideal container for the portrayal of heteroglot social discourse as it plays out in lived experience; he believes that the novel embodies “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.” By emphasizing the novel’s shifting, protean tendencies which make space for the interplay of several different types of language, Bakhtin’s idiosyncratic praise for the form neatly parallels that of Barth’s preference for the “stained-glass” approach to writing. Bakhtin’s theoretical aesthetics and Barth’s authorial practice find the novel’s greatest potential in its ability to foreground a sweeping range of distinct discursive forms. Like Barth’s contention that the foregrounding of language in the novel creates space for the “defamiliarization of the familiar so we may see it afresh,” Bakhtin argues that generic blending within the novel allows conflicting speech genres to be “juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another, and be interrelated dialogically.” Through his critical evaluation of novelistic prose as a stratified, multiform juxtaposition of multiple styles, Bakhtin provides an illuminating theoretical lens through which to examine Barth’s work in *The Tidewater Tales*.

⁴⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail, “Discourse in the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 261

Early in the essay, Bakhtin explains that when one digs into the fabric of a novel, one is “confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls.”⁴⁹ The author’s role in constructing the novel is the careful composition and arrangement of heterogeneous forms of discourse, which Bakhtin calls “compositional-stylistic unities.” He provides a broad overview of the general types of stylistic unity that serve as the novelist’s raw materials, which includes the following:

- (1) Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants);
- (2) Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (*skaž*);
- (3) Stylization of the various forms of semilitarary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.);
- (4) Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical, or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth);
- (5) The stylistically individualized speech of characters.⁵⁰

The novel can never be reduced to one single stylistic unity but instead places multiple styles in dialogue with one another. It combines them to form a “structured artistic system,” which subordinates each of its diverse, mixed forms to a “higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole.”

In *The Tidewater Tales*, Barth performs exactly the type of orchestration with which Bakhtin tasks the novelist. Barth not only makes clear and distinct use of all five of Bakhtin’s forms of stylistic unity, but he also uses each of them in diverse registers by bringing different generic conventions to each form of composition. On the level of authorial narration, Barth’s use of both Peter and Kathy’s dual perspective, as well as the novel’s embedded frame stories, provides a flexible narrative structure that allows his narratorial voice to speak through several different generic styles.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 261

⁵⁰ Ibid. 262

Passages narrated primarily by Pete, who speaks as a practicing, if stuck, writer of fiction and *teller* of stories, are shot through with the language of literary craftsmanship. Though uneasily aware of the fact that “lives aren’t stories,” he has a strong tendency to filter experience through the conventions of dramaturgy, both in his reflections upon his past as a sort of character formation, and in his anticipation of the future, which he sees as several potential strands of unrealized narrative potentiality. Kathy, whose career as a librarian and *collector* of stories, complements Peter’s narrative perspective as a writer by acting as the receptive reader. While Pete registers experience as a *producer* of narrative, Kathy catalogues life as the endless proliferation of stories through the lens of a narrative *consumer*. She acts as an interpreter of experience by providing commentary upon, and comparison between the stories that she, Peter, and their friends exchange throughout the novel. However, Barth gives priority to neither Peter’s *writerly*, nor to Kathy’s *readerly* narration.

In Bakhtin’s terms, both elements of primary narration in *The Tidewater Tales* figure “into the style of the whole,” by offering support and participating “in the process whereby the unified meaning of the whole is structured and revealed.”⁵¹ By refusing to give pride of place neither to Pete, nor to Kathy, Barth sets up a non-hierarchical dialogue between writer and reader. The novel resists both authoritarian, dogmatic deference to the author as well as a relativistic interpretive free-for-all of reader response by situating cognition in the dialogue between the two roles.

Through the myriad framed stories within *The Tidewater Tales*, told by a diverse host of characters, Barth incorporates a spectrum of different forms of Bakhtin’s “oral everyday narration” into the novel. Its structure as a series of stories exchanged between characters within the larger frame of Pete and Kathy’s sailing voyage enables Barth both to move freely between the different character-narrators’ perspectives and to emphasize the *telling* of stories in *The Tidewater Tales*. The novel’s characters come from a broad range of social, ethnic, class, and career backgrounds that

⁵¹ Ibid. 262

colors their discourse as they take their turn at the narrative steering wheel. Pete and Kathy's upbringings offer the most obvious contrast: Pete's working-class Eastern Shore youth was "lower-middle-class, unaffluent, semirural, semiredneck, semicivilized, [and] semieducated; Kathy's blueblooded childhood carried with it "the strength of a certain WASP cultural tradition."⁵² Barth infuses each of the novel's minor characters with similarly distinct narratorial voices relative to their own life experience. Franklin Talbott, as a reformist former intelligence officer, tends toward conspiratorial paranoia in his narration; Frank's wife, Leah Talbott, a professor of literature, injects her stories with literary allusion and critical erudition; Leah's mother, Carmen B. Seckler, an aging, esoterically inclined divorcée, speaks as both a mystic and a marital sage. The novel also includes examples of amateur everyday storytelling and interpretation from non-professionals in cases such as the unborn twins' "**THE TOWN QUEEN OF SWAN CREEK'S PRINTS**" fairy tale and Pete's father, Fritz Sagamore's tendency to speak in rehashed anecdotes and Kathy's younger brother, Chip Sherritt's explication of James Joyce's "Araby."

The written representation of every day oral speech holds a unique place in Bakhtin's early twentieth century Russian milieu. Several formalist critics that immediately preceded Bakhtin's work on Dostoevsky, such as Boris Eikhenbaum, Yury Tynyanov and Viktor Vinogradov took a strong interest in the imitation of the individualized oral narrator in written storytelling which they referred to as *skaz* (a Russian term which Caryl Emerson notes has no precise English translation in a footnote to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*).⁵³ Bakhtin takes a particular interest in *skaz* in the Dostoevsky book, where he differentiates between simple, imitative *skaz* and parodic, double-voiced *skaz*. He observes that all writing inherently has at least some small, self-evident tendency to orient

⁵² Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*, 32, 31

⁵³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8

itself toward the spoken word. However, *Skaz*, as a unique type of discourse, enters into narration when a narrator who is “not a literary professional [...] commands no specific style but only a socially and individually specific manner of storytelling.” Bakhtin sees Eikhenbaum’s account of *skaz*, which he glosses as “*orientation toward the oral form of narration*,” to be incomplete. Missing from Eikhenbaum’s definition, according to Bakhtin, is the fact that *skaz* tends to be narrated in “*someone else’s voice*, a voice socially distinct, carrying with it precisely those points of view and evaluations necessary to the author.”

Bakhtin draws an important distinction between two different types of *skaz* which he calls *simple* and *parodistic*. Simple *skaz*, on the one hand, is blank pastiche. It is orientation toward oral speech that serves the “*direct* expression of [the author’s] own intentions.”⁵⁴ Citing Turgenev as his primary example, Bakhtin explains that simple *skaz* serves to “enliven” one’s own narration without subversive intent, and without a parodic target, whether it be a specific person or a specific form of speech. Parodistic *skaz* on the other hand, is “double-voiced;” it makes use of someone else’s speech in order to introduce “into that discourse a semantic intention directly opposed to the original one.” Parody renders palpable the relationship between an author’s discourse and that of their target; the goal of the original speaker and the goal of the author “pull in different directions” to further the author’s artistic ends.

In *The Tidewater Tales*, Barth’s frequent use of oral narrative serves as a form of parodic *skaz* to highlight the distinction between stories that are *told* and stories that are *written*. Along with his use of individual characters who make use of different forms of oral narration, Barth weaves spoken conventions into the very fabric of the novel’s primary narration through asides between Pete and Kathy that remain unflagged by quotation marks, verbal tics, and digressions to approximate spoken rather than written dialogue.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

In the episodes “39” and “**ANOTHER VERSION OF THE OLD PRISON JOKE,**” Pete and Kathy each riff on an “old joke about prisoners telling one another old jokes,” – a joke that, Pete claims “everybody knows.”⁵⁵ Barth uses the widely understood joke to act as a stand-in for the unwritten, oral tradition, in which stories without a known author serve as common property to be reworked and reorchestrated by their teller. Jokes are often *told* rather than *read*; Barth’s *written* depiction of an exchange in a conventionally *oral* medium works as both an illustration of the general use of “every day oral narration” that Bakhtin values in the novel as well as the “*orientation toward the oral form of narration*” unique to *skaz*.

When the narrative moves from the novel’s general outside perspective to Pete’s spoken discourse, there is a sharp, two paragraph shift from written to spoken language that lasts the duration of Pete’s retelling:

“Uh, once upon a time there was this bunch of convicts who’d done so much time together in the same cell block that without even trying they’d memorized all of one another’s jokes, okay? So to save time...Why would anybody who’s *erving* time want to *save* time? Anyhow, to save time they gave each joke a number: Instead of saying Have you heard the one about the rabbi and the priest who both survived the same airplane crash et cetera, somebody would just say Seventeen, or Three Forty-five, and the others would know which joke he meant.

P falters. Swallows. Kathy Sherritt rests her cheek on his hand. Uh so one day a new guard is assigned to this cell block, yes? And he hears one inmate say Fifty-eight, and the other inmates laugh a little. Another one says Seventy-four, and they laugh harder. Yet another one says Four Twenty-two, and everybody chuckles. The new guard thinks maybe they’re talking in code so that the guards won’t understand. He asks an old trusty what’s going on, and the old trusty explains all that stuff I said before, and then about the rabbi and the priest who both et cetera. So he goes Eighty-seven, so he asks the old trusty Do you know the one about the cons who’ve done so much time on the same cell block that they’ve all learned one another’s jokes et cetera, and the old trusty says sure, everybody knows that one, it’s number Thirty-nine, give it a try. So the new guard hollers Hey guys: Thirty-nine! But nobody laughs. So the new guard wants to know how come, and the old trusty shrugs and says Some people just can’t tell a joke.

⁵⁵ Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*, 70

As Pete works his way through the joke, Barth fills his speech with extraliterary starts and stops. His narration is disjointed by interjections (“Anyhow,” “yes?”) and stutters (“Uh, once upon a time,” “Uh, so”). He makes asides to Kathy about logical lapses in the joke’s narrative (“Why would anybody who’s *saving* time want to *save* time?”) and his sentences follow a repetitive pattern with the repetition of “So” at their beginnings that is far more characteristic of extemporaneous speech than prepared writing. Barth also eschews conventional punctuation in Peter’s narration, lending it a looser pace and cadence that more closely resembles the messiness of oral rather than written language. The lack of quotation marks in the guards’ dialogue places their speech in Peter’s mouth, rather than the mouths of fully fleshed out characters, further foregrounding the anecdote as a construct of Pete’s speech rather than one that takes place between fully developed characters. Significantly, Barth also does not use quotation marks to set Pete’s narration apart from the novel’s narration, blending the obvious *skaz* that takes place within his retelling of the joke into the novel’s conversational, dialogic narration that takes place between Pete and Kathy. Though narratorial discourse in *The Tidewater Tales* as a whole orients itself toward spoken language, when *individual* characters take the narrative helm, its orientation toward orality intensifies.

Barth’s use of multileveled *skaz* at varied intensities is not a blank incorporation of orality that merely animates the joke; it is not the simple *skaz* of Turgenev that lends a straightforward realism to characters’ speech. Though the joke’s content carries with it a degree of thematic freight in its parallels between the prisoners’ reduction of narratives to tidy indexing and the “less is more” writer’s block with which Pete struggles, Barth ultimately turns the joke’s orality toward a subversive end. His objective is not merely to deliver an amusing joke, but to foreground the way the joke is told. It works in the mode of Bakhtin’s parodic *skaz* through its double-voiced goal both to deliver a joke *and* to introduce a “semantic intention” distinct from the joke itself.

Barth also makes prominent use of Bakhtin's "semiliterary" narration throughout *The Tidewater Tales*. One of the animating motives for Pete and Kathy's stock-taking voyage is the "touching of bases, personal and narrative."⁵⁶ They hope to work out where they're "headed; but knowing where [they're] bound requires knowing where [they] are, which like good navigators [they] reckon from where [they've] been" in order to work through Pete's prolonged case of writer's block. Cursed with the affliction of a reductive tendency toward minimalism which draws his fiction closer and closer silence, Pete hopes to lift what he calls the metaphorical dwarf "Coomb," who represents the "[bane] of bores, scourge of the gussied-up, astringent to logohrrea" creative crisis of "Less is More," from his authorial back in order to re-commune with the muse. As Pete draws inspiration from the trip, he begins to outline plans for a new novel that he hopes to write upon the completion of his and Kathy's journey, which, in a self-reflexive turn, proves to be *The Tidewater Tales* itself. However, Kathy places a strict embargo on any actual *drafting* during the trip. Instead, she restricts Pete to preliminary *notes* on his novel to come. She suggests that he "*not* write down these tales and drams and anecdotes," asking that they "dream and tell, tell and dream, narrate and navigate whither listeth wind and tide until we are delivered of our posterity." Instead, she advises that he "keep a list. Keep a log. Keep an inventory [...] Then when your time comes, use that list as a table of contents." Barth places Pete's "semiliterary" preparatory notes directly into the novel twice: his jottings appear directly in the novel's text as the narrative unfolds by serving as intertitles; his travel diary also appears *in full* as *The Tidewater Tales'* table of contents.

Both the table of contents and the intertitles in *The Tidewater Tales* work as what French critic Gerard Genette calls *paratexts*: the elements of a given text which "surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, it's 'reception' and consumption in the form [...]"

⁵⁶ Ibid. 316

of a book.⁵⁷ Paratexts are the liminal aspects of a book that act as “*thresholds*” or “vestibule[s] [...] between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text.” Genette argues that paratexts serve a functional role which, “in all its forms is a discourse that is fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself.” They are normally subordinate to the text itself and cannot stand alone; their functionality “determines the essence of [their] appeal and [their] existence.” Traditional paratexts supplement the main text from without; though set apart from the text, paratexts operate at the fringes to alter a reader’s interpretation of a work.

Genette devotes a full chapter to the study of intertitles in *Paratexts*. They title *sections* within a work addressed not to the “public as a whole” but to specific *readers* of a text.⁵⁸ He tracks the development of the use of intertitles from medieval translations of ancient takes, pointing out that Alexandrian scholastics and Eustathius “handed down thematic titles of episodes” in their translations of Greek works. However, the use of thematic titles, according to Genette, appears to have “no foundation in the ancient written tradition,” but instead grew out of the “numbered mechanical division” present in Latin epics, Dante, Milton, and Voltaire. He argues that the use of thematic intertitling in non-fiction narrative likely developed in the middle ages, possibly through the parodying of “serious texts by philosophers or theologians,” as in the use of “descriptive intertitles in the form of noun clauses: ‘How...,’ ‘Wherein Is Seen...,’ ‘Which Tells...,’ ‘About...,’”

Intertitles in the case of first-person narrative pose a challenge to the reader. Genette writes that “these clausal intertitles may raise the question [...] of the identity of their enunciators.”⁵⁹ The use of a third-person narrator in the intertitle generally offers a straightforward answer: it “makes the

⁵⁷ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 294

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 301

author the enunciator.” However, the first-person intertitle introduces a degree of self-referentiality into the paratext. It establishes “the narrator-hero as someone with not only narrative authority but also literary authority, as an author responsible for putting together, managing, and presenting the text and is aware of his relation to the public.”

This is exactly the type of reflexivity present in the intertitles that Barth uses in *The Tidewater Tales*, the majority of which make use of the first-person plural, such as **“TAKE US SAILING,”** **“WHY ARE WE TELLING US ALL THIS,”** **“THINGS WE NOT ONLY NEVER SAW BEFORE IN OUR PEACEFUL CHESAPEAKE, BUT HOPE NEVER TO SEE AGAIN EVER ANYWHERE,”** **“THE OPINION OF US SAGAMORES,”** and **“WHAT WE’VE DONE IS WHAT WE’LL DO.”**⁶⁰ He also alludes directly to the presence of his footnotes and table of contents *within* one of his footnotes and in the table of contents late in the novel: **“IN STORY’S LOGBOOK TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR THIS NOVEL, WE DON’T EVEN AWARD SEPARATE-CHAPTER STATUS TO DAY 12, THOUGH BEFORE ITS DONE WE HEAR AT LEAST TWO NOT BAD TIDEWATER TALES.”** Though the novel does contain several third-person intertitles, such as **“PETER SAGAMORE CONSIDERS, TOO,”** and **“PETER SAGAMORE IN THE CAVE OF MONTESINOS,”** conversation between the Sagamores confirms that *all* of the titles are entries in the logbook are also penned by Pete.

Barth’s placement of Pete’s journal, a “semi-literary” form of written narrative,¹ between the levels of text and paratext works to blur the distinction between *The Tidewater Tales*’ inside and its outside. Pete’s notes no longer serve only the “functional” role that Genette assigns to the conventional intertitle but instead work on two different levels: they mark sections within the novel and they are a part the fabric of the text. In several cases, the intertitles lose their purely functional purpose and merge text directly with paratext, such as when Barth/Peter writes:

⁶⁰ Ibid. 34, 48, 237, 421, 463

“But the seamy undersides of power and the seamy backsides of the powerful are as one in the seamless web of our tidewater tales, which should likewise incorporate

THE STORY OF PETER SAGAMORE’S MEETING HIMSELF FORTY YEARS

LATER SEVENTEEN YEARS HENCE⁶¹

Pete doesn’t just recount his voyage with Kathy, but also “makes himself a writer by establishing his narrative as a literary text that, thanks to him, is already provided with one part of its paratext.”⁶²

This further relegates Barth, as the text’s author, to the role of the “editor” or “presenter.” It works as a “fictive division of responsibilities” between Barth, the novel’s *actual* author and Pete, the novel’s *fictional* author.

By placing Pete, rather than himself, at the helm of *The Tidewater Tales*’ composition, Barth calls attention to the *process* of writing. The inclusion of Pete’s entire logbook of intertitles in the novel’s table of contents offers a skeletal outline of plot points and are foregrounds the development of Pete’s creative machinery. It is yet another example of his use of “stained glass” writing that calls attention to the medium of language and the printed book within the context of a fairly realistic frame. He uses Bakhtin’s “semiliterary” discourse to construct a novel about writing and writers not only on the level of content, but on the level of form.

Bakhtin sees the artistry of constructing a novel from his compositional-stylistic unities in the orchestration and arrangement of heteroglot forms of discourse. The novelist makes prominent use of another’s speech, “whether as storytelling, as mimicking, as the display of a thing in light of a particular point of view as speech deployed first in compact masses, then loosely scattered” or in impersonal cases of “‘common opinion,’ professional and generic languages.”⁶³ Though on its face, this may appear to strip the author of personal style, Bakhtin observes that authorial style is to be

⁶¹ Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*, 317

⁶² Genette, 302

⁶³ Bakhtin, “Discourse and Novel,” 308

found within the structural unity that governs the interaction of different types of speech within the novel. The novelist's style is present in the "organic and unitary law" that holds together "the way he plays with languages and the way his own real semantic and expressive intentions are refracted within them."

In several of Barth's non-fictional essays, he offers a similar conception of his own role as a practicing novelist to Bakhtin's general novelistic aesthetics. In "Some Why Reasons I Tell Stories the Way I Tell Them Rather than Some Other Stories Some Other Sort of Way," Barth reflects on his youthful aspirations to be a jazz drummer, noting that he always felt that his strength was in orchestration rather than creation. He feels that this tendency carried over into his fiction, writing that "at heart, [he is] an arranger still, whose chiefest literary pleasure is to take a received melody – an old narrative poem, a classical myth, a shopworn literary convention, a shard of [his] experience, a *New York Times Book Review* series – and, improvising like a jazzman within its constraints, reorchestrate it to present purpose."⁶⁴ He repeats this sentiment in "My Two Muses," where he comments upon several of his own works, observing that he "wrote a long comic reorchestration of the abstract model [of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey cycle] (*Giles Goat-Boy*) and a number of short stories and novellas based on particular manifestations of it: the story of Menelaus and the Old Man of the Sea; the story of Narcissus and Echo; the story of Perseus and Medusa, the story of Bellerophon and the Chimera."⁶⁵ Barth's sense that his greatest strength as an author is his capacity for "arrangement" and reorchestration of "received melody" reflects the structural role that Bakhtin assigns to the author. In this role, Barth does not produce original forms of discourse, but writes *through* them; he *facilitates* dialogue between heterogeneous types of speech. In Bakhtin's terms, this "in no sense degrades the general, deep-seated intentionality [...] of the work as a whole," but

⁶⁴ John Barth, "Some Why Reasons I Tell Stories the Way I Tell Them Rather than Some Other Stories Some Other Sort of Way," *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. (New York: Putnam, 1982), 6

⁶⁵ John Barth, "My two Muses," *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. (New York: Putnam, 1982), 159

instead acts as the driving force behind Barth's project in *The Tidewater Tales*.⁶⁶ The novel is not a simple imitation or pastiche of pre-existing genres, but a stage on which conflicting types of literary language form a "microcosm of heteroglossia."

Bakhtin takes care to note that the use of the speech of another is never wholly separated from the speech of the author. The boundaries remain a "flexible and ambiguous [...] *play with the boundaries of speech types*."⁶⁷ Such play serves a parodic function. It incorporates heterogenous types of discourse to "[penetrate] the deepest levels of literary and ideological thought itself, resulting in a parody of the logical and expressive structure of any ideological discourse as such." Bakhtinian parody takes as its target literary discourse itself; it distances "the author still further from language" to "[refract] new authorial intentions." Where Barth's critics take him to task for his foregrounding of language, Bakhtin's aesthetics help illuminate the project of the "stained-glass approach." His project is not the destruction of the novel, as Beverly Gross argues, but its expansion; he does not shirk the responsibility of "mastering reality" as Lasch charges, but to expand the breadth of reality available to mastery by addressing its medium of representation. The heteroglossia at play in *The Tidewater Tales* serves a replenishing function. His blending of disparate genres serves the Bakhtinian novelizing role of "[exposing] the conventionality of their forms and their language" in order to allow them to "sound in new ways."

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 2

Unfinalizability – “The Story of Our Life is Not Our Life. It is

Our Story.”

Present throughout Bakhtin’s career is a strong resistance to determinism; he maintains a firm belief that the world remains in constant flux. It is messy and incomplete; it resists closure at all turns. He favors *becoming* over *being*, writing that that life and the world are *unfinalizable*, that “[nothing] conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and always will be in the future.”⁶⁸ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson refer to unfinalizability as a “global concept” within Bakhtin’s oeuvre; it is one of “the key issues pertaining to [his] thought” that carries important implications in *all* of his disparate lines of inquiry.⁶⁹ For Bakhtin, a finished world is a mechanical world. A world in which “time forges nothing new.”⁷⁰ Like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, who believes that determinism reduces life to a “table of logarithms” or a “mathematical formula” that predetermines all human choice, Bakhtin believes that a closed or finished outlook strips human life of its fundamental freedom and creativity.⁷¹

Much of Bakhtin’s resistance to determinism stems from his disagreements with two dominant strains of thought prominent at the outset of the twentieth century: the Structuralism that grew out of Saussurian linguistics and the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx. Saussure’s use of the abstract concepts *langue* and *parole* places actual speech beyond scientific inquiry. Structuralist linguistics sets out to study the *abstract* system at the expense of the *concrete* event, an approach that Bakhtin believed fails to account for “something essential about language or any other cultural

⁶⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 166.

⁶⁹ Morson and Emerson, 11

⁷⁰ Bakhtin, Mikhail, quoted in Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, 38

⁷¹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Notes from Underground*, (New York, New York, Vintage), 24

entity: their ‘eventness.’”⁷² The synchronic study of abstract systems makes no room for change or spontaneity. It sets “the laws of systemic change [...] beyond human agency and therefore at crucial points beyond human creativity.” The reduction of language to a static structure treats all speech acts as the recombination of given elements; structuralism diminishes both speech and literature to mere acts of selection and discovery rather than unbound creativity.

Along with his objection to a mechanistic view of language, Bakhtin also takes issue with Marxist historicism. As in his critique of Saussure, Bakhtin finds its reduction of history to an ongoing dialectic molded by impersonal, material conditions to ignore the individual and the particular. Morson and Emerson align the Bakhtinian critique of dialectical materialism with Jean-Paul Sartre’s observation that “lazy Marxism,” has a strong tendency to “dissolve” actual people “in a bath of sulphuric acid;” it elevates the dialectic to the place of “a celestial law...a metaphysical force which by itself engenders historical processes.”⁷³ The Marxist foregrounding of economic conditions serves as a similar abstraction from lived experience to that of Saussure’s *langue* and *parole*. It provides no account of the concrete experience of real, living people and instead favors a highly theoretical system. By laying out an inevitable sequence of future historical development, Marxism presents a finalized worldview governed by ironclad laws. It leaves no room for responsibility on behalf of the individual, it blocks out the possibility of the unexpected, and it places historical change beyond human agency. It also constrains itself to “more or less guarantee in advance the significance of anything one might find,” requiring that all discoveries, acts of creativity, and freedom must be straightjacketed into the dialectic rather than freely interpreted.⁷⁴

Such worldviews fail to account for the fundamental immanence and essentiality of unfinalizability in lived experience. Bakhtin’s emphasis on the world’s openness is an attempt to

⁷² Morson and Emerson, 39

⁷³ Sartre, John Paul, *Search*, quoted in Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, 44

⁷⁴ Morson and Emerson, 44

restore a sense of freedom. He hopes to rescue active creativity from structuralist selection and recombination of given elements; he attempts to reintroduce free will into historical development. Experience is not a static, synchronic system of finite possibilities from which one may choose, nor is it a diachronic sequence of moments that “[unfold] in a systemic and systematic way.”⁷⁵ Lived experience takes place primarily in the present; Bakhtin “opposed all ways of thinking that reduced the present moment – each present moment – to a simple derivative of what went before.” The present is radically distinct from the past in its openness. However tempting it may be to view in the present “only those possibilities that were in fact realized,” lived time is far more laden with potential, both realized and unrealized. The retrospective imposition of realized potential on the past ignores the fact that “every past moment exhibited ‘presentness’ when it occurred,” carrying with it the possibility of a host of alternative futures.

Cognition – The Ongoing Dialogue between Self and Other

The unfinalizability of experience carries particular importance for one’s ability to reflect upon, conceptualize, and narrate self-consciousness. In “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” Bakhtin argues that one’s life, as a complete and finalized whole, can never exist for the *I* but only for the *other*. Time, as experienced from within, differs drastically from time experienced from without; there is a marked distinction between “my own time and the time of the other.”⁷⁶ For oneself, temporality remains open. It has yet to be fulfilled. Meaning remains in an ongoing state of becoming; experience, as “*not yet final*” is “the only way in which I can actually experience within myself the temporality, the givenness of my being in the face of meaning.” The future looms large over one’s lived experience as a plenitude of unrealized possibilities. The ongoing duration of time

⁷⁵ Ibid. 44

⁷⁶ Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” *Art and Answerability*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 121

leads to an ongoing deferment of the future. It is “never realized, for me myself, in any given act, always remaining a pure demand for my own temporality, historicity, finitude.”

From the position of inner consciousness, as the ongoing anticipation of an unrealized future, it is impossible to form a complete reflection upon one’s own life. Bakhtin writes that “[at] no point in time is my reflection upon myself realistic” because one remains in a constant state of unfinished development.⁷⁷ One can never be a given for oneself but will always remain as “something-yet-to-be with respect to meaning and value.” Meaning, for oneself, is constantly deferred toward the future. It is never determinate because it remains yet to be “actualized in my experience.” From within oneself, one can only *anticipate* meaning.

For Bakhtin, the only perspective which one’s life may reach fully consummated meaning is through dialogue with the other. From within, one’s own birth and death, the two bookends crucial to achieving any certainty of a beginning or an ending of finality, remain inaccessible. Because one cannot experience the “terminal points” of one’s own life, birth and death, the “emotional weight [of one’s own life] *taken as a whole* does not exist for [oneself].” Consciousness is without beginning and without end; it, “by its very nature is infinite, revealing itself only from within.”⁷⁸

However, the imperceptibility of one’s own birth and death, does not preclude their existence. Like “the back of one’s head,” birth and death remain beyond the perception of the *I*, however, they remain objective facts for the *other*. One’s internal experience “in relation to the other [...] continues after his death.”⁷⁹ From without, following the death of another, “the whole of his life lies directly before me.” That one may perceive the biographical bookends of the other offers “an axiological approach to the other’s *finished* life.” External apprehension of the birth and death of the other is the only way to overcome the constant deferral of meaning. It frees life “from the claws

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 290

⁷⁹ Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” 106

of what-is-yet-to-be” and renders the life of the other “emotionally measurable, musically expressive, and self-sufficient.” Consummation, which, in Bakhtin’s terms, refers to “how parts are shaped into wholes,” remains “in the eye of the beholder.” The disparate parts of a life can only be shaped into a comprehensible whole from without.

Bakhtin offers pride of place to neither the perspective of the *I* nor the perspective of the *other*. Each position carries with it pieces of experience inaccessible to the other; each position has lapses or lacunae that the other supplements. During an exchange between two people, each holds an “[*excess*] of *Seeing*” over the other.⁸⁰ Each will always see and know things unavailable to the other. Bakhtin writes that “regardless of the position and the proximity” between two interlocutors, “[one] shall always see and known something that [the other]” cannot, such as things behind their back. When two people look into each other’s eyes, “two different worlds” will be reflected in their pupils. Such an excess is the result of situated knowledge founded “in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of [one’s] place in the world.”

The gap between two interacting subjects is bridgeable by way of what Bakhtin refers to as *cognition*, which “surmounts this concrete outsidersness of me myself and the outsidersness-for-me of all other human beings.”⁸¹ Cognition places the *other* and the *I* in a “relative and convertible” relationship that gives equal weight to both internal and external perspective. It is located neither with the *I* nor with the *other* but located in the ongoing and unfinished dialogue between the two. As an ongoing, unfinalizable process, one cannot perceive cognition as a “unique concrete whole” in the same way that one can a landscape or building. However, it can be *thought*, in the ever-shifting, incomplete, complementary relation of the individuals’ excesses of seeing.

⁸⁰ Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” 22

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 23

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin conducts a study of Dostoevsky's characters in order to clarify how an author make work to provide an aesthetic representation of cognition. The Underground Man, for example, examines himself not only from within, but from without, as he eavesdrops on other characters. Bakhtin writes that he looks at himself, "in all the mirrors of other people's consciousnesses, he knows all the possible refractions of his image in those mirrors [...] he knows his own objective definition, neutral both to the other's consciousness and to his own self-consciousness."⁸² The Underground Man finds a complete image of himself neither from his own perspective, nor from that of the other. Rather, objectivity must work from the perspective of a hypothetical "third person" situated between the self and the other. Though he depends on the other to fill lapses in his perspective, the Underground Man, in his internal monologue, always has the last word, the "word of his self-consciousness:" an unvoiced rejoinder to the position of the other. Dostoevsky situates true objectivity in *Notes from Underground* not within the Underground Man, nor without, in other characters, but in the ongoing dialogue between the two, in all of its "unclosedness and indeterminacy."

Dostoevsky, according to Bakhtin, maintains an unfinalized image of his protagonists by constructing "not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament [...] but rather the hero's *discourse* about himself and his world."⁸³ He builds his characters by working from the inside, through their language. The verisimilitude of Dostoevsky's characters is not set forth by the authorial narrator, but rather, through the character's own discourse. Most importantly, this is a discourse that does not take place in the past. It is "no stenographer's report of a *finished* dialogue," but rather a conversation that takes place "right now [...] in the *real present* of the creative process." By situating his characters in the present, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky reaches the heart of their

⁸² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 53

⁸³ *Ibid.* 53

unfinalizability. He represents them “*on the threshold* of a final decision,” and allows their dialogue to unfold in an “*unclosed whole*.”

The joint-narrative structure that Barth uses throughout *The Tidewater Tales* sets up an unfinalized dialogue between Pete and Kathy that works in a way similar to that of Dostoevsky. Barth relinquishes his own narrative authority by turning the voice that governs the novel over to his two protagonists. At no point are they represented by an authorial voice situated beyond themselves. Rather, Barth presents them to the reader through their ongoing and unfinished conversation that unfolds over the course of the novel. As products of their own dialogue, they remain “*pure voice*,” as Bakhtin described Dostoevsky’s characters.⁸⁴

In a follow up essay to the novel, Barth describes Pete and Kathy as “[bodies] of words.”⁸⁵ He muses on distinction between mind and body, both in the essay and in *The Tidewater Tales* in order to work through lived experience not only from within and without, but also as narrated through discourse. The essay opens by addressing habitual assumptions about the “first-person singular pronoun,” which normally takes as its antecedent “a gross or more pounds of live meat, bone, blood, and gristle, embodying this other thing that I think I have, mainly inside the first thing’s head end.” He adds to this rough assemblage, in the case of his own first-person pronoun the “imperfect memory of the history of a half-century” as well as his own consciousness of his consciousness.”

However, in the case of *fictional* characters, self-consciousness and the first-person pronoun take on an entirely different nature. It is not the same to imagine that the created Katherine Sherritt Sagamore has a body or mind as it is to imagine those of actual John Barth. Kathy is “Words on the page [...] *no more than* words on the page.”⁸⁶ This process of constructing representing, and

⁸⁴ Ibid. 53

⁸⁵ John Barth, “A Body of Words,” *Further Fridays*, (New York, Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), 127

⁸⁶ Ibid 132

embodying characters through language mirrors that of self-consciousness in lived experience. Both the mind and the body, according to Barth, are concepts which “we apprehend in what we call our minds, and we deploy and manipulate them by *calling them*: that is by means of (what we call) language.” Barth takes care to avoid allowing his argument to fall into solipsism or Berkeleyan subjective idealism, by pointing out that this separation is not to suggest that language corresponds with nothing outside of the mind. Rather, language serves as the means through which one achieves consciousness; one cannot escape from using language to relate to the world and to bodies: “bodies,” Barth writes, “come down to words.”

By placing Pete and Kathy’s dialogue at the forefront of *The Tidewater Tales*, Barth uses the novel’s narrative composition in a way similar to that of Dostoevsky: “he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero’s discourse about himself and the world.”⁸⁷ Pete and Kathy, the *characters*, are not the subject of the novel. Rather, its primary subject is Pete and Kathy’s *dialogue*. Barth refuses to turn the Sagamores into “the voiceless [objects] of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process” that stands over and above them. They are “*pure voice*,” *heard* but not *seen*. They depend upon *conversation* to achieve any degree of self-consciousness. As they recount their life stories, they take turns filling in gaps in the other’s limited, internal perspective. By situating Pete and Kathy’s consciousness from neither an outside, authorial point of view, nor from a limited, first-person perspective, Barth generates unfinalizeable characters whose identities continue to develop through ongoing dialogue with one another.

The clearest example of Barth’s unfinalized representations of the Sagamores takes place early in the novel when Pete and Kathy introduce themselves to the reader. As in the rest of the novel, Barth does not place any of his own authorial weight on the scale by describing the characters

⁸⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 53

from without. Rather, he allows the couple to reveal themselves to the reader through dialogue about one another in the chapters “**DO THE WOMAN**” and “**NOW DO THE MAN.**” Pete and Kathy use their longstanding intimacy to attain self-consciousness in a way similar to that of Dostoevsky’s Underground Man’s eavesdropping.

“**DO THE WOMAN**” opens by acknowledging the difficulty of reconciling Pete and Kathy’s unfinished dialogue. They write that it “won’t be easy from our coupled point of view – P’s promptings, K’s cadenzas – but she’ll draw a great breath; we’ll try.”⁸⁸ The chapter moves into a long, third-person outward description: “Katherine Shorter Sherritt at thirty-nine is a rangy, long limbed looker looking thirty-three tops and topped with beach colored hair,” who is will “dress to the nines when occasion calls” but is also “easy in the preppie drag she wears to work.” However, after laying out a description of her appearance, Barth reminds the reader that “all of this” is in “her husband’s opinion.” Moving toward Kathy’s perspective, the introduction continues, “[she] is memorious, practical, capable, Kathy, but more dependent than she wishes upon Peter’s stability and good humor to level out her swings from up to down to up.” It shifts between her own *inner* affect and Peter’s *external* perception of her. Kathy *dislikes* “snobbishness, foolishness, weakness, coquetry, moral laziness, snobbishness, cowardice, dissembling, bad faith;” Kathy *is* “in her husband’s view, knowledgeable sensible, well-organized, ardent, reasonable, energetic, [...] and morally courageous.” Pete points out that she is “damned good-looking;” however, in the same sentence, “[Kathy] adds, much drawn to genuine talent and virtuosity.”

“**NOW DO THE MAN,**” is a yet another joint effort between the couple that works through dialogue to paint a consummated portrait of Pete. Kathy, “in her and this narrative’s opinion” is lucky to have “for the man of us, Peter Sagamore.”⁸⁹ As in “**DO THE WOMAN**” the

⁸⁸ Barth,

⁸⁹ Ibid. 31

chapter moves between Pete's inner feelings and Kathy's external observations. Pete "felt affection for but not much kinship with his mother: and "respected and felt kinship with but not much closeness with his father."⁹⁰ From Kathy's perspective, Pete is "a handsome U.S. six-footer, lean and healthy, even athletic, with curly hair the color of woman's and skin to match its darker locks;" in "his wife's opinion," Pete *is not* "eccentric, high-energetic- very outgoing, Romantic, religious, politically enthusiastic, vain, gregarious [...] though he sure does have opinions." After the coupled narrator(s) point(s) out that "Because [Pete] does not quite know who he is, he may never quite learn what he cannot do, and this ignorance, if it does not ruin him may be his strength," Kathy tries to correct for Pete's increasing narratorial dominance, asking that he "let her have a say," because it "sounds more like the man of us talking than the woman."⁹¹

Neither Pete nor Kathy has a complete image of themselves, but instead looks to the other's excess of seeing for external consummation. However, also like the Underground Man, the perspective of the other is also incomplete: Pete does not have the last word about Kathy; Kathy does not have the last word about Pete. Through their ceaseless dialogue, Pete and Kathy "[look] at [themselves]" through one another's point of view and take into account "all the possible refractions of [their images]" each other's externalized consciousness. Barth uses their joint narration, an open and unfinished conversation, to build an aesthetic representation of the "unitary concrete whole" of Bakhtinian cognition.

The Novel as Open-Ended Present

In "Epic and Novel," one of the defining features that separates Bakhtin's conception of the novel from other canonical forms is its flexible readiness to accommodate an unfinished,

⁹⁰ Ibid. 31-32

⁹¹ Ibid. 32

unfinalized, and open-ended future. The form itself is one that he sees as unfinalizeable; the novel remains “the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted.”⁹² Where genres such as the epic tend to dwell on a distant, finalized, and closed past, the novel “inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality.” The novel’s contemporaneity provides a more comprehensive account of the indeterminate and unfinalizeable experience of lived life.

Bakhtin uses the Greek epic as his primary point of contrast to the novel. It serves as his key example of a finalized worldview. He observes three major features that characterize the epic: a national past which “serves as the subject for the epic,” a national tradition which “serves as the source for the epic,” and, most importantly, an *absolute temporal distance* which “separates the epic world from contemporary reality.”⁹³ The epic works by projecting an unbridgeable chronological gap between the past and present. It places epic time in a world beyond reproach to both its author and its audience by foreclosing alternative possibilities and unrealized potentials that may have transpired.

Epics transfer “a represented world into the past;” they are never “about the present” or about their own time.”⁹⁴ Instead, the epic remains stuck in the past – a past entirely disconnected from the present, “infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries.” It is an absolute past that emphasizes fathers, firsts, and founders. Epic narrative produces an evaluative hierarchy in which a mythologized past becomes the “single source and beginning of everything good for all later times as well.” Cultural foundation becomes sacrosanct in the epic: “One cannot glimpse it, grope for it, touch it; one cannot look at it from any point of view; it is impossible to experience it, analyze it, take it apart, penetrate it to its core.”

⁹² Bakhtin, Mikhail, “Epic and Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination*, 3

⁹³ Ibid. 13

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Through such absolute temporal distance, epic narrative places a single, finalized view of national origin beyond reproach. Set at the font of cultural lineage, the epic genre's total closure refuses critical investigation and instead demands unqualified reverence and piety. The unrealized potentials of the past, for the epic, do not exist; history, in the epic, is a determinate procession of inevitable events leading to an ineluctable present.

The closed past of the epic demotes the value and status of the present; where the past offers denouement, the present is capricious. It remains fleeting and transient. Bakhtin points out that in the closed worldview of the epic, the present "is something transitory, it is flow it, is an eternal continuation without beginning or end; it is denied an authentic conclusiveness and consequently lacks an essence as well."⁹⁵ To epic consciousness, openness is indecision. The present, carrying with it all the anxieties of a looming future, lacks the confident certainty of a completed past. In contrast, the absolute past is finalized and unambiguous. It is "closed and completed in the whole as well as in any of its parts." Epic narrative functions as a microcosmic model of the closed universe that Bakhtin resists; it projects the present as the only possible outcome of a past previously fraught with potential. The completed past offers a tempting, though false, epistemological foothold that serves as the source of "all authentic reality and value."

Bakhtin traces the folkloric roots of the novel to the popular parody and satire that he believes worked to dethrone the Classical Greek epic by way of parody. It is in popular laughter, the bringing low of the gods, demigods, and heroes, that he finds the earliest elements of novelization. He argues that "serio-comical genres [...] anticipate the more essential historical aspects in the development of the novel in modern times."⁹⁶ The Bakhtinian proto-novel is a response to the "authority and privilege" of the epic narrative's closure and distance. Early folk narrative

⁹⁵ Ibid. 20

⁹⁶ Ibid. 22

emphasized contemporaneity; it cleared the ground for a new understanding and evaluation of the relationship between the present and the past. Such an emphasis on contemporaneity compresses the space that separates the present from the absolute past. It opens historical determinism to parody by uncrowning myth's privileged place in the wider culture imagination.

Bridging the gap between the past and the present precludes the foreclosure and completion represented in the epic. In his examination of parody as a particular form of open-ended narrative, Bakhtin sees it as a step toward reexamination of origins in general and of national myth in particular. Novelistic writing is tradition "brought low, represented on a plane equal with contemporary life, in an everyday environment, in the low language of contemporaneity."⁹⁷ Popular speech and folk humor work to re-familiarize the absolute past of myth. Laughter, for Bakhtin, is the first step in a re-examination of the past from a new perspective:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.⁹⁸

Parody brings epic narrative low; it strips the epic of its pretense to completion by offering a new proximity to the absolute past. Such familiarity endows the artist with the power to defamiliarize myth and tradition previously taken for granted. As "the artistic logic of analysis" and "dismemberment" come to reign supreme in the novel, the past sits "on a plane equal with contemporary life, in an everyday environment." This new proximity to history reveals it to be an incomplete, ongoing process with ramifications and unrealized potential outcomes that continue into the present. In the novel, Bakhtin believes that reality "is only one of many possible realities; it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities."

⁹⁷ Ibid. 21

⁹⁸ Ibid. 23

Unlike the epic, the novel embraces the spontaneous, unfinished, and unfinalized present. Bakhtin argues that what keeps the novel from “congealing” is its emphasis upon “everything that is not yet completed.”⁹⁹ The pivot from the past to the future in the novel makes the future, in all its unrealized potentialities, tangible. It is a radical reorientation of temporality that refuses finality by depicting a “world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken.” The epic, on the one hand, tends toward *prophecy*, which fulfills itself within an absolute past and cannot touch the reader’s actual lived experience except through recognition. The novel, on the other hand, can only approach the future through the *prediction* of one outcome among others. Rather than providing the reader with the opportunity to “[ponder] and [justify] the past,” it makes space for the anticipation of a yet-to-be-realized future.

The novel poses new questions for both beginnings and for endings. The lack of internal completion creates a “sharp increase in demands for *external* and *formal* completeness and exhaustiveness” in regard to plot.¹⁰⁰ Bakhtin argues that the epic shows an utter disregard for “formal beginnings,” and, despite its claims to closure, can never serve as an exhaustive whole. It serves a metonymic function by attempting to “take any part” of the absolute past and “offer it as the whole.” Epic treats history as an undifferentiated mass in which “the structure of the whole is repeated in each part, and each part is complete and circular like the whole.” The epic author can start and stop a narrative at any point because any randomly selected slice of time follows an inevitable, closed pattern that will repeat itself. Bakhtin looks to the *Iliad* as an example of arbitrary endings in the epic, pointing out that its conclusion with Hector’s burial leaves many narrative strands unfinalized. Homer leaves the reader wondering how the war ends and what may happen to Achilles. The novel, by contrast, foregrounds the gap between *narrated* and *lived* completion.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 31

Barth takes a keen interest in the problem of narrative completion and fullness; his authorial practice is one that enacts exactly the role that Bakhtin sets out for the novelist by questioning received assumptions about storytelling and spotlighting its inevitable limits. In a 1981 lecture at the Second International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, he discusses his own similar fixation upon the impossibility of endings and the inherent unfinalizability of narrative. Citing Tsvetan Todorov's contention that "narrative structure is an echo of deep linguistic structure" Barth argues that *all* narrative is inevitably "about language and about telling."¹⁰¹ He collapses the distinction that John Gardner draws between "primary" and "secondary fiction," arguing that *all* fiction is, to some degree, fiction about fiction. Barth lends metafictional and phenomenological import to fiction's self-referentiality, arguing that "[we] tell stories and listen to them because we live stories and live in them. Narrative equals language equals life." Barth's belief that to "cease to narrate [...] is to die" echoes Bakhtin's belief that only after one's death, can one render a complete the telling of one's life and work.¹⁰²¹⁰³

Later in the lecture, Barth attempts to justify his frequent use of the frame tale story structure, arguing that it serves as a powerful vehicle for fiction to take itself as its own thematic content. This is not the trivial or frivolous gesture that Gardner consigns to secondary fiction. Rather, because "fiction about fiction is in fact fiction about life," Barth believes that the reflexive opportunities afforded by the frame tale offer access to an area of "ordinary experience and activity" inaccessible to Gardner's preferred conception of realism. In the case of *The Tidewater Tales*, Barth uses frame structure to examine the contours of storytelling itself in two key ways: on the level of content, his characters, often writers and critics themselves, offer in-depth dramaturgical, symbolic,

¹⁰¹ John Barth, "Tales within Tales within Tales," *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. (New York: Putnam, 1982), 236

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Gary Saul Morson and Cheryl Emerson, "Introduction: Rethinking Bakhtin," *Rethinking Bakhtin*, edited by Gary Saul Morson and Cheryl Emerson, (Northwestern University Press 1989), 1

and mythological interpretation of the novel's framed stories; on the level of form, he works across several different generic conventions, juxtaposing conflicting narrative styles in order to place them in conversation with one another. No single genre represents a complete worldview in and of itself; Barth's multiform approach allows different genres to consummate one another in order to present a more complete representation of reality situated *between* conflicting perspectives.

Barth concludes with a personal anecdote, told as a frame tale, to demonstrate the narrative boundaries he set out to define in the lecture. The story, which he insists shares the "formal properties of tales within tales," recounts the quotidian chore of painting the bottom of his sailboat. However, it begins, not at the outset of the sailing season, but at a vaguely defined point in his life far ahead of the narrative present:

Once upon a time I wished, and indeed I wish still, to lead a reasonably full, good, useful, and therefore happy life. In pursuit of this objective I have made up the best stories I can to entertain and instruct myself and others, and have assisted apprentice writers in the same activity, and have refrained from becoming e.g., a CIA agent, a book reviewer, or an author of either romans a clef or nonfiction novels.¹⁰⁴

The painting of his boat begins with Barth's pursuit of happiness rather than the boat's need for a fresh coat of paint. Though the anecdote is ostensibly about a household chore, Barth challenges conventional narratorial beginnings, not only starting the story at a distant and undefined point in the past, but also by demonstrating that the present is only one of many *possible* presents.

The anecdote ends before Barth begins painting. Rather, he uses the task to set off a string of digressive additional chores that delay the story's completion. Before he can start the task, he "must wet-sand [...] and wet-sanding requires both a certain sort of sandpaper, of which [he is] out, and lots of water."¹⁰⁵ But he has not yet turned on the faucet to his garden hose, which also requires that he fix a valve, "a chore that requires valve-packing material of which [he is] also out," which in

¹⁰⁴ Barth, "Tales within Tales," 237

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

turn requires a trip to the hardware store. While running the errand, he remembers that he has promised to buy a windsurfer for his wife's birthday, which reminds him that he needs to add an extra off-campus lecture to his schedule to cover the cost, which in turn leads to musing upon possible lecture topics such as the one he is delivering in the *authorial* present on "this whole phenomenon of tasks-within-tasks." The drive home from the store requires yet another chore as Barth stops at a gas station to add air to his tires and refill his tank which leads him to "tisk [his] tongue at the price of fuel and shake [his] head about the narrative connection, so to speak, of between the gasoline in [his] tank and the American hostages in Tehran." The continued interruption of his initial chore with additional chores leads the anecdotal Barth to draw an isomorphic comparison between the task of painting his boat's generating further tasks to that of a mythical hero: "to marry the princess you must slay the dragon, to kill whom requires the magic weapon, to acquire which requires knowing the magic word which only a certain crazy lady can tell you, to bribe whom requires etc., etc." Painting his boat serves as a narrative frame for additional micronarratives and musings. It stands as an example of an "*activity or process [...] whose progression is suspended by, yet dependent upon digression and even regression of an ultimately enabling sort.*" Barth uses the anecdote to demonstrate the inexhaustibility of reality by narrative, turning a story that, on its face recounts a simple household chore, into one about the relationship between life as *lived* and life as *told*. It not only acknowledges the present as one of many possible outcomes, but illustrates the inexhaustible, unfinalizable nature of experience. Barth concludes the anecdote by denying conclusion, ending with a call for continuation: "On with the story!"

The writer's block that afflicts Peter in *The Tidewater Tales* stems from a vertigo induced by the infinite regress that Barth demonstrates in the "Tales within Tales within Tales" anecdote. Faced with the task of telling Kathy a story of women and men like them and "their house's

increase,” Pete is initially paralyzed by the challenge of finding an appropriate place to begin.¹⁰⁶

Kathy further troubles him by placing their story’s beginning further and further in the past. When Pete tells her that he does not know where to start, she slips into a regressive sequence of potential narrative points of entry, telling him to “[start] at the very beginning, if you want to: ab ovo. The sperms and eggs that got us into this mess [...] You can start with the thawing of the last ice age, for all I care, when the Set Designer came up with the Chesapeake Bay and the Eastern Shore of Maryland [...] Go clear back to the Big Bang.”

When Pete declines, Kathy turns to Homer as a possible guide, suggesting that he instead start “near the end [...] Instead of the ninth year of the war or the wandering, start in the ninth month of their pregnancy.”¹⁰⁷ She proposes a possible structure for his narrative that gradually brings together past and present. It should mirror the tide, which washes “a little farther up the beach of Where We’re Going with each wave and then rolling back to pick up Where We’ve Been.” Pete ultimately settles on this approach, which avoids treating the stories of their past as isolated or complete narrative unites. Instead, the novel’s tidal structure works to preserve a continuity between the past and the present; the stories of their past remain ongoing state of unfinished becoming as they continue to develop in Pete and Kathy’s present and guide them toward their unrealized future. Kathy further blurs the distinction between past and present, explaining that at their “tale’s high-water mark,” Pete should allow the past to “[overtake] the present and [sweep them] to a finale rich and strange.” As they recount stories from their past lives, Pete and Kathy never to draw any of them to a definite conclusion, but rather explore their lasting consequences and unrealized potentials that remain yet-to-be-narrated as they move toward an unrealized future.

¹⁰⁶ Barth, *The Tidewater Tales*, 66

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

One of the short stories that Pete writes during his period of minimalist stagnation is the product of a writerly anxiety induced by his realization that lives are not stories, and thus, cannot be adequately represented by conventional narrative endings. Pete, who has built his life's tradecraft on conventional narrative, realizes the limitations of transparent writing and tightly packaged conclusions in presenting an adequate picture of lived experience. In response to this epiphany, he pens the unpublished short story (quoted in full):

APOCALYPSE

*One drizzly Baltimore November forenoon, as from an upstairs workroom window of our little house I mused over the neighbors' lawns – some raked clean, some still leaf-littered – and considered whether*¹⁰⁸

“**APOCALYPSE**” draws out the narrative consequences of the need for a consummating other that Bakhtin discusses in “Artist and Hero.” It denies its unnamed protagonist a complete or finalized view of his life by refusing to allow him to experience his own death from within. Commenting on the story, Pete explains that he intends the story to demonstrate how “in the first-person narrative viewpoint from which each of us leads life.” Pete concludes the story by refusing to bring it, or even its final sentence, to a conclusion in order to underline the radically incomplete perspective of the first-person singular perspective. By ending the protagonist's life with the apocalypse, rather than his own singular death, Pete draws further emphasis on the need for a consummating other to render a complete picture of one's life. The apocalypse extinguishes all outside points-of-view along with that of the protagonist; without a consummating other left to finish his story, his story becomes impossible to see in full. It precludes cognition, and in turn, can never be represented as complete.

The short story underlines what Pete calls his “art's great lie.”¹⁰⁹ It is a part of his general project separate the tidy linearity of narrative from the messiness of lived experience. He hopes to

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 142

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 141

contrast the inherent selectivity of moments, which storytellers bottle into contained episodes to generate “narrative pressure” and “dramaturgical suction” in order to maintain coherent meaning and impose predetermined telos onto life as one actually experiences it in the present. Barth sees the digressive flow of meaningless interruptions that he demonstrates in the “Tales within Tales” anecdote as a closer and more accurate depiction of reality. Stories, on the one hand, rely on expressions like “*Just then, or Suddenly, or Even as she looked desperately about her for some sign,*” both to provide coherent structure and to “[call] The Next Thing into existence.” Lives, on the other hand, do not have clearly demarcated plot points; “gray rainy nature” can end a life “quite stupidly, meaninglessly, interrupting [one’s] story between any of its words and smash [one] into hamburger with a jackknifed trailer truck [...] or any any of her million ways derail [one’s life] without foreshadow or significance.”

In order to be told, stories, rely on a degree of determinism. Pete, reflecting on his boyhood musings thinks back to the many times that John Wayne characters may have died meaningless deaths. However, he acknowledges that the audience *knows* that Wayne will remain safe because “if he died there could have been no movie, and there *was* a movie.”¹¹⁰ “**APOCALYPSE**” is an attempt to subvert such determinism in order to reintroduce the inconclusive and open-endedness of lived experience that Bakhtin seeks in fiction. Pete observes the strong human compulsion to navigate the world through narrative, pointing out that “we are on the one hand so lulled by ubiquitous narrative convention that we may indeed forget, reading a realistic story, that in it even the meaninglessness is meaningful, it having been put there by the author just to remind us that real life comprises much meaninglessness.” *All* narration requires active decisions on the part of the author to include some things and to discard others. This, to both Pete and to Barth, is a false

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

finalization of life because it presupposes a predetermined sequence that assigns meaning to carefully selected events as the only realized potential present in a closed and finalized past.

In a story, when “nothing is the thing that happens next, that is the thing that happens next: The nothing becomes a thing, which, we may be sure, the author will quickly cause to be followed by the *next* thing, a more conventionally dramatic thing.”¹¹¹ However, Pete goes on to write that “in fact, nothing is no thing, and our story does not necessarily go on, for the reason that our lives are not stories.” Though on its face, Pete’s observations may appear to be a call for a *more* finalized expression of experience, his emphasis on the possibility of “nothingness” as the thing that may come next, lines up with Bakhtin’s conception of life’s unfinalizability. Bakhtin does not argue that lives do not end. Nor does he deny that what follows one event may be meaningless oblivion, but instead situates *experience* in an unfinalized present that is entirely distinct from the complete and closed nature of conventional narrative conclusions. Pete’s consciousness that even experimental writing that attempts to re-introduce such open-endedness must always be guided by an external authorial hand is one of the driving forces behind his writer’s block. It leads him closer and closer to Beckettian silence as he grapples with his “art’s great lie.” However, through short stories such as “**APOCALYPSE**,” which draws to an abrupt and unexpected close, and through the tidal structure of *The Tidewater Tales* as a whole, which narrates past events in an ongoing flux that continues to carry into the future, Pete attempts to use narrative form in order to offer a readerly experience that comes closer to life’s unfinalizability than that of ordinary realism.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 142

Chapter 3

Barth's Chesapeake Epic: Domesticating the Adventure Chronotope

In his 1937-38 essay, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin introduces the concept of *chronotope*, which he uses to think through the "interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artfully expressed in literature."¹¹² The literary-artistic chronotope is an evaluative tool in which "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought out, concrete whole." In any represented world, time "thickens" and becomes "artistically visible while space becomes "charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history." Bakhtin uses chronotopes to carry generic freight; he treats them as a "formally constitutive category" that "determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature." Genre, argues Bakhtin, is largely determined by how a given work chooses to represent the twin problems of space and time.

Bakhtin fleshes out the idea of chronotopes largely through example. He compares and contrasts the treatment of time and space across several generic conventions, works his way forward from the Greek romance, touches on the satires of Apuleius and Petronius, skims over the roguish and clownish humor of the middle-ages and eventually settling upon the metafictional concerns that would come to preoccupy many western writers in the late twentieth century. Chronotope, more than thematic concerns or syntactic form, determines a given work's generic conceits. Regardless of its specific events or the author's sentence structure, a work's orientation toward time and space serves as Bakhtin's primary generic marker. For example, no matter their content or style, works that adhere to Bakhtin's *adventure-time* chronotope bear remarkable similarities in structure. In broad

¹¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, (University of Texas Press, 1981), 84

strokes, the adventure genre, which Bakhtin closely aligns with the historical period of Greek romance, consists of a combination of some (if not all) of the following elements:

There is a boy and a girl of *marriageable* age. Their lineage is *unknown, mysterious* (but not always: there is, for example, no such instance in Tattius. They are remarkable for their *exceptional beauty*. They are also exceptionally *chaste*. They meet each other *unexpectedly*, usually during some festive *holiday*. A *sudden* and *instantaneous* passion flares up between them that is as irresistible as fate, like an incurable distaste. However, the marriage cannot take place straightaway. They are confronted with obstacles that *retard* and delay their union. The lovers are *parted*, they seek one another, find one another, again they lose each other, again they find each other. There are the usual obstacles and adventures of lovers: the abduction of the bride on the eve of the wedding, the *absence of parental consent* (if parents exist), a different bridegroom and bride intended for either of the lovers (*false couples*), the flight of the lovers, their journey, a storm at sea, a *shipwreck*, a miraculous rescue, an attack by *pirates*, *captivity*, and *prison*, an attempt on the innocent of the hero and heroine, the offering up of the heroine as a purifying sacrifice, wars, battles, *being sold into slavery*, *presumed deaths*, *disguising one's identity*, recognition and failures of recognition, presumed betrayals, attempts on chastity and fidelity, false accusations of crimes, court trials, court inquiries into the chastity and fidelity of the lovers. The heroes find their parents (if unknown). Meetings with unexpected friends or enemies play an important role, as do fortune telling, prophecy, prophetic dreams, premonitions and sleeping potions. The novel ends happily with the lovers united in marriage.¹¹³

Despite such an exhaustive sequence of events, the most important feature of adventure time is the fact that the events of the story serve as a “sharp hiatus between two movements of biographical time, a hiatus that leaves no trace in the lives of the heroes or their personalities.” All of the events serve as a “pure digression from the normal course of life” for the hero. Adventure time is highly intensified but undifferentiated;” the course of events has no bearing on the life of the hero after the story’s conclusion. The “empty time” of adventure leaves no trace anywhere, no indications of its passing; apart from the possibility of marriage, the heroes may freely return to their lives as they were before the call to adventure. Odysseus, despite twenty intervening years of war, extramarital sex, several lost crews, and the suitors’ bloodbath at the epic’s close, remains a static character and freely resumes his life in Ithaca at the end of the poem.

¹¹³ Ibid. 87-88

Bakhtin's essay progresses through several other generic forms of chronotope before concluding with an exploration of the interior and exterior contours of fiction that anticipates Barth's metafictional concerns. The essay moves from straightforward generic concerns toward a meta-analysis of the broader literary significance and implications that the study of chronotopes brings not only to individual genres, but to narrative in general. He writes that that "chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied"¹¹⁴ Chronotopes allow narrative events to "become concrete" and cause "blood to flow in their veins." They separate narrative from static visual arts such as painting and sculpture and they account for beauty as it is "drawn into a chain of represented events rather than "static description," as in the case of lyric poetry. Bakhtin defends his concept by arguing that chronotopes are not only crucial tools for navigating represented worlds, but also the defining feature in a "literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality defined by its chronotope." He explains that a represented world resonates with a "real-life timespace" and that fictional chronotopes draw upon the lived experience of space and time by real people. However, these real people, be they readers, listeners, or authors, "may be (and often are) located in differing time spaces, sometimes separated from each other by centuries and by great spatial distance, but nevertheless they are all located in a real, unitary, and as yet incomplete historical world" set apart by a clearly demarcated boundary from the world represented in a text.

Bakhtin is careful to explain that the boundary between lived and created chronotopes is impermeable: "We must never forget this, we must never confuse [...] the represented world with the world outside the text (naïve realism); nor must we confuse the author-creator of a work with the author as a human being (naïve biographism); nor confuse the listener or reader of multiple and varied period recreating and renewing the text with the passive reader of one's own time."¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 250

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 253

However, this sharp dividing line between represented and representing world does not leave the two realms hermetically sealed off from one another. They are wholly averse to fusion, yet they are also ineluctably bound and “indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction.” Like living organisms in their surrounding environment, real and imagined worlds engage in “uninterrupted exchange.” Works of fiction enter into and enrich the real world; the real world enters the work of fiction through its process of creation. Represented and representing worlds, though separated by an immutable boundary, remain in a dialogic relationship of continuous renewal, a relationship that is itself chronotopic: “it occurs first and foremost in the historically developing sensual world, but without ever losing contact with the changing historical space.” The author stands in a unique position between the work and the world. Though *outside* of the work as a living person in the real world, the author also comes into exceptionally close contact with a work as its creator. Though outside of a work’s chronotopes, the author remains “tangential” to them.

In an “Author and Hero,” Bakhtin refers to the author as “the bearer and sustainer of the intently active unity of a consummated whole [the whole of a hero and of a work]” and also a “consciousness of consciousnesses.”¹¹⁶ Likewise, the author’s time-space is the *chronotope of chronotopes* within a given work; it is the author who “segments the work into parts [...] that assure [...] a kind” of authorial expression.¹¹⁷ Readers sense the mutual interaction between the world internal and the world external to a work through basic features of story structure. All narratives have a beginning and an end, but “beginnings and ends lie in different worlds, in chronotopes that can never fuse” but they are also “interrelated and indissolubly tied together” by a chain of cause and effect. Exposition and conclusion exist at different times and in different places, however, they

¹¹⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity, 12

¹¹⁷ Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 254

are bound by the “single but complex event” that Bakhtin calls “the work in totality of all its events including the external material givenness of the work, and its text, and the world represented in the text, and the author-creator and the listener or reader; thus we perceive the fullness of the work in all its wholeness and indivisibility, but at the same time we understand the diversity of the elements that constitute it.”

Bakhtin once quipped that only after one’s death, does an aesthetically whole picture of one’s life and work become possible.¹¹⁸ It is in such a space of open-ended incompleteness, before death, in which an author freely manipulates chronotopes. It is where the author draws and shapes distinctions between represented and representing time. Without violating the objective course of chronology, an author-creator can begin story at its beginning, middle or “at any moment of the events.”¹¹⁹ The author inhabits an “unresolved contemporaneity in all its complexity and fullness.” That contemporaneity serves as a vantage point that includes “not only contemporary literature in the strict sense of the word, but also the literature of the past as it continues to renew itself in the present.” The author lives in permanent dialogue with the whole of literature and culture, which impinge upon the chronotope of her created world; works of literature have a dialogic character to their context that mirrors the interrelationship between tangentially connected chronotopes.

The tangential relationship of the author-creator to his fictional world is always mediated, either through first person identification with a character or through the point of view of a narrator. Authors can only represent their world *as if* they were an omniscient witness. Bakhtin takes such mediation a step further by extending it to autobiography and confessionals. “If I relate (or write about) an event that has just happened to me, then I as the teller (or writer) of this event, am already

¹¹⁸ Gary Saul Morson and Cheryl Emerson, “Introduction: Rethinking Bakhtin,” *Rethinking Bakhtin*, edited by Gary Saul Morson and Cheryl Emerson, (Northwestern University Press 1989), 1

¹¹⁹ Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 255

outside the time and space in which the event occurred.”¹²⁰ He goes on to argue that it is “just as impossible to forge an identity between myself, my own “I” and that “I which is the subject of my stories as it is to lift myself up by my own hair.” Even a represented world of pure truth cannot be chronotopically identical to the world it represents; everything in a literary work remains an image.

THE UNFINISHED STORY OF PENELOPE’S UNFINISHED WEB: Domesticating Adventure-Time

In one of *The Tidewater Tales*’s major set piece episodes, Barth inserts a parodic treatment of the gaps that Homer leaves in *The Odyssey*, and he fulfills Bakhtin’s observation that one’s life can never be represented in full until after one’s death. On Day Two of their journey, Pete and Kathy encounter Ted and Diana Dmitrikakis, a middle-aged couple sailing in an unnamed and mysteriously Homeric replica of a Phaeacian ship. The Sagamores spend a night anchored alongside the Dmitrikakis and join the couple for drinks aboard their boat. The conversation quickly turns to both couples’ “common enthusiasms for classical Greek literature, especially Homer’s *Odyssey*.”¹²¹ After trading readings and commentary upon one another’s favorite episodes in the epic, Ted picks up where Homer left Odysseus and Penelope, sharing **“THE UNFINISHED STORY OF PENELOPE’S UNFINISHED WEB”** with his dinner guests. Ted explains that while Athene made the night of Penelope and Odysseus’s reunion especially long, what Homer leaves out is that “this second night was even longer, for in its course, after making love, they raised and answered a question much upon their minds.” Penelope, after twenty years of separation, broaches the topic of her husband’s infidelity while abroad. Odysseus obligingly recounts his liaisons with Calypso and Circe, assuring his hurt wife that the affairs took place under coercion; by no means did he give

¹²⁰ Ibid. 256

¹²¹ Ibid. 176

himself to either woman willingly or emotionally. Odysseus in turn, questions Penelope about her own fidelity during his absence. She admits that though “no god [...] came down from Olympus to interrupt her loom-work with irresistible importunings, nor did any wandering Aeneas make her his Dido-of-a-season,” she *did* engage in an extended affair with Odysseus’s goat-herd, Phemius who grew to show such a way with the lyre and with his voice that Eurycleia assigns him to perform for Penelope as she weaves Laertes death shroud. Phemius, Penelope explains, concocted the weaving and unweaving of the shroud. Following the story, the queen stays her outraged husband from hunting down and killing the goatherd-turned-bard by reminding him that the suitors would likely have had their way with her had it not been for Phemius’ ruse with the shroud.

The next day, Odysseus sets out overland to make an offering to appease Poseidon. Several nights into the excursion, Odysseus happens upon Phemius as he camps in the mountains. The bard explains to a disguised Odysseus that he is a fugitive from the king’s halls for reasons that he can sing better than speak. At Odysseus’s request, Phemius picks up his lyre and sings “that while Odysseus plowed the wine dark sea and Penelope’s suitors plowed their way through Odysseus’s wine, Phemius plowed Penelope herself. *And he kissed the freckles on her hey-nommy no.*” Odysseus, enraged less by his cuckolding than by Phemius’s “putting his private offense into public art” and “[advertising] so lewdly that detail of his wife’s complexion,” decides to spare the bard’s life out of gratitude for the shroud trick. However, Odysseus also takes measures to insure that Phemius never again publicly celebrates his affair with Penelope: he claps “a hand over [his] mouth and with the other [blinds] him in both eyes” so that whenever he Phemius sings in the future, he will have no way of knowing whether or not Odysseus is there to hear.

On his return, Odysseus grows restless. The twenty-year interlude away from his wife leaves an amicable, yet irreparable rift between the couple. Penelope no longer “welcomes her husband’s embraces and never herself [takes] sexual initiative with him, as she had learned to enjoy doing with

Phemius.”¹²² Nor does Odysseus “often press those embraces upon her.” Though on good terms, they find that it there is “no longer much between them besides the tapestry” that Phemius helped Penelope weave.

Barth’s intertextual play with *The Odyssey* enters into what Gérard Genette calls a *hypertextual* relationship with Homeric myth and the adventure chronotope. Hypertextuality, explains Genette, is “any relationship uniting a text B,” which he calls a *hypertext*, “to an earlier text A,” which he calls a *hypotext*, “upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.”¹²³ Genette says that such a relationship serves as the basis for both *pastiche*, which he briefly glosses as “imitation without satirical intent,” and *parody* in which a hypertext imitates its hypotext in a way that is *transformative* (generally to a humorous or satirical effect). Epics such as *The Odyssey*, due to their age and established place in the popular imagination, are easy and frequent targets for parody and pastiche. Genette outlines three procedures through which epic parody operates: first, a writer may “divert a text from its original purpose;” second, an epic text can be transposed from a “noble register” to the commonplace or vulgar; third, a parodist may borrow epic style “to compose in that style another text treating another, preferably antithetical subject.”

Ted’s story works through the second of Genette’s three types of parody by separating the letter of its work “from its content.”¹²⁴ No longer the virile warrior, nor even the cunning trickster of mythical legend, the Odysseus that Barth depicts after his return to Ithaca is a middle-aged cuckold clearly past his prime. Penelope finds that while in “his absence she had come to endow him with her [Phemius’s] better qualities as well as his own,” she now finds herself “endowing Phemius, in *his* absence, with Odysseus’s better qualities, remembering the bard as stronger, braver,

¹²² Ibid. 194

¹²³ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree*, translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, (University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 5

¹²⁴ Ibid. 12

shrewder than he had ever been.”¹²⁵ The vow never to have another man in their marriage bed, nor to go to the bed of another man, a sign of faithful chastity in Homer, becomes a space for semantic loopholes: Penelope keeps the vow in letter only as she and Phemius carry on their affair “in her weaving room, beside her loom” on a couch “piled deep with the yards of her art. Gone is the elegant ancient Greek verse in Ted’s retelling; Barth casts the story in conversational twentieth century American English – complete with a dash of pseudo-Elizabethan doggerel from Phemius.

All three of the above parodic markers subvert the chronotope of Greek romance found in Homer by refusing to treat Odysseus’ journey as the bracketed hiatus that Bakhtin attributes to adventure time. Much of the diminished valor Odysseus displays in the episode is the result of aging, the loophole Penelope creates to keep her vow is a matter of location, and Barth brings low Homer’s epic style through the use of anachronistic language. All three of Barth’s major transpositions are matters of time and space; all three transpositions subvert the undifferentiated chronotope common to Greek romance. Additionally, it is Penelope’s extended affair with Phemius in comparison to Odysseus’ comparatively brief trysts with Calypso and Circe that most hurts the king’s feelings. Barth’s chamber romance that takes place off-stage between Phemius and Penelope as Odysseus fights the cyclops and navigated between Scylla and Charybdis underlines the simultaneous coexistence of, and dialogic relation between, multiple, “mutually inclusive” chronotopes.¹²⁶

Bakhtin characterizes the adventure chronotope as one “governed by an interchangeability of space,” and a world of “technical, abstract connection between space and time” and it presents “reversibility of moments in a temporal sequence.”¹²⁷ Barth places the domestic chronotope in Ted’s story into dialogue with the time-space of the epic in order to both re-introduce a sense of

¹²⁵ Barth, *The Tidewater Tales* 194

¹²⁶ Ibid. 252

¹²⁷ Ibid. 100

lived, biographical time, and also, to undermine the inconsequential, reversible moments and interchangeable space of the adventure chronotope. Odysseus cannot remain the stoic and static character of the epic when confronted with domesticity and day-to-day life. Greek romance, according to Bakhtin, is an essentialist genre that *affirms* the self of its heroes over evolution or growth. Adventure does not *make* heroes, it instead “[verifies] and [establishes] their identity, their durability and continuity.”

Barth inserts the domestic chronotope into Ted’s story, placing it in dialogue with the time-space of the epic in order to both re-introduce a sense of lived, biographical time, and also, to undermine the inconsequential, reversible moments and interchangeable space of the adventure chronotope. Odysseus cannot remain the stoic and static character of the epic when confronted with domesticity and day-to-day life. Greek romance, according to Bakhtin, is an essentialist genre that *affirms* the self of its heroes over evolution or growth. Adventure does not change heroes, it instead “[verifies] and [establishes] their identity, their durability and continuity.”¹²⁸ A hero is simply “a product that passes the test.” Barth’s parody forces growth into the adventure chronotope. It unravels the “*unity of the human image*” that Bakhtin sees as a key characteristic of the Greek romance and epic time.

“The Long True Story of Odysseus’s Short Last Voyage:” Escaping Time; Lifting Oneself by One’s Own Hair

Barth pivots back to the Sagamore/Dmitrikakis dinner scene as Ted wraps up his story. After pouring another round of drinks, Diana picks up where Ted stopped. As Odysseus and Penelope decide to separate, she tells the “**THE LONG TRUE STORY OF ODYSSEUS’S SHORT LAST**

¹²⁸ Ibid. 107

VOYAGE.¹²⁹ Near the end of Ted's story, he notes that where Odysseus's mind lingered most during the dissolution of his marriage, is on his time in Phaeacia with Nausicaa. Diana follows Odysseus back to the island, ostensibly to pay tribute to the Phaeacian sailors who died helping him return home, but secretly, with the hope of re-meeting the princess. On arriving, the disguised Odysseus visits Queen Arete, who informs him that King Alcinous has passed away and that Nausicaa is missing and presumed dead. Arete explains to the incognito Odysseus that Nausicaa, lovesick for the Ithacan traveler, fell into a deep depression after his departure. Nausicaa hounds the local bard, Demodocus to "leave off singing of Ares and Aphrodite and the moon and stars" and instead begs that he sing only of the Trojan war, "specifically episodes starring her hero." She goes so far as to commission an "entirely new song, based upon the grand tale Odysseus had told [...] of his long voyage homeward." Eventually, the aging Demodocus retires, replaced by a "younger bard who had lately become the rage of the Mediterranean, chiefly on the strengths of his Odyssean songs. The new bard, Homer, agrees to Arete's stipulation that he avoid further inflaming Nausicaa's fantasies by always ending his songs with the reunion of the wandering king and his faithful wife. He appears suspiciously amenable to ending the story at their reunion and remains at peculiar "pains to emphasize Penelope's fidelity."

Odysseus, wary of Homer's blindness and familiarity with his story, then meets with Demodocus to learn more about the newly arrived troubadour. Demodocus explains that Homer is intensely reclusive. After performing for the court, he sprints from the town and into the mountains, where his adoring fans have yet to successfully follow him. Apart from his performances, Homer remains a mystery to the Phaeacians.

The next night, Odysseus attends one of Homer's performances and immediately recognizes him as Phemius. As Phemius-Homer departs, Odysseus gives chase, and, like the Phaeacian

¹²⁹ Ibid. 196

groupies, cannot keep pace with the blind bard. This continues for a week as Phemius makes his way through *The Odyssey* in its entirety. On the eighth night (and conclusion of the epic), Odysseus identifies himself as he pursues Phemius from the hall, chases him into the dark mountains, and, “[unable] to see, [...] is forced to listen.”¹³⁰ As he scrambles up the mountainside, he hears Phemius singing to himself about “how wrathful Odysseus had gouged out the bard Phemius’s eyes for having sung the beauty of his mistress.” Odysseus, drawing his sword, slowly realizes that the song is not a taunt; Phemius thanks “his assailant, who in blinding him had done him unwittingly a triple service.” First, losing his sight means that he will never see Penelope grow old; second, his blindness enabled him to evolve from a “singer of freckles on “hey-nony-nos” to the gifted author of his popular epic poem; third, his singing led Nausicaa to fall in love and run away with him.

Odysseus follows the song to a cabin where he spies Nausicaa through a window, copying out the text of *The Odyssey* for posterity. As sees the two begin to couple, Odysseus, “unable to stand quietly by, [bursts] into the cabin” calling Nausicaa’s name.¹³¹ He assures the terrified Phemius, “his phallus fast descending” that he means him no harm – that the excellent work of *The Odyssey* has more than redeemed the bard. Nausicaa, whose lovesickness reignites immediately upon Odysseus’ appearance, agrees to join him in departing from the island (and assures Phemius-Homer that their fling, though fleeting, was sincere even if doomed to an early end).

The reunited Odysseus and Nausicaa, anxious about the fact that their future together will be cut short by Odysseus’s old age, resolve to escape from time’s grip. They decide to set sail for the legendary “Land Where Time Stands Still,” reachable only by sailing past the setting sun on the western horizon. Time itself poses the greatest challenge in escaping from chronology: The Place Where Time Stands Still is not fixed in space but “recedes to westward at exactly the speed of the

¹³⁰ Ibid. 202

¹³¹ Ibid. 202

sun itself [...] one [is] obliged to sail so fast that the sun would appear to reverse its course and rise in the west.”¹³² On overtaking the sun, “neither ship nor sailor [will] thenceforth age, he might cruise those flower girt waterways forever, never tiring of them, for what stales our pleasures is time, and there, he will be out of time.” Odysseus and Nausicaa spend the following months planning the voyage, obtaining permission to marry from Queen Arete, and outfitting the fastest ship that Phaeacia has to offer before setting sail.

The couple sail west and top out the Phaeacian ship’s speed. From their perspective, this cause the setting sun to stop in place. However, despite stopping the sunset, Odysseus and Nausicaa cannot go fast enough to reverse it. Desperate, they resort to literalizing idioms. When they fail to “whistle up a wind,” they turn to “singing up a storm,” a colloquialism which Homer previously revealed to be a trick one can, in fact, put into action “as a last resort when becalmed,” provided that the singer knows the right song for the occasion. Unsure of what to sing, Odysseus heeds Demodocus’s advice that all one must do is “get the first line right, and the second; the rest will follow.” He blindly begins bellowing “*Once upon a time*” into the ship’s sails; Nausicaa offers a second line as a rejoinder, singing “*There was a story that began.*” Before they reach the song’s third line, the ship surges forward. The two lines, in repetition, prove to be the correct formula for the task. The infinitely repeatable combination of (clichéd) narrative tropes works to short-circuit the flow of time. It has no beginning and no ending; the two lines may be reversed at will. The mantra “*once upon a time/there was a story that began/once upon a time/there was a story that began...*” offers precisely the temporal paradox necessary to unravel time and send Odysseus and Nausicaa careening beyond the setting sun into eternal temporal arrest.

¹³² Ibid. 208

Ted ends the story with a fairy tale conclusion that acts as both the motto for, and primary marker of the adventure chronotope: “They lived happily ever after.”¹³³ When Katherine asks what happened upon their arrival on the shores of The Land Where Time Stands Still, Ted gives the only possible answer in which living happily-ever-after can possibly hold true. On their arrival, Ted explains that what happened was “nothing.”

Barth pushes the implications of the adventure chronotope to their limit. In order for the “hiatus” of the adventure to truly “leave no trace,” a hero’s return to ordinary, biographical time must in fact put an end to the passage of time. Athene hands “down her pacts of peace/[...] for all the years to come” on the grand, socio-political stage at the end of *The Odyssey*; however, Homer fails to close the door upon Penelope and Odysseus’s domestic lives. The end of the epic embodies Bakhtin’s observation that adventure time is “an eternal form that is *not consistent* with the authentic content of an individual man.” Although it is ostensibly an internal emotion – love for his wife – that motivates Odysseus to embark upon his arduous journey rather than comfortably living out his post-Trojan years on Calypso’s island, Homer’s treatment of space and time serves to illustrate Bakhtin’s critique that the treatment of space and time in Greek romance is entirely alien to internal human emotion and experience. Barth, in examining the domestic consequences of Odysseus and Penelope’s twenty-year interlude, enacts a narrative, parodic treatment of the ancient world’s failure to generate “forms and unities adequate to the private individual and his life” that puts Bakhtin’s theoretical critique of the shortcomings inherent to the adventure chronotope into practice.

Bakhtin writes that the chronotope of the Greek romance is the most abstracted novelistic time-space. It makes no room for “evolution, growth, or change;”¹³⁴ it is a finished, complete, and consequence-free time which leaves no trace. By reintroducing the domestic sphere into *The Odyssey*

¹³³ Ibid. 225

¹³⁴ Ibid. 110

in the first part of the episode, Barth parodies the affirmation of an unchanging heroic identity central to the Greek romance. He underlines the impossibility for stasis in the wake of the extreme trials set forth by adventure and he examines the implications of such an ordeal upon Penelope and Odysseus as *private* individuals. In the second part of the episode, Barth identifies the only possible conditions (short of immediate death after the story's close, which, as mentioned above, Bakhtin admits *can* allow for full aesthetic apprehension of a life), under which a happily-ever-after ending may take place. For adventure time to truly leave no trace, the only way that the story of a life (or lives) can reach its conclusion before death, is exit the flow of time, to leave the world of chronotopes in favor of a Land Where Time Stands Still.

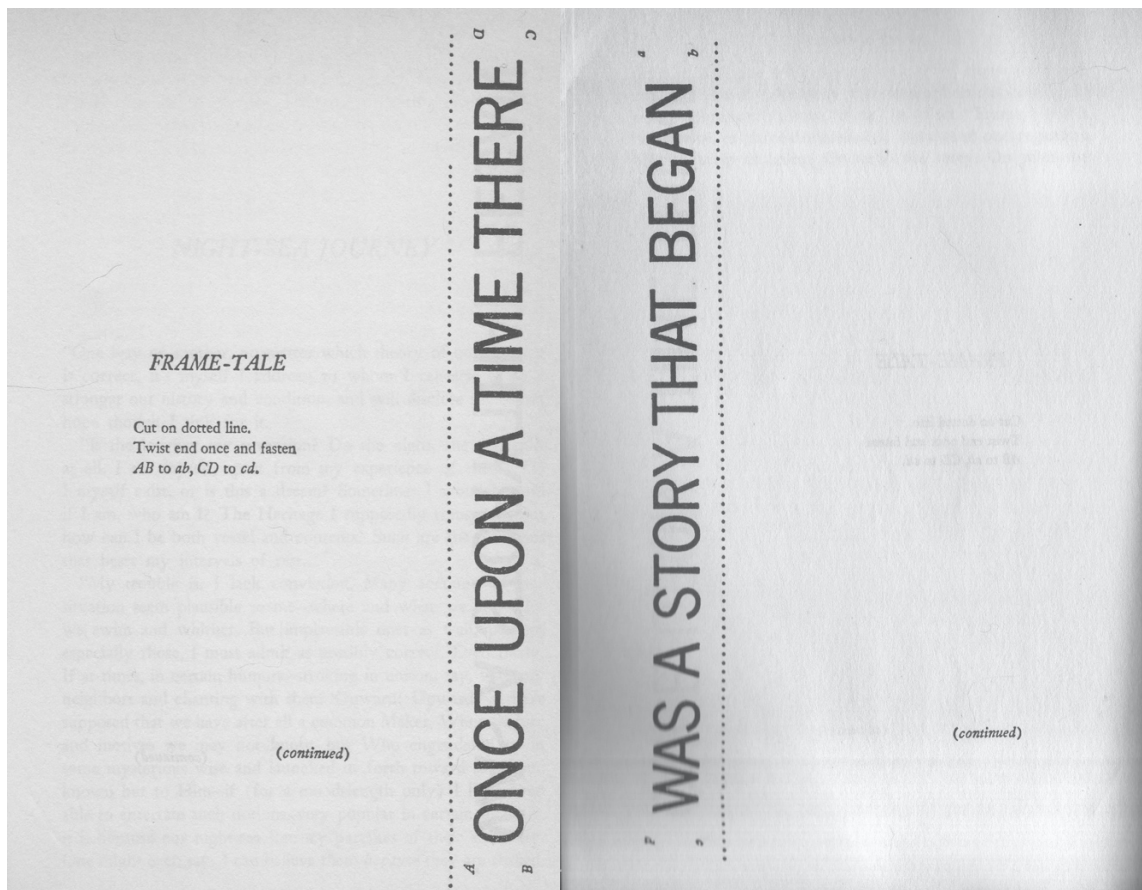
In "Author and Hero," Bakhtin observes the complex relation between omniscient authors and their protagonists. He notes that an author not only "sees and knows everything seen and known by each hero."¹³⁵ but also sees and knows *more* than each hero. The author sees the life of a hero as an "invariably determinant and stable excess." Under normal circumstances, a hero makes ethical choices within an open world while the author sees both the hero's world and the consequences of all of his ethical choices from the "manifoldness of [the world's] already existing makeup." Bakhtin places the author in a panoptic position over a hero and his companions' perspectives; the author can simultaneously see in the direction a hero faces, along with everything peripheral to, and even behind, a hero. The comprehensive whole of the hero's world encompasses his own consciousness along with everything that is "transgredient" to it; the whole descends upon him from a consciousness not his own, from the consciousness of the author. Supplying knowledge of this whole to the hero, argues Bakhtin, "would falsify his consciousness."

Barth's Odyssean epilogue completely disrupts this relation of hero to author. Ted and Diana, act as both reader-listeners *to* Homer's *Odyssey* and as author-creators *of* Homer's world. This

¹³⁵ Ibid. 12

layering also extends two steps beyond the Dimitrikakis/Homer relation: Ted and Diana are characters in Pete's represented travelogue; Pete himself is a character in John Barth's novel. Ted and Diana flatten the hierarchical gap between author and hero. Homer still occupies a position outside of his hero; however, this being-outside is a diminished vantage point. He not only has lost the omniscient perspective that allowed him to know *more than* Odysseus knows, but no longer even knows *all* that Odysseus knows – his detumescent terror upon Odysseus's entry into the cabin underscores that Odysseus's mind and motivations are inaccessible to the bard. He no longer sees in the direction Odysseus looks, along with everything beyond his peripheral vision, but instead, no longer sees – period (ironically, it was his aesthetic object who stripped him of his sight). Where Bakhtin claims that all “moments that actively consummate the hero render the hero passive” in relation to the whole that encompasses him, Barth places Homer into a passive role in relation to the whole created by the Dimitrikasises, which encompasses *him*. Barth (or Pete, depending on one's choice of narrative strata and one's willingness to read *The Tidewater Tales* as fantasy over realism) further complicates the whole in which Homer dwells by hinting that the Dimitrikasises may in fact be the immortalized Odysseus and Nausicaa living out their timeless eternal youth on a pleasure cruise that exists beyond time. This additional wrinkle places a single and circular twist into the relation between Homer and Odysseus. If Ted is in fact Odysseus, there is no longer an exterior/author or interior/hero in his own story or in Homer's *Odyssey*. Phemius-Homer narrates the life of Ted-Odysseus who narrates the life of Phemius-Homer, who narrates the life of Ted-Odysseus, etc., etc. Like the time-breaking chant that Odysseus and Nausicaa use to escape from the flow of time, the author/hero relationship Barth creates (again, through his own author/hero

relationship with Pete) takes the shape of a mobius strip: an endless circle with no inside and no outside (illustrated below by Barth's experimental short story, "Frame Tale").*¹³⁶



Though on its face, Barth's subversion of the gap between author and hero appears to fly in the face of the impermeable boundary that Bakhtin hopes to establish in "Author and Hero," Barth's play with the interior and exterior of narrative serves to illustrate the collaborative, dialogic character of the world central to Bakhtin's large project (and, again, it is important to keep in mind that in the episode, the Ted-Odysseus/Phemius-Homer is a represented world within author-creator Pete's represented-representing world, which, in turn is an aesthetic object of author-creator-human

*To clarify, the story is printed on each side of a single page— the "cutaway" portion form a mobius strip when one follows Barth's instructions. I've been unable to find the original source, several articles, I think correctly, call "Frame Tale" the shortest, longest story ever told.

¹³⁶ John Barth, "Frame Tale," *Lost in the Funhouse*, (Anchor, 1976), 1-2

John Barth's representing real world). Bakhtin points out that a consciousness with "nothing transgredient to itself, nothing situated outside itself and capable of delimiting it from the outside" cannot be "aestheticized."¹³⁷

For Bakhtin, such aesthetic events, which require two non-coinciding consciousnesses, are not merely decorative objects of cognitive pleasure, but serve as a fundamental basis for engaging with another person as a fully realized whole. A response is specifically aesthetic, for Bakhtin, when it reacts to the "*whole* of the hero as a human being."¹³⁸ Aesthetic experience attempts to think through the "actually experienced horizons" of two separate people that do not coincide. Bakhtin explains that "I – the-one-and-only-I—occupy in a given set of circumstances this particular place at this particular time." *Cognition* offers a window to the "outsideness-for-me of all other human beings, as well as the excess of my seeing in relation to each one of them, which is founded in that position of outsideness." It forms a unitary whole; however, the unitary whole of cognition cannot be perceived as such; though it remains beyond the bounds of perception, one may *aesthetically comprehend* the unitary whole that encompasses the relation between oneself and another.

The whole that Bakhtin claims unifies the parallax between two consciousnesses is a "consummating form" that must "fill in" the horizon of the other human being who is being contemplated."¹³⁹ It must "enframe him, create a consummating environment for him out of this excess of my own seeing, knowing, desiring and feeling." Like the relation between narrative interior and exterior in Barth's novel, the space of cognition, which unifies two different consciousnesses, takes on the shape of a mobius strip. From the inside (one's own perspective), one can never see the whole of what is outside; from the outside (the perspective of another), one can never see the whole of what is inside. The unified whole of cognition is knowable only in the

¹³⁷ Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," 22

¹³⁸ Ibid. 5

¹³⁹ Ibid. 23

dialogic space *between* people. Barth, disrupting the conventional hierarchy which places the author above his hero, as well as between author and listener (Odysseus told his stories to Phemius who then, as Homer sings them to Odysseus), places the author, hero, and listener into a dialogic relationship in which no one figure perceives the entire unitary world of cognition.

Conclusion

Much as Barth plays with beginnings and endings within the stories contained in *The Tidewater Tales*, the novel itself has no firm beginning or ending. It is cyclical in structure; its final pages leave off by returning to its first: of both the main body of the text itself as well as its paratextual boundaries. Pete and Kathy grope toward a tentative but incomplete ending, not only by echoing the “dippy verses” of its opening lines, but also by repeating the title page at the very end of the book. Barth sends the reader back to the novel’s beginning as Kathy draws it to a false conclusion in the final sub-chapter, quoted in full below:

ON WITH THE POEM!

Oh, *that*,

Tuts Katherine Sherrit with mild surprise—
Kith at her starboard Nipple, Kin at her port,
Doubly draining, twice delight her;
Burning our coupled candle at both ends:
At once Exhaustion and Replenishment,
(Drink up, bids Kath: ‘There’s more where that came from.)

It’s true she spoke in verse in our prologue,
Improbable such a thing may seem.
And she left that doggerel green-belt poem undone
Like Penelope’s web; like Scheherazade’s last yarn;
Like *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel*, finished now
But for some wrap-up word, some curtain line....
Or did she? Comrade reader, look again
Through the keyless hole or holeless key of Form.
We thought we lacked a closing rhyme for *cost*
To end our poem with: one less bleak than *lost*,
Remember? But we were in formal fact
Not at the end at all.

Au Contraire.

We’d launched a new stanzaic pair: a Jack
Implying and preceding some new Jill,
As in Ma Goose (though in *our* Genesis,
As C.B.S. predicted, it was Eve
Who foreran Adam). Weren’t we a brace
Of wiser birds than we supposed? A whole

New ball game! Maybe a whole new tale in verse...or prose: *Our House’s Increase*, by P.S. out of Katherine Sherritt Sagamore, its Once Upon a Time the Ever After of:

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Kathy waxes poetic on the impossibility of completing the task, of telling a story, that she set for Pete at the novel's outset. The birth of their children may draw Kathy's pregnancy to an end; however, "in formal fact," it is "not the end at all" of her story. Rather, it is, in Bakhtin's terms, a "threshold [...] an unfinalizable -- and *unpredeterminable* -- turning point for [her] soul."¹⁴¹ Though the narrative may stop, the story of Pete and Kathy's "*House's Increase*," continues; its "ending," for as long as Pete and Kathy continue to live, cannot be an *end*, nor can it be a beginning. Though they may perceive the birth and beginning of their children, as Bakhtin points out, Pete and Kathy cannot

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 654-656

¹⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 61

perceive their own births, their own beginnings. Their story remains unfinalizable (and in turn, unbeginnable as well). It can only be a pure present in an ongoing state of becoming.

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