

DIDACTIC METAFICTION

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Abstract:

This postmodern concern forms the conflict at the heart of the collections' title story, which has two separate narratives competing for its audience's attention: the first, a seemingly typical story of an adolescent's growing self-consciousness as he makes his way through a funhouse in Ocean City, is continually interrupted--and finally overtaken--by the story of the narrator's growing self-consciousness as a writer. This narrator knows that his authorial audience does not come fresh-eyed to his text, that his readers have a great deal of experience reading fiction, and that this experience has created expectations that the narrator simply cannot fulfil. The narrator similarly believes that his readers will not measure his story against their experience in the everyday world, but against their experience as participants in fictional worlds.

Key Words: Metafictional, Fictionality, Menelaid, Anonymiad, Funhouse, Rhetorical Strategies, Marxist interpretation.

I. Introduction

In "The Literature of Exhaustion," which appeared in 1967 the year before Lost in the Funhouse, John Barth makes the distinction between ideas worth discussing and things worth doing and suggests that because anymore can talk about ideas he prefers the type of art that not many people can do. The more congenial relationship between author and reader, or teller and told, is the one implicit in "Menelaid" and "Anonymiad," the last stories in the collection. Although both are clearly meant for print, as Barth's experimenting with punctuation marks unique to written language indicates, the underlying relationship between writer and reader is that of the teller and auditor of the oral tale. As Ong suggests, the oral narrator's audience already knows the tale; the pleasure comes from the surprising manner in which it is told.

II. Educating Readers: The Pleasures of the Text

Comparing the pop artists of the sixties with the acrobats who delighted him as a child, Barth claims that he is "on the whole more impressed by the jugglers and acrobats at Baltimore's old Hippodrome...:genuine Virtuosi doing things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do." 1

This preference for doing over talking, for the performance over the idea, for the process over the substance, is at the very heart of Lost in the Funhouse, but the consequences of Barth's preference have been denounced more than they have been applauded. Alter, for instance, objects to Barth's emphasis on the writer's virtuosity, calling it "a peculiarly elitist and miraculist notion of literary continuity and renewal." 2 Claiming that... the metafictional techniques employed in Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera are gratuitous and indulgent, Klinkowitz further suggests that Barth's performance result in very unsatisfying art: in these works, he claims, Barth "confuses the product of art with the conditions of its inception, a process which obviously fascinates Barth ... but which often result in simple bad writing." 3 Shloss and Tololyan, on the other hand, applaud Barth's virtuosity, but they raise a serious question about the effect of performance literature on the relationship between the author and his reader: "To control, to parade with feckless, changing voice through a brilliantly patterned but hollow text, may be masterful, but it is also solipsistic; it promotes an independent and wary intelligence in readers at the expense of a more satisfying confirmation of the specific narrator or artist." 4 The objection that Barth's performance alters the nature of the literary transaction so that it is less satisfying than that of more traditional narratives has ominous implications. Cynthia Ozick, for example, claims that experimental fiction which seeks to create "wholly different" expectations subverts "not only literature but the

desire to have a literature. “5 These objections deserve serious consideration, for like the charges of elitism and gratuitousness, they extend beyond Lost in the Funhouse to metafictional strategies in general. But in order to evaluate the consequences of Barth’s preference for the performance over the idea, it is first necessary to look more closely at the nature of Lost in the Funhouse .

The author’s note to this collection is the first indication of his preference for doing over saying.

Indicating the ideal methods of presentation for each of his fictions, he claims that the story called “Title,” “makes somewhat separate but equally valid senses in several media; print, monophonic recorded authorial voice, stereophonic ditto in dialogue with itself, live authorial voice, live ditto in dialogue with monophonic ditto aforementioned, and live ditto interlocutory with stereophonic et cetera, my own preference; it’s been ‘done’ in all six.”⁶

Despite the obvious facetiousness of this note, many readers have taken his suggestions at face value, either claiming as one critic has, that many of the pieces in Lost in the Funhouse do indeed “lose much meaning in print and have to be imagined spoken .”⁷ or suggesting, as another has, that Barth has capitulated to “the forces of an imperfectly understood Marshall MacLuhan.”⁸ While Barth’s note does not offer any helpful suggestions for ways of reading his collection (and after all, the printed version is in fact the only way it’s been ‘done’), it does indicate that he is an author intensely aware of his medium. But that awareness shines through his choices within his medium for talking about media: his use of words like aforementioned and et cetera, and his repetition of ditto (which, of course, indicates repetition itself) work to undercut the literal content of his statement and to satirize—rather than capitulate to—the inter media artist. The quotation above, for example, is difficult to process when heard, but when heard, but when the referents to all those dittoes and afore mentions are stabilized on the printed page, it is simply a matter of backtracking according to grammatical conventions to discover meaning. Barth’s note on possible and preferred medium, then, leads back to an implicit claim for the distinctiveness of—and his virtuosity with written language. This preference for doing over saying creates an interesting rhetorical problem for the author of Lost in the Funhouse. Like all virtuosos, Barth needs an audience who can appreciate his considerable skills. Yet as Peter Rabinowitz suggests, Barth seems to belong to a group of writers who “have intentions which are so subtle and complex that they can only write for an authorial audience which they know to be, at best, but a tiny portion of their actual audience.”⁹ Others have likewise suggested that “Barth wants to annoy his readers rather than engage them.”¹⁰

The rhetorical strategies of Lost in the Funhouse, however, suggest a different intention and a different attitude toward the authorial audience. Barth seems to have believed, in 1968 anyway, that things audience was unprepared to participate fully in the process of making meaning from the type of art he could do best. These readers know the conventions of realistic literature, and they generally expect fiction to reveal some truth about the world outside of the text; in other words, Barth writes for an audience steeped in the high modern aesthetic. His rhetorical difficulty, then is that he must on the one hand make his readers self-conscious about their expectations of what literature should be and thus teach them the falseness of those expectations; and on the other hand, he must perform in ways that teach the reader to appreciate his virtuosity. He must be both pedant and acrobat, talker and doer. In handbook fashion, the narrator of “Lost in the Funhouse” explains the traditional functions of the parts of a narrative: the beginning should “introduce the principal characters” and “establish their initial relationships,” while the middle has the “double and contradictory function of delaying the climax while at the same time preparing the reader for it and fetching him to it” (73-74). Although Barth is hardly conventional, he nevertheless loosely follows this strategy in order to instruct and woo his reader.

Thus the collection is roughly divided into three parts, with the first part introducing his fictional concerns through narratives that his audiences will be able to enter with the conventions... they already understand. The metafictional middle of the book has the double function of making explicit statements about the nature of conventional narratives and of preparing the reader for his unconventional ones. The stories of the third part, then, reward Barth’s steady pupils and provide a type of climax--the author is finally allowed to escape his self-consciousness and to perform his type of art. Let me begin by examining two stories from the first part of the collection, “Night-Sea Journey” and “Petition.” On the narrative level, the first is about the journey of a sole surviving sperm, blindly pursuing the egg, and the second is the letter of an embittered Siamese twin petitioning for independence from his crude brother; but these stories actually introduce Barth’s theme of the writer’s solitary endeavour and begin to establish his notion of the uneasy relationship between writers and readers.

Barth's swimming "tale-bearer" (Shloss and Tololyan have already pointed out the pun--sperm bear tails while authors bear tales) posits many possible purposes for the journey, but he is unable to choose one that best explains his situation. The contemporary author faces a similar difficulty: though capable of creating many patterns that might explain or structure his experience, he ultimately cannot impose any single one on the world because "Truth" is not only relative but ultimately... indeterminate. Barth furthers the analogy between swimmer and writer by suggesting that the sperm cannot determine the meaning of the journey any more than "he could say what would happen after She and Hero, Shore and Swimmer, 'merged identities' to become something both and neither" (10).

The writer's endeavour, like the sperm's, becomes meaningful only when received by another; but as Iser suggests, "reading removes the subject-object division that constitutes all perception, "11 and though the text can be given life only by a reader, it becomes something that partakes of both reader and writer--and yet is neither. The petitioner's dependence upon his brother likewise mirrors the writer's upon the reader. The brother who writes the letter says he is solitary, articulate but mute, "an observer of life, a mediator, a taker of notes, a dreamer (59); his twin, on the other hand, is "incoherent but vocal, "ignorant, uncompromising, and uncooperative. They depend on each other for existence, yet fight each other for supremacy. The petitioning brother craves his independence--an identity not merged with another's: "Death itself I would embrace like a lover, if I might share the grave with no other company. To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither is unspeakable" (68). In "Petition," the fact of dependency is threatening, particularly to the writer, who can assert power only by pulling against his brother (reader), spoiling his pleasure, and halving his force (61). But the Siamese twin, like Bath, realizes that he will always be dependent on another and imagines a new type of relationship, "something more congenial and sympathetic" (67).

While these stories from the beginning of Barth's collection introduce his fictional concerns, they are not meta-fictional. That these stories are implausible does not make them necessarily unconventional; they do, in a manner, offer "truths" about the conditions of their narrators. No intrusive narrator reminds us of the functionality of these fictions or of the fact that a sperm could not tell his story, and it is possible to enter the narrative audience in the same way we make the leap of faith when Kafka's narrator tells us that Gregor Samsa awoke one morning to discover he had been metamorphized into a cockroach. Similarly, the analogy between sperm and writer is not explicit in the text; we discover it, from implicit clues in the text, using the same process we use to find analogies in traditional fiction. What is perhaps also implicit in Barth's bizarre choice of narrators is the belief of many postmodern writers that it is almost impossible to write anything new.

By writing, for example, "When Ambrose and Peter's father was their age, the excursion was made by train, as mentioned in the novel *The 42nd parallel* by John Dos Passos" (70), the narrator relies for support not upon the historical correctness of a fictional precedent. Similarly, when he worries that a remark attributed to Ambrose might seem too sophisticated for a thirteen-year-old boy, he wonders not if some real teenager could think like that, but if he is violating the fictional principle of verisimilitude. And after writing that Ambrose and his brother were "stimulated by the briny spume, "he recalls that "The Irish author James Joyce...uses the adjectives snot-green and scrotum-tightening to describe the sea. Visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory" (71).

The narrator recognizes that in comparison his own adjectives are trite and will fail to engage the reader's imagination. Failure of imagination occurs at every level of "Lost in the Funhouse." On the narrative level, both Ambrose and the narrator are imaginatively paralyzed by their self-consciousness. The lonely adolescent, who feels "different" from everyone around him recognizes that funhouses appeal to lovers and attempts to imagine one where it would be impossible to get lost: "He would be its operator: panel lights would show what was up in every cranny of its cunning of its multifarious vastness; a switch-flick would ease this fellow's way, complicate that's, to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened, all the operator had to do was" (93). Lost in the conventional form, Ambrose is unable to approach the problem freshly, so he is unable to imagine a better funhouse. Similarly, the narrator's awareness of his literary predecessors renders him incapable of completing even a simple metaphor, and the story is thus full of open-ended statements such as this: "The brown hair on Ambrose's mother's forearms gleamed in the sun like" (70). Unwilling to simply complete the fictional formulas he knows readers expect and unable to imagine new formulas, he leaves them blank.

But Ambrose and the narrator are not the only ones lacking imagination. Implicit in this story is a condemnation of the authorial audience's dependence upon pat fictional formulas. Barth's accomplishment in this story is that by beginning to make readers conscious of the falseness of their aesthetic expectations--by

revealing the artifice of those techniques that make literature seem “real,” he also makes them complicit in the writer’s failure to fulfill their expectations to tell the truth with artifice.

Barth moves from implicit suggestion in “Lost in the Funhouse” to explicit statement in “Title” and “Life Story,” narrative which seem to support Klinkowitz’s contention that the author’s obsession with the processes of composition results in “simple bad writing.” These stories are not only uninteresting apart from what they have to tell us about fictionality, but they are purposely tedious—they are perfect illustrations of Barth’s belief that it is far easier to talk technique than in is to make art. But each of these stories works in two ways to instruct the reader and alter his or her expectations of what literature should be. On the first level, the narrators clearly articulate problems all contemporary authors must face: the usefulness of old forms, the difficulty of impressing readers who are all too familiar with conventional techniques and perhaps most important, ...the fact that “the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed unless as a false analogy” (125). Barth’s narrators, then not only desire to abandon old forms, but to abandon likewise the mimetic notion that fiction can really tell us anything about how real people behave; in other words, Barth wants us to acknowledge “the fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity” (125) of even purportedly realistic fiction.

But in addition to articulating these concerns, Barth instructs his reader through the manipulation of technique. In “Title,” for instance, the narrator is so overwhelmed by ennui at the prospect of writing another predictable story that he frequently writes like this: “In this dehuman, exhausted, ultimate adjective hour, when every humane value has become untenable, and not only love, decency, and beauty but even compassion and intelligibility are no more than one or two subjective complements to complete the sentence” (103-4). Unlike the narrator of “Lost in the funhouse” who is unable to fill in the blanks because of his consciousness of the reader, this narrator, this narrator substitutes grammatical terms for what should be content words in order to frustrate the reader’s expectations that the author should fill in the blanks for her.

In addition to making her aware of the writer’s role as performer, this substitution of form for substance makes her more conscious of her activity as a reader. That is, even a “passive” reader of traditional narratives anticipates certain means by which the author will complete things, even sentences. When for example, a reader meets with this beginning, “The house on the hill was,” she might anticipate some physical description, such as white or sprawling, and if the author fulfills that expectation, she processes the information without taking much notice of it. If, on the other hand, the author completes the sentence with a less familiar description—with “haunted” or “in flames” for instance--the reader automatically recognizes that this minor departure from the anticipated is significant and forms new narrative expectations based on it; the reader, however, is surprised only by the content, not by the form, and she is able to process the information without consciously contemplating her activity. But when the author simply completes the sentence with “adjective,” the reader is unable to process it passively, for instead of meeting the anticipated content word, she expected. Her reading thus disrupted, she is forced both to contemplate her own expectations and to attend more closely to the words that actually appear on the page.

And Barth rewards his authorial audience for this heightened self-consciousness through verbal play. The narrator of “Title,” for instance, comments upon his metafictional techniques and suggests that “it’s self-defeating to talk about it instead of up and doing it; but to acknowledge what I’m doing while I’m doing it is exactly the point. Self-defeat implies a victor, and who do you suppose it is, if not blank?” (107). The reader is invited to fill in that blank in two ways: the writer, of course, is victorious in that having talked about technique, he will now be able to perform; but the reader is likewise a winner, for having acknowledged the fictitiousness of conventional structures, he is able to participate in a different type of process.

At this point, Barth acknowledges the necessity of an audience to appreciate his virtuosity and makes explicit the dependent relation developed in “Night-Sea Journey” and “Petition”:

...your own author blesses and damn you his life is in your hands! He writes and reads himself; don’t you think he knows who gives his creatures their lives and deaths? Do they exist except as he or others read their words? age except we turn their pages? And can he die until you have no more of him? (124)

Despite the necessity of readers, the narrator of “Life-Story” risks alienating them or as one critic has put it, “John Barth heckles his literary coconspirators”¹² with explicit insults:

The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it’s you I’m addressing, who else from inside this monstrous fiction. You’ve read me this far, then? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don’t go to a

movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, and make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, and turn you off? Where's your shame? (123)

Where indeed? The story itself has no plot, and the narrator's self-conscious sophistry is tedious and unaffecting. The reader who forbears and continues reading despite the narrator's pleading that he put an end to the miserable story by closing the book must be different from the narrative audience.

Linda Westerville suggests that John Barth "gives the readers signals that his narrators are not to be identified with him in any simple fashion."¹³ Similarly, the authorial audience is not to be identified with the narrative audience that the writer in "Life-Story" addresses. Barth is, in part, distinguished from his cranky, bored narrator by his verbal virtuosity, his playfulness, and by his ability to imagine a more congenial relationship between author and reader. The reader who can survive the surface of the printed page is likewise distinguished from the reader who desires more traditional narratives by his willingness to delight in play. The insult is aimed at readers who must have their expectations for action and mimesis fulfilled; as the narrator of "Anonymiad" says, "if you must have dialogue and dashing about, better go to the theatre" (172). (And the... implication here is that other mediums--film, television, theater--fulfill certain narrative functions, while the printed word offers different types of narrative and verbal satisfactions). The insult hurled at these "incompetent" readers, then, becomes a compliment to Barth's authorial audience, which is made up of a select community of print-oriented people who are willing to engage a difficult written text.

The teller's performance likewise depends upon his audience; according to Ong, the more active and delighted the audience, the more involved the tale.¹⁴ In the oral narrative, then, both auditor and teller are more concerned with the performance than with the substance of the tale; the purpose of the narrative occasion is not only to instruct the audience by providing insights into the human condition (although these well-told tales do that as well), but also.. to engage and entertain the audience. Thus for the final stories in the collection, Barth chooses classic tales he expects his authorial audience to have read, and he playfully retells them. Fiction becomes the source of more, original fiction, with the emphasis shifting from the substance to the performance, a shift for which the previous stories in the collection have prepared his audience.

While the reader's awareness of literary precedents paralyzes the narrators of the metafiction in the middle of *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth turns his audience's literariness to his advantage in "Menelaiad." Here, the audience's familiarity with the characters and events of the odyssey is a prerequisite for understanding and appreciating Barth's imaginative revision of a small part of Homer's epic. "Menelaiad" has more substance--more "story"--than "Title" or "Life-Story," but he effects of Barth's fiction depend upon its departures from, and additions to, the classic tale. By employing the mythic tale, Barth thus controls the conventions to which his readers must appeal and leads them to those of the epic and the oral tale.

Like Barth's post-modern narrators, Menelaus is worried about his role as "story-teller." The "voice" of "Menelaiad" recounts the story told to Telemachus (Odysseus' son) and Peisistratus (Nestor's son) when they...came to Sparta for news of Odysseus. Within this recounting, however, are other "telling" of the events leading to his marriage to Helen, the Trojan war, his ambush of Proteus, and his "reconquering" of Helen to several different audiences: Helen, Proteus, his daughter Egdothea, Telemachus and Peisistratus, and finally, the auditor of his current telling, the reader of Barth's book Each telling envelops the previous telling, resulting in a convoluted attempt to distinguish between discourses:

...."Why?" I repeated, "I repeated," I repeated," I repeated." I repeated, "I repeat" (148). The action of telling takes on greater significance (and takes up more space) than the tale itself, and each occasion for the recounting alters and becomes part of that tale.

And like the previous narrators of *Lost in the Funhouse*, Menelaus is uncertain about his own existence; he is only a "voice," and his story-and his existence as a character in it--can only unfold through a narrative situation. The presence of auditors, then, is necessary for Menelaus to affirm his existence, but by participating in the narrative event, each auditor alters the tale, for every question, utterance, response is incorporated in the next telling. Menelaus, momentarily confused about the occasion of a particular telling, wonders to whom he's speaking: "Got your ear, have i? like to know how it was, I suppose? Where in Hades are we? Where'd I go? Whom've I got hold of? Proteus? Helen?" (128). His auditor's response indicates both the mythic nature of Menelaus' narrative and that the tale are already well-known:

...Telemachus Odysseus'-son,' the lad replied, 'come from goat-girt Ithaca for news of my father, but willing to have his cloak clutched and listen all night to the tale how You Lost Your Navigator, Wandered Seven Years,

Came Ashore at Pharos, Waylaid Egdothea, Tackled Proteus, learned to Reach Greece by Sailing up the Nile, and Made Love to your Wife, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, After an Abstinence of Eighteen Years." (129)

The capitalized phrases act as chapter headings for the events in Menelaus' life and emphasize the story-like quality of that life. But Telemachus' interpolation regarding Helen's beauty arouses the teller's suspicions about his auditor's real reasons for coming to Sparta and gives him another reason to hold tight to Telemachus' cloak and entertain him all evening with his well-told tale. What is a minor event in Homer's *Odyssey*, the purpose of which is very specific--Menelaus must tell about Proteus' news of Odysseus--assumes major importance in Barth's "Menelaiad," for the auditor's participation in the tale gives the teller another purpose: to figuratively hold Telemachus captive with his tale in order to keep him out of Helen's bed. And by creating these suspicions, Telemachus ensures that this narrative occasion will become the next episode in Menelaus' life-story, as well as the frame for the current telling.

Unlike the modern writer who cannot wrestle his readers to the ground, Menelaus physically compels his auditors to authenticate his existence. He holds tight to Proteus' tail as he exhausts his animal guise, just as he hangs on to Telemachus' shirt tail; even Helen, confronted in her Trojan bedroom, must hear their history rehearsed by a sword-wielding Menelaus. But eventually it is the version of reality that the tale provides that wins over Telemachus. Smitten by Helen (who is herself a clever fiction-maker), Odysseus' son is a gullible member of the narrative audience and anxious to believe her story--that Proteus "made a Helen out of clouds" to take her place in Troy, while she languished, "chaste and comfy," in Pharos, waiting for her true husband to return. Menelaus, despite his doubts about the truthfulness of her tale, chooses to incorporate his wife's fiction into his own, not because he wants to believe her faithful, but because her fiction proves that he is "loved," for in his version of the Cartesian dictum, to be loved is to be.

Wise Nestor's son is more like the "modern" reader who must be held only by the tale and is concerned with consistency of both fact and technique, but because he is an auditor of an oral tale, Peisistratus is able to interrupt Menelaus' narrative and ask questions of the principal characters. He sceptically asks, for instance, why it is that Proteus, who can see both past and future, ...must depend upon Menelaus' tale in order to discover Egdothea's treachery. Peisistratus' rational questions thus cast doubt upon the "realism" of Menelaus' tale and increase the narrator's doubts about his own reality, despite his attempts to ignore his auditor. When, for example, Menelaus reaches the very center of his narrative, which unfolds the story of why Helen chose him to be her husband over her more heroic suitors, he switches to third-person, as if he cannot quite believe he is the hero of his life-story and as if the story, so often repeated to so many different auditors, no longer belongs exclusively to him. Just as Menelaus is about to repeat his climactic "Why," Peisistratus begs leave to ask two questions, but Menelaus, responding as though his auditor is referring to the question so important to the narrative, impatiently corrects him:

"One! One! "There the bedstead stood; as he swooning tipped her to it his throat croaked "Why?"

"Why?" asked Eidothea.'

"Why Why?" Proteus echoed."

"My own questions," Peisistratus insisted, 'hed to do with mannered rhetoric and your shift of narrative viewpoint.'

"Ignore that fool!" Proteus ordered from the beach."

"How can Proteus--' 'Seer.' 'So.' 'The opinions echoed in these speeches aren't necessarily the speaker's. (149-150).

Like Barth, who distances the insults aimed at incompetent readers through a series of narrators, Menelaus refrains.... from insulting Peisistratus directly and from thus risking the loss of his most attentive, if least gullible, auditor by attributing his impatience to Proteus, whose ability to see future events clearly includes future narrations.

Although Peisistratus is a comic characterization of the modern reader who lacks imagination, he also possesses many traits of the authorial audience Barth attempts to create throughout *Lost in the Funhouse*: while he wants playfulness, Peisistratus is engaged, actively involved, and willing to work as hard as his narrator. His pragmatic questions frustrate and annoy Menelaus, but Peisistratus' attention to details would surely earn Barth's admiration (after all, it is through Peisistratus' observations that Barth exhibits his own ability to "read" closely). And while other auditors seek in the narrative support for their own versions of truth, Peisistratus

approaches the narrative disinterestedly, as simply a story, though a story whose characters; actions and motives should be psychologically realistic.

It is likewise important to remember that while Menelaus suffers from the same insecurities as the narrators of “Lost in the Funhouse,” “Life-Story,” and “Title,” Barth himself is liberated from the solipsism of those stories through his use of Menelaus’ tale. Instead of worrying about writing for an audience incapable of appreciating his abilities, Barth writes for the reader ... Who, having made his way through the funhouse, has, at least temporarily, consented to Barth’s type of fiction. While Menelaus must coerce and force his auditors to attend to his tale, Barth knows that his audience can be held only by the force of his words, and he writes with a confidence missing from the earlier stories in the collection. Unlike the narrator of “Title” who feels he must explain the paradox inherent in the term “Self-defeat,” the author of “Menelaid” writes for a reader whose consciousness of linguistic play has been raised by the previous stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Having replaced the reader’s expectation for plot and mimesis with an expectation for verbal virtuosity, Barth grants the reader his or her freedom to discover and appreciate that play. Menelaus, for example, relates Helen’s response to his story about the capture of Proteus which he tells while holding her on the deck of his ship off Pharos: “”Hard tale to hold onto, this,” declared my pooped spouse” (139). The author does not explain that tale is a homonym for tail and thus refers not only to the convoluted story, but also to the literal tail by which Menelaus holds Proteus and to the figurative one by which he holds Helen, not does he explain that Helen is not only pooped by the attempt to follow the tale, but also literally “decked.” He allows the reader to discover the reverberations and double entendres, and his clever use of sexual euphemisms, anachronisms, and American idioms reveal not a weariness with writing, but rather a love affair with the printed word, a love he seeks to share with his reader.

Love is the overriding theme of this collection, from its inception and night-sea journeying sperm through its final anonymous narrator, who suggests that “The trouble with us minstrels is, when all’s said and done we love our work more than our women. More, indeed, than we love ourselves” (177). Throughout *Lost in the Funhouse* it seems, as Linda Westervelt has suggested, that “Lover and designer and designer are mutually exclusive roles... On the one hand, the narrator-agents of “Lost in the Funhouse” and “Life Story” are envious of the “lovers for whom funhouses are designed” and characters in rousing good yarns,” and they hope to interest those kinds of readers in their fiction: on the other hand, they realize the futility of that hope.”¹⁵ But, as I suggested earlier, through the use of Menelaus and the anonymous minstrel, Barth distances himself from these narrative complaints and from this type of futile relationship with his readers. Through the medium of his fiction, he engages in a type of mutually satisfying love-making with his readers. The Genie who appears to Scheherzade in Barth’s next work, *Chimera*, is a character not so distant from his author: like the flesh and blood Barth, the Genie is “a light-skinned fellow of forty or so, smooth-shaven and bald as a rock’s egg,” with “queer lenses that he wore in frame over his eyes.”¹⁶ A writer from the twentieth century, he laments that “the only readers of artful fiction were critics, other writers, and unwilling students who, left to themselves, preferred music and pictures to words” (17). And it is the Genie who most clearly articulates the relationship Barth seeks with his authorial audience: narrative, says the writer, is “a love-relation, not a rape: its success depended upon the reader’s consent and cooperation, which she could withhold or at any moment withdraw; also upon her own combination of experience and talent for enterprise, and the author’s ability to arouse, sustain, and satisfy her interest” (34). Instead of antagonizing his reader as does the narrator of “Life-Story” or resenting his dependency and his role as a solitary observer, a dreamer, a taker of notes as does the petitioning Siamese twin, Barth--in “Menelaid” and “Anonymiad,” as in *Chimera*--grants his reader her independence and power at the same time that he seeks to share with her his love of language and his artistry.

If Barth’s preference for doing over saying gives his book this type of rhetorical construction, a construction that necessitates his persuading the reader to consent to his performance, then how troubling are the various objections cited at the outset? Critics like Shloss and Tololyan find the analogy between reader and lover to be false, “incapable of closure and bound inevitably to ... disappoint. A reader is not a surrogate lover. Nameless, faceless, uncommitted to the literary transaction except as it pleases or annoys him, he cannot validate a writer’s self in the same way that men and women confirm each other’s worth.”¹⁷ On a certain level this complaint is valid, as Barth himself seems to suggest in “Menelaid,” for Menelaus is clearly pitiable for his inability to accept Helen’s love, for his need to find authenticity through narration, for his need to force his auditors to comply--to “rape” his narrates. But what happens to the characters in the literary work (whether that work is *Lost in the funhouse* or something more traditional, like *Middlemarch*) is not what happens to the flesh

and blood reader or writer of that work; the transaction between reader and writer exists not in the text, but through the text, through the medium of the printed page. Throughout *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth seeks to educate his reader in order that he or she can appreciate not the man John Barth writes not for an audience that seeks verification of its own truths in his work, but for one that consents to participate in that virtuosi performance. In other words, Barth uses the analogy between reader and lover not in the romantic sense that Shloss and Tololyan do--that lovers share a heartfelt emotional and moral bond--but in a sexual sense--that reader and writer luxuriate in each other's skillful performances.

For what Shloss and Tololyan simply ignore--or refuse to grant--is the metafictionalist's basic assumption that the false analogy is the romantic one that equates author and god and replaces religion with literature, and it is ultimately Barth's refusal to communicate a "vision" that frustrates and disappoints readers like them. By making the reader aware of the text as art, metafictional strategies deprive him or her of the emotional satisfaction of losing the self to the vision of the author. A heightened consciousness of the artifice in a literary work brings about more than just a "wary intelligence" and a freedom to discover and delight in the text's offerings; it also relinquishes to the reader a disconcerting responsibility for his own moral life. For Barth, literature is not sacred (as his willingness to "rewrite" Homer indicates), and to those of us who are critics, writers, and teachers of those "unwilling students," this is his biggest affront. By turning literature into a sexual experience--a fondly remembered one-night stand--Barth denies the possibility of true transcendence through art. As Chimera's *Genie* suggests, "the treasure of art...could not redeem the barbarities of history or spare us the horrors of living and dying"(25).

It is no wonder, then that Robert Scholes suggests that Barth is a chronicler of our "despair over the exhausted forms of our thought and our existence."¹⁸

For...if the desire to have a literature is connected to man's desire to bring order to the chaotic facts of the world, the metafictionalist's exposing of the artificiality of that order would indeed seem to undermine that desire. Eagleton's objection to Roland Barthes' "hedonistic" critical approach likewise applies to performance literature: caught up in this exuberant dance of language, delighting in the textures of words themselves, the reader knows less the purposive pleasures of building a coherent system, binding textual elements masterfully together to shore up a unitary self, than the masochistic thrills of feeling that self shattered and dispersed through the tangled webs of the work itself...Far from returning the reader to himself, in some final recuperation of the selfhood which the act of reading has thrown into question, the modernist text explodes his or her secure cultural identity, in a jouissance which for Barthes is both readerly bliss and sexual orgasm.¹⁹

Metafiction is not an inherently asocial form (one need only look at Borges or Coover to discover strong political and cultural concerns), but like most writers of this genre, Barth does despair over literature's failure--and ultimately its inability--to redeem mankind through the construction of ordered systems representative of "reality". Yet Barth's metafictional strategies suggest that reading can offer sustenance of another kind: an intellectual and aesthetic repast, a pleasant, joyful exercise of mind that differs from but nevertheless coexists with, other happy diversions like playing tennis, watching acrobats or movies, and wandering through funhouses. Performance literature is thus a retreat from the prosaic and chaotic facts of everyday existence--the stuff of which realistic literature is constructed--and its linguistic play is a source of readerly bliss. And play for play's sake may indeed be a worthwhile cultural value, for the writer of metafiction, like this character in Tom Robbins' *Jitterbug Perfume*, seems to be "convinced that play--more than piety, more than charity or vigilance--was what allowed human beings to transcend evil."²⁰

In addition to the pleasure of play, however, performance literature offers a more enduring satisfaction. While it may not return the reader to a secure cultural identity, its self-referential language does return to the reader a certain power over linguistic structures by emphasizing the "man-maddens" of those structures. Language may not be able to corral the random facts of the world into a coherent order, but readers can actively create order from the words that appear on the page. The fact that language is contextual and meaning is slippery may be a source of anxiety for semanticists and truth-seekers, but for writers and readers of metafiction, it is a source of intellectual stimulation. Rather than despairing at the multiple meanings of words and the structures made from them, readers are encouraged to celebrate their ability to decipher and find meaning in these man-made structures.

The metafictional performance does, however, make the literary work only an "artful trinket" which, while having no redemptive power, "at least sustained, refreshed, expanded, ennobled, and enriched our spirits

along the painful way” (Chimera,25). The emphasis on the pleasure offered by the author’s performance, then is paramount and perhaps lends credence to Alter’s and Klinkowitz’s charges of elitism and gratuitousness. Barth draws our attention to the suppleness of language and to its complete tractability in his hands, and some critics find the metafictionalist’s flaunting of his virtuosity gratuitous because his “artificial” structures never seem to point to anything outside of themselves. As many readers have suggested, Barth, like Ambrose, seems lost in a structure with no way out, but unlike Ambrose, Barth is lost in structures of his own making. By employing what he sees as worn out conventions and themes against themselves, by making them the subject of his writing, Barth attempts to educate his readers to the pleasures of performance literature, and far from being gratuitous, Barth’s “performance” is thus integral to his work. In fact, the performance is ultimately all there is, and this does put a particularly elitist—and perhaps egotistical—emphasis on Barth’s own ability as a performer. Alter, for instance, suggests that, “Barth seems to be saying, we have come to such a pass that it is virtually impossible to write ...anything at all. Nevertheless, a few geniuses, having recognized that difficult task, will somehow manage to create.”²¹ If the reader of Barth’s fiction is made to feel elite, a member of a select community of print-oriented people, how much more elite is the author who is able to entertain this select group.

What distinguishes Barth from many other experimental writers is his attempt to initiate a broader audience to the pleasures of performance literature. Rather than written for a tiny portion of his actual audience, as Rabinowitz has suggested that he does, in *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth instructs his actual audience in order that he may include them in his authorial audience. Indeed, in “The Literature of Replenishment,” Barth wrote that the post-modern writer should aspire to make his work more democratic: He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Michener and Irving Wallace—not to mention the lobotomized mass--media illiterates. But he 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.²²

Barth attempts to reach an audience that extends beyond other writers, critics, and unwilling students, for his simple explanations, and unwilling students, for his simple explanations of critical issues like structuralism and reception theory, and his deconstructionist musings about the disparity between sign and meaning are not ...directed toward already knowledgeable critics, nor are they an attempt to flaunt his own knowledge. Rather, Barth’s instructional comments are directed toward the reader steeped in the high modern aesthetic who may find questions raised by current literary theory terribly esoteric, and by educating this reader with his handbook, Barth seeks to count him or her among the “elite.”

This didactic quality may make *Lost in the Funhouse* a work whose rhetorical strategies create their own obsolescence. Wayne Booth, for instance, asks “Why do some works of intricate narrative obliquity, like John Barth’s ‘Lost in the Funhouse,’ seem thinner and thinner the longer one studies them?”²³ I have already suggested that stories like “Life-Story” and “Title” are tedious apart from what they can teach us about fiction, and the failure of these stories to sustain our interest during subsequent readings has to do, in part, with their textbook quality: once a reader grasps the issues raised in these fictions and becomes skillful at deciphering the puzzles offered, these didactic stories, like an old McGuffey reader, are no longer necessary or satisfying. Although the second, third, and fourth readings of any work differ from each other, sometimes revealing new depths, sometimes answering old questions, and sometimes betraying serious flaws, subsequent readings of a metafictional text that seeks to teach its reader to read itself offer little remuneration for the effort.

But also responsible for the apparent “thinness” of these stories is the ephemeral nature of the transcendence offered by Barth’s literary performance. By focusing on the activity of reading rather than the content offered by the text, Barth dissolves meaning into a free play of language--play which lasts only as long as the activity itself continues. Although he accepts the importance of the reader in the literary transaction and acknowledges her independence, the more congenial relationship Barth establishes is not that of the Iserian “co-creator.” “The teller’s role,” Chimera’s Genie suggests, “regardless of his actual gender, was essentially masculine, the listener’s or reader’s feminine, and the tale was the medium of their intercourse” (34). Although the Genie goes on to suggest that the “femininity” of readers was not docile or inferior condition” (34), the fact remains that it is the “masculine” author’s role to arouse the feminine reader’s interest by leaving blanks for her to fill and by creating puzzles for her to solve. This sexually defined relationship ultimately stresses the potency of the author, upon which the reader’s bliss depends (and interestingly enough, the mythic heroes of the last two stories in Chimera are worried about impotency). But as she becomes increasingly conscious of her activity as a reader and increasingly familiar with the text’s intricacies, the rarer are the delights offered by the text--and the

thinner that text seems. Because the pleasures offered by Barth's text are primarily intellectual (the satisfaction of suddenly finding oneself a member of the select group of readers who are print-oriented rather than of the disdained group which needs dialogue and dashing about), they are not as intensely felt during the second or third reading; it is not that the structures--the puns and double entendres--are no longer clever or amusing, but rather, that the novelty of discovering them for oneself wears off when the text has seemingly exhausted itself.

These failures, however, testify to the overall success of Barth's rhetorical strategies in *Lost in the Funhouse*. The text itself may fail to bring enduring delights to the individual reader, but by initiating readers to the almost hedonistic delights offered by performance literature, Barth creates an audience of active, self-conscious readers capable of experiencing the pleasures of discovery whenever they are confronted with a new puzzle. While he may not share a vision, he does share his wonder at the joyful power of man-made structures to sustain and refresh us, and in the process, he creates an authorial audience that can appreciate his verbal acrobatics. Writers of metafiction may indeed attempt to create "wholly different expectations" and to ...alter the relationship between the reader and the writer, but inherent in their strategies is the realization that the reader must consent to their performance and must willingly enter the authorial audience. Rather than attempting to destroy our desire to have a literature, writers of metafiction seek to make us more self-conscious readers of literature. Those who make it through the Barth in funhouse emerge, perhaps not as better people or better lovers in the "real" world, but as better readers and better lovers of the printed word.

Educating Readers; Beyond the Pleasures of the Text:

"That a present-day book should derive from an ancient one is clearly honourable: especially since no one (as Johnson says) likes to be indebted to his contemporaries."²⁴ Barth, of course, has acknowledged his admiration of--and his indebtedness to--the author of this quotation, Jorge Luis Borges. In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth claims that Borges' "artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work;" he is an artist who "doesn't merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it."²⁵ Borges' appeal to the appropriateness of ancient works as a source of new literature, his obsession with labyrinths and mirrors (both elements in a funhouse), his steadfast refusal to write ...realistic fiction, and his fascination with the structures man creates have indeed influenced writers like Barth; as John O. Stark suggests, Borges is "the archetypal writer of the Literature of Exhaustion."²⁶

If Borges is indeed a predecessor of "metafiction," why is he treated in this study as something of a postscript? Although many of his themes do correspond to those of writers considered here, Borges is more of a metaphysicist than a metafictionalist, more of an epistemologist than a literary theorist. It is, for example, quite possible--and perhaps even appropriate--to interpret "the infinite game of chance" of "The Babylon Lottery" as a corollary to the infinite possibilities of literature, but the story itself does not do so, and "The Babylon Lottery" is clearly more of a fable about man's desire to explain the chaos of existence than a metafiction that flaunts its own processes of composition. Because Borges is frequently interested in general questions of the disparity between man's knowledge of the world and the reality of that world, rather than in specific questions about literary art, a great deal of his work—including a number of his best fables--is beyond the scope of this study.

Borges is, however, a writer, a reader, and a librarian, and books do sometimes find their way into his fictions. His exegeses of imaginary texts, for example, are studied here because their rhetorical strategies defy traditional readerly expectations and thus teach us as much about the reading process as they do about the composing process. To begin with, stories like "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," "Tlon, Uqbar, orbits Tertius," and "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," are fictions mustarding as book reviews; in addition to a scholarly tone, Borges employs the critical apparatus, citing other reviewers, including apparently pertinent information in footnotes, and using diagrams to outline the works' structures. Stark suggests that Borges' imitation of nonfiction genres in these works "tricks the reader by playing on his past reading experience,"²⁷ and these exegeses do ask the narrative audience to read them as though they were essays, and thus realistic and factual. But the authorial audience certainly is not tricked by Borges' choice of form; not only do these works appear in a collection bearing the title *Ficciones*, but Borges provides a context for his "essays" in the prologue, suggesting a more positive version of Barth's notion that it is easier to talk technique than to make art:

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary. (15)

Given this context, members of the authorial audience recognize Borges' scholarly pose as a device, just as they recognize Nabokov's posing as John Ray, Jr. as a device to make the narrative audience accept the manuscript of *Lolita* as a "real" autobiographical work.

While not really an attempt to trick his readers, Borges' parody of nonfictional forms does play upon their past reading experience in order to make them more self-conscious readers. For like the protagonist of "The Circular Ruins" who seeks to dream a man and understands "with a certain bitterness that he could expect nothing from those pupils who accepted his doctrine passively, but that he could expect something from those who occasionally dared to oppose him" (58), Borges desires a reader who is active, thoughtful, and perhaps even wary. For this reason then, Borges, like Barth, sometimes taunts his reader by asking, for example, "You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?" (87), or by writing footnotes that muddle rather than clarify something in the text. By forcing the reader to question the "truths" offered by the text, he seeks to create an independent and cautious reader, but Borges is perhaps less susceptible to the type of criticism levelled at Barth because his work is finally less solipsistic. While Barth's primary purpose in *Lost in the Funhouse* is to create readers who can appreciate performance literature, a side effect of which is the creation of better readers in general, Borges' didactic purpose is much further reaching. He seeks not merely to teach us to read a particular type of fiction, or even fiction in general, but he hopes to make us better interpreters of all verbal structures, and ultimately even of those cultural structures which are not explicitly verbal.

"An Examination of the work of Herbert Quain" is representative of Borges' theatrical strategies and has the additional advantage for this study of a fictional author-subject who is in many ways like Borges himself. The fiction begins with a simple statement: Herbert Quain has recently died. The narrator suggests that the literary obituaries which have appeared in magazines like the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Spectator* have not done justice to Quain's work, so he intends to set the record straight by teaching us the correct way to interpret Quain's work. Borges uses many techniques to establish the reality of Quain and his fictions for the narrative audience: he quotes from a letter which Quain wrote, he refers frequently to better known writers like Flaubert and Henry James, and he even establishes the physicality of one of Quain's books by suggesting that he has lent it, "irretrievably," and must rely upon his forgetfulness, which both "impoverishes" and "purifies" his description of the book. By suggesting that his memory of the novel is fuzzy, he not only instills in the reader the notion that the book exists outside of Borges' imagination (and could be consulted by the reader to check for the narrator's errors), but he also implies that books exist outside of their physical boundaries, in the reader's memory and imagination.

And in his explications of Quain's work, the narrator teaches his narrative audience--and Borges his authorial audience--to be careful and imaginative readers. One of Quain's novels, a detective story, ends with this phrase: "Everyone thought that the encounter of the two chess players was accidental." Rather than allow this phrase to stand as a statement of fact--merely because "everyone" believes it--the narrator suggests that it "allows one to understand that the solution is erroneous. The unquiet reader rereads the pertinent chapters and discovers another solution, the true one. The reader of this singular book is thus forcibly more discerning than the detective" (74). The reader is also more important to the execution of Quain's novel than his protagonist, but like Barth, "Quain was in the habit of arguing that readers were an already extinct species (78). While the narrator attributes this comment to Quain, thus distancing the insult, he clearly agrees that readers are habitually lazy and passive, in need of a lesson in inventiveness. More important than the correctness of the commentator's interpretation of Quain's ambiguous statement is his activity as a reader--his ability to look beyond the surface of the text to discover multiple solutions in Quain's fictional structure. In other words, Borges teaches his reader through the example of his close reading narrator.

While Borges would agree with Barth that complex verbal structures are delightful and pleasurable, and thus worthwhile for their own sake, he also suggests that "formal complexities" sometimes "hindered the author's imagination" (77). Regarding *April March*, a novel for which the narrator provides a detailed structural diagram, the modest and self-deprecating Quain is quoted as saying, "I lay claim in this novel...to the essential features of all games: symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium" (75). The rage to order which informs *April March* and creates nine different novels, each with a common first chapter, sometimes results in simple bad writing, "unworthy of Quain." But the reader's rage to order similarly alters the quality of the book, for "Whoever reads the sections in chronological order...will lose the peculiar say or of this strange book" (76). So while symmetrical and orderly man-made structures offer various pleasures, the desire for such structures inhibits the ability of literature to arouse our imaginations--and perhaps prevents us from discovering truth in disorder.

Like Borges, Quain believed “that of the various pleasures offered by literature, the greatest is invention” (78), and like Borges, he attempted in his last work, *Statements*, to encourage inventiveness in his readers. A work that seems to prefigure Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, *Statements* consists of eight stories, each of which “promises a good plot, deliberately frustrated by the author” (78). By frustrating his readers’ desire for a well-imagined story, Quain shifts the burden of completing the stories to his readers; unable to remain passive, the readers must become writers themselves. The narrator, for instance, who until the last line of the fiction has been identified primarily as a reader by his explications of Quain, is now the writer Borges, who has himself invented a fiction from one of Quain’s stories: “I was ingenious enough to extract from the third, ‘The Rose of Yesterday,’ my story of ‘The Circular Ruins’” (78). For the narrative audience, the first story is as real as the second, Quain as real as Borges, but his last line of “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain” has a curious effect on the authorial audience. By identifying himself as both the reader of the imaginary Quain’s work and the flesh and blood writer Borges, he crosses the boundary between what we know to be fictional and what we know to be real; as one critic suggests, Borges’ use of a “shifting (and sometimes shifty) narrator intentionally confuses the... traditional limits and distance between literature and reality, between narrator and reader.”²⁶ By doffing his own fictions to Quain, Borges makes the authorial reader question his own sense of reality and his role as a participant in a literary experience. Shumway and Sant translate part of the prologue to one of Borges’ stories as follows: “A volume, in and of itself, is not aesthetic experience; it is a physical object like any other. The aesthetic experience can only occur when someone writes or reads it.”²⁹ though they do not exist in printed form as physical objects, the works of Herbert Quain are real as a result of their being part of a shared aesthetic experience; they exist as imaginative constructions of both Borges and his reader, for as Quain suggests, everyone “is a writer, potentially or in fact” (78).

Borges similarly seeks to teach the reader to experience the pleasures of invention in “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” another story in which he attributes a “real” literary work to a fictional author. Menard was engaged in “reconstructing literally” Cervantes’ “spontaneous work” (51), not merely in producing a physical copy of it. Those chapters of *Don Quixote* which Menard attempts to reconstruct from memory are themselves self-consciously concerned with literary theory, and in particular, the narrator in the ninth chapter tells the story of his reading of the manuscript of *Don Quixote*; as Stark suggests, Borges’ fiction is thus “literature about literature about literature.”³⁰ (Actually, one could add a fourth “literature” there, since Borges writes about Menard, who writes about Cervantes, who writes about literature; my quoting Stark adds literatures five and six, a development which would, I’m sure, amuse Borges, supporting as it does his contention that literature, far from being exhausted, is infinitely expansive.) Borges is, however, interested in Menard’s authorship of the *Quixote* not for what it implies about actual literary production (the creation of physical books) but for what it implies about inventive reading: “Menard (perhaps without wishing to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the hesitant and rudimentary art of rereading: the technique is one of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions” (54).

The narrator, for instance, ironically compares passages by Cervantes and Menard which are “verbally identical,” but he claims that Menard’s version is “infinitely richer” (52). The reader-narrator, knowing that Cervantes’ was a product of seventeenth-century Spain, claims that the style of the original is more natural, while the twentieth-century Frenchman’s version seems affected; but the content of Menard’s passage is enriched by the cultural and intellectual changes that have taken place over three centuries. While Cervantes’ suggestion that history is the mother of truth is a “mere rhetorical eulogy of history,” the narrator suggests that because he is a contemporary of William James, Menard’s version implies that historical truth is what we thing took place rather than what actually took place. Borges’ own response to criticism that he refuses to except the writer’s responsibility to the social and political climate is that writers are always engaged in their own time:

Being contemporaries, we have to write in the style and mode of our times. If I write a story—even about the man in the moon—it would be an Argentine story, because I’m an Argentine; and it would fall back on Western civilization because that’s the civilization I belong to....You have a certain voice, a certain kind of face, a certain way of writing, and you can’t run away from them even if you want to. So why bother to be modern or contemporary, since you can’t be anything else?³¹

Although the linguistic structures of Menard and Cervantes are identical, Menard’s have a different significance—a modern meaning—simply because he is a product of his own culture; meaning is always determined by context. But, of course, it is the inventive reader who perceives these distinctions and discovers different significations, and interestingly, this reader seems more able to escape his cultural dispositions than is

the writer, for he is able to read the passage as the product of both the seventeenth century and of the twentieth century. Borges certainly does not mean to imply that the reader has any... responsibility to the author's intention, for he is far more impressed with the modern reading of Cervantes/Menard; but the narrator's explications do make the reader more self-conscious of the process by which she reconstructs the fiction as she reads. Borges would not, for instance, necessarily disapprove of an anachronistic Freudian reading of the relationship between Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon or of a Marxist interpretation of the failure of the Lydgates' marriage (except that he would be as sceptical of Freudian and Marxist theories as he is of other orderly systems), but he wants the reader to be aware of her own inventiveness in constructing such readings, and ultimately, he wants us to remember the inventiveness of all theorists who offer interpretations of both literature and the world.

Shumway and Sant suggest that for Borges, truth, "like meaning and value," "is located in the reader's mind, arising from the ability of the perceiving intellect to make sense of what it perceives. In other words, what raises coincidences to the level of pattern, what invests them with teleological possibilities is the constructive power of the mind."²² like Barth, Borges extols the power of the man mind to construct order from a reality that is apparently chaotic, and while he educates the reader to the pleasures of labyrinth-making and game-playing, he also returns to the reader the responsibility for using this constructive power wisely. By suggesting that all humans possess the power of inventiveness—"Every man should be capable of all ideas" (54)--and by reminding us of the man-madness of all structures of order, Borges attempts to create wary readers and cautious human beings. His rhetorical strategies--obscure references, sometimes real and sometimes fictional, a shifting narrator, multiple explications of texts, false attributions--all function to make his authorial audience wary of even the truths he offers; but they also make this audience uncertain of its own knowledge and skeptical of its own expectations that fiction should reveal truths about reality yet somehow remain outside of reality, somehow remain fictional. Borges thus disorients his readers not just to make way for his particular type of literary production, but to make them independent observers of society and culture, as well as inventive readers of the written word. "History, for Borges," suggests Scholes, "is a matter of witnessing as much as a matter of doing."³³ And Truth, the offspring of history, can only be perceived by those who exercise the mind's constructive power, by those who refuse to accept passively--those who dare to oppose--the order offered to explain the world.

One of the most poignant warnings against the misuse of the mind's power to construct and against passive reading is contained in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," a story in which the line between construction and destruction is as tenuous as the line between fiction and reality. In this fiction posing as essay, the narrator discovers an article on a fabulated country, Uqbar, in what should be factual, trustworthy publication: an encyclopedia. His search for the truth includes careful reading, by which he "discovered, beneath the superficial authority of the prose, a fundamental vagueness" (19), and a trip to the library to check maps, travel books, and histories to affirm the validity (or, in this case, the invalidity) of the references contained in the article. His search might indeed parallel that of reader who discovered Borges' exegesis of Quain out of its fictional context, in, for example, a sabotaged copy of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. The invalidity of the fictional article about a false country in an otherwise "factual" work is relatively easy to determine, however, since the country is purportedly part of the verifiable world. Not so, however, is the history of an invented planet, Tlon, which appears in a fictional encyclopedia entirely devoted to the construction of an orderly world where the imagination completely conquers matter.

The teleological possibilities of Tlon would clearly appeal to Borges. "Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality" (29), so that a lost item, for instance, may be duplicated simply by the searcher's desire to recover the object, and the invented object may actually be more desirable than the original because it is "more in keeping with his expectation" (29). The literature of the planet is likewise Borgesian in character: their critics invent authors and falsely attribute dissimilar works to the same author, and plagiarism is impossible since "all books are the work of one single writer, who is timeless and anonymous" (28). Not only is the inventiveness of the secret society of scholars responsible for the encyclopedia of Tlon appealing, but the world they have invented is seductive in its orderliness, its idealism, and the control over reality it attributes to the imagination.

III. Conclusion:

The obvious solipsistic pleasure offered by the construction of such a world is undercut by Borges' postscript. The human desire for order and construction is paralleled by the human desire for power and destruction of those people and things that do not coincide with our invented version of reality. The narrator tells us that people began to believe in Tlon, because "Ten years ago, any symmetrical system whatsoever which gave the appearance of order--dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism--was enough to fascinate men. Why not fall under the spell of Tlon and submit to be witnesses to history, wary readers of the world. Human constructions be fallible and destructive, but because they are made by humans, they can be perceived by humans: "Tlon may be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth plotted by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men" (34). Borges does not suggest that it is impossible to discover truths, only that it is impossible to construct an order that comprehends all of reality; if the world operates according to an orderly plan, it is "in accordance with divine laws--I translate: inhuman laws--which we will never completely perceive"(34).

Unlike Barth, Borges clearly believes that readers can discover complex human truths in fiction, truths that extend beyond simple statements like "love conquers all." For Borges, art is as valid a human construction for the dissemination of human knowledge as philosophical, theological, and even scientific discourses. Although his meta-fictional essays do indeed teach his authorial audience about fiction and the pleasures of inventive reading, Borges does not suggest that his readers are in any way dependent upon his virtuosity--his labyrinth-making and game-playing--for their pleasure, because his attempt to cultivate intellectual inventiveness arises from a belief that all readers are potential writers and that all writing--indeed all human constructions--can be imaginatively read. The reader's pleasure extends beyond Borges' verbal constructions.

Humility, however, is the implication that the desire for literature cannot be squelched by the creation of inventive readers with altered expectations. Narrative, suggests Borges, "When it is not in their hopes or their fears, is at least in the memories of all my readers", and his narratives depend upon that concave basin which is the collective memory" to enrich and amplify them" (33). The desire for literature is connected to the desire for truth, both of which belong to the collective memory, which, Borges would argue, can only be subverted by the harmonious histories of fictitious pasts which passive readers might mistake for truth.

Notes:

1. Atlantic Monthly, 220 (August 1967), p. 30.
2. Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 227.
3. Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 7.
4. Carol Shloss and Khachig Tololyan, "The Siren in The Funhouse: Barth's Courting of the Reader," *Journal of Narrative Technique* (Winter, 1981), p. 73.
5. Cynthia Ozick, "Innovation and Redemption: What Literature Means," in *Art and Ardor* (New York: Dutton Publishers, 1984) p. 243.
6. *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. ix. All further references will be noted in the text.
7. Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1980), p. 99.
8. Susan Helgeson, "Fiction that Teach Readers How to Read—And How to Write" (Unpublished Manuscript).
9. Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1977), p. 126.
10. Shloss and Tololyan, p. 71.
11. Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1974), p. 293.
12. Shloss and Tololyan, p. 71.
13. Linda Westervelt, "Teller, Tale, Told: Relationships in John Barth's Latest Fiction," *Journal of Narrative Technique* (Winter 1978), p. 48.
14. Walter J. Ong, S. J., "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," *PMLA* 90 (January 1975), PP.9-21.
15. "Teller, Tale, Told", p. 51.
16. *Chimera* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1972), p. 16. All further references to this work appear in the text.

16. "The Siren in the Funhouse," p.73.
17. Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 123.
18. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 82-83.
19. Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), p. 197.
20. *Partial Magic*, p. 227.
21. *Atlantic Monthly*, 245 (January, 1980), p. 70.
22. *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 446.
23. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," *Ficciones*, ed. By Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grave Press, Inc. , 1962),p. 42.
24. *Literature of Exhaustion*," p. 31.
25. John O. Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov. And Barth* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), p. 11.
26. Stark, p. 26.
27. Thomas E. Lyon, "Borges and the (Somewhat) Personal Narrator," *Modern Fiction Studies* 19(1973-74), p. 366.
28. Nicolas Shumway and Thomas Sant, " The Hedonic Reader: Literary Theory in Jorge Luis Borges,"
29. *Latin American Literary Review* 9 (1980-1981), p. 42. Shumway and Sant use their own translation of Borges, *Obras Completas* (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1974) .
30. Stark, p. 24.
31. *Borges on Writing*, ed. By Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Daniel Halpern, and Frank MacShane (new York: E. P. Dutton & Co. , Inc. , 1973), p. 51.
32. Shumway and Sant, p. 51.
33. Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, p. 17

