

JOHN BARTH'S PLAYFUL TREATMENT OF HISTORY IN
THE SOT-WEED FACTOR

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History is more or less real.

J. Barth

This laconic claim, expressive of the highly ambiguous status of what we dub history and of the impossibility of sifting facts from fiction, sets the tone for the discussion of John Barth's *The sot-weed factor* (1960, revised edition 1967). The author's contention is helpful in that it elucidates to some extent the intricacies of plotting and the equivocal predicament of the protagonists in his only novel to date that is so extensively involved with the stuff of history, to be precise with the late 17th century history of Maryland. The above statement at the same time places the novel under consideration side by side with texts that openly defy the sacrosanct truths and axioms of historical past. History according to them is highly unreliable; it is perceived as a figment of historians' rampant imagination or as a bri/collage of inaccurate, oftentimes mutually exclusive accounts of past events. As a consequence, the latter may freely be substituted by their alternative, or paradigmatic versions.

Degeneration of certainty and disbelief in the unalterable is by no means Barth's own invention. This inability to get to the core of things and to fathom absolute truth, human history included, has been increasingly a hallmark of at least one whole century. Truth as a multifaceted entity, forever elusive and beyond our reach, is presented, for instance, by Friedrich Nietzsche in his essay titled "On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense": "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and antropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use *seem* firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people" (in: Kaufman 1968: 43, my italics). To be truthful means using the customary metaphors. Our knowledge of past events, then, is not based on what actually occurred, but on what others thought might have occurred. Elsewhere in his writings the philosopher

furnishes a definition of truth viewed as a purely utilitarian construct: “*Truth is that sort of error without which a particular type of living being could not live. The value for life is ultimately decisive*”. Lack of credibility in the “canonical truths” would mean, as Nietzsche points out, “the ruin of our species” (in: Levy 1913: 20, 22); they simply render our lives more intelligible.¹ We should be cognizant, however, of the derivative character of these time-honored laws. In the course of human history those notions, or fabrications, that have shown themselves to be less useful than other fabrications, or even positively harmful, are reputed as “error”. On the other hand those which have proved their utility to the species have attained the rank of unquestioned “truths”, or rather have ossified into belief. Belief is no doubt comfortable, but is inimical to the truth, since it bars inquiry and the pursuit of other, equally legitimate facets of the real.

In the United States much the same idea of the relativity of human endeavors to signify the truth was expressed at the end of the previous century by Charles Sanders Peirce. In the essay under the title “How to make our ideas clear” (1878) he writes: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real”. Peirce coins the term “fallibilism” which he succinctly defines in the following manner: “On the whole, then, we cannot in any way reach perfect certitude nor exactitude. We can never be absolutely sure of anything, nor can we with any probability ascertain the exact value of any measure or general ratio” (in: Scholes 1979: 9). A view exhibiting a striking resemblance to the two outlined above, showing that our attempts to attain certainty concerning questions of fact are doomed to failure, was put forth by Bruno Schulz, a Polish writer and critic. In one of his essays, fittingly titled “Mityzacja rzeczywistości” [“Mythologizing reality”], we read:

Najtrzeźwiejsze nasze pojęcia i określenia są dalekimi pochodnymi mitów i dawnych historyj. Nie ma ani okruszyny pośród naszych idei, która by nie pochodziła z mitologii – nie była przeobrażoną, okaleczoną, przeistoczoną mitologią. Najpierwotniejszą funkcją ducha jest bajanie, jest tworzenie historyj.

[Our most sound notions and definitions are but remote derivatives of myths and old hi/stories. There is not a tiny particle amongst our ideas that would not come from mythology, that would not be a transformed, maimed, or transfigured mythology. The very basic function of spirit is telling or creating hi/stories.] (Schulz 1936 [1989]: 366, my translation)

According to Schulz, historical truth fades into mythology with the passage of time. Subsequent versions of things past, piled one upon another in a haphazard fashion, places of indeterminacy, or lacunae within historical accounts, as well as

¹ Both fragments quoted here can be treated as a gloss to Nietzsche’s views put forth in *The birth of tragedy* (1872). The Dionysian perspective on human predicament, showing life as a tumultous flux, is more faithful, for all its gloominess, than the “sunlike” Apollonian one.

points of divergence, or ungrammaticalities between them, are directly responsible for the dissemination of truth.

The deferral of the positive and the unquestioned cannot be construed solely as a diachronic process, however. It is concurrent with historical events themselves. Already at the moment of happening, history becomes no more nor less than a personal fabrication; it becomes transformed into a story, or a text (see: Waugh 1984: 107f). It would be in order at this point to recall Jacques Derrida’s statement that converts virtually every single field of reality into a text: “there is no outside-text” (Derrida 1976: 158). The notion of “the general text”, given in “The truth in painting” encompasses any system of signification, anything that can be perceived as signifying structure from natural phenomena to social codes. Treating history as a text is yet another argument in favor of the claim that the former is arbitrary. Existing as a semiotic entity, it is founded on the interplay of innumerable signifiers and signifieds. The former, used in lieu of their referents, perform twofold function. On the one hand they point to some *presence* outside the text, but are simultaneously traces of *absence* within it. They both bridge the gap and are accountable for an increased hiatus. Deferral, imprecision, and misinterpretation are thus inherent qualitative features of any text, not excepting history: “the world is a happy climate for imposture!” (Barth 1967: 330). All these ideas reverberate through John Barth’s *The sot-weed factor*. The characters themselves, consciously or otherwise, invoke Nietzsche by admitting that the sum total of history is “no more than the stuff of metaphors”. Anything goes; the author takes liberties with Maryland’s early history throughout. This is how Barth has his protagonist account for his own fabulative exploits:

’Tis not that the facts are absent The difficulty is, e’en on the face of them the facts are dark – doubly so if you grant, as wise men must, that an ill deed can be done with good intent, and a good with ill; and triply if you hold right and wrong to be like windward and leeward, that vary with standpoint, latitude, circumstance, and time. History, in short, is like those waterholes I have heard of in the wilds of Africa: the most various beasts may drink there side by side with equal nourishment (Barth 1967: 486).

In a direct way Barth’s novel situates itself at the intersection of at least four other texts: that of American history and three of its earliest accounts: John Smith’s *A true relation of Virginia* (1608), and *The general historie of Virginia* (1624), as well as a poem by one Ebenezer Cooke under the title *The sot-weed factor* (1708).² *The sot-weed factor* of our century enters into a dialogic relationship with these pretexts but this dialog is devoid of any reverence; Barth appears to derive a lot of pleasure from unmercifully twisting these texts for his own purposes.

As far as historical records go, the “concrete” events and dates from the early

² For an enumeration of some other possible pretexts see, for instance, Frank D. Mc Connell (1977: 134-135).

colonization period in Maryland constitute but a tiny fraction of the total of the text, apparently acknowledging the superiority of the fabulator's work over that of a historian. Ebenezer Cooke, one of two protagonists of Barth's book, is embarking on a journey from Plymouth to Maryland in the hope of regaining his patrimony. He is, however, just like most of the readers, "completely innocent of Maryland's history" (Barth 1967: 77). Therefore he is given a crash course in the colony's past by its Lord Proprietary, Charles Baltimore (who later turns out to be his friend and former tutor in disguise, Henry Burlingame). The chapter in which this happens is packed full of "facts" and so looks (almost exactly) like a chapter from a history textbook (see: Hofstadter – Miller – Aaron 1959: 42-43). We get to know how Sir George Calvert, first Lord Baltimore, obtained a grant of land from Charles I in northern Virginia with a view to establishing a sanctuary for English Catholics in America. The stretch of land between the Potomac River and the 40th parallel was named Maryland in honor of the English Queen, Henrietta Maria. In 1649 Puritans, who had become a majority by then, took control of the colony till the year 1657. The Calverts ruled undisturbed until August 1691, when Maryland became a royal colony. The third Lord Baltimore's efforts to regain his privileges, constantly countered by one John Coode, constitute the historical backdrop of the book's plots.

Barth does not intend to dwell on these facts too long. Ebenezer Cooke, as is his habit when faced with too many tedious details, interjects impatiently: "'Sheart, my man, pass over the history and commence thy fabrication!" (Barth 1967: 505). Fabulation becomes an imperative. As soon as Burlingame finishes briefing Cooke on the past of the latter's native country, a "burly game" of fiction commences. The author's idea of history is that of a palimpsest, a text that is created on parchment or paper on top of other texts after they have been partially erased. In the case of *The sot-weed factor* we would have to speak about double, or even multiple palimpsests. The previous texts have resisted complete erasure and some words, phrases, or even whole paragraphs come to the surface here and there to the reader's utter bewilderment (and amusement).³ Due to its multi-layer and multi-dimensional structure Barth's palimpsest becomes so obscure and dense a text that the reader is frequently in no position to discern the borderlines between its component parts. Their individual meanings coalesce to produce a totally *novel* one. John Barth, then, pens his story in precisely the same manner as does his protagonist Eben Cooke, Poet and Laureate of the Province of Maryland by appointment of its Lord Proprietary. Cooke writes his *Marylandiad*, "an Epical Poem setting forth the Graciousness of Maryland's Inhabitants, Their Good Breeding and Excellent Dwelling-places and the Majesty of her Laws" (Barth 1967: 93) not in a regular notebook, but on the pages of an account book, a ledger, that he snatches

in a stationery store. *The sot-weed factor* likewise cuts through many historical wavelenghts; facts mingle with fabulation, texts merge into one another.

Alan Holder (1980: 196) indicates that the author is oftentimes at variance with the historical records as they appear in the *Archives of Maryland*. Despite his being knowledgeable about many a document from this period, Barth presented Baltimore's opponent, John Coode, as a Catholic priest who later turns against his fellow brethren, whereas in reality he was an Anglican cleric. Likewise, the author arbitrarily described him as the associate of several other men, whom he could not have known. Another apparent fabrication of Barth's is the alleged plot by Indians and escaped slaves to massacre every white man in Maryland. Equally improbable is the idea that the colony is to be infested with opium dens, and gambling houses. Burlingame ascribes to Coode the "wondrous plot ... to ruin the Province with pox and opium, the better to overthrow it" (Barth 1967: 450). Implausible though the above contention may initially appear, we find more than one grain of truth in it; Cooke's estate in Malden is a far cry from the pastoral and blissful place he had hoped it to be. It is rapidly falling into disrepair, "becoming every day more evidently a gambling house, tavern, brothel, and opium den", frequented by hordes of "lecherous Marylanders" (Barth 1967: 489). Malden, a site of decay and corruption, becomes a cruel travesty of Thoreau's plain lodgings in Walden, "the inversion of that most romantic of American Edens" (Mc Connell 1977: 140).

This unfavorable image of Maryland as a "verminous province" (Barth 1967: 467) stems largely from Barth's extensive use of parody, always debunking all that is supposedly glorious and decorous. Parody offers alternative versions of events, as well as exposes their sham and true character. Here Barth is at his best when he unearths John Smith's secret journal, in fact a spoof on the Captain's *General historie of Virginia*. Smith's *A secret historie of the voiage up the Bay of Chesapeake*, along with the equally well fabricated *The privie journall of Sir Henry Burlingame*, differ in many respects from historical facts handed down elsewhere. Smith's original account and its parody may be looked upon as the *verso* and *recto* of Maryland's history. Barth tries to show his readers that they both, or neither of them, may have been closer to the truth. The time lapse between the two texts is immaterial; they can be treated on equal footing. Besides, Captain Smith seems to share Barth's knack for story telling: "in the narration of incidents that have occurred in his own wild life he had an aptitude for being intensely interesting; and it seemed to be his theory that if the original facts were not in themselves quite so interesting as they should have been, so much the worse for the original facts" (Tyler 1967: 17-18). The most conspicuous example of the discrepancy between the texts is no doubt the story of the Indian princess Pocahontas. It was allegedly through her intercession that Smith saved his life when imprisoned by the girl's father, Powhatan. To Barth such a claim, too good to be true, is suspect outright. Thus he ironically shows that the otherwise valiant Captain does save his life, but solely on the strength of his exceptional virility; Smith alone is capable of gratifying Pocahontas' sexual needs. Even more grotesque is the adventure in the tribe of *Ahatchwhoops*. This time Henry Burlingame, the alleged forebear of the protago-

³ Some critics, to say nothing of many readers, would vehemently object to calling the book entertaining. Gore Vidal, for example, in the essay "American plastic: a matter of fiction" deems it tedious beyond endurance. He calls it "an astonishingly dull book" (Vidal 1977: 111) and further censures it on the grounds that it is "ignorant of the eighteenth century" (Vidal 1977: 113). The latter remark sounds especially puzzling in light of Vidal's earlier statement in his novel *Messiah*: "I am tempted to affirm that historical truth is quite impossible" (Vidal 1954: 12).

nist of Barth's novel, proves his superiority over the tribesmen. He enters into an eating contest, vying for the position of the king of the tribe, and wins after a good many hours of gorging on copious amounts of food.

The 18th century poem *The sot-weed factor* by Ebenezer Cooke is equally well recognizable in the fabric of John Barth's novel under the same title. It certainly hovers in the background, but is not followed closely. The author superimposes his character on the one from the 1708 poem. The identity of the latter Cooke still puzzles critics. In the poem he pretends to be an Englishman who arrives in America allured by the prospect of improving his financial status. What he finds here by no means differs from the Old Continent. Scenes of riot, debauchery, and robbery abound. Being basely swindled while selling his goods and cheated even worse by his lawyer, the embittered merchant returns to England, cursing the inhospitable colony and its dwellers:

May wrath divine then lay these regions waste,
Where no man's faithful, and no woman's chaste.
(Tyler 1967: 155)

Exactly the same curse is uttered by Barth's protagonist. He also becomes aware of the fact that "here's naught but scoundrels and perverts, hovels and brothels, corruption and poltroonery! What glory, to be singer of such a sewer!" (Barth 1967: 457). At this point he resolves to alter the title of his poem from the lofty *Marylandiad* to *The sot-weed factor*. Disillusionment with the colony is a point of convergence of the two texts. In many respects, however, they are disjoined. First, the Cooke of the novel is American by birth. Second, he sets out on the voyage with a different objective in mind - he is supposed to regain his father's estate. Third, his side objective is to compose rhymes about Maryland "*ad maiorem Baltimorensi gloriam*" (Barth 1967: 349), an idea for a long time alien to the Cooke of the poem.

Constant dynamic tensions between history and story, an intricate network of intertextual relations, improbable coincidences, abrupt changes in the locale, not to mention the kaleidoscopic shifts of guises and personalities throw into a great confusion not only the readers decoding the novel, but also the protagonists themselves. In Cooke Barth fictionalizes a real person, a real author; the reverse is true about Burlingame, who is a genuine made-up character. While immersed the ocean of story they both earnestly seek a life-buoy, or some minimal certainty. They are ill at ease because of the strong sense of inauthenticity, of being entrapped in something beyond their grasp. In Eben's own words he feels like a "victim of a monstrous prank" (Barth 1967: 438), often thinking aloud: "I don't know who I am" (Barth 1967: 479). In the process of ascertaining his identity, Eben "suffers from mirror-gazing" (Hassan 1973: 57).⁴ "Examining various faces of himself in his looking glass" (Barth 1967: 69), inspires his hope for solving the existential conundrums. In Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), a novel raising similar issues of the

⁴ For basically the same reason a like malady affects other Barth's characters, like Narcissus and Ambrose in *Lost in the funhouse*.

relationship between story and history, we find a scene which depicts the character's lack of stability within the story in the following fashion:

... he took to studying himself in the mirror, perhaps expecting some change to take place before his eyes. He could not see that he was taller than he had been even a few months before, or that his hair was darkening. ... he continued the practice not from vanity but because he had discovered the mirror as a means of self-duplication. He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one. The sensation was of being disembodied. He was no longer anything exact as a person. He had the dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly. He would entrance himself so deeply in this process that he would be unable to come out of it even though his mind was lucid. He would have to rely on some outside stimulus, a loud noise or a change in the light coming through the window, to capture his attention and make him whole again.
(Doctorow 1975: 133-134).

On the face of it, Burlingame does not show any concern for his true identity. In reality, however, he is afflicted with the same problem. Small wonder; in the course of the novel he assumes a host of different guises, posing as Lord Baltimore, Colonel Peter Sayer, John Coode, Timothy Mitchell, and Monsieur Casteene, to mention but a few. Ebenezer himself has serious difficulty recollecting his friend's outward appearance: "he could not even remember with any precision what his dear friend looked like; at best his mental picture was a composition of the very different faces and voices of Burlingame before and after the adventures in America" (Barth 1967: 240-241). Henry's profound interest in his status in the ongoing fiction is evidenced by the zest with which he collects all the fragments of Captain Smith's journal. He is cognizant of the fact that only upon gathering all the extant versions of the document will he be able to get closer to an approximation of truth about himself. He clings to the text that would shed some light on his tenebrous past.

Uncertainty about the validity of historical judgments and the consequent use of parody when speaking about the elusive and polymorphous past lie at the basis of John Barth's *The sot-weed factor*. History is consistently construed as a palimpsest, a text whose reading is immeasurably enriched by all the previous ones, by all the traces of presence and absence of earlier fabulations. Since lacunae and understatements prevail, both the readers and the characters are faced with a multiplicity of choices and have to make decisions as to which can be trusted most. Can any of them be trusted more than others, however?

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