



HEROES/SHEROES AS ARTISTS OF THE SELF: IMAGING THE HEROIC OMNIPOTENCE IN JOHN BARTH'S *LETTERS*

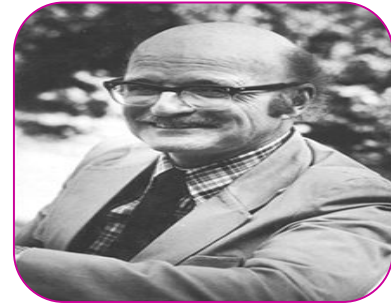
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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to expose postmodern writer John Barth's view over the various types of quest mankind undertaken in life and the problem they suffered from the origin. The modern man enjoys several privileges and facilities compared to the primitive one, his search in life. Letters is concerned primarily with letters, old letters, new letters, stolen letters, secret letters, public letters, false letters, unread letters, letters within letters, letters of the alphabet, letters as the state of art, letters as opposed to pictures, and letters as history, true and false. It is a novel about novel-making, letters on Letters on letters. Letters are both the subject matter and narrative materials which seem to create themselves out of the chaos of history and the arts. As the artist-creator of his world, Barth is behind every action, meeting, coincidence and character in his novel. The previous six books all connect because Barth sees their inter-relatedness and makes them all into his world. Like the narrator of an epistolary novel or a god, Barth pulls all the strings. As the ruler and creator of his world, Barth makes his characters in his own image, clones or pieces of himself. The Author is part Proteus, part Zeus, and part Barth in his mythic role as archetypal artist/creator.



KEYWORDS : Hero, detachment, misunderstood life, Temperamental Differences, Feeling, Emotions.

INTRODUCTION

In postmodern discourse, self is displaced as a central presence in experiences and re-appropriated as yet another personal signifier. The self has come on extraordinarily hard times. In John Barth's seventh novel, *Letters*, the characters journey through time, colliding with unpredictable forces while trying to perceive a pattern in the movements of their lives. Most of the heroes in *Letters* are from Barth's previous works, with the exception of John Barth as Author, Germaine G. Pitt (Lady Amherst), as the most expansive letter writer, and Reg Prinz as an "avant-garde cineaste" currently making a film of Barth's writing. Todd Andrews of *The Floating Opera* reappears as a sixty-nine-year-old lawyer who occasionally transcends his apprehension of gloom, but is preoccupied by his journey toward death, too slow for his morbid temperament. As Author, Barth describes the fictional framework of intricate relationships linking the characters as follows: "Their several narratives will become one; like waves of a rising tide, the plot will surge forward, recede, surge farther forward, recede less far etcetera, to its climax and denouement" (49). Thrust forward by a mysterious momentum, the characters continually struggle against old habits in an odyssey leading to either discovery or destruction.

Most of the action the epistolary novel takes place between March, 1969, when Germaine G. Pitt writes her first letter to the Author, and September, 1969, when the Author writes to the Reader announcing

the completion of the work. One exception is the correspondence of A. B. Cooke IV, a descendant of Anna Cooke and Henry Burlingame in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, who writes to his unborn son or daughter in 1812. Comprised of eighty-eight letters written by seven characters, *Letters* resembles a puzzle designed to test one's ingenuity and powers of observation. Within each of the seven sections, the letters are always arranged in the following order: Lady Amherst (Germaine G. Pitt), Todd Andrews, Jacob Horner, A.B. Cook IV, Jerome Bray, Ambrose Mensch, and the Author. Each letter has been assigned an alphabetical letter so that if the letters are arranged on a calendar representing the seven months of the novel's action, they spell out the subtitle: "an old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls and dreamers each of which imagines himself actual."

Letters begins with a letter from Lady Amherst, Acting Provost of Marshyhope State University in Maryland, to one John Barth inviting him to accept the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. This literary play, offering a Doctor of Letters in a book entitled *Letters* made up of eighty-eight letters, is characteristic of Barthian humor that thrives on puns and dizzying implications. Written in March of 1969, a time of campus unrest in America echoed in the work, the letter is brief, but the postscript elaborates at length upon the political implications of her request. As acting Provost, Germaine is asked to appoint a nominating committee for a proposed honorary degree, but Germaine has no intention of accepting Schott's candidate, Andrew Cook VI, the "Maryland Laureate." Suspecting Schott of sinister political motives and decrying the Laureate's "rape of Mother English," Germaine looks upon Barth as an appropriate candidate to foil the extreme right and thereby preserve academic rigor. While the Author gently refuses her invitation to accept the honorary degree, he is struck by certain uncanny similarities between Germaine and a character in his own novel-in-progress. Stunned by the coincidence, the Author takes it as a sign: "It is as if Reality, a mistress too long ignored, must now settle scores with her errant lover" (52).

At first Germaine refuses indignantly, but after being startled by "certain spooky coincidences" between her first letter to the Author and his notes toward a new novel, she is intrigued by the idea of sharing her life via letters with a long-distance audience. As Germaine continues writing to Barth, she admits, "Even my personal correspondence is usually brief. But this genre of epistolary confession strikes some deep chord in me: come Saturday's, Dear J., my pen races, the words surge forth like Ambrose's etc., I feel I could write on, write on to the end of time!" (251). By using the epistolary novel as a vehicle, Barth is able to open the gates of creativity, transmuting resistance into a never-ending stream of words spewed forth by seven characters. Although the Author never answers Germaine's letters, his silence provides space for her words to capture her erudite observations. The characters' lives are interwoven by chance meetings at funerals, marriages, cocktail parties, and Reg Prinz's film sessions. *Frames*, as the film is called, is described by Ambrose as a "visual orchestration of the author's Weltanschauung" (224). Ambrose, disenchanted with the novelty of film, is persuaded to participate in the project "only when Prinz assures him that the film [will] 'revise the American Revolution' and 'return toward the visual purity of silent movies'" (223). Classified as one of Barth's most extraordinary comic inventions, Prinz is the perfect counterfoil to Ambrose as the nonverbal and the verbal continually clash in a fierce struggle to gain mastery.

Ambrose Mensch, colleague, lover, and eventually husband to Germaine G. Pitt, is engaged in a life-long response to a letter originally discovered at age thirteen in "Water Message," in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Nearly blank, the letter contains only an opening salutation, "To Whom It May Concern," and a closing, "Yours Truly." While the film *Frames* provides a way of bringing the characters together, the pathway they take is determined by their reactions to the first half of their lives. The Barthian actors ricochet off the past, searching for strategies of movement that will emancipate them. Like Perseus and Bellerophon in *Chimera*, the correspondents try to break free of their past by either purposely going counter to previous patterns or by reliving earlier events with new actors. As Barth frequently illustrates, the past is a potent force that has to be acknowledged. Because Barth is continually drawn to explore the relationship of the present to the past, as Author, he incorporates his past works in a new creation that records its own process of becoming. For Barth, one cannot ignore the past because to do so might produce repetition, but sheer imitation is a

trap leading to imaginative sterility. Inventing a varied literary and erotic past for Germaine, Barth creates the perfect candidate to fuse the creative impulses of the ages. Mingling freely with Sinclair Lewis, “Sam” Becket, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas, numbering Hesse, Huxley, and Mann among her lovers, Germaine has had such a varied erotic past that at one point she refers to: “The Amherst Phallic Index to Major British and Continental Novelists of the Early 20th Century, With Commentary” (248).

When Germaine is pregnant in the spring of 1940, Germaine and Andre move from Europe to avoid the Nazis and eventually settle in Ontario. After giving birth to a son, the young mother finds herself unable to cope with life in the midst of a postpartum depression. Her acquaintance with the great modernist tradition through reading and personal experience prepares her for the role of lover and wife to Ambrose and muse to Barth. In her letters to the Author, Germaine dwells on her love affair with Ambrose Mensch, a junior colleague at Marshyhope State University. Their connection, begun in March 1969 when she is fifty and he nearly thirty-nine, grows out of their political alliance against John Schott and his self-serving politics. Ambrose first admires Germaine from a distance, having already admired her editions of Mme. de Stael's letters and her articles on de Stael's connection with Gibbon, Byron, Constant, and Napoleon. He is equally charmed by her recollections of H. G. Wells, James Joyce, Hermann Hesse, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and Thomas Mann. For Ambrose, her past is stimulating:

That you had personally known, even been on more or less intimate terms with, several old masters of modernist fiction as well as their traditionalist counterparts, made you for me Literature Incarnate, or the Story Thus Far, whose next turning I'd aspired to have a hand in(40).

As he finds occasions to ingratiate himself with Germaine, Ambrose becomes more and more dazzled until his feelings erupt in a letter declaring his love and inviting her to fornicate. In the union of Ambrose and Germaine, often troubled and turbulent, Barth merges the past and the present, providing a pathway to the future transformed.

Adopting the pen name, “Arthur Morton King,” Ambrose tries various narratives techniques (recites concerts, tapes, slides, assemblages, and histories *trouvées*) but is “still laboring to fill in the blanks, still searching for an exit from that funhouse.”(188). When Ambrose becomes sexually attracted to Germaine, he is so eager that he suggests they copulate on her conference table. In the depiction of their union Barth highlights the risks involved in both creativity and conception. Germaine's daring is comparable to Barth's, who imaginatively merges the traditional and the *avant-garde* in the epistolary novel, *Letters*. In Barth's letter of invitation to Lady Amherst he tells her, “I considered marrying one venerable narrative tradition to another,” but I lack, “characters, theme, plot, action, diction, scene and format; in short, a story, a way to tell it in!” (53). Germaine answers his needs and he gives birth to *Letters*, an offspring some may think to be both monster and misfit.

Their first stage corresponds to his youthful affection for Magda Guilanova, who eventually becomes his brother's wife. With Magda Ambrose suffers adolescent anguish in *Lost in the Funhouse* when he feels sexual stirrings while she appears uninterested. The second stage of intense sexual coupling echoes his affair at nineteen with Jeannine Mack at sixteen, comprised mostly of “sexual calisthenics.” In May, when Ambrose and Germaine enter the third stage and he makes clear his desire to have a baby, the relationship is analogous to his celibate but adoring relationship with Magda, by then his brother's wife, Mrs. Peter Mensch. The fourth stage is viewed by Ambrose as strictly for procreation and reflects the unfaithful, demanding, and imperious behavior characteristic of his seventeen-year marriage to Marsha Blank, mother of Angela, his retarded daughter. Like many of the offspring in Barth's novel Angela's paternity is uncertain since Marsha had an affair with Ambrose's brother, Peter Mensch, at the time of Angela's conception. During what Ambrose perceives to be the fourth stage of his affair with Germaine, she feels particularly distraught over his behavior. While shooting the film, *Frames*, Reg Prinz and Ambrose compete for the affection of Jeannine Mack, known by her stage name, Bea Golden. As Germaine looks on helplessly, Ambrose becomes the victor: “He told me frankly then what was pretty obvious anyroad: that while he regarded our connation as Central, and central to it his desire not only to impregnate but to wed me

straightway thereupon, he was determined by the way, to make conquest of Bea Golden [nee Jeanine Mack] if he could" (375).

Enamored of the avant-garde, Ambrose adopts the pen name "Arthur Morton King," rejects traditional forms, and spends his life frantically looking for ways to answer "Yours Truly." Here Barth uses Ambrose as a surrogate self, one insensitive to the needs of others or to the emotional depths possible in a work of art. Perhaps confessing his own constrictions, Barth satirizes the avant-garde writer's tendency to focus on formal structure rather than the dynamics of human emotion. Germaine provides the balance, offering to both Barth as a writer and Ambrose as a lover the depths of human compassion. Writing to the Author on June 7th from her office at Marshyhope, Germaine confesses her latest indignities and complains eloquently about her acquiescence to Ambrose's demands.

For Germaine, a character pretending she really exists, fictionalizing her life gives her a sense of control. For Barth, an author pretending he is a character, the art of fiction serves a similar purpose. In their mutual quest, Barth and Germaine use language as a vehicle, taking any risk to ballast their lives with words made up of letters to form letters. At one point in their affair, Germaine and Ambrose journey through New York State going from one motel to another, the blandness of the motels serving as a backdrop for their sexual odyssey. In spite of the humiliation Germaine endures with Ambrose, she is able to transcend her difficulties. She explains to the Author, "Age and experience have evidently taught me to contain the unassimilable" (539). Her strength and forbearance inspire Ambrose to free himself from the past and turn to her in what he considers the sixth stage of their affair, a time of genuine interaction untarnished by the past. Referring to his infidelities and other un-kindnesses, Ambrose declares all that to have been the purgation by reenactment (a variety of catharsis not mentioned by Aristotle) of sundry immaturities and historical hang-ups long laid on him like a spell. He declares that my love and forbearance have dispelled that spell, set him free to love me truly and properly for what I am, have been, shall be this without regard to what's womb-wise, though nothing could more crown his Ad-mi-ra-ti-on than Ge-ne-ra-ti-on(544).

Ambrose, like a Freudian analyst, believes he has to understand and conquer his past before he can get on with his future freed from constraints. With Germaine, he relives his first five affairs with the women in his life who have been important to him. Faced with the prospect of making it new, Ambrose clings to the familiar. Compelled to act out of old needs, Ambrose produces suffering and pain for Germaine, who temporarily accepts his demands and inconstancy rather than reject him altogether. Germaine, able to accept events without deciding beforehand how they will be played out, is like a behaviorist concentrating on the future. Ironically, she is the historian and Ambrose the avant-gardist, but their emotional lives are the reverse of their professional lives. In this context knowledge of history helps one to shed its grasping influence. When Ambrose is freed from his past, he promises to abandon his pen name "Arthur Morton King" and to stop his life-time habit of writing letters to "Yours Truly." Instead he plans to write Not, praise be, another of those regressive epistles to Yours Truly, buta fiction in the form of a letter or letters to the Author from a Middle-aged English Gentlewoman and Scholar in Reduced Circumstances, Currently Embroiled in a Love Affair with an American Considerably Her Junior (556).

Germaine's letters to the Author are punctuated with tales of terror and suspense about the political upheavals at Marshyhope State University and the violence that disrupts the filming of Frames. Plots, infidelities, disguises, and coincidences proliferate as the seven months from the beginning of the novel to the end are recounted in several narratives. Andre Castine, for example, Germaine's former lover, is a shape shifter, who plays so many roles that Germaine is never able to verify his real identity. During the several decades of their separation, Andre gets in touch with Germaine periodically to ask her help in bringing about the "Second Revolution." Andre originally helped her get a job at Marshyhope as a ploy to meet their son, Henry, who was supposedly there carrying on secret revolutionary work. Marshyhope is an important location both because their son is there and according to Andre a "certain secret base in these same marshes not very far from Marshyhope State Universty college, was the eastern U.S. headquarters for the Movement: Maryland and Virginia were peppered with their secret bases; that's why ours was safest there"

(200). The machinations of the nineteenth-century characters, revealed in the letters of Andre's precursor, A. B. Cook IV, erupt with virulence in the twentieth.

The propensity to start anew as a pathfinder unrestricted by family beliefs persists from century to century. In imitation of the past, the characters in *Letters* are moved by the same impulse to "break the pattern." One of the startling revelations in the book is the disclosure of Andre's identity. On the surface, Andre seems to be the opposite of A. B. Cook VI, the Maryland Laureate, but he reveals to Germaine halfway through the book that they are one and the same. To complicate matters further, a Monsieur Casteene, playing the role of the Doctor in the segment of *Frames* inspired by *The End of the Road*, confesses to Germaine that he is really Andre disguised to serve the cause of the Second Revolution. One of the effects of the formal structure of *Letters* is to suggest that Barth as author is using real-life characters as models or inspirations for his work. Germaine pretends she is a "real" letter writer in Barth's fictional universe. Andrew Cook's letters, so painstakingly detailed, masquerade as authentic documents by imitating a historical approach with prose made impenetrable by a multitude of facts. Another apparent figure from "real life" is Todd Andrews of the *The Floating Opera*, appearing here as a sixty-nine-year-old lawyer whose attempt at suicide once again furnishes Barth with material for a novel. In a letter to the Author, Todd recalls the effect of the publication of *The Floating Opera*, allegedly written on the basis of Barth's conversation with Todd at a New Year's Eve party in 1954:

About your *Floating Opera* novel,... I understandably have mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was decidedly a partial betrayal on your part of a partial confidence on mine, and though you altered names and doctored facts for literary effect, some people hereabouts imagined they saw to the real thing. On the other hand, my old love of fiction, aforementioned, was gratified to see familiar details of my life and place projected as though a camera obscure(85).

In *Letters*, fictional characters frequently complain about Barth's usurpation of their life stories as material for his fiction. While the reader knows the work is an artificial construct, the characters' protests imply that fiction would not be possible without reality as a model. Yet, because Barth's characters are fictional and modeled on fiction, Barth uses the techniques of realism to show that art imitates art rather than life. Like the other correspondents in *Letters*, Todd writes to one who will never answer, his dead father. Sartre in his lecture offers a unique insight to the human psychological condition, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes himself" (14). Unable to resist the pull of the past, Todd is seduced by the temptation of carrying out his own suicide and joining his father at last. His role in *Letters* is a replay of the part he plays in *The Floating Opera*, only Todd has become more compassionate and more able to experience the depths of emotion.

In the brief and tender interlude Todd shares with Jeannine there is a sharp contrast between the triumphant beginning and the despondent parting, a downward direction prototypical of their harrowing lives. The promise of consolation, sexual excitement, and compassion modulates rapidly into remorse, guilt, and anguish. Todd retains the memory of that defeated face, convinced that his sexual appetite contributed to her decline: As Todd plans for his own suicide, death and destruction proliferate in the fictional world around him. Several unexplained and unexpected explosions interrupt the filming of *Frames* with real bombs instead of stage props. In Todd's final communication, "Draft codicil to the Last will and testament of Todd Andrews," he relives the dramatic moments preceding the explosion in *The Floating Opera*. Having embraced death all of his life, Todd finds a perfect way to join his father.

Todd discovers that Drew Mack and his radical friends are plotting to blow up the Tower of Truth and thereby prevent John Schott from becoming president of Marshyhope. Because the demolition has been carefully planned with the expert advice of the "Late 'Red Baron' Andre Castine" (736), Todd feels confident of its success. Todd realizes he will not have time to bring the codicil down to the cornerstone of the building. His last words are: "6:53 Good-bye Polly; good-bye, Jane; good-bye Drew. Hello, Author; hello, Dad. Here comes the sun. Lights! Camera! Action!" (738). Todd's last statement becomes a paper airplane sailing through the air with its words from the dead. While many of the characters journey toward death or

emotional distraction, Jacob Horner becomes remobilized, shaking off his customary inertia. Having suffered from emotional paralysis in *The End of the Road*, Jacob Horner discovers in Letters that his passage through life is continuous: "If only roads did end. But the end of one is the commencement of another or its mere continuation" (279). Joseph, still angry about Rennie's death in *The End of the Road*, warns: "You're going to Change the Past. You're going to Bring Rennie Back to Life"(20). Frustrated by constant paralysis, Jacob describes the magnitude of his self-imposed deprivation Heraclitus says you can't step into the same stream twice: I'd be Content to step Into It once. And Horace speaks of the man standing on the riverbank, shoes in hand, forever waiting to take the first step, till all the water's run by. I'm that man (108).

But Jacob does step into the stream in Letters when he meets Marsha Blank, Ambrose's ex-wife, in the film version of *The End of the Road* with Marsha Blank playing Peggy Rankin. Bragging to the Doctor that the film has set him into motion, Horner discovers that he is in love with Marsha Blank. Unfortunately, Marsha Blank is addicted to a substance called honeydust, concocted by a lunatic called Jerome B. Bray at Lillydale, and is more interested in obtaining a fix than encouraging the overtures of Jacob Horner. Jerome Bray, descended from Harold Bray of Giles Goat Boy, continues Harold Bray's claim of authorship: "Nearly 7 years have passed since the True Giles delivered to our trust the Revised New Syllabus of his ascended father Harold Bray, Grand Tutor of the universal University"(30). Jerome Bray, writes to Todd Andrews in an effort to expose Barth for pretending that *Giles Goat-Boy* is his novel. He applies for a Renewal of a Tidewater Foundation Grant to reconstruct his Lilydale Computer Facility and finish his Revolutionary Project, Novel: Inasmuch as concepts, including the concepts Fiction and Necessity, are more or less necessary fictions, fiction is more or less necessary. Butterflies exist in our imaginations, along with Existence, Imagination, and the rest. Although Bray embraces Barth's concepts of Art, "art is as natural an artifice as Nature," he is otherwise unredeemed by recognizable human aspirations. Rather, Bray is a caricature of Barth's tendency toward the diagrammatic. Like rejected outtakes of a Barth movie, Jerome Bray's section of letters is crowded with prose thickened by verbal games and tortuously put together.

In the episodes of Jacob Horner's tentative steps to married life, Barth throws into relief the pace Germaine and Ambrose maintain in their romance. Just a "Bellerophon," with its concentration of marsh and excrement, accentuates the triumph of Perseus in "Perseid," so, too, the marriage of Marsha and Jacob with its sordid details brings into focus the forceful passion of Germaine and Ambrose. In contrast to the other characters in the book, destroyed or distraught, Ambrose and Germaine take a journey toward creativity and creation. Ambrose grows out of his habit of answering "Yours Truly" and Germaine is carrying within her a new life. Barth burns up old fictional selves, making room for new permutations and combinations as corpses pile up in a heap: Andrea Mensch, Ambrose's mother, dies of cancer. Peter Mensch, Ambrose's brother, kills himself with tylenol rather than face Paget's disease and amputation of both legs. Shot by his own hand, Joseph Morgan dies; Henry Burlingame Cook VI is missing, thought to be lost at sea; A. B. Cooke VI is destroyed in an explosion and Todd Andrews arranges for his own suicide in the Tower of Truth. Built under false pretenses on a shaky base, the Tower of Truth has to be destroyed in order to level the falsities of the past. To get rid of the past, Barth kills off the used-up aspects, recycling what is still viable.

Through the Barthian apocalypse, Germaine and Ambrose thrive, their emotions nurtured by their marriage. As they make love for the sixth time on their wedding day, they have a simultaneous orgasm and a double vision at the seventh stroke. The quality of their shared ecstasy promotes a calmness that seeps into Germaine's consciousness. Breaking his earlier record at nineteen with Jeannine Mack, Ambrose responds to Germaine with a sexual vigor unequalled in his previous experiences. As Ambrose and Germaine wait for word from the doctor about her condition, that could be menopause or pregnancy, they anticipate that "Stage Seven," "like the outer arc of some grand spiral, will curve on and out at least beyond our sight" (678). In spite of the uncertainty of the future, Germaine feels serene, drawing sustenance from her vision. Should Ambrose one day cease to love me; should he go to other women, I to other men; should our child miscarry or turn out to be another Angela worse, another "Giles" like Mme de Stael's, an imbecile "Petit Nous"; should my dear friend come even to deny (God forbid!) that he ever loved me, even that he ever

knew me ... I should still (as I envision) remain serene, serene (691). She finds the peace which pass understanding because of her sexual intimacy and communion with another human being, consecrated in the ancient ritual of marriage.

For Germaine and Ambrose, the book has a typical happy ending, one reminiscent of a traditional nineteenth century realistic novel: girl and boy meet, fall in love, encounter some obstacles, and live happily ever after when the obstacles are removed. In Barth's imagination, though, the tradition is made to reflect a complex vision, one beyond the scope of realistic conventions. Unlike a typical realistic heroine, Germaine is fifty, carrying a child sired by a thirty-nine-year-old avant-gardist with one retarded daughter. Furthermore, Germaine and Ambrose imagine that they actually exist and assume authorship of Germaine's letters and Barth's *Letters*. Barth takes a convention and converts it into an instrument of literary insurrection. *Letters* is a journey undertaken to expunge played-out notions. As the voices in his mind clamor for a chance to exist, Barth gives them life in his fictional universe. Forced to confront the past, each character takes a journey eventuating either in death a viable existence. As their lives evolve in random configurations, the characters in *Letters* use the written word to give some order to the surrounding confusion. By incorporating the past and transforming it into a new medium, Barth achieves the standard he sets forth for his ideal author in "The Literature of Replenishment": "He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back."

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