

**“ODYSSEUS AMONG THE MUSKRAT-EATERS:”
INTERTEXTUALITY IN JOHN BARTH’S *TIDEWATER TALES***

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The Tidewater Tales: A Novel (1987) is a voluminous and exuberant example of postmodernist intertextuality, constituting a spirited attempt at creating what Barth himself has called “literature of replenishment”.¹ As in *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982) Barth writes about a couple sailing on the Chesapeake, concerned with and engrossed in twentieth-century America with the problems of violence, ecology, industrial pollution, dirty politics, and the ubiquity and iniquity of the CIA. Though consciously or even self-consciously more topical and “realistic” than previous works, both these novels are nevertheless self-reflective and very much concerned with literary creation, the task of narrating stories in both oral and written form. Whereas *Sabbatical* was short, *The Tidewater Tales* make up a hefty volume, full of jokes, anecdotes, stories, poems, limericks, even a postmodernist TV comedy reenacting Barth’s short story “Night-Sea Journey” from a feminist viewpoint. To use Raymond Federman’s terms, it is a montage or collage of “playgiarized inter-texts”.² All this is told, retold, noted down, finally written up by the protagonist, a professional writer not unlike Barth himself. *The Tidewater Tales* form a kind of literary monster, devouring and digesting a variety of texts, *from ancient literature to New Journalistic exposes of the CIA and environmental scandals*. In addition, *The Tidewater Tales* incorporate the story of *Sabbatical* and carry it forward, allude to other texts by Barth and to the tradition of Great Literature that Barth is obsessed with, here represented by the *Odyssey*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Don Quixote*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I wish to concentrate on the *Odyssey* motif, which provides an excellent example of Barth’s use of traditional literary texts within his own text.

¹ John Barth, “The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction”, *Atlantic*, 245 (January 1980), 65-71.

² Raymond Federman, “From Intertextuality to Incestuality: The Case of Moinous”, a paper given at a Poznań AM University conference on “Intertextuality” in Baranowo near Poznań, June 5-8, 1989.

First, however, let us look at the work as a whole. It provides an ingenious answer to Roland Barthes' contention about the death of the Author. In his 1968 essay of that title Barthes claims that

... a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost: a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.

And then he adds that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author".³ Barth addresses this situation by combining the role of narrator, listener-reader, and author, so that he can have his cake and eat it. The stories of *The Tidewater Tales* are narrated by a variety of characters, explicitly fictional or "real", i.e. implicitly fictional, and it is the story of these stories being told or retold that makes up the narrative of *The Tidewater Tales*: "A novel in which next to nothing happens beyond an interminably pregnant couple's swapping stories", to use words taken from the book itself.⁴

The Tidewater Tales deal with literary creation and with procreation, both longtime concerns of Barth. Whereas *Sabbatical* features a Barth-like couple who decide against having children and concentrate on literary and critical creation, *The Tidewater Tales* have three Barth-like couples, of which one (the protagonists and narrators) are on the very brink of becoming parents to the twins Adam and Eve, whose birth concludes the novel. The protagonists and narrators of *Sabbatical* are present in this novel as the Talbotts, authors of a semi-autobiographical novel entitled *Sabbatical*. For Barth both works, one subtitled a romance, the other a novel (though it is not more "realistic", than the first, quite the contrary), are a way for exploring the difficulties of aging, both of people and of literature. They address the two ways of prolonging existence open to mankind – procreation and artistic creation. Barth sees a close analogy between the two, best illustrated by the striking example of Scheherazade, but also addressed in his reworking of Odysseus's story.

Katherine Sherritt Sagamore, a librarian and experienced oral storyteller, is about to give birth to twins; her husband, Peter Sagamore, a distinguished American writer of serious fiction, is suffering from writer's block, a familiar Barthian situation (Peter's initials may be telling – P. S., a Postscript to Literature?). A parallel is set up between the situation of the two. Katherine cannot give birth until her husband conceives a new fiction, and it is for this purpose that they are sailing the Chesapeake, retelling stories of their past, personal and literary, and meeting a host of characters from other literary

³ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 148.

⁴ John Barth, *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* (New York: Fawcett, 1987), p. 427. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

works. The writer Peter Sagamore is seen as conceiving and then gestating *The Tidewater Tales*, becoming father to a written retelling of various oral narratives. The ultimate Author, Barth, comes close to Barthes' position in "From Work to Text":

It is not that the Author may not "come back" in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a "guest". If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of the characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fiction but a fiction contributing to his work....⁵

Barth plays with the notion of authorship, at one and the same time effacing himself behind his numerous narrators, and bringing attention to himself through the deliberate use of parallels between his own life as writer, professor, husband, sailing buff, and native of the Chesapeake Bay region. He plays with the literary tradition as well, making his "real" or implicitly fictional characters meet mythical-literary characters, such as Sheherezade, Don Quixote (Donald Quicksoat!), and Odysseus with Nausicaa, in America, in the explicitly stated year 1980, thus creating an "ontological flicker", a movement back and forth between two or more worlds, that Brian McHale singles out as one of the most characteristic features of truly postmodernist fiction.⁶ The Sagamores' boat *Story* meets with a strange replica of an ancient Greek galley and they are entertained by a fascinating couple. Theodoros and Diana Dimitrikakis, who look like "a pair of Greek movie stars doing *Odysseus Among the Muskrat-Eaters*" (p. 174). The American couple profess their admiration of *The Odyssey* and retell two key scenes – Peter the moment of Odysseus' finding himself in Ithaca and meeting Athene, Katherine the reunion scene between Odysseus and Penelope. The Greek couple recall their favorite scene of Odysseus meeting Nausicaa. The reader familiar with *The Odyssey* thus has his memory refreshed, while the ignoramus gets enough information to follow and appreciate the next narratives. For their knowledge and appreciation of *The Odyssey* Barth's protagonists are rewarded with a continuation of the story of Odysseus. Here Barth follows other writers, from post-Homeric to modern times, in taking up the story of Odysseus' last journey.⁷

What follows are two accounts: one gives the "inside story" of Odysseus' reunion with Penelope, when his wife confesses to an affair with a young singer-poet. The other tells how a bored Odysseus, aimably estranged from

⁵ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text" in *Image Music Text*, p. 161.

⁶ See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), in particular pp. 32, 34, 134-37.

⁷ See W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978).

Penelope, sails to Phaeacia, remeets Nausicca, and starts a new life with her. They sail from East to West in a Phaeacian dream-ship so fast that they pass the setting sun (echoes of James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen*) and move out of time altogether, to drink from the fountain of Eternal Youth (traditionally located in Florida) and sail the waters of the American seaboard in an eternal Present. There is strong indication that "Ted" and "Diana" are "in fact" Odysseus and Nausicaa, magically surviving off the coast of contemporary America, occasionally socializing and swapping stories with a select few who understand and love their story.

Barth moves his favorite fictional characters – Odysseus, Nausicaa, Scheherezade, and Don Quixote – to contemporary America, and makes them mingle "in the flesh", so to speak, with his more realistic characters, creating what Heide Ziegler, writing about *LETTERS* and *Sabbatical*, calls the supra-realistic novel. "Suprarealism is a parody of realism; yet parody here only means that mimesis, the imitation of life, is superseded by the attempt to turn narration into life, life into story".⁸ There is a deliberate blurring here between fiction and non-fiction, between different "levels" of fiction (the "classics" of literature, Barth's works, the stories of and about the narrator-protagonists of *The Tidewater Tales*), calling into question the division of reality into fact and fiction, the real and the fabulous. One is reminded of Barth's statement in *Chimera* that "the only Baghdad was the Baghdad of the *Nights*, where carpets flew and genies sprang from magic words".⁹ As the tradition of literature has moved westwards, so also classical myths and the classics of literature have become embedded in the literary consciousness of America as much as of Europe. Their protagonists exist in the consciousness of readers, hence they *exist* in reality. On these terms Scheherezade and Odysseus are as real as the Chesapeake Bay.

Like so many of Barth's protagonists, the Odysseus of *The Tidewater Tales* faces the problem of aging, of *ennui*, and of his own immortality as the hero of *The Odyssey*. The way that Barth transforms the classical myth is by defamiliarizing it through what I would like to call "familiarization", close to Todorov's term *vraisemblabilisation*.¹⁰ Odysseus and Nausicaa are put into a genre familiar to the reader, though unconventional for mythical heroes – the novel. Being in a novel, they are given familiar psychological traits, become rounded characters with personal and political problems familiar to the contemporary reader. Here Odysseus is that typical character of American fiction in general, and Barth's in particular, the middle-aged male in crisis, while Nausicaa runs away from home to live with a poet because she cannot

⁸ Heide Ziegler, *John Barth* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 83.

⁹ John Barth, *Chimera* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest, 1973), p. 25.

¹⁰ See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 137 ff.

have her hero. Penelope is no longer the mythical stereotype of patient Griselda, but a mature woman who becomes an artist through her weaving and feels drawn towards a fellow artist, despite his lack of heroism. Barth's Odysseus, like Barth's Perseus, Bellerophon, Shah Zaman, must come to terms with the independence and intelligence of women, a mythical hero confronted by twentieth-century feminism.

Barth changes and continues the story of *The Odyssey*, stressing the contemporary psychology of the mythic characters on the one hand, and his postmodernist concerns with narration on the other. He thus defamiliarizes the traditional story, by embedding it into a novel, yet by putting it into a contemporary context he makes it to a certain extent familiar and acceptable (*vraisemblable*) to the reader. The figure of Odysseus is especially well suited to this enterprise for three reasons. First of all, he is a sailor whose voyage has become synonymous with the motif of a long quest, and the whole of *The Tidewater Tales* is the story of a sailing trip which is a quest for new literary inspiration and a "literary scavenger hunt" (p. 181). Secondly, Odysseus has continually reappeared in world literature because the complexity of that Homeric character provides each literary epoch with an appropriate facet to develop. As W. B. Stanford puts it in his study of *The Ulysses Theme*, Homer's Odysseus is a "polytropic hero" or ambiguous "man of many turns", only truly appreciated as such in the early twentieth century by Joyce and Kazantzakis in two monumental works, in prose and verse respectively. Stanford also mentions the "rapport between living persons and dead (or mythical) heroes" as "a mutually energizing power ... exchanged between the author and the hero".¹¹ This seems to be the case for John Barth, whose analysis of *The Odyssey* stresses its complexities of psychology and narration.

Thirdly, it is these complexities of narration of *The Odyssey* that parallel and guide or provide inspiration for the complexities of *The Tidewater Tales*, or the story of *Story's* cruise. Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out the sophisticated literary character of *The Odyssey*: "L'Odyssee n'est donc pas un récit, au premier degré, mais un récit de récits, elle consiste en la relation des récits que se font les personnages", which is the technique Barth uses in *The Tidewater Tales*. Todorov also points out that when Odysseus tells his story, he always modifies it to suit his listener and to justify his present situation: this is precisely what Barth's Odysseus-figure, Dimitrikakis, does – he and his wife tell a story that explains their appearance in Chesapeake Bay, just as Peter and Kate Sagamore tell *The Tidewater Tales* to justify their irrational cruise at the end of Kate's pregnancy.¹²

¹¹ Stanford, p. 246.

¹² Tzvetan Todorov, "Le récit primitif: L'Odyssee" in *Poétique de la prose, choix, suivi de Nouvelles recherches sur le récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 28, 29.

"I narrate, therefore I am" could well be the motto of the book. The characters literally exist as their own narrators and protagonists of their own or other narrators' stories: "raconter égale vivre", as Todorov puts it in his discussion of *The Thousand and One Nights*. "L'acte de raconter n'est jamais, dans *les Mille et une nuits*, un acte transparent; au contraire, c'est lui qui fait avancer l'action".¹³ This technique is again paralleled by *The Tidewater Tales*, where the action moves forward mainly through the characters' exchanges of stories.

In Barth's version of Odysseus's tale both Penelope and Nausicaa take as a lover the poet Homer, who is then able to display a knowledge and appreciation of the female psyche in his *Odyssey*. Penelope, who becomes a narrator in tapestry, feels affinity towards her young fellow artist, while Nausicaa loves the exiled and blinded (by jealous Odysseus) poet because he so artfully and movingly sings the story of *The Odyssey*, which she then transcribes into writing. Odysseus must come to terms with the poet's primacy over himself, art's primacy over life. He lives in *The Odyssey*, where he and Nausicaa are "fixed forever there like figures on a terra-cotta vase" (shades of Keats), "immortal and misrendered" (pp. 206, 207). Barth invents alternative events for Odysseus and Nausicaa; these are "private" and "secret" as opposed to the "public" version of *The Odyssey*. When the hero and his lady defy time, they are metamorphosed to their younger, immortal *Odyssey* selves – time moves back before it stops and Nausicaa loses her unborn child. She and her new husband become "fixed forever" in their Calypso-like timelessness, although time moves around them, so that they can witness America in 1980. They live forever, but it is in the book of *The Tidewater Tales*; it is the consciousness of readers such as Barth that allows them to survive. After all, the move beyond time thanks to the magic words: *Once upon a time there was a story that began ...* (p. 224), a quotation of the continuous sentence printed on a Moebius strip at the beginning of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*.¹⁴ It is an effective way of stressing the characters' fictionality on the one hand, and the infinite possibilities of narrative on the other. The telling of stories is unending and life-giving.

Odysseus and Nausicaa are given a new lease of life by Barth in a postmodernist piece of fiction, while Barth's fiction is "replenished" by retellings and conversions of the literary classics. Kristeva has pointed out that "every text takes shape as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts".¹⁵ Barth is fully aware of this and foregrounds the intertextuality of his text, making it clear to his reader as well,

¹³ Todorov, "Les hommes-récits: *les Mille et une nuits*" in *Poétique de la prose*, pp. 41, 40.

¹⁴ John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Bantam, 1969), pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Semiotike: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 147, quoted in Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 139.

filling his *Story* with a motley crew of characters and storytellers representative of all literature, from mythical antiquity to Barth's own works. He plays with a text that is a patchwork of varied texts, like the great tapestry woven by his Penelope, "that both tells and is her story" (p. 186). Again, one is reminded of Barthes, who in his "From Work to Text" speaks of "the *stereographic plurality* of /the Text's/ weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric)".¹⁶ Penelope's tapestry retells *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* as they occur, but always leaves a small corner of alternative future endings unraveled, unfinished. A storyteller's work is never done, for the telling of tales has no beginning and no end.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 159.