

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FRONTIER  
IN JOHN BARTH'S *THE SOT-WEED FACTOR*

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The American frontier, or as Wright Morris describes it in *The Territory Ahead*, "a series of circles dissolving westward" (Morris 1961: 9), has unfailingly impregnated the minds of settlers in the New World. The reason? Sheer vastness of the unchartered territory with the attendant air of mystery, an indeterminate promise of adventure, improvement of one's financial and societal status, as well as of fulfilment of one's innermost dreams and diverse expectations have for the last four centuries tantalized those who first got to know about the existence of the continent and subsequently those who, upon arrival in the prospective U.S. felt the urge to go further out West. Wrestling with the frontier has had profound ramifications for whole groups and for their individual members. Crossing a physical boundary, be it a body of water, a mountain range, or a wilderness, unleashes hitherto unreleased energy and provides an opportunity for the realization of one's full potential. Oftentimes, if not always, it is paralleled by a change in the consciousness of the individual. The latter, being faced with a new locale and novel circumstances per force alters his/her conceptual paradigm and the outlook on the world. Ever since the Pilgrim fathers special emphasis has been laid on reading and interpreting the outward semiotic reality, which acquired the status of a text. Perceivable "physical things" and phenomena have been attentively read and construed by the observers, who subsequently re-read and re-interpreted their inner semiotic reality, i.e. their consciousness and outlook on the world. Changes of landscape trigger restructuring of ontological inscape. It goes to show that the *geographical* frontier, a surpassable physical rim, is but a pretence, or a pretext, for crossing a spiritual and ontological one; movement forward is bound with a descent inward.

It is the aim of this paper to trace the shifts in the development of the protagonists of John Barth's *The sot-weed factor* (1960, revised edition 1967) brought about by their contact, or rather, clash with the semiotic, textual reality of the

American frontier. It will be also concerned with what the characters' epistemology of this textual reality.

For a purpose such as this Barth's third novel is well adopted. For one thing, it is replete with borders of various sorts, geographical ones being one of them. For another, more important reason, the flabbergasting adventures take place in the latter half of the 17th century, at the onset of settlement in America. The author himself notes the unique character of the setting of the better part of the book, that is his native Maryland. (Parenthetically, the state has already acquired the status of Barth's Yoknapatawpha County, being also the stage of nearly all of his books to date.) Explaining his choice of Maryland as a setting, Barth remarks, "Something like a border state (that's what Maryland is called, it's historically one of the border states, as well as being a tidewater area where the boundary between the land and the water, between one physical state and another, is negotiable and somewhat in doubt) can be a kind of emblem for other sorts of border states, ontological states, of personality, and the rest" (in: Harris 1983: 61).

There are points of convergence between the two protagonists. Albeit a long-time British residents, they are both Americans by birth. Ebenezer Cooke was born in June 1666 in Malden, an estate in Maryland's Dorchester County owned by a tobacco merchant (or rather, a sot-weed factor, as representatives of this profession were known by this name at those times). The other main character, Henry Burlingame is born around 1654. He is a third son of an Indian chieftain who, being dissatisfied with his newly-born child's too light complexion, sends him down the river in a canoe. Henry is fished out of the water of the Chesapeake Bay, Moses-like, by some European sailors and, having spent most of his boyhood at sea, finds himself in England. There he earns a living, among others, by being a tutor to Eben. The fact that both Cooke and Burlingame are "natural born Americans" gives a special dimension to their journey. The passage to the New World is for them not so much a journey of *discovery*, but rather a *re-discovery* of America. At the same time, setting sail from Plymouth, theirs is a replica of the numerous sea voyages embarked on by thousands of settlers, and a simultaneous prefiguration of all the voyages to be set out on yet. They become archetypal pilgrims, and are like other passengers of ships bound for America, cherishing a host of different, often contradictory expectations and hopes about the territory ahead.

Even prior to the arrival in Plymouth as their take-off point, it becomes evident that their individual goals to be sought after are disparate. Eben is to lead a planter's life on his family estate. He is by no means overjoyed at such a prospect, though. The New World, Maryland, even though being his birthplace, initially does not appeal to him in the least. Nor does it hold for him any promise or hope of self-realization, and most probably he would never have toyed with the idea of heading West had he not been *made* to do so by his father. The latter grows acutely aware of the fact that Eben, never an academic high-flier, fritters away his own time and his father's money at Magdalene College at Cambridge. He studies little and learns next to nothing. As a punishment (and this is the true irony of the nature of his passage to America) he is bid to return to America and oversee the sot-weed plantations. Eben's feeble protests and promises of amending his ways

at Cambridge are cut short by the irate father's impatient interjection, "Cambridge my arse! 'Tis Maryland shall be your Cambridge, and a field of sot-weed your library! And for diploma, if ye apply yourself, haply you'll frame a bill of exchange for ten thousand-weight of Oronoco!" (Barth 1967: 39). In this irrevocable paternal judgment we find the first indication of the instructive, educational, and epistemological value of Eben's imminent sojourn in Maryland, as well as a foreshadowing of the actual development of events.

Cooke Jr. reluctantly yields to his progenitor. Before long, however, quite unexpectedly even to himself, he hits upon a more lofty "excuse" for the trip. Namely he (successfully) pleads with Charles Calvert Baltimore, Lord Proprietary of Maryland to be granted the commission of the Poet Laureate of the said province. No one is in the position to precise *what* made Ebenezer Cooke think that Maryland, the gate to the whole continent, is a fit subject matter of a poem and warrants its poet laureate. Glamorous and exaggerated accounts of those who have trodden on American soil may have been to blame for such a conviction. These may have been coupled with his incorrigible naivety, one of the most conspicuous of his features. (The latter is evidenced, for instance, in his Quixote-like infatuation with Joan Toast. The girl could probably be called a lady, but of easy virtue, and even this term is a gross understatement.) As Charles Harris notes in *Passionate virtuosity*, by beginning his ode to Maryland before his journey has even commenced makes its words "purified of referentiality to anything but his idealistic conceptions" (Harris 1983: 70). One way or another, Cooke's attitude toward his native country undergoes a dramatic shift from that of utter indifference to blind and idealistic worship. In America he perceives at first as a kind of New Canaan; it becomes for him a new Elysium to be sung about and regained. To get a gist of Cooke's naive and worshipful reverence it would be in order to quote his own words used during the audience at Lord Baltimore and describing the foreseen content of the poem. *The Marylandiad* is supposed to be

an epic to out-epic epics: the history (...) relating the heroic founding of that province! The courage and perseverance of her settlers in battling barb'rous nature and fearsome salvage to wrest a territory from the wild and transform it to an earthly paradise! The modesty and enlightenment of her proprietors, who like kingly gardeners fostered the tender seeds of civilization in their rude soil, and so husbanded and cultivated them as to bring to fruit a Maryland beauteous beyond description; verdant, fertile, prosperous, and cultured; peopled with brave men and virtuous women, healthy, handsome, and refined: a Maryland, in short, splendid in her past, majestic in her present, and glorious in her future, the brightest jewel in the fair crown of England. (Barth 1967: 75)

Within a short time of uttering the above words, however, Eben is "demythologized". As the frontier loses its lure for him for good, the myth crumbles. The tribulations and trials encountered already during the voyage, but above all the blatant injustice, debauchery, and squalor found at its destination strip him of his idealism. His very first encounter with Maryland's legal system is one such eye-

opener. Eben regards with mounting dismay how, in a truly Kafkaesque courtroom, wagers are being made on the outcome of the trials. (see: Barth 1967: 389) The practice is also a favorite pastime of the members of the jury, who have enough decency, however, to exchange notes for tobacco solely among themselves. Verdicts brought by the said jurors-gamblers may be overruled at whim by the judge. The latter may likewise arbitrarily charge the jurors with contempt of court if their verdicts are not to his liking, a practice that adds to the picture of a travesty of justice. When the indignant Cooke intervenes with the court's proceedings, he does so in such an inopportune fashion that by his judgment he loses the right to his long sought-after patrimony. To compound the irony of the situation, Eben becomes an indentured servant on his former estate driven by a vague hope of regaining it in some unspecified future. Roughly at this time Malden gradually goes down hill, and is transformed into "a gambling house, tavern, brothel and opium den. Every night the whole point bustled; planters came from all over Dorset by horse and wagon (...) and the house rang with their debauchery (...) Ebenezer walked past the gaming tables, through the rooms of intoxicated, narcotized, and lecherous Marylanders, and across the tobacco fields where kots of solemn Indians moved toward the [tobacco] curing-house" (Barth 1967: 459), converted into a brothel.

Contrary to common expectations, however, the above situation proved beneficial for Eben. He comes to the understanding that America is a far cry from "an earthly paradise" and realizes how utterly incongruous his ideas of the country have been. What the frontier does offer him, though, is an opportunity for coming of age and for getting to know the true state of the world. (In this respect Cooke senior's words turn out to be genuinely prophetic.) Eben conforms thus to the "frontier paradigm: an innocent figure (or more likely an ignorant one) undergoes an initiatory experience that grows out of the element he confronts in the transformed wilderness he faces" (Mogen 1989: 98). *The sot-weed factor* combines the American subjects and setting with the primordial quest for one's true self. The felicitous character of the American experience for Eben is noticed and commented upon by his erstwhile tutor, Henry Burlingame, "There is a lesson in your loss [of Malden]" (Barth 1967: 400). Cooke readily concurs with the appropriacy of the statement and himself concludes that "a man should see the world as it is, for good or ill." (Barth 1967: 400) Presently, along with the abandonment of his exceedingly high and totally unfounded opinion of Maryland, Cooke relinquishes the project of penning a poem in honor of the province. No longer a victim of self-delusion, he cannot bring himself to compose verses extolling a place which is but a wicked, "verminous province" (Barth 1967: 467). He muses, "I'faith (...) What price this laurateship! Here's nothing but scoundrels and perverts, hovels and brothels, corruption and poltroonery! What glory, to be singer of such a sewer!" (Barth 1967: 457) From this moment onwards he rewrites the already existing idealistic *Marylandiad* into a more mundane and satirical *Sot-weed factor*. "He would versify his voyage to Maryland from beginning to end, as he had planned before, but so far from writing a panegyric, he would scourge the Province with the lash of Hudibrastic as a harlot is scourged at the public post, catalogue her

every wickedness, and expose her every traps laid for the trusting, the unwary, the innocent! Thus might others be instructed by my loss" (Barth 1967: 458), concludes Cooke his tirade and jots down the concluding lines of the poem:

*May wrath divine then lay these regions waste  
Where no man's faithful and no woman chaste!*

(Tyler 1967: 155)

In this way John Barth's *The sot-weed factor* evolves into a portrait of the poet as a disgruntled man, who gives vent to his disillusionment through his artistic output. The fact of rewriting the text of the poem is especially weighty and symbolic in that it mirrors the rewriting of another text, that of Eben's *Weltanschauung* and his own self. The coming of age he experiences can certainly be viewed in such a textual way. Human life is, after all, one of the host of textual realities. Suffice it to remind ourselves here of Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (1957) or another of his works, *Sade, Loyola, Fourier* (1972), showing the basically linguistic dimension of any system around us. They are all bathed in, or rather composed of, language. We can also invoke Jacques Derrida's oft-quoted contention that "there is no outside text" (Derrida 1976: 158), or Mark Freeman's 1993 book titled *Rewriting the self*, summing up what the above-mentioned authors and a number of others have written on the subject. As Freeman writes, "human action, which occurs in time and yields consequences the significance of which frequently extends beyond the immediate situation in which it takes place is itself a kind of text; it is a constellation of meaning which, not unlike literary texts or interviews, calls forth the process of interpretation", and equally indispensable reinterpretation. These two processes are affected above all by shifts, lacunae, and ruptures in the textual reality outside that of the individual's self.

If it is true that the life of each and every one of us is a text, the contention seems to obtain even more in reference to "real" fictitious characters. Throughout Barth's *The sot-weed factor* its protagonist, Ebenezer Cooke keeps on writing and rewriting the texts of his own poems. He literally clings to the ledger-book wherein they are being penned. He bemoans the moments when he loses sight of the precious ledger and goes into raptures as soon as he regains possession thereof. The mere physical act of writing, irrespective of the dubious quality of his Hudibrastic couplets, gives him indescribable satisfaction inasmuch as it instills in him existential certainty. It helps him realize that he is "alive and kicking somewhere". The ledger, destined originally for book-keeping in any kind of business, proves a hypersensitive device that keeps track of the character's development.

Just like Eben resorts to scriptotherapy to account for his *present* predicament, Henry Burlingame clings to the written word with a view to shedding some light on tenebrous *past*. It is with this purpose in mind that he goes to America, as if against the grain of all those descendants of European settlers who travel to the Old Continent in search of their roots. The quest to discover the history of his parentage is, in Henry's words, "the business of [his] life; Nor would I value any business higher but ransack the very planet in my quest till I had found my answer or die a-searching!" As a consequence, he endeavors to gather the extant versions

of two journals from the 1610s, Captain John Smith's and Henry Burlingame I's, his progenitor. Henry is cognizant of the fact that only upon unearthing all the existing copies of these documents will he be in a position to get closer to an approximation of truth about himself. This truth remains forever elusive and blurred, though.

On the face of it, Henry could not care less about it, affirming at every moment that "the world is a Heraclitean flux" (Barth 1967: 126) and assuming a number of different guises, posing as colonel Peter Sayer, John Coode, Timothy Mitchell, and last but not least, Lord Baltimore himself. (Incidentally, it is Henry, not the real Charles Calvert, who confers the title of Poet Laureate on Eben.) In light of these kaleidoscopic shifts the comment made by Italo Calvino in his essay on *Candide* that the characters there "seem to be made of rubber" (Calvino 1986: 178) could not be a more appropriate descriptive tag of Burlingame, who shares many a feature with Dr. Pangloss. There is, however, an inherent danger in the Protean existence and incessant shape-shifting of Henry's. As a consequence throughout the book we see him yearning for the center; despite his frequent allegations to the contrary, he is aware that, as Manfred Puetz says in his essay "The Pitfalls of Mythopoesis", "his freedom makes him utterly diffuse and somehow nullifies him as an individual. Embracing everything, he eventually embraces (like Thomas Pynchon's V.) nothing." (in: Waldmeir 1980: 138) To counter this existential void, adrift in the ocean of life and of story, Burlingame seeks a lifebuoy that would impart but a minimal certitude into his life. This can be obtained in Maryland, where all the fragments of the journals can be traced, and thanks to them his natural father discovered.

America, indeed proves to be a library and a place providing references to the most *vital* questions. Although toward the end of the novel it is no longer perceived as a benign, innocent Adamic world, Barth's protagonists benefit greatly from all that it encompasses in itself. For them it serves as a kind of a huge university of life, whose function is manifold. It helps them define their *current* status in the ongoing fiction as well as come to grips with their *past*, the consequences of which extend into the *future*; coming to America, their birthplace, Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame come full circle to be spiritually reborn.

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