

Boundary Crossings: John Barth's Renewed Love Affair with the Short Story

Loes Nas

Summary

John Barth's return to the short story after an absence of almost 30 years in the genre has been heralded by the publication of two collections of short stories. Both collections signify a valuable building block in his life-long encyclopaedic project on the origin of fiction, its viability and its survival. In vintage-Barth style, narration is theorised and theory is narrativised in the self-conscious short narratives. Playing with different narrative levels helps Barth in teasing out what constitutes a story, what constitutes the ground truths of narrative theory. The narrative process is defined as a complex (or chaotic) system of suspended, yet incessant, motion. Thus the narrative process is simultaneously linear and non-linear. In the second collection we find the author also questioning the function of (apparently) trivial stories in the aftermath of 9/11. Storytelling may be a distraction from catastrophe, but it is not an escape. It is conceived of as a life-giving urge, while its function in times of crisis is to reassert the human capability to shape the world.

Opsomming

John Barth se terugkeer na die kortverhaal na 'n afwesigheid van die genre van byna 30 jaar word ingelui deur die verskyning van twee bundels kortverhale. Albei dié bundels versinnebeeld 'n waardevolle bousteen in sy lewenslange ensiklopediese projek oor die oorsprong van fiksie, die lewensvatbaarheid daarvan, en die oorlewing daarvan. Op uitnemende Barth-trant word die narratief geteoretiseer en die teorie genarratiseer in hierdie selfbewuste kort narratiewe. Die spel met verskillende narratiewe vlakke help Barth om uit te pluig wat 'n storie uitmaak, wat die grondwaarhede van narratiewe teorie uitmaak. Die narratiewe proses word as 'n komplekse (of chaotiese) stelsel van onderbreekte en tog onophoudelike beweging gedefinieer. Die narratiewe proses is dus terselfdertyd liniêr en nie-liniêr. In die tweede bundel bevraagteken die skrywer ook nog die funksie van (skynbaar) onbenullige stories as nadraai van 9/11. Die vertel van stories is miskien 'n afleiding van katastrofiese gebeure, maar dit is nie ontvlugting nie. Dit word gebore uit 'n lewegewende drang, terwyl dit in krisistye dien ter herbevestiging van die mens se vermoë om vorm te gee aan die wêreld.

John Barth is primarily known as a writer of experimental long fiction. So far he has published novels, non-fiction collections, novellas and three collections of short stories: *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (1968), *On with the Story: Stories* (1996), followed by *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories* (2004). In 2005 he published *Where Three Roads Meet: Novellas*. With the publication of the second collection of short stories in 1996 it had taken him almost 30 years to return

to the genre of the short story. He is known to prefer writing long fiction to short fiction. As he wrote in one of his essays (“Borges and I: A Mini-Memoir”, in *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures and Other Nonfiction*): “[T]he short story ha[d] never been [his] long suit” (1995: 169). Eight years after his second collection, a third was published, in 2004, followed in the year after by a new series of novellas.

John Barth is well known for the shortest short story ever written, “Frame Tale”, the one-sentence opening story in his experimental *Lost in the Funhouse*, which is paradoxically also the longest short story as it goes on and on, ad infinitum: “Once upon a time there was a story that once upon a time there was as story that once upon a time ...” and so on and on, ad infinitum. This was his “initiation fee” into the domain of the short story, as he calls it, “it was the shortest story in the whole corpus of literature, which would at the same time be literally endless” (1995: 101). In the prologue to this *Funhouse*, called “Night Sea Journey”, we see a sperm narrating the story, reflecting metafictionally on creation of various sorts, life and letters. It is a theme that signals Barth’s life-long preoccupation with fiction in relation to life, a theme which we again find echoed in the later collection of short stories.

However, this early love affair with the short story in *Lost in the Funhouse* was short-lived, because as he put it, “his muse no longer visited the neighbourhood of the short story” (1995: 176), and soon after he returned to what he called “congenital novelising” (p. 103), finding the short-story framework too straight-jacketing. “[S]hort story writers as a class,” he writes, “from Poe to Paley, incline to see how much they can leave out, and novelists as a class, from Petronius to Pynchon, how much they can leave in” (p. 90). The main difference between long and short fiction, he writes in “It’s a Short Story,” in his second essay collection *Further Fridays*, is one of inclusion versus exclusion. The difference between the practitioners of the two modes is like the difference “between sprinters and marathoners” (p. 91). He claims to belong to the latter group, for the “prospect of inventing every few weeks a whole new ground conceit, situation, cast of characters, plot, perhaps even voice, is as dismaying as would be the prospect of improvising at that same interval a whole new identity” (p. 90). He went on to write long novels, one of which even included a complete rewriting of all of his own earlier work in one novel, *LETTERS*, published in 1979.

Barth is also well known for his creative writings on the theory of fiction as his fictions self-reflexively critique themselves, crossing boundaries in the process, such as the boundary between narrative and exposition, fiction and theory of fiction, tale and autobiography. He was a professor of creative writing, now retired, at Johns Hopkins University. Many of his essays and stories deal with the genesis of fiction, or story, if you like. For him short stories always served as a tool, rather than as a genre, which he used in his

creative writing seminars at Johns Hopkins University. Barth's relationship with the short story can thus be characterised as ambivalent: for a long time his only engagement with the short story was through "unenvious" teaching of short stories by others to his fiction-writing coaches (1995: 99), mainly because novels were "more cumbersome and time-intensive to deal with in fiction workshops" (p. 110), whereas conventional short stories could be dealt with within the allotted hour of a writing seminar.

Nevertheless he confesses also to have derived pleasure from this engagement with the short story, for apart from the pedagogical advantages of teaching short fiction, there were aesthetic values too, he writes, such as "compression, implicativeness, rendition against mere assertion, precise observation, subtlety of effect" (1995: 97). Because he was not committed to writing short fiction, he could teach it "with respectful pleasure" (p. 97). Yet, in spite of this reluctance, he renewed his love affair with the short story in 1996, resulting in the publication of *On with the Story: Stories* followed in 2004 by *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories*, according to the blurb on the jacket an "irreverent, but deeply human" response to the "emotional and ethical demands of tragic events" that had beset the United States in 2001.

Both short-story collections signify yet another valuable building block in his life-long encyclopaedic project as a creative writer, who throughout his entire career concerned himself not only with the origin of long and short fiction, its viability and survival, but at the same time provided a self-reflexive critique of these as well. In both his critical and fictional writings Barth has reflected on the possibilities of short fiction, in a boundary crossing between self-reflexive practice and theory. Rather than creating narratives that one might easily compare to mimetic non-fiction, Barth often creates narratives that – like the image of the snake eating its own tale – focus on the story of their own creation, becoming their own autobiography.

Miriam Marty Clark refers in "Contemporary Short Fiction and the Postmodern Condition" to the genre of the short story in its contemporary form as "an ideal site for the displacement and negotiation of postmodern concerns" (1995: 149). Mark Currie points out that narratives were no longer seen as stable structures or "buildings", but rather as "narratological invention[s] construable in an almost infinite number of ways" (1998: 3). "Construction, construal, structuration and structuring," says Currie (p. 3), became preferred terms, pointing at the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. Thus Barth chose the short story as the vehicle for his self-conscious narratives, in which narration is theorised and theory is narrativised at the same time. He mixes narrative voices and in many of the stories we have three or sometimes four narrative layers being played out simultaneously where we usually have a pattern like (1) the narrator talking about (2) the narrator of the story who tells (3) a story, actively involving the narratee at all layers of construction.

Playing with these narrative levels helps Barth in teasing out what constitutes a story, what constitutes the ground truths of narrative theory, and to this effect he likes to “freeze-frame” the story, suspending the action of the story, which suspension in itself then becomes the point on which the story hinges. In the story “Ad Infinitum” in *On with the Story* for instance, the story hinges on postponement, suspension. The telephone rings, a message is received (with bad news about the male character’s health), but it takes forever for the message to be conveyed by the woman in the story to her husband as Barth invokes the coastline measurement problem: “[H]ow long is the shoreline of a coast – as long as ‘the crow flies’, or do you measure every bend and curve, creek and cove, rock and grain of sand?” (1995: 240-241) as well as Zeno’s paradox of Achilles never being able to overtake the tortoise, forever halving, re-halving, re-re-halving the distance between them, ad infinitum. In this way, like in the earlier-mentioned “Frame Tale,” the reader would be approaching infinity, a familiar Barth trope, which she would instantly recognise for instance from earlier stories like “Menelaid”, from *Lost in the Funhouse*, where in a moment of self-referentiality without escape protagonist Menelaus eventually turns into a mere voice repeating its story forever.

The coastline problem says Barth, in an essay on his short story “Ad Infinitum”,

applies to every story, in fact, it applies to every narrated action *within* every story. How long does it take Irma to answer the telephone once she hears it ring? In real life, anywhere from a few seconds up to maybe half a minute, if the caller persists and the answering machine does not intervene; in narrated life, however, whether factual or fictional, the answer depends on the author’s verbal/narrative waypoints. It may take no longer than the space between the word *dingaling* and the word “Hello?” Or it may be that Irma hesitates and reflects a bit on who might be calling; or she may hesitate and reflect a lot – her narrative, anyhow, may do so. Irma may set down her glass of Chablis (What brand of Chablis? What sort of glass?); she may tap the ash from her cigarette (What brand of cigarette? Tap the ash into what?), reflecting that she would probably be a non-drinker/non-smoker these days if it weren’t that her estranged abstemious party-pooing husband, Fred, always used to nag her so on that subject, and wondering whether that’s Fred calling now, or maybe her own lawyer, Rodriguez, whose interest in her case she’s half afraid is becoming more than merely professional ... Irma’s author may even freeze-frame between ring and response and cut to an extended flashback, perhaps several chaptersworth of retrospectional marital case history.

(Barth 1995: 241)

In the actual story itself, just like in Zeno’s paradox where Achilles will never overtake the turtle, the bearer of some bit of life-altering news never actually reaches her destination to deliver the news. As the above-quoted passage from “Ad Lib Libraries: Coastline Measurement Problems” in

Further Fridays clearly shows, the amount of narrative distance can be anything from zero to infinity, and in the title story of *On with the Story* this narrative technique, derived from chaos theory, does exactly that, by infinitely suspending and protracting the main action of the story.

In the title story of the collection, also called “On with the Story,” Barth employs Zeno’s paradox and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle to characterise the happenstance relationship between its author, reading his own work, a short story called “Freeze-Frame” in an in-flight magazine, while sitting in flight next to a woman who is simultaneously reading the same story. Here in this particular story within the story we find one demonstration after the other that “in physics and fiction alike ... alternative wordlines are not only imaginable but ... quite possible” (1996: 250).

In the story within the story another character is freeze-framed when in an ironic move the narrator of that story, mirroring the freeze-framing move in the essay collection, freeze-frames the narrative by invoking Zeno’s celebrated arrow of time (his seventh paradox), where apparent motion is illusory:

If an arrow in flight can be said to traverse every point in its path from bow to target ... and if at any given moment it can be said to be at and only at some one of those points, then it must be at rest for the moment it’s there ... therefore it’s at rest at every moment of its flight and its apparent motion is illusory.

(Barth 1996: 24-25)

The paradox is of course that all those nested freeze-frames are in fact in motion, otherwise the story would not proceed.

In fact, says Barth, all stories

are essentially constructs in time, and only incidentally in the linear space of written words. Written or spoken, however, these words are *like* points in space, through which the story arrow travels in time. Just now it rests at this point, this word, this – yet of course never resting there, but ever en route through it to the next, the next, from Beginning to Middle, et cetera.

(Barth 1996: 94)

Throughout the collection we see Barth play with moments of suspension like these, when the author tries to take control over the narrative, freeze-frames it as it were, yet living on in story. In earlier works we saw that life out there (in the real world) is unavoidably limited and teleological, while in fiction it is limitless and cyclical. In other words, Barth is concerned with what Michael Trussler in an article has called “post-narratorial existence” (1996: 558). “Post” should be read here as referring to extratextual discourse, or the multiple discursive possibilities of narrative discourse, of “rereading (and rewriting) the crucial and always mutually constitutive

relationship, emblematically interrogated by Zeno, between the tale and its telling, story and discourse, narrative and narratology” (O’Neill 1994: 159-160). Barth has linked this post-narratorial existence in the story “Ever After” to quantum mechanics, and speaks of “multiverses” instead of universes. This makes the reader aware of possible multiverses/world lines that might or might not have happened and at the same time it puts a different perspective on the terminal disease of one of the narrators/protagonists in the different stories, that is, paradoxically freeze-framed as he is in story, he will live on in story.

In another story called “And Then One Day”, Barth applies one element from chaos theory, or rather the theory of complex systems, to the story, that is, “some small quantitative increment precipitating a significant qualitative change”, for instance: “love is like sensitive dependence on initial condition” (1996: 99), as part of a discussion of what the nature of dramatic narrative is (p. 41), linking this up with the notion of multiverses as derived from quantum theory (many possible world lines). “On with the Story” hinges on suspension, and is about motions-within-motions and our galaxy which appears to have no motion, yet it is rushing at a phenomenal speed toward an interclusteral space known as the Great Attractor. While discussing this phenomenon, Barth simultaneously enacts this paradox in the story with stories nested in stories, where motion seems to have stopped, yet the story is moving onward.

In a story entitled “‘Waves’, by Amien Richard”, the longest story in *On with the Story*, a man dying of cancer and his wife have checked into a resort hotel, their “last resort”. We learn that he will commit suicide, and this is the last chance to review his life, to retell the stories which matter to him, and eventually to live on in multiverse. Not unlike the case of *The Book of Thousand Nights and a Night*, whose central figure Scheherazade has become Barth’s ever-present muse, it is the framing story of danger that propels the narrative. The story is narrated by the male half of a married team of documentary film producers (as civilians, Amy and Richard, but as professionals, the single, pseudonymous and presumably Gallic Amien Richard) and spends 25 of its 40 pages postponing the description of a great personal trauma, the attempted assimilation of which is the narrative engine of the story.

The narrative process is in this way defined by Barth as a complex (or chaotic) system of suspended, yet incessant motion. Thus defined the narrative process is simultaneously linear, in the sense that it moves forward, and non-linear, in the sense of the disproportional relation of causes and effects described in the previous paragraph. When analysing chaotic narrative systems the focus is shifted from individual units of the system to “recursive symmetries between scale levels” (1995: 332), not unlike the butterfly effect of the Lorenz attractor: “some small quantitative increment precipitating a significant qualitative change” (p. 329). Barth

acknowledges his debt here to N. Katherine Hayles's *Chaos Bound* (1990) when discussing the denaturing of experience in postmodern culture resulting in scepticism toward narrative as a form of representation (p. 304). It came to be recognised that the reading of story constructed its object. Barth's early shortest story "Frame Tale," already referred to, was an early example of how chaotic systems also share "feedback mechanisms", in which output loops back into the system as input (p. 333), but with a difference.

In one of the early stories in the collection, "And Then One Day," we are told the story of the apprenticeship of Elizabeth, now a successful novelist, which turns into an enactment of a lecture on basic dramaturgy when one of her friends, "a professor of wordsmithery", reminds her "that every conventional story-plot comprises what she ought to remember his calling a Ground Situation and a Dramatic Vehicle" (1996: 35-36), after which she finds herself "rethinking not only the origins of her vocation, but indeed the story of her life" (p. 37). This familiar Barth trope will return later in "The Ring" in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, where the metafictional narrator self-consciously propels story by analysing the elements of story:

A story, typically, comprises both a "ground situation" and a "dramatic vehicle" As a rule, one without the other will not make a story: No matter how wretched or exalted, a GS without a DV is no more than a state of affairs; no matter how exciting or "dramatic", a DV without a GS is not more than happenstance.

(Barth 2004a: 54)

By running through the possibilities inherent in a simple "dramatic vehicle", the discovery of a lost ring while on a Caribbean holiday, it becomes clear that the conventional understanding of a story requires a "ground situation" to give meaning to the dramatic vehicle.

On with the Story can be read as another example of typical self-conscious multi-voiced Barthian fiction, where Zeno's arrow of time, chaos theory, the expanding universe, Schrödinger's wave-function equations and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle rub shoulders with autobiographical elements. Yet at another level it can also be regarded as a narrative theory manual, a creative primer for aspiring students of fiction, Barth's farewell present as it were, on his retirement as a professor of creative writing, to future students of creative writing. This is well illustrated by the following passage from the story "'Waves' by Amien Richard":

Pleasurable as is this familiar routine, however, and new as we are to the art of short-story-writing, A.R. Inc. well understand that *action* is not to be confused with *plot*; that mere busyness – Wrangling down the road, citing Donne and Leibnitz, and swimming out now through the wave-stirred water in search of submarine diversion – so far from necessarily advancing our story, may in fact

delay its progress. The classic curve of dramatic action is (excuse us) a Hokusai-like wave, rising conflicted from the trough of an initial ground situation to a climactic crest and then crashing to its life-altering denouement. However diverting in itself, any particle of action that fails to increment that wave (e.g., perhaps, this paragraph) is indeed a diversion, quite beside the dramaturgical point.

(Barth 1996: 122)

The stories in *On with the Story* offer Barth an opportunity to meditate on life and letters, it offers him an autobiographical narrative vehicle to expand on narrative theory while using the frame of the bedside story, referred to as “pillow talk”, a device borrowed from *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night* and used again in his later *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, the voice that urges on the reader – and perhaps himself – is ostensibly that of the author, who repeats it twice at the end of his first “Author’s Note”. In *On with the Story* that voice belongs to one of the members of the narrative couple who seem to stand simultaneously outside and within the collection’s longer tales, and in *Ten Nights and a Night* it is the teamwork between Teller Graybard and Muse What You See Is What You Get propelling the story. The injunction from *Lost in the Funhouse* reflects some of the impatience with self-reflexive fictions that minimise mimetic action – even as it creates them. Rather than creating a narrative that one might easily compare to mimetic non-fiction, Barth often creates narratives that focus on the story of their own creation, becoming their own autobiographies.

Finally, the stories in *On with the Story* are not so much to be read together as a series, like his injunction to the reader in the “Author’s Note”, but the collection rather engages the reader in boundary crossings with the continuously developed frame tale, focusing on non-linear dimensions of resonant echoes to a greater degree than serial development. In this way the collection of stories bears a family resemblance to his longer works which employ the frame-tale voice within the canvas of a novel. As a writer Barth employs narrative not only as an active engagement of self with the world, but rather as a reflection of memory or mimesis, one that unlike our own lives, never ends, crossing fictional boundaries once again.

Eight years after *On with the Story* Barth returned in 2004 to the short story with the publication of the already-mentioned *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories*. In the “Invocation” preceding the frame and tales in *Ten Nights and a Night*, we read that the book had originally been intended to be a collection of earlier published, but so far uncollected, stories, the

fruit of ... long collaboration both with the Original Author – whom never mind – and with their Present Teller. Most of said stories perpetrated over the decade past (i.e., the closing decade of the Terrible Twentieth), but a couple of

them dating back considerably farther; most of them pure fiction, but a couple more or less non-; most of them Autumnal, shall we say, in theme and tone, addressing such jolly topics as the approach of old age, declining capabilities, and death but a couple not. And several having to do, for better or worse, with (hang on to your hats, folks) ... the Telling of Stories!

(Barth 2004a: 2-3)

In typically Barthian fashion, the stories are framed by the narration of an aging writer, Graybard, and his flirtatious muse, called WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). During the eleven days that follow September 11, 2001, Graybard and Wysiwyg debate the meaning and relevance of writing and storytelling in the wake of disaster, or “TEOTWAW(A)KI 9/11/2001 – The End Of The World As We (Americans) Knew It” (Barth 2004a: 3). Not only do we see the re-emergence of familiar Barth themes, the genesis of story and the different layers of storytelling, as for instance in “not for one nanosecond shall Reader conflate Present Reteller of these tales with their Original Author” (p. 20), but we also find the author questioning the function of (apparently) trivial stories in the aftermath of such a catastrophe:

Their quandary (Graybard’s and Wysiwyg’s) is that for him to re-render now, in these so radically altered circumstances, Author’s eleven mostly Autumnal and impossibly innocent stories, strikes him as bizarre, to put it mildly indeed as if Nine Eleven O One hadn’t changed the neighbourhood ... if not forever, at least for what remains of Teller’s lifetime. And yet not to go on with the stories, so to speak, would be in effect to give the mass-murderous fanatics what they’re after: a world in which what they’ve done already and might do next dominates our every thought and deed.

(Barth 2004a: 4-5)

After Black Tuesday, which radically changed the world as the Americans knew it, Barth wonders whether one can still tell stories or any tales in a world so transformed overnight by terror that they seem “impertinent. Bizarre. Obscene, almost: idle quasi-erotic fantasising in the very smoke of Ground Zero!” (Barth 2004: 19) or, at best, irrelevant. Irrelevant, that is, to “Black Tuesday’s terrorism, American unilateralism, Islamic fundamentalism versus post-Enlightenment Western rationalism, the fallout from economic globalization” (p. 46). These musings are eventually turned into the frame tale encompassing and commenting on the stories included in the book:

Graybard-the-Present-Teller, in his professional capacity as Narrative Imagination, is by definition virtually free of restraint and inhibition, at liberty to project himself into any age, gender, ethnicity, circumstance and situation whereinto Ms. Muse may inspire him in her capacity as supplier not only of

said Inspiration, but of Material for Author to transform into stories via the about-to-be-upgraded Graybard Software application.

(Barth 2004a: 20)

By framing the earlier published tales in a new context of relevance, this story sequence creates tension between new-found unity and multiplicity, balancing between centrifugal and centripetal impulses in the narrative, leading to a challenging interplay between its discrete narrative parts and the aesthetic whole, questioning the relevance of “relevance” of stories after 9/11 in the frames between every story. Storytelling is conceived of here by Barth as a life-giving urge, a theme that has indeed been running all along in his work, and is far from being irrelevant; rather, as Blair Mahoney points out in his online review of the collection, the function of telling stories in times of crisis is “to reassert the human capability to shape the world (in the imagination at least)”, even as the world seems to spin out of control.

Most of the story sequences that have most inspired Barth throughout his career – and explicitly inspired *Ten Nights and a Night* – share apocalyptic backgrounds. In *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*, Scheherazade tells stories not only to save her own life, but also to postpone the mass executions of innocent virgins ordered by the vengeful King Sharyar. In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the lords and ladies of Florence have fled their plague-ravaged city, and tell stories as the world presumably comes to an end around them: “Catastrophe, if not quite apocalypse, has them by the throat, but they spin their yarns nevertheless” (Barth 2004: 7), drawing the following response from the narrator of this story: “Not nevertheless ... *therefore*” (p. 7). A few lines further down the point is made that “to tell irrelevant stories in grim circumstances is not only permissible, but sometimes therapeutic As somebody's grandma-from-Minsk used to say about *shtetl* humour back in the time of the pogroms, *If we didn't laugh, we'd hang ourselves*” (p. 8).

In the fall of 2001, Barth writes in an e-mail to John Barry, cited in the *Baltimore City Paper*,

I was more than once asked by interviewers or audience members whether I did not feel that irony, even comedy in general, was perhaps inappropriate, to put it mildly, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent national emergency. Less in my own defence than in defence of artistic liberty I found myself invoking [*The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*] and Giovanni Boccaccio's 14th-century 10-cycle story *The Decameron*], in both of which classics the frame situation is grim indeed, but the stories thus framed are often scandalously comic or otherwise “inappropriate” to that situation – which seemed to me to be precisely apropos. In short, I was defending the relevance of irrelevance.

(Barth 2004b)

This “therapeutic” approach to storytelling has been used for centuries by artists and writers. In the above-mentioned interview with John Barry, Barth finds particular comfort in Boccaccio’s “Decameron”, in which characters respond to the Black Death by holding themselves up in a castle and holding storytelling contests, “making the best of a horror show they can do nothing about”. This theme of people surviving cataclysms by telling stories has been running through all of Barth’s work. But he also cautions that telling tales does not mean being oblivious: “Indeed, Boccaccio’s lords and ladies get criticised, not for fleeing a catastrophe that they can do nothing about, or for amusing themselves with the ribald stories while it runs its course, but [for] not acknowledging the dreadful context of their tale telling, even upon their return to plague-devastated Florence” (Barth 2004b). So, as is Barry’s obvious conclusion, storytelling may be a distraction from Ground Zero, but it is not an escape: “It is not high drama, and it does not result in belly laughs or black humour, and sometimes it can get downright boring, but it is Barth’s *raison d’être*: what he calls the ‘low-grade suspense’ of waiting to see where it all ends” (Barth 2004b).

In the second story of the collection, already referred to, we find vintage Barth metafictionalising, as the narrator runs through the possibilities inherent in a simple “dramatic vehicle”. As the reader is informed, the conventional understanding of a story requires a “ground situation” to give meaning to the dramatic vehicle. The “story” the reader has in front of her, however, on the discovery of a lost ring, lacks any such device. Barth uses such conceits to explore the boundaries of fiction. We find a similar theme in the fourth story, when C.P. Mason, the “author” and protagonist of the story called “A Detective and a Turtle”, is struggling to extract a story from the peculiar (and seemingly unpromising) dream image of a “detective and a turtle”. Amidst these struggles C. P. Mason informs us that

telling stories is as characteristically human a thing as we humans do, and is thus itself at least as fit a story-subject as another Our brains posit the useful fiction of a Self that attends, selects from, organises, considers, speculates and acts upon that data – an “I” who invents and edits itself as it goes along, in effect telling stories to itself and to others about who it is. Indeed, an I whose antecedent *is*, finally, nothing other than those on-going, ever-evolving stories, their centre of narrative gravity.

(Barth 2004a: 95-96)

It is a statement that reads like a manifesto for Barth himself: “An unusual dream may become the vehicle of dramatic action, the dust mote that precipitates a story. Precipitates it out of what?” (Barth 2004a: 99). The reader of the story ends up with both narrative theory on the origin of story, “the Ground Situation” (p. 99) and the story itself. Vintage Barth.

At the end of the collection, as Kate Preusser puts it in her review of *Ten Nights and a Night*, the frame story between Wysiwyg and Graybard

becomes the story itself, and the irrelevant suddenly becomes not only relevant, but the very centre of the story, the Centre of Narrative Gravity, to borrow a Barthism. In this way, Barth seems to purge himself of the question of relevance simply by writing through his concern, so that the work itself self-reflexively becomes an answer to the questions it poses. Along the way, Wysiwyg imposes certain rules on Graybard's stories when she sees them growing tiresome or repetitive; but most importantly, she forces him to *tell* the stories, despite Graybard's reluctance to engage in such a fanciful pursuit as frolicking with his muse while the world itself falls apart, as well as his growing fear that he has no stories left to tell.

The final "Afterwords" of the collection thus leaves the reader with the question "Will there be a story henceforward to go on with?" (2004a: 295). The query could equally apply to the world, post 9/11, or to Barth himself, who is always suggesting his next book will be his last. With the publication in 2005 of yet another collection of short fiction, entitled *Where Three Roads Meet: Novellas*, it has become clear that Barth still has a (short) story to tell. After too long a silence in short fiction, his love for the genre has definitely taken root again.

References

- Barth, John
- 1968 *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*. New York: Doubleday.
- 1972 *Chimera*. New York: Random House.
- 1979 *LETTERS*. New York: G.P. Putnam's.
- 1995 *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures and Other Nonfiction*. New York: Little Brown.
- 1996 *On with the Story: Stories*. New York: G.P. Putnam's.
- 2004a *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- 2004b The End of the World as He Knows It: John Barth, Literary Comic Master, Grapples with Life and Literature after Sept. 11 in His New Collection, *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*." Review in *Baltimore City Paper on Line*, 4 July.
Online: <<http://www.citypaper.com/arts/story.asp?id=6216>>.
Accessed on 15 January 2007.
- 2005 *Where Three Roads Meet: Novellas*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Clark, Miriam Marty
- 1995 Contemporary Short Fiction and the Postmodern Condition. *Studies in Short Fiction* 32: 147-159.
- Currie, Mark
- 1998 *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. Houndmills: MacMillan.
- Hayles, N. Katherine
- 1990 *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Mahoney, Blair
2004 Review of *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories*, 25 October.
Online: <<http://www.themodernword.com/reviews/barthnights.html>>.
Accessed on 15 January 2007.
- O'Neill, Patrick
1994 *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Preusser, Kate
2004 Poetry after Auschwitz: Is Barth Relevant Anymore? *The Stranger*, 17-23 June.
Online: <<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=18521>>.
Accessed on 15 January 2007.
- Trussler, Michael
1996 Suspended Narratives: The Short Story and Temporality. *Studies in Short Fiction* 33: 557-577.