

“Let’s Run It through Again, but in Another Key”: Intertextuality in John Barth’s *LETTERS*

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Summary

The article gives a poststructuralist reading of the different forms of intertextuality in John Barth’s *LETTERS* (1979); it also focuses on his destructive and/or creative recontextualisation of his earlier works in *LETTERS*.

The novel structures itself around the theme of doubles and echoes, of repetition and reorchestration, establishing a bottomless *mise-en-abyme* of the already read and the already said. Defying notions of origin and originality the novel is constructed in a movement of auto-intertextuality, or to use Lucien Dällenbach’s phrase, autotextuality.

LETTERS establishes itself as an imitation, not of reality, but as an intertextual product of the mimetic act, imitating, that is reading and writing other works. With the publication of his seventh novel John Barth has definitely arrived at a form of poststructuralist mimesis, one of the ultimate forms of intertextuality.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel gee ‘n poststrukturalistiese lesing van die verskillende vorme van intertekstualiteit in John Barth se *LETTERS* (1979). Daar word ook gefokus op die destruktiewe en/of kreatiewe herkontekstualisasie van sy vroeëre werk in *LETTERS*.

Die roman struktureer homself rond die tema van dubbels en eggō’s, van herhalings en reorkestrasie waarby ‘n bodemlose *mise-en-abyme* gevëstig word van alles wat gelees en wat reeds gesê is. Begrippe soos oorsprong en oorspronklikheid word gekonstrueer in hierdie roman wat ‘n beweging word van outo-intekstualiteit, of soos Lucien Dällenbach sê, outotekstualiteit.

LETTERS vestig homself as ‘n imitasie, nie van die werklikheid nie, maar as een intertekstuele produk van die mimetiese handeling waarby andere werke nageboots, dit wil sê, geskryf en gelees word. Met die publikasie van sy sewende roman het John Barth definitief uitgekom by ‘n vorm van poststrukturalistiese mimesis, een van die hoogtepunte van intertekstualiteit.

This article is an investigation into the different forms of intertextuality in John Barth’s *LETTERS* (1979), the author’s seventh fictional work. Intertextuality is a strategy often used by writers of metafictional texts; it is also a key concept in reading and appreciating John Barth’s later fiction. Jonathan Culler defines intertextuality in *The Pursuit of Signs* as “not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived”, but as a wider network that includes “anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts” (1981: 103).

This is obviously a move away from the traditional dichotomous conception of intertextual relations between text and source, where on the one hand we find an author influenced by earlier literary texts, also known as a positive intertextual relation,¹ and on the other hand an author inspired by earlier literary texts that are changed to suit the author’s specific needs, called a negative intertextual relation. “Positive” in this context denotes an imitation or borrowing by a later author of features of a text written by an earlier author, whereas “negative” refers to a for instance ironic transformation of

these earlier features by the later author. John Barth uses this second type of traditional intertextuality in his earlier work: both *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958), his first and his second novels, are heavily influenced by European existentialist texts, whereas *The Sotweed Factor* (1960) is a pastiche of the eighteenth-century picaresque novel. However, this traditional binary division does not take intratextual relations within the work of one author into account, let alone auto-intertextual, or to use Lucien Dällenbach's term autotextual relations (1976: 282–296). The traditional concepts of influence and inspiration are subverted by the contemporary usage of intertextuality. Intertextuality now operates as a dynamic metalanguage that has become a generative mechanism for the production of meaning. John Barth's highly self-conscious and self-referential use of language calls for this radical approach to intertextuality.

In contemporary theory intertextuality is positioned on the border between modern and postmodern knowledge as a concept that helps us to rethink "literature and literary history in terms of space instead of time, conditions of possibility instead of permanent structures, and 'networks' or 'webs' instead of chronological lines or influences" (Morgan 1989: 274). In Julia Kristeva's definition intertextuality is a transposition of one or several systems of signs into another and text is produced by the transformation of various signifying systems into language.² So instead of being seen as a diachronic concept, intertextuality has come to be regarded in synchronic terms.

According to Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen in *Het postmodernisme in de literatuur* (1988) modernist authors, through techniques of collage and montage, introduced elements of spatiality and simultaneity into their texts, abandoning the linear chronological line of classic realism; and postmodern authors transform this simultaneity into an immediate accessibility and availability of all that is intertextual. This results in multiplicity and discontinuity at the same time, and becomes a game of similarity and difference, of infinity and undecidability, in other words what Derrida calls "différance". This play on "differ" and "defer" indicates the endless dissemination of meaning within the text.

In looking at narrative in terms of spatial intertextual relationships we actually return to the situation of narrative before the modern period. Wallace Martin (1986) has pointed out that for at least 2000 years, until the modern period, the most common method of creating a narrative was "expanding on inherited materials" (Martin 1986: 170). He refers to the apocryphal tradition in Christian letters concerning the life of Jesus and to stories that answer questions like: what happened to Odysseus after he got home? What happened to the beaten heroes after the destruction of Troy, Thebes, Rome? He also mentions Chaucer as an example of an author who made use of popular stories and turned them into art.

In the Renaissance imitation and derivation were common practice. The modern period, starting with the Enlightenment, shows a developing discontinuity with the past as high value was put on individuality and originality. Interpreting and rewriting of existing narratives was no longer practised, as imitation and derivation were judged to be inferior. Narratives even became

personal property after the introduction of copyright laws. The emphasis on individuality and originality led to a highly aesthetic form of literature.

In 1967 Barth had voiced his concern about the exhausted possibilities of such aesthetics in literature, which he called, "more chickly, the literature of exhaustion" (1984: 62–76). Going back to the origin of the genre, Barth observes in the essay with that title that the novel began as a form of imitation, "with *Quixote* imitating *Amadis of Gaul*", and "Fielding imitating Richardson". His own novels should be seen as "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" (Barth 1984: 72). And when writing a novel the contemporary novelist must make sure, says Barth, that his imitation is carried out with ironic intent, otherwise it will be an embarrassment. The novelist must take into account "where we've been and where we are" (Barth 1984: 69). The past must, in other words, be revisited "with irony, not innocently", as Umberto Eco says in *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1985: 67).

In 1980 a complementary essay followed, "The Literature of Replenishment (Barth 1984: 193–206). Here he outlines his recipe for the renewal or replenishment of letters; in his definition of a postmodernist programme a writer has "one foot always in the narrative past... and one foot, one might say, in the Parisian structuralist present" (Barth 1984: 204). Barth's own programme encompasses a self-conscious return to the springs of narrative, which almost as a matter of course has taken the spatial form of a reinterpreting and rewriting of the narratives of the past, his own included. For instance, in his sixth work, *Chimera* (1972), he rewrites the Greek myth of Perseus, who slew Medusa. In his seventh, *LETTERS*, we see Ambrose rewriting the myth of Perseus. He discards the manuscript which is found by the author and published as one of the stories in *Chimera*. And in his ninth novel, *The Tidewater Tales* (1988), he does give apocryphal answers to questions like what happened to Odysseus after he got home? What happened to Scheherazade after the thousand and one nights? What happened in the third part of *Don Quixote*?

By rewriting his own previous six fictional works in his seventh, by using, parts of works five and six in novel eight, and by rewriting novel eight and using parts of five and six in novel nine, Barth has defined notions of origin and originality in his attempt to rethink literature and literary form: he has remoulded the traditional concepts of authorship and intertextuality and transformed them into something new, into an intertextuality of immediate accessibility and availability. And in his latest novel, his tenth, called *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), he offers us a fine example of accessible postmodern writing by presenting us with a contemporary protagonist-narrator, who has set out to retrace the legendary voyages of Sindbad the Sailor. Lost in medieval Baghdad the contemporary narrator finds his way back into twentieth-century Maryland by challenging Sindbad to a storytelling marathon.

Barth often refers to himself as an adapter or reorchestrator, as in the metaphor of musical arrangements as in jazz; in an interview with Charley Reilly he says he sees himself more as "an arranger than... a composer," and

his work as "a reorchestration of old conventions and old melodies. I'm tempted to well, reconstruct an old story – something to the effect of 'Let's run it through again, but in another key'" (Reilly 1981: 11). Since Barth was a jazz musician before he started writing, it comes as no surprise to us that he sees his imitations as reruns in another key. "For better or for worse, my career as a novelist has been that of an arranger", he repeated in another interview four years later (Plimpton 1985: 144–159). "My imagination is most at ease with an old literary convention like the epistolary novel, or a classical myth – received melody lines, so to speak, which I then orchestrate to my purpose" (Plimpton 1985: 148).

Intertextual relationships then are not a passive given in Barth's work, they are instead used as means of transgression and reactivation. In *LETTERS* this reactivation takes the form of "reenactment, recycling or revolution – the last in a metaphorical sense rather than a political sense. . . . Taking another look at one's imaginative past, resurrecting old characters, seemed highly appropriate" (Reilly 1981: 10). By using the eighteenth-century British epistolary novel as one of his intertexts, as he explains in one of the last sections of *LETTERS*, he tries to bring back to life exhausted forms of literature: as "an honorary Doctor of Letters, I take it among my functions to administer artificial resuscitation to the apparently dead" (Barth 1979: 654). In an interview with Heide Ziegler he said about *LETTERS*: "On one level, there is nothing original whatsoever; that is, it is a novel which is conspicuously assembled out of old literary conventions. On the other hand I regard it as a very original novel" (Ziegler 1980: 173). Ancient themes and myths are recycled as well as the history of America of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Other intertexts include works by H.G. Wells, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and James Fenimore Cooper, all of them part of the infinite body of what Gérard Genette calls the "unfinished Book" (Genette 1982: 453) that is permanently being reread and rewritten.³ As in the jazz metaphor Barth's rewriting takes the form of a continuous circulation; he aspires to what he referred to in *Chimera* as a "New, the *Second* Revolution, and Utterly Novel Revolution" (Barth 1972: 254). We see him execute this idea catachrestically as he literally enacts a "revolution" in his novel. The author's role has thus become that of an arranger or reorchestrator of inter-, intra- and autotextual spatial relations rather than that of an initiator of linear ones, although he remains of course the genetic locus of the narrative.

This recycling of materials from the past, of form as well as of content, is Barth's "one foot in the narrative past", the first leg of his programme for the renewal or replenishment of letters. Once the internal structures of *LETTERS* have been decoded and the "already reads" and the "already says" have been located, one would expect the text to lead to signification. But the text does not, on the contrary. Instead, it leads to an opening up into an infinite *mise-en-abyme*. This then is the second leg of Barth's programme for rejuvenation, his "other foot", not put down in the "Parisian structuralist present", as he said in 1980, but rather in the Parisian poststructuralist

present. Barth's rewritings are an illustration of Derridean dissemination; they are quests for "presence", for referents outside the realm of language. But these referents are only able to anchor themselves in a linguistic reality, in the space of the already said. His rewritings are a form of what Robert Con Davis has called "poststructuralist mimesis" (1985: 59), whereby the text exists solely as an imitation, not of reality, but as a product of a mimetic act, imitating other works. Barth's recyclings move beyond traditional forms of mimesis which lead out to "reality" as a referent, and move into an acceptance of repetition, which is inherent in mimesis. "The escape from mimesis," as Davis says, "will itself be mimetic" (Davis 1985: 59); what we end up with then in poststructuralist mimesis is a "round-robin continuation of the mimetic process" (Davis 1985: 60). Self-imitation, or autotextuality, as practised by John Barth, is of course a next logical step in this continuous spatial process of imitation.

To illustrate this point I will give just one example of such self-referential mimesis from *LETTERS*. Jane Mack, wife of Harrison Mack, is Todd Andrew's erstwhile lover. In *The Floating Opera*, Barth's first novel, she had started an affair with Todd with her husband's consent. In *LETTERS* she has turned into a successful businesswoman who prefers to forget she was ever involved with Todd. What are truthful memories to him, are fictitious events to her. Later, when he seduces her daughter Jeanine Mack and thus possibly commits incest, he opts for the ability to live in the past and forget the present "as Jeanine became her-mother-back-in-May all over again" (Barth 1979: 695). In this way he has become an internal reader of his own life, the text of which seems to be *reading* itself. On the other hand his life also seems to be *writing* itself as the "Second Cycle" of his life turns out to be a re-enactment of the first. In a letter to the Author he writes: "Something tells me, you see – lots of things – that my life has been recycled since 1954, perhaps since 1937, without my more than idly remarking the fact till now" (1979: 256). When he draws up a list of events in his life and notices the parallels between the first and the second half, he exclaims he feels "like the principal in a too familiar drama, a freely modified revival featuring Many of the Original Cast" (Barth 1979: 256), which mimetic movement is in its turn cast into another *mise-en-abyme* when the author of *The Floating Opera* inquires in *LETTERS* what he'd "been up to since 1954 and whether he'd object to being cast in his current fiction" (Barth 1979: 255). And when film director Reg Prinz proposes to shoot "a film version of certain themes and images" (Barth 1979: 256) from his life as featured in *The Floating Opera* and Todd enacts his own life in that film, which film in its turn can be repeated endlessly, we have definitely arrived at a "round-robin continuation of the mimetic process". The text, divorced from the things it signifies, seems to exist only as an imitation, not of reality, but as an intertextual product of a mimetic act, imitating, that is *reading* and *writing* other works.

The duplications, echoes, recyclings, repetitions, and re-enactments are all geared towards the opening up of the original in order to move beyond it, breaking down the margins and borders of contexts and thus questioning the status of text, context, reader and author. Barth's reappropriation of the past

in *LETTERS* signifies a return to past tradition in order to "recover the possibilities that generated the tradition but that have since become sedimented within it and thereby forgotten (Harris 1983: 166).⁴ "This Heideggerian form of repetition finds expression not in what has been thought, but rather in "something that has not been thought" (Harris 1983: 166) and so it breaks the original open and explores and restores other by-now forgotten elements of that original.

Closely linked with this recycling is Derrida's notion of "citation". In "Signature Event Context" we read:

Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written . . . can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.

(Derrida 1972/1988: 12)

The question that is raised here is that of context. Does the context limit the sign, the text? Or does it have the opposite effect? In Todd Andrew's case the first cycle seems to delineate and determine the context of the second. But when Lady Amherst quotes from *Hamlet* in *LETTERS*: "She cited Prince Hamlet's scribbling in the grip of his emotions, 'A man may smile and smile', & cet" (1979: 297), "& cet" will have to do as a citation, as the author does not even bother to repeat the already said. The text is in this way broken up and opened up into numberless other fields of discourses. In Derrida's view a word or sign can be cited in an infinity of times and places; he calls this "iterability" (Derrida 1972/1988: 7). The citation breaks the sign loose from its old context and creates and enters into a limitless number of new contexts that all have their mobile intertextual background. All signs carry in them all contexts that they have been used in before and likewise carry with them all possible contexts in which they could be used. With this multiplier effect representation seems impossible and "& cet" will indeed have to do.

It is true that there is a certain tension between the idea of multiplication of contexts and the restrictive nature of contexts. A context supposedly frames and thus limits text or sign. But Derrida undermines this idea of context by saying that a written sign always breaks from its original context, which is the moment of its inscription, because the producer of the sign who was present at the moment of its inscription, is forever absent after the moment of its production. Yet in spite of this absence, the sign is still capable of functioning, "by virtue of its essential iterability" (1972/1988: 12). As a text can inscribe itself into any context, it can create an infinity of new contexts and is therefore limitless, "repeatable" or "iterable" (1972/1988: 7).

Barth plays with the ideas of context and iterability in *LETTERS*. On two occasions the Reader is directly addressed by the Author in the novel:

"March 2, 1969"

Dear Reader, and

Gentles all: *LETTERS* is now begun, its correspondents introduced and their stories commencing to entwine. Like those films whose credits appear after the

action has started, it will now pause. If "now" were the date above, I should be writing this from Buffalo, New York, on a partly sunny Sunday...

(1979: 42)

"Sunday, September 14, 1969"

Dear Reader,

LETTERS reaches herewith and "now" (the Author outlines this last on Tuesday, July 4, 1978...)

(The Author drafts this in longhand at Chautauqua Lake, N.Y., on Monday, July 10, 1978, a decade since he first conceived an old-time epistolary novel.... In the interim between outline and longhand draft, as again between longhand draft and first typescript, first typescript and final draft, final draft and galley proofs, he goes forward with... rewriting, editing...)

(He types this on October 5, 1978, in Baltimore, Maryland...) the end.

(1979: 771-772)

In the first letter the Author states that a letter has two times, that of its writing and that of its reading, but "that very little what obtained when the writer wrote will still when the reader reads" (Barth 1979: 44): the meaning of the letter changes in the period between its conception and reception.⁵ What is called the first time of the letter, would be the so-called "real" context, with which context the second time breaks. Derrida calls this latter a "force de rupture" (Derrida 1972/1988: 9), a breaking force that is the very structure of the written text. Barth's second time could then be read as Derrida's iterability: whenever the letter is read again after its first reading, meaning changes. But Barth adds more layers of time to the written sign:

And to the units of epistolary fiction yet a third time is added: the actual date of composition, which will not likely correspond to the letterhead date, a function more of plot or form than of history. It is *not* March 2, 1969: when I began this letter it was October 30, 1973...

Now it's not 10/30/73 any longer either. In the time between my first setting down "March 2, 1969" and now, "now" has become January 1974...

The plan of *LETTERS* calls for a second letter to the Reader at the end of the manuscript, by when what I've "now" recorded will seem already as remote as "March 2, 1969". By the time *LETTERS* is in print, ditto for what shall be recorded in that final letter. And – to come at last to the last of a letter's times – by the time *your* eyes, Reader, review these epistolary fictive a's-to-z's, the 'United States of America' may be... a mere memory.

(1979: 44-45)

Every time the "now" sign is inscribed into a new context it breaks with its former context. The enunciation of "now" in the above two letters is similar to that of Derrida's signature in "Signature Event Context", in that both sylleptically imply the "actual or non-presence of the signer" (Derrida 1972/1988: 20).

The reader who is addressed as "Dear Reader", is the extra-digetic narratee, the implied reader, inscribed into the text. But it is the flesh and blood, what I would call implicated reader, who has to decode the "now", as the Author requests her to "supply date and newsitems" (1979: 722) herself

every time the letter is read and "*LETTERS* herewith and 'now'... (reaches) the end". This external reader is demarginalized and forced by the Author out of a passive reading experience into the intertextual space of the here and now. In this way the "now" of "*LETTERS* is now begun" and the "now" of "*LETTERS* reaches herewith and 'now'... the end", detached as they are from the present and singular intention of the moment of their production, become the signs of deferred presence, in ever changing contexts that refuse to be "tethered to the source" (Derrida 1972/1988: 20). The notion of repeatability and the infinity of intertextuality establish the poststructuralist picture of intertextuality.

By offering the external reader different routes of reading and by piling up external as well as internal intertexts, references and quotations, Barth has made intertextuality into a form of play, or "a mode of composition,... a practice of montage and quotation", resulting in a text "in which all writing is citation. Writing has lost its reference" (Thiher 1984: 183). The question we could ask ourselves at this point is whether Barth's abundant use of intertextuality constitutes either a destructive or a creative force. Has *LETTERS* indeed reached "a Beckett-like end-game in which play serves as the final gesture for warding off the onset of madness?" (Thiher 1984: 171) or does it offer us a viable programme "for the replenishment of letters?"

Barth's position after *Lost in the Funhouse* seems to be summed up by his alter ego in *LETTERS*, Ambrose Mensch, who by the way disputes Barth's authorship of *Lost in the Funhouse* and claims it for himself. Mensch writes in a letter to another correspondent, called Yours Truly: "I was...done with avant-garde contraptions, was looking for a way back to aboriginal narrative, a route to the roots" (1979: 40). This route to the roots has taken the form of a self-conscious return to the springs of narrative allowing Barth to add on to these narratives, to "fill in some earlier blanks" (1979: 42) in an attempt to generate new life into letters. In *Chimera* we witnessed a first tentative step back to myth and oral tradition. In *LETTERS* this avenue is further explored through an explosion of the "already said".

As the Author explains in his letter To Whom It May Concern on page 49 of the novel, *LETTERS* consists of altogether eighty-eight letters, written by seven correspondents:

LETTERS: An old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls & dreamers, each of which imagines himself actual. They will write always in this order: Lady Amherst, Todd Andrews, Jacob Horner, A.B. Cook, Jerome Bray, Ambrose Mensch, the Author. Their letters will total 88 (this is the eighth), divided unequally into seven sections according to a certain scheme: see Ambrose Mensch's model, postscript to Letter 86 (part S: 770). Their several narratives will become one; like waves of a rising tide, the plot will surge forward, recede, surge further forward, recede less far, et cetera to its climax and dénouement. On with the story.

(1979: 49)

The linear writing order of the seven correspondents in his seventh novel is determined by the order in which Barth's six earlier works were published; the sequence is opened by a new character, Lady Amherst, whose life comes

to be constructed in *LETTERS*, and is closed by the Author, whom we know from earlier works. Todd Andrews, the second correspondent, we remember from Barth's first novel, *The Floating Opera* (written in 1955, first edition published in 1956, second (original) edition in 1967); the third correspondent, Jacob Horner, we remember from his second novel, *The End of the Road* (written in 1955, published in 1958); the forebears of the fourth correspondent, A.B. Cook, populated the third novel, *The Sotweed Factor* (1960); those of Jerome Bray, the fifth correspondent, we remember from his fourth novel, *Giles Goat Boy* (1966), and Jerome Bray himself from "Menelaid", one of the stories in his sixth work, *Chimera* (1972), whereas his fifth work, *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), rendered account of the genesis and youth of Ambrose Mensch, the sixth correspondent. The present work is thus intratextually structured through the author's past work.

The final correspondent is the author, who includes himself as capital A – "Author" among the recycled versions of his fictitious characters, giving another fictionalized version of himself. Barth had done this before in *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera*. In *LETTERS* the author is one correspondent among the others who claims to be a character, "Author", just like the other correspondents. He is like the other letter-writers an internal (that is within the novel) writer and reader who operates indeed on the same intra- and extra-diegetic levels as the six other letter-writers. Yet he also operates on a higher, what I would call, metadiegetic level.⁶ After all it was the Author who created his fellow-correspondents as characters in his earlier works: "You may have heard of *The Floating Opera* about a lawyer named Todd Andrews" (1979: 189), he writes in his seventh novel to Todd Andrews, protagonist of his first novel, "something like your *Inquiry* and *Letters* must have turned my original minstrel-show project into *The Floating Opera* novel" (1979: 191).

Although the author is fictionalized as Author, the author's life has not been subject to fictionalization by an outside party, as have the lives of the other characters in the novel. Their lives have been written for them and on them; they have, like the external reader of the novel, become objects in the Author's discourse; they have become internal readers of their own lives. The author, however, writes himself. Ontological boundaries are crossed by Barth's presence in the text as both a "paper-I" (Barthes 1977: 161) and a real life author when the Author, called John Barth, receives a letter in the mail offering him an honorary doctorate of letters: "Some months before the... invitation – last year in fact, when I began making notes towards a new novel – I had envisioned just such an invitation to one of its principal characters" (Barth 1979: 51).

The internal readers in the novel gradually find out that their lives have been projected as objects within the discourse in which they are subjects. This becomes evident when they come to realize that their lives have been made objects of earlier novels written by the same Author who now solicits their cooperation for his work in progress. Todd Andrews writes to the Author about "Todd Andrews", a fictionalized version of himself, whose authorship comes to be disputed later on in the novel: "I beg pardon for speaking like a literary adviser, even like a father, when in fact it's you who are in a sense *my*

father, the engenderer of 'Todd Andrews'" (1979: 97). There is also ontological uncertainty about the authorship of the Author's earlier fictions. In a letter to the Author dated May 17, Lady Amherst recounts Ambrose's claims to the intellectual property of "Water-Message", a story published in *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth's fifth work:

Briefly: my lover dates his erratic and problematical career in letters from his receipt, at the age of ten, of a cryptic message in a bottle washed up on the Choptank River shore near his present odd establishment. You know the story: Ambrose even told me...that you *wrote* the story, anyhow rewrote and published it with his consent.

(1979: 234)

Jacob Horner, protagonist of Barth's second novel, writes to himself that your account of your "Immobility, Remobilization and Relapse, entitled *What I Did Until the Doctor Came*", became

the basis of a slight novel called *The End of the Road* (1958) which ten years later inspired a film, same title, as false to the novel as was the novel to your Account and your Account to the actual Horner-Morgan-Horner triangle as it might have been observed from either other vertex.

(1979: 19)

A.B. Cook VI, related to the protagonist of Barth's third novel, drives in Barth's seventh novel up to Pennsylvania, where Barth teaches at the State University. He invades Barth's classroom to discuss the background and sources of the latter's first two novels; on return to Baltimore he tells Jacob Horner (from the second novel) that the author claims "to have derived the story line of *The End of the Road* from a fragmentary manuscript found in a farmhouse turned ski lodge in northwestern Pennsylvania" (1979: 365). And when Lady Amherst queries the Author about *The End of the Road*, she wants in one and the same breath to find out about the genesis of *The Sotweed Factor*. She writes to the Author that A.B. Cook demands to know whether "you are guilty or innocent in the matter of your sources for *The End of the Road*, as he means to approach you forthwith to compare his information on Ebenezer Cooke & Co., and his literary projects with yours" (1979: 365).

What we are faced with here is a demystification of the notion of author in a Barthesian "writerly" text (1990: 4). The voice of the author has lost its authority. It can no longer be used to authenticate the text. In much the same way the voices of other authors from the intertexts, such as used in quotations of the actual text, can no longer be used as means of authentication of that text. It is only through the reader that the text can be authenticated, every time anew when she inscribes herself into the text.

Having lost his authorial authoritative voice, the author in *LETTERS* becomes the voice of the already said, a repository as it were of other literary voices that have preceded him. In this way Barth can make Lady Amherst in *LETTERS* literally inscribe herself in the text as "The Fair Embodiment of the Great Tradition" (1979: 39). In exactly the same way as Pierre Menard rewrites *Don Quixote* in Borges's story of the same title (Borges 1970: 69),

she literally rewrites the opening passages from a number of canonical novels from that “Great Tradition”, by authors such as Herman Hesse, Thomas Mann, H.G. Wells, Evelyn Waugh, James Joyce and George Orwell (1979: 68). Having allowed herself in her earlier days, in the time of the literary salons of Paris, to be physically written on by the “old masters of modernist fiction” (1979: 40) – she had for instance been “deflowered” by H.G. Wells’s fountain pen (1979: 71), and Sinclair Lewis had been “introduced into” (1979: 71) her –, Lady Amherst has become the voice of the already said. So when Ambrose forces her to physically rewrite these modernist authors, she in effect becomes “Literature Incarnate” (1979: 40).

By having her furthermore add to these passages “the opening words of Arthur Morton King’s own fiction-in-progress: a retelling of the story of Perseus, of Medusa” (1979: 68), Ambrose positions himself among these already saids, as Arthur Morton King is his pen name. And with him his alter ego, John Barth, is also positioned among the already saids as Barth was also working on the same retelling of the story of Perseus. This rewriting was actually published as one of the stories in *Chimera*. The authority of the voices from the past seems forever broken.

By moreover forcing Lady Amherst to make love to him while she is rewriting the opening passages mentioned above (“he makes me recite passages from the works of my earlier, more famous lit’ry lovers whilst he rogers me . . . ” (1979: 67), sexual and textual processes actively fuse into one another as she holds “an instrument in each . . . my faithful English Parker Pen must yield to his poky poking pencil pencil pincel penicellus penicillus peeee” (1979: 71). Thus both processes become one generative mechanism for the production of meaning, ultimately (and this establishes Barth’s project) resulting in the engendering of new life for letters, as Lady Amherst who was earlier referred to as “Literature Incarnate”, seems to have fallen pregnant and Ambrose seems to have discovered a new formula for writing: “Epistles + alphabetical characters + literature . . . = LETTERS” (1979: 768).

Intertextuality is physically and literally enacted as an equation of writing and being; and narrative is offered as Barth’s programme for living. In his next two novels we see the protagonists overcome their existential crises by living “in” and “by” their story. But that is a different story altogether.

Notes

1. The terminology is borrowed from Thais Morgan’s “The Space of Intertextuality” in O’Donnell & Davis’s *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, pp. 239–279.
2. See pp. 261–262 of Laurent Jenny’s “La stratégie de la forme” on Kristeva’s ideas on intertextuality.
3. My translation. The original text speaks of a “. . . Totalité, dont tous les auteurs ne font qu’un, et dont tous les livres sont un vaste Livre, un seul Livre infini”. Genette borrows the idea from J.L. Borges’s line in *Enquêtes*. This line, in Borges (pp. 307 & 244) reads: “La littérature est inépuisable pour la raison suffisante qu’un seul livre est”. Quoted in Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (1982: 453).

4. Harris suggests an analogy here between Heidegger's and Barth's ideas on repetition.
5. Barth's multiple times in these two letters to the Reader also denounce the concept of narrative duration as developed by Genette in Chapter Two of *Narrative Discourse* as they also render account of the duration of their being corrected and reread.
6. The use of the term "metadiegetic" in this context is not to be confused with Gérard Genette's use of this term for a narrative in the second degree (1972: 228). Genette admits that his term functions in a way opposite to that of its model in logic and linguistics. I propose to restore the original meaning in the term and use it for a narrative above the first degree.

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