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"Scheherazade, *c'est moi*": Narrativist Mimesis and the Principle of Metaphoric Means in John Barth

Loes Nas

Summary

Since his retirement in the early nineteen nineties as a professor of creative writing from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, John Barth has published three new works: *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera* (1994) - which he calls a "semi-novel semi-reminiscence"; *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction* (1995) - a collection of essays; and *On With the Story: Stories* (1996) - a collection of short stories. The title and contents of this latest work confirm my earlier hypothesis that Barth's entire later work is governed by the principle of what I have come to call "narrativist mimesis"; the ultimate form of poststructuralist mimesis. His fictions have over the years developed an ongoing critique of forms of mimesis, moving from realist and mythemic to poststructuralist and narrativist mimesis.[1] Concurrently we also see in Barth's later fiction that not only the genesis, but also the viability and survival of fiction as such, are other major concerns. Part of his programme for the replenishment of literature is a return to "the story-teller's art", in the form of narrativist mimesis, a return with a difference to "the springs of narrative". This article investigates how his later fiction, that is, from his seventh novel, *LETTERS* (1979), onwards, is fed by contemporary literary-aesthetic theory and guided by the principle of narrativist mimesis.

Opsomming

Sedert sy aftrede in die vroeë jare neëntig as professor in Kreatiewe Skryfkuns aan die Johns Hopkins Universiteit in Baltimore, het John Barth drie nuwe werke gepubliseer: *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera* (1994) - wat hy 'n semi-roman/semi-herinnering noem; *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction* (1995) - 'n versameling opstelle; en *On With the Story: Stories* (1996) - 'n versameling kortverhale. Die titel en inhoud van die laasgenoemde werk bevestig my vroeëre aanname dat Barth se latere werk gerig word deur die prinsipe van wat ek narrativistiese mimesis noem; die uiterste vorm van poststrukturalistiese mimesis. Sy fiksies het 'n voortgaande kritiek ontwikkel op verskillende vorme van mimesis, van realistiese en mitemiese tot poststrukturalistiese en narrativistiese mimesis. Tegelykertyd sien ons ook in Barth se latere werk dat nie alleen die oorsprong nie, maar ook die lewensvatbaarheid en

oorlewing van die fiksie as sodanig sy groot belangstelling wek. 'n Onderdeel van sy program vir die heropbloei van literatuur is 'n terugkeer na die vertelkuns, in die vorm van narrativistiese mimesis, 'n terugkeer na die narratiewe bronne. Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe sy latere fiksie, dit wil sê, vanaf sy sewende roman, *LETTERS* (1979), gevoed word deur die hedendaagse literêr-estetiese teorie en gelei word deur die prinsipe van narrativistiese mimesis.

John Barth established his fame as a writer of postmodern fiction at the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s with the publication of *Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus* (1966), *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and *Chimera* (1972). He is also well-known for his essays "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), followed by "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980),[2] which were often referred to in discussions on the state of the novel at the time. Klinkowitz characterises Barth's contribution to American literature in that period as follows:

> Having been told that because of realism's eclipse the novel was dead, he felt compelled to challenge and hopefully reinvent conventions of fiction which in terms of the mainstream had been fairly stable since the days of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner.
>
> (Klinkowitz 1991: 426)

In "The Literature of Exhaustion" he attempts to articulate "an aesthetic for the making of new and valid work that is yet responsible to the exhaustive, even apocalyptic vastness of what has been done before" (Barth 1995: 169). Barth has never believed literature to be exhausted or exhaustible, as he is often accused of doing, but holds that "felt ultimacies in an artistic or cultural generation can become a considerable cultural-historical datum in themselves by a virtuoso to generate lively new work" (1995: 178). In "The Literature of Replenishment" he elaborates on this point and argues that as a "true post-modernist" he has to keep "one foot ... in the narrative past ... and one foot in, one might say, the Parisian structuralist present" (1984: 204). And later in "Postmodernism Revisited" he would write that the "ideal Postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century Modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back" (1995: 120). Interested in "how to save and save again one's narrative neck" (1984: 159) he takes the notion of exhaustion, or felt ultimacies, as his starting-point, by returning to what has been done before and synthesising this into a new way of writing. "It doesn't surprise me", he says,

> to find reflected in the work of novelists new developments or changes of coloration in their culture's general aesthetic sensibility. It wouldn't surprise me even to discover, conversely, that novels may occasionally affect as well as reflect literary-aesthetic theory.
>
> (Barth 1995: 282)

In his shop, he continues, that sort of reciprocal influence is called "coaxial esemplasy", a term he likes better than "feedback loop". In his project the art of the novel and literary aesthetic theory thus form the constitutive elements of a process of conversion and synthesis which takes place when ideas that have been around for some time, are converted into a tradition and are synthesised into the prevailing paradigm (Barth 1995: 283). By developing a highly self-referential way of writing, which uses "literary exhaustion as a device against itself" (Klinkowitz 1991: 428), Barth has thus positioned himself as what I would like to refer to as a postmodernist of the centre.

In her book *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (1990) N. Katherine Hayles uses the term "denaturing" to refer to the processes in postmodern culture whereby what has been considered to be natural facts, turn into social constructions. She sees four waves in this crisis of representation, which involve the denaturing of language, context, time and eventually the human. First of all there is the denaturing of *language*, which consists of its coming to be seen "not as a mimetic representation of the world of objects but as a signs system generating significance internally through a series of relational differences" (Barth 1995: 304). This is followed by the denaturing of *context*, the disjunction between message and context, and the denaturing of *time*, when time no longer functions as a continuum along which human action can be plotted, when time has become a world of disconnected present moments that jostle one another but never form a continuous progression (Barth 1995: 306), a world of simulacra in other words. The prospective fourth wave in the narrative of cultural postmodernism is the denaturing of the *human:* "What will happen to the movement for human rights when the human is regarded as a construction like any other?" asks Hayles, when hinting at "the removal of taboos and safeguards that at present functions as stays, however fragile, against the destruction of the human race" (Barth 1995: 307). This denaturing of experience implies and results in skepticism toward narrative as a form of representation and thus constitutes the link between literary-aesthetic chaos theory and literature.

When we talk about chaos, we refer to chaotic, or rather, complex systems, that are "disordered in the sense that, unlike linear systems, they are unpredictable, but ordered in the sense that they possess recursive symmetries that almost, but not quite, replicate themselves over time. In short, they are

deterministic despite their unpredictability" (Barth 1995: 331). It is here that we can see the connection with Barth's repetitions and rewrites, because his fictions are in a continual feedback loop and replicate themselves over time, albeit with a difference: for him chaos becomes the "ground metaphor" or "paradigm" (1995: 328) for postmodern writing, a return with a difference to the springs of narrative. If one wants to write a truly contemporary novel, Barth says, one does not merely write "about contemporary matters", but one writes "in a contemporary way" (1995: 341). For him the paradigm or ground metaphor of chaos theory has become the "principle of metaphoric means", with which not only form, but plot, narrative viewpoint and process, tone, choreography, and the text itself have to be invested. Thus chaos theory and narrativist mimesis are linked in Barth's fiction.

I have taken the concept of mimesis to be the central issue in Barth's work. The characters in his first two novels, *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958), move against middle-class American culture of the 1950s in what can be referred to as realist mimesis. *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and *Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus* (1966) rely heavily on myths or mythic archetypes in order to dismantle the romantic quest pattern of these myths: this could be referred to as mythemic mimesis. In his next books, *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), *Chimera* (1972) and *LETTERS* (1979), Barth moves beyond traditional forms of mimesis into an acceptance of repetition, inherent in mimesis, realising that the escape from mimesis will itself be mimetic: this is known as poststructuralist mimesis. When in his three latest novels, *Sabbatical* (1982), *The Tidewater Tales* (1987) and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), narrative is offered as a programme for living, we have arrived at the final stage in his critique of mimesis, that is, at narrativist mimesis: the ultimate form of poststructuralist mimesis.

Poststructuralist mimesis takes the form of recycling of old literary forms and old characters in *LETTERS* (1979). In an interview Barth said that *LETTERS*'s "true subject, stated simply, would be Reenactment, or Recycling, or Revolution .... Taking another look at one's own imaginative past, resurrecting old characters, seemed highly appropriate" (Barth quoted by Reilly 1981: 10). The novel not only recycles old-time literary forms and literary works, it also recycles historical events and characters from earlier fictions. Barth's favourite description of himself as an "orchestrator" or "arranger" who reorchestrates "old conventions and old melodies", fits in well with that of Borges's librarian who observes that the whole universe is contained in "the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet" (Borges 1970: 81).

Barth's poststructuralist mimesis is not an "imitation" of the world, but an imitation of linguistic activity in the form of echoes and rewrites. Official

historical documents have in *LETTERS* (1979) obtained the status of mimetic textual substitutes for a past that is forever lost or might not even have existed. History has become a "code, which, labouriously and at ruinous cost, deciphers into *HISTORY* .... She is a scattered Sybil whose oak-leaf oracles we toil to recollect, only to spell out something less than nothing: e.g. WHOL TRUTH, or ULTIMATE MEANIN" (Barth 1979: 332), which, as the misspelling already hints at, can by necessity only refer to a textual reality. The idea of a knowable history has become an impossibility. History is seen as a function of language: language does not reflect, but re-presents or even shapes the past. The received version of history, as it is known to us from historical documents, is only one interpretation of the facts. This implies that identical facts could lead to an infinite variety of possible interpretations. As Theo D'haen observes in *Text to Reader*, Barth's concern in *LETTERS* "is not with writing as a means to record the past, but rather with writing as creating the past" (D'haen 1983: 47). Both "official" and fictionalised history are rewrites, mimetic attempts at the construction of "reality". In Barth's fictions both history and life have become questions of story: narrative has thus become a prerequisite for living in and knowing of this world.

In his rethinking of the notion of mimesis Barth has used, rediscovered and indeed gone beyond, traditional categories of mimesis. He has shown that for the novel to survive its existential crisis, it should no longer be an imitation of life, but an imitation of the fiction of life, or even further removed, an imitation of the documents of that fiction. He has taken this idea quite literally and we see that his later work, from *LETTERS* (1979) onwards, is characterised by a continuous process of imitation which, broadly speaking, has taken on two guises.

Firstly, one of the forms this continuous process of imitation has taken is that of autotextuality, also known as self-imitation. In *LETTERS* we recognise all protagonists but one from six earlier novels (cf. Nas 1993 for a discussion of this phenomenon); and characters, plot and structure in *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), his ninth novel, imitate the characters, plot and structure of *Sabbatical* (1982), his eighth novel; "THE AMATEUR, or, A Cure for Cancer", an episode in *LETTERS,* the seventh novel, imitates the autobiographical sections in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), his sixth work of fiction; *"SEX EDUCATION"* in *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), the ninth novel, imitates "Night-Sea Journey" in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968); and the story of "Scheherazade's First Second Menstruation and her Unfinished Story" in *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), the ninth novel, imitates "Dunyazadiad" in *Chimera (1972)*, his fifth work of fiction. "Don't Count on It: A Note on the Number of *The 1001 Nights"*, the last entry in *The Friday Book,* his first collection of essays (1984), examines

Scheherazade's three pregnancies and deliveries - a piece which would again be echoed some years later in a chapter in *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), entitled "The Story of Scheherazade's First Second Menstruation". Scheherazade also appears in his second book of essays, *Further Fridays* (1995), which title in itself echoes the title of his first book of essays *The Friday Book* (1984). His twelfth book, *Once Upon A Time: A Floating Opera* (1994), referred to as a "semi-novel/semi-reminiscence" (Barth 1995: 187) brings the narrative circle back to his first novel, entitled *The Floating Opera* (1956), published almost forty years earlier. In terms of chaos theory this phenomenon could be referred to as "recursive symmetries between scale levels" (Barth 1995: 332), when individual elements are replicated, but never quite duplicated over numerous scale levels, not unlike the butterfly effect in meteorology.

This is how Barth himself aptly describes his method in an essay in *Further Fridays*: "As a working novelist, I am in the habit of giving my first attention to my fiction in progress, including the reverberations in it of what I've written before, the retrospective illumination of old themes by new variations and reorchestrations, and the possible foreshadowing of future projects. This priority may be reprehensible - morally, politically, intellectually - but it is an established habit" (Barth 1995: 280). One typical example is the story of the death of J. Arthur Paisley, the ex-CIA-agent, whose body was found floating in Chesapeake Bay - a given which returns in three of Barth's novels. From being just one among many incidents in *LETTERS* (1979), this story forms part of the plot in the next novel, *Sabbatical* (1982), and in *The Tidewater Tales* (1987) its recurrence even takes on metaphorical dimensions. The Paisley episode in *LETTERS* (1979) can in this respect certainly be regarded as a trial run for its follow-up in *Sabbatical*, to the identical plot of which Barth decides in the next novel to add his four narrative "compass-points", resulting in a novel, *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), over twice the size of its main intertext, *Sabbatical*, its predecessor. Is this replay substantialist, as it apparently takes on more meaningful aspects every time it is rerun? Does it become less and less "real" in its mimetic reproduction? Or does its significance only lie in its round-robin continuation of the mimetic process? The story is certainly used as a Derridean "hymen", its function being no other than language caught in the folds of fictional self-reference, investigating the relations between fiction and reality.

Mimesis has thus become a continuous process, rather than a product, in which there will never be a stage where finality will be reached. This process of *différance*, or of "recursive symmetries between scale levels", to use a phrase from chaos theory, and the metaphor of tidal waters in *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales* and that of the voyager through time and space in the next novel, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), seem particularly apt

in this respect. The floating tidal waters in Chesapeake Bay, the setting for his latest novels, have been turned into a cradle for narrative life.

In this tidal flow of story the above-mentioned four literary compass-points help Barth navigate his narratives, and these could be considered to constitute his second guise of imitation. His four navigational stars are, as Barth explains,

> in literary-historical order .... Odysseus striving homeward from Troy across the wine-dark sea; Scheherazade, yarning through the night to save her neck; Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, chatting their way across the plains of La Mancha; and Huckleberry Finn, rafting down the heart-waters of America .... In my personal pantheon, those four are the regnant dignities, there is no fifth yet.
> (Barth 1988: 284-285)[3]

For Barth, these four touchstones of human imagination at the same time paradoxically constitute the limits of human imagination. For him literary imagination entails intertextual re-creation, or, to use his own term, re-enactment, of these four "profound, multi-faceted, transcendentally appealing narrative icons", which "4,500 years of writing have produced ...: about one every eleven centuries" (Barth 1988: 285). *The 1001 Nights* is, for instance, re-created in *Chimera*, *The Tidewater Tales* and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, whereas *The Odyssey*, *Don Quixote* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are re-enacted in *The Tidewater Tales*.

In "The Limits of Imagination" (1988) Barth describes himself as "a writer who has spent his professional life monkeying around with the limits of ancient storytelling, setting the bar ever higher on my personal high jump at the risk of ending up with a mouthful of turf" (Barth quoted by Ziegler 1988: 275). Mid-career, as we saw above, he was concerned with the search for a narrative solution for the apparent demise of the aesthetic novel, so, as a "bona fide honorary Doctor of Letters" he made "it a part of his business to administer artificial respiration to the apparently dead, whether the patient is the classical myths or certain exhausted conventions of the novel" (Barth 1984: 159-160). In *Further Fridays* he explains he has been groping toward a definition of the spirit of postmodernism in his fiction, and describes this slippery term with the clarity of hindsight as "an aesthetic for the making of new and valid work that is yet responsible to the exhaustive, even apocalyptic vastness of what has been done before" (1995: 169). This notion of being responsible to what has been done before is what Barth referred to above as "coaxial esemplasy".

In another essay in *Further Fridays*, called "Once Upon a Time: Storytelling Explained", this idea of responsibility to the past is tied to the role of memory in a writer's concern as a fictioneer: "the conventional story-teller's formulation `once upon a time' invokes both memory and invention, inasmuch as the `time'

is both past and presumed to be fictitious" (Barth 1995: 187). Both memory and invention are driven by fabrication, in both senses of the term, and hence it is not the question "What happened?", but rather "Who am I?", says Barth, that is important to him as a writer: "the creation of fiction and its enjoyment are a model of and a spin-off from the great fictive enterprise of human consciousness itself: the ongoing fabrication of our selves, in which memory is always the co-author" (p. 188). Story-telling, that is, "our concocting and controlling the ongoing story that we tell others and ourselves about who we are", thus becomes a "fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control and self-definition" (p. 195): we become the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are. Language is not something we construct, but something we create and re-create ourselves; consciousness is "multiply drafted scenario-spinning" (Barth 1995: 195). In this way, narratives have become the documents of man's existence and the treasure-house of cultural memory. In his three latest novels, *Sabbatical*, *The Tidewater Tales* and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, Barth indeed offers narrative as a programme for living, and narrativist mimesis is the device to achieve this aim.

Barth's narrativist mimetic device allows Don Quixote in *The Tidewater Tales* to land up in twentieth-century America to meet Huckleberry Finn, another "traveller out of fiction" (Barth 1987: 612), as well as the avatars of Odysseus and Nausicaä, and allows William Behler, the narrator-protagonist of *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, a twentieth-century journalist who gets lost in medieval Baghdad, to travel, through story, through different continents and centuries. Through story-telling Behler seeks to reinvent, if not recover, his old identity. As he cannot remember his past, he has to invent the past part of his narrative in a week-long narrative battle with his host who is known as Sindbad the Still-Stranded. Behler's realistic stories literally merge with the fabulous ones told by Sindbad in such a way that at the end of the novel he has narrated his way out of his predicament, in much the same way as Scheherazade did five hundred years before him, and as a result he finds himself back in contemporary America.

The language used in story-telling is used to live in the world and not to refer to things of the world, which is where we can clearly see the influence of Tzvetan Todorov when he says in *The Poetics of Prose* (1977) that "narrative equals language equals life" (Todorov quoted by Barth 1984: 236). Both life and story are governed by the same narrativist principles, the only difference between the two being that life "out there" is unavoidably limited and thus teleological, as it inevitably leads towards death, whereas a narrativist mimetic life-story is indeed limitless and cyclical. At the end of *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* the reader is thus invited to follow Scheherazade's

twentieth-century avatar into the realm of narrativist mimesis. And in *Once Upon A Time: A Floating Opera* and *On with the Story* this pattern of boundary-crossing "fugues", seems to be re-enacted again in Barth's ongoing investigation into the genesis and nature of narrative as storage of cultural memory.

Of the four touchstones of human imagination, Scheherazade seems the figure with the deepest relevance for Barth, as demonstrated by his dictum "Scheherazade, *c'est moi"*, after Flaubert, in *Once Upon a Time* (Barth 1994: 15) and repeated in *Further Fridays* (Barth 1995: 163). And in the earlier-mentioned essay, called "Once Upon a Time: Storytelling Explained", he refers to her as "the emblem not only of us professional storytellers, whose continuance is always on the line, but also of the (fictionalistical, "as-if"ish) scenario-spinner that is the continuously auto-creating self of every one of us. Go up an order of generality, and I do not doubt that the same might be said of a subculture, of a culture, perhaps of the species homo sapiens" (Barth 1995: 196).[4] Scheherazade has thus for him become an emblem of the human condition in that the equating of narrativity, output and input, with being humanly alive, is a real one. The frame icon of yarning through the night, the intimate relation of that with sexuality, with fertility and productivity, this equation, is the profoundest image in Barth's imagination of Scheherazade.

To illustrate this point, I would like to mention just one example. In one of the chapters of *The Tidewater Tales*, entitled "The Story of Scheherazade's First Second Menstruation", it occurs to the narrator why the book called *The 1001 Nights* lasts exactly 1001 nights. There are a thousand and one nights of love and life-engendering narrative, not only because there had been the same number of murderous deflorations by King Sharyar, who after he had discovered his wife's adultery and his subsequent murder of her, deflowered and decapitated a virgin every night for 1001 nights in a row, but more so because Scheherazade got pregnant in Night One, had her three pregnancies spaced about evenly through the thousand and one nights, with the first one probably beginning between Night One and Night Ten, and the third one late enough, so that the child is not crawling yet at the end, when she is about to menstruate for the second time on Night Ten Oh Two. Scheherazade thus keeps fertilising during the 1001 nights, keeps telling the story while she has a child every nine months and a bit, which aspect is seen by Barth as an emblem of the human condition.

The figure of Scheherazade has not only appealed to Barth, but also to writers as diverse as Edgar Allen Poe, Honoré de Balzac and Jorge Luis Borges to mention but a few, and in *Reading for the Plot* Peter Brooks sees her as a life-giving symbol for narrative desire, defined as "a primary human drive" (Brooks 1984: 61), which ties in with Foucault's observation on the relationship between

writing and death in "What is an Author?" where he says that "our culture has metamorphosed [the] idea of narrative, or writing as something designed to ward off death" (Foucault 1988: 198). It is through story-telling, writes Barth, "our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control and self-definition" (Barth 1995: 195) that we create and re-create ourselves: "We *are* the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are" (p. 196). And it is exactly here that the significance of Barth's narrative project lies.

Apart from the "fictional" discourse, Barth has also continued to stage a "critical" discourse in his novels, a critique of fiction as part of a narrative investigation into the genesis of fiction itself. Barth's later novels can thus also be read as metafictional treatises on the origin of fiction. His two latest works of fiction, *Once Upon A Time: A Floating Opera* (1994) and *On With the Story: Stories* (1996) also attest to this. By rethinking questions of authorship and mimesis Barth has actually offered a possible narrative way out of this mid-century's narrative crisis in the form of narrativist mimesis.

After he had published *LETTERS* in 1979, Heide Ziegler questioned Barth on his ideas on mimesis. In *LETTERS* we saw Jerome Bray trying to create the perfect novel with the aid of the computer Lilyvac II, just as Bray had been trying to do in "Bellerophoniad" in *Chimera* (1972). In this novel he set out to compose the perfect Novel by means of a sophisticated computer programme to which he had fed canonical fiction and literary theory. Was it the quintessential Novel he had attempted to write, "the absolute type, as it were the Platonic Form expressed?", Ziegler wanted to know from Barth. To this he answered: "It's certainly not the Platonic Form expressed, but it certainly participates in the Platonic idea that Bray is speaking of" (Barth quoted by Ziegler 1980: 173). Barth sees Bray's role as a kind of mad limiting case trying to create pure form, in which attempt he fails. To Barth no such thing as creating the ultimate capital N Novel seems possible: "No novel made out of mere words, mere language could ever arrive at Bray's notions of formal perfection and purity" (p. 174). What the reader ends up with after having finished "Bellerophoniad" and *LETTERS*, is not the novel Jerome Bray aspired to compose, but "something that has fallen from Plato, although it participates in Bray's idea" (p. 174).[5]

Towards the end of *LETTERS,* Ambrose Mensch, one of Barth's alter egos, seems to foreshadow the realm of narrativist mimesis when he writes to a character named Yours Truly: "Might [the artist] not as readily, at least as possibly, be imagined as thereby (if only thereby) enabled to love the narrative through the form, the language through the narrative, even the world through language?" (Barth 1979: 650). This does not mean to say that the artist prefers language to the world, the processes of narration to language and the abstract possibilities of form to narrative processes. But if the artist achieves all this,

writes Ambrose, "might he not find himself liberated to be (as he has after all always been, but is enabled now more truly, freely, efficaciously to be) in the world?" (Barth 1979: 651).

The next step in this process, when "narrating almost literally equals living", can be traced back, as mentioned above, to Todorov's influence[6] on Barth. In his essay "Tales Within Tales Within Tales" he writes:

> We tell stories and listen to them because we live stories and live in them. Narrative equals language equals life: to cease to narrate, as the capital example of Scheherazade reminds us is to die - literally for her, figuratively for the rest of us. One might add that if this is true, then not only is all fiction fiction about fiction, but all fiction about fiction is in fact fiction about life.
>
> (Barth 1984: 236)

The language used in story-telling is used to live in the world and not to refer to things of the world. Barth's eighth novel, *Sabbatical*, for instance, opens with a sense of story unfolding in time that contradicts our sense of the completed text which is the novel we are reading: "There was a story that began, / Said Fenwick Turner: *Susie and Fenn* - /Oh, tell that story! Tell it again! / Wept Susan Seckler" (Barth 1982: 9). The narrator alternates between third and first person because Fenwick and Susan are composing (or have already composed, depending on when one reads the text) the novel that is about them. In the novel we see protagonists Fenwick and Susan Key overcome their existential crises by living in and by story: they will perform the story: "this story, our story, it's our house and our child .... We'll have made it ..., and we'll live in it. We'll even live by it" (p. 294). Narrative has for them become the condition for living. At the end of this novel the protagonists have decided to write their own life-story: "If that's going to be our story, then let's begin it at the end and end it at the beginning, so we can go on forever. Begin with our living happily ever after" (p. 301). Their life-story has to be cyclical for it to be able to continue, for them to be and stay alive.[7]

And when the narrators in the following novel, *The Tidewater Tales*, directly address the external reader: "What you're reading, reader, is P's and K's *story*. But what husband and wife are living, and trying rather desperately just now without success to read ahead in, is not their story. It's their life" (Barth 1987: 140), life equals story and story equals life. Even the unborn twins in *The Tidewater Tales* realise the textuality of reality, when the one quotes his/her father's opinion to the other: "[T]he end whereto one is fetched forth into the parlous world is neither more or less than this: to hear or make up stories, and to pass them on" (1987: 423).

In *The Tidewater Tales* the different characters, also referred to as "travellers

out of fiction" (Barth 1987: 612), have become "prisoners of dramaturgy", as Barth's alter ego in the novel, Djean, says, and "they've thrown away the key" (p. 604). The language used in story-telling is not used to refer to things of the world, but used to live in the world. Language does not represent a reality outside itself. This lands us in the realm of narrativist mimesis. Scheherazade, her sister, the Author, Odysseus, Nausicaä, Don Quixote and Huckleberry Finn in *The Tidewater Tales*, and William Behler and Yasmin in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* all overcome boundaries of time and place by erasing boundaries between reality and imagination, in a dynamic process of intertextual spatialisation.

Notes

1. *John Barth's Later Fiction: Intertextual Readings, with Emphasis on LETTERS (1979)*. PhD, UCT, 1994.

2. Both essays are reprinted in his first collection of essays, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (1984).

3. In "Borges and I: A Mini-Memoir" he does actually add a fifth name. Speaking of Borges's short stories he says: "Its author remains among my principal navigation stars, even though he never attempted a novel and I rarely attempt anything else ..." (Barth 1995: 181).

4. Repeated in Roland Sodowsky's interview with John Barth:
   > But early on ... I like to think I saw in Scheherazade a kind of emblem of the storyteller's condition. Later on when I got older and wiser and thought about it a little, she became for me an emblem of some cardinal aspects of the human condition ....
   >
   > (Barth quoted by Sodowsky 1993: 114-115)

5. Jerome Bray's ideas on what constitutes a novel link up with the idea of the essentialist Ideal Novel, which, as Bray's failure to compose it within the boundaries of the novel proves, can never be written; this idea of Novel will always remain Novel "under erasure". The novel can of necessity only be a linguistic construct, "mere words, mere language", never able to attain substance or mimesis in the Platonic sense, which in itself is already a third remove from reality, thereby underlining its nonreferentiality. For Barth substance, as presupposed in the Platonic ideal realm, does not exist, but what does exist is linguistic form, narrative, the language of nonreferential reality, hence narrativist mimesis.

6. Inspired by Tzvetan Todorov's argument in *The Poetics of Prose* (1977) Barth acknowledges his debt to Todorov's "Narrative-men" in a footnote (Barth 1984: 235). Todorov uses examples from *The 1001 Nights* to illustrate his argument that narrating almost literally equals living.

7. This is reminiscent of the cyclical nature of the library "The Library of Babel" in *Labyrinths*, where J.L. Borges deals with the fictionality of the universe "which others call the Library" (Borges 1964: 78). The universe is seen as a library in which everything is present, "all that is given to express, in all languages" (p. 81), which makes "the Library ... unlimited and cyclical" (p. 85).

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