Chapter 3

John Barth: A Spooky Simulacrum of Sense

John Barth has been at the forefront of a campaign to redirect the exhausting narrative possibilities and to refuel the American novel. In a highly productive creative career spanning about sixty years, worth a dozen of excellent novels, he has encompassed quite a number of literary strategies, inviting varied critical labels: American absurdist, black humorist, fabulator, and finally neo-realist. With the likes of Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut and Donald Barthelme, John Barth led the American fiction of the sixties to break new ground in terms of its form and content. Drawing on the modern as well as the postmodern poetics of fiction, he has set a course which has undermined the conventional taken-for-granted parameters of fiction while building on the same foundations a fiction of possibilities on the possibly exhausting fiction.

The rationale which fits John Barth to the present study, together with Faulkner and Doctorow is, to put it in a general introductory way, his idée fixes: the mechanics and politics of narrative which splinters into themes of self, narrative, and social dilemmas. Barth's fictional obsession could be simplified in the words of Max Schulz as "felt life and fictive means" (xi). As is the case with William Faulkner, Barth's characters are
incessantly caught up in the linguistic, social and metaphysical entanglements in their struggle to narratively delineate a sense of being. Whether real or parodic, they are all questors attempting to write/narrate/record themselves to firm up a feeling of wholeness. Chasing an ever-receding meaning of self, they exhaust their narrative, rendering the ceaseless genesis of the self-narrative circle further elusive. The epistemological and ontological concerns, which inform the contents of Faulkner’s novels, make their presence rather emphatically here. The postmodern queries of confronting as well as capturing reality, the problem of knowing and representation, the imaginative and intellectual cul-de-sac into which the contemporary novel has allegedly fallen--these power Barth’s fictional mission at replenishment.

Two essays, “Literature of Exhaustion” (1962) and “Literature of Replenishment” (1979) sum up the fictional manifesto of John Barth. Echoing Philip Roth’s well-known plaint of reality outstripping fiction and the consequent feeling of exhaustion of fictional possibilities, these essays argue for the contemporary need for confronting the vacuum generated by the death of high modernism and general narrative exhaustion by turning the cul-de-sacs against themselves. Barth advocates employing the narrative dead ends to generate tales. He prescribes a
"synthesis or transcension" (FB 203) of the modernist/postmodernist categories as in the writings of Italo Calvino or Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

If the modernist, carrying the torch of romanticism taught us that linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naïve illusionism, transparent language, innermost anecdote and middle class moral conventions are not the whole story, then from the perspectives of the closing decades of our century we may appreciate that the contraries of those things are not the whole story either (FB 203),

argues Barth. Working a path of synthesis. Barth has settled down to the claim of being a teller of tales, Janus faced ones, with "one foot in the narrative past and the other in the structuralist or poststructuralist present" (Walkiewics 13).

"...The condition of disorientation...is my characteristic subject matter, my fictionary stock in trade. Intellectual and spiritual disorientation is the family disease of all my main characters", Barth states, "a disease usually complicated by ontological disorientation, since knowing where you are is often contingent upon knowing who you are," Barth states (FB 13). Starting with Todd Andrews in The Floating Opera, every major figure in his fiction is aggressively involved in the act of consolidating their lives on meaningful lines. Language fails them
because of their uncertainty regarding the reality that circles him as a result of the consciousness of the unreliability of medium and the absurdity of existence. The result always being that "the medium is the message" (FB 86). Regress in infinitum in the novels of Barth vis-à-vis characters or themes are a direct consequence of this dilemma. As and when the hunt for the self deteriorates in to a play with language, at the ontological level the search for identity settles down into a sedimented articulation of the path, not the destination. If language unsettles the voyage at one level, the social obstacles perform the same at another. A Barthian hero always gets stuck in the dense, to use a word loved by Barth, "labyrinth" of these shifty permutations of self, narrative and society. In the words of Robert. A. Hipkiss:

The threatening world outside drives the characters into themselves in these novels and in the play of their consciousness we see both their attempts to escape the threat and the abortive attempts to defeat it. The imagination of the author and his characters, art and artist, become an alternative world in which the divided self took refuge to put itself back together (121).

The narrative and epistemological voyage within, in Barthian terminology, scriptotherapy, pushes the protagonist headlong into the
vertiginous quick sands of language, into the mutually constituted and mutually consuming narrative and consciousness.

This unenviable plight of Barth’s self-brooding and self-making protagonists is compounded by certain commonalities. They are either loners on the trail of consoling self-discoveries or individuals compulsively following what is felt to be the destined herohood, like Giles in *Giles Goat-Boy*. They all end up adding one more component to the Barthian scheme, without offering anything valid in terms of the goals which initiated their quest, making Barth comment that “what I’ve been writing about all these years is not only orientation and education (rather, disorientation and education), but imperfect or unsuccessful or misfired education at that: not *ergiehungsromane* but *herabziehungsromane*; ‘down-bringing-novels’” (FB 132). The scribblerian instinct to fix oneself in letters to halt the fluidity of being boomerangs as the slippery signification process proves equally unyielding to the ever evolving self’s manoeuvres. The destination of absolutes—absolute values in terms of personhood, narrative, truth, reality etc—fails as the slippery foothold the intellect provides in grasping the essence of reality outwits them.

The narrative consciousness reflects on as well as becomes a reflection of this struggle. Hence, terms like self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness have dual function in John Barth, as is the case with
William Faulkner. The proclivity of John Barth to lean heavily on the Greek and Arabic myths also could be explained away as a consequence of his characters mythotherapy, to play roles to derive belongingness to affirm themselves. This chapter looks into selected works of Barth with the intention of making a prefatory exploration of the stated flux of personhood of its major characters, in terms of the forever constituted narrative consciousness it depicts, including its causes and consequences. As in the case of Faulkner, the chapter goes about its task in a tripartite manner analysing the metaphysical, the narrative and the social aspects of the issue.

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question in philosophy”, states Albert Camus (3). Todd Andrews, the hero of Barth’s first novel, *The Floating Opera*, the first of his great role players, is a Maryland lawyer whose sixteen year long enquiry into the baffling suicide of his father drives him to the conclusion that “everything, I’m afraid, is significant, and nothing is finally important” (FO 252). He adopts a series of masks, roles to counter his ailing heart condition—that of a rake, a saint and a cynic—in the search for a character suiting his state.
Todd is extremely self-conscious, sceptical and given to intense bouts of self-doubts and serpentine processes of vacuous self-scrutiny. No amount of thinking assists him as he grapples with his bifurcated sense of selves to create coherence since he “can understand everything at once in about three ways” (FO 31). A case in point is the question he asks as he broods on the word ‘love’: “are the differences between, say, ones love for his wife, his mistress, his parents, his cat, his nation, his hobby, his species, his books, his natural environment differences in kind or merely degree?” (FO 36), he muses. Like Daniel, the hero of Doctorow’s The Book of Daniel, who also sets out to bring out the truth of his executed father, Todd is in chronic inability to keep his mind and narrative attuned to the one strand that will enlighten him. Multiple viable possibilities way lay his attempt at objectivity. As his attempt to blow up the floating opera to kill himself in the process fail, he resigns to the logic that “there is no final reason for living (or for suicide)” (FO 245) and settles on a life which borders on death.

“The ontological vacuum” (FB 133) named Jacob Horner of The End of the Road is, as Noland puts it, “Todd Andrews with a complete paralysis of will” (18), varying in degree from simple inability to decide to total paralysis in which he remains rooted to the bench he is occupying in the Pennsylvania station for eleven hours. Jacob’s doubts as to his
sense of identity are confirmed by the well known opening statement of the novel: “In a sense, I am Jacob Horner”. “It is the malady called cosmopsis, the cosmic view…” (ER 60), an intense version of Todd’s cosmic cynicism. The myothertapeutic job as a teacher of prescriptive grammar brings him opposite Joseph Morgan, his colleague and his wife. Jacob, the sceptic is pitted against Joseph, the rationalist. If Jacob can’t believe that he exists, Joseph’s is a case of being too sure of his ground. If in The Floating Opera Todd finds no justification for anything, even for death. Jacob can’t see reason even for motion. He denies a fundamental, authentic human identity. On certain days, “Jacob Horner, except in a meaningless metabolic sense, ceased to exist, for [he] was without personality” (ER 33), echoing Rennie’s feeling that Horner cancels himself off. Rennie too tells Jake: “I think you don’t exist at all. There’s too many of you. It’s more than just masks you put on and take off… you cancel yourself out, you’re nothing” (ER 62-3). David Kerner’s remark sums up the man: “every choice of action is a piece of acting--the assumption of a role, a mask, an arbitrary pretence of identity: under the mask is no “true self”--nobody. Horner is this nobody” (92). Rennie’s pregnancy hots up the relationship among the three and the botched abortion of Rennie leads to her death. Rennie’s death strips him off his mask, pushing him again to immobility. The statement the Negro doctor makes to Horner that “Existence not only precedes essence; in the case of'
human beings it rather defies essence" sums up the attitude of both the novels (ER 128).

The Sot-Weed Factor, in the form of an eighteenth century historical narrative, portrays the identity concerns of Ebenezer Cooke and a protracted debate on the issue with his foil, Henry Burlingame. It combines the picaresque and the philosophical traditions of the eighteenth century with themes of existentialism and American innocence, against the backdrop of colonial history. It is the story of the education of Ebenezer Cooke in which the major discoveries are dubiety and futility. Unlike Todd or Jake who falls working for absolutes, Ebenezer, "dizzy with the beauty of the possible", decides to create the necessary absolute and latch on to it. "Faith, it is a rare wise man knows who he is... Did I, then, make a choice? Nay, for there was no I to make it! 'T was the choice made me, ...what am I? What am I? Virgin, sir! Poet sir! I am a virgin and a poet" (SWF 70-1). As Puetz puts it,

In the course of the ensuing events, Eben's original fantasy generates other fantasies... since he is the poet per se, ... there must be a land worthy of his labour and praise. Since his love is pure and untainted by what he calls base motives, there must be a woman worthy of it. Thus the myth of Maryland, the perfect and the fantasy of Joan Toast, his
eternal love, are born. In sum, the hero turns to the panacea of mythopoesis and creates fictional schemes and mythical worlds around himself which in turn support the very self concepts from which all interpretations of self and world have sprung (SWF 325).

So the fragility of one's self is what is left lingering in Ebenezer even after the attempt at narrative self-composition.

Ebenezer's legendary tutor Henry Burlingame raises the counterpoint in this now parodic, now serious debate over personhood. He is the "suitor of totality" (SWF 526), who persuades Eben and his sister Anna to revel in role taking. His faith lies in the argument that since existence basically lacks essence it is imperative that, "one must assert, assert, assert" (SWF 360) by creating and inventing roles. The world is indeed a flux, Burlingame is certain. Notwithstanding the occasional use of him to ridicule the archetypal shape-shifter of the fiction of the sixties, the character aids our understanding and Barth's experimentation in the varying dimensions of plurality of selves. If Eben is on the look out for his parentage, Burlingame has none to explore, as he is "Sprung de novo like a maggot out of a meat, or dropped from the sky" (SWF 142). "[H]urtling through a vacuum, racing to the grave". Burlingame is aware of the dark, undecipherable script of existence (SWF 344-5). As a "suitor
of totality," (SWF 526) his world remains a diffuse entity. He variously exists in the roles and disguises of Lord Baltimore, John Cooke, Peter Sayer, Timothy Mitchell, Nicholas Lowe and even Ebenezer Cooke. This is why he finds it hard to accept the discovery that he is the son of Tayac Chicamec of the Ahatchwhoops Indian tribe. It painfully restricts him and cuts him off all the persuasive liberty of the quest. It denies him an opportunity to be what Faulkner calls a "splendid failure" (Meriwether 180). This is the dilemma of the hunt for selfhood too. It is a Hobson's choice between the submission to a suffocating identity and the diffusive freedom with no claim whatsoever to a personhood--"a freedom that is both a blessing and a course" (SWF 178).

The ending of the novel doesn't offer any ultimate solution to the problems of identity. It is true that Eben wins almost everything he strives for—marriage of his choice, estate, recognition and maturity. It is a hollow victory all the way still. His love Joan Toast is a whore carrying syphilitic scars of their past. The legal victory, which helps him regain his estate, is through the benefit of a legal loophole. The so-called recognition is earned at the expense of his real maturity as a consequence of his capacity to tolerate their treacheries. Hence one can concur with Beverly Gross's contention that "there is neither victory nor resolution in any of this. Only
a precarious equilibrium and a defeat which, if one is to remain sane, had better be accepted as success” (37).

Questions of success and failure are the staple themes of Giles Goat-Boy, his next novel, interrogated against the allegorical background of academic education. George is the goat-boy stuck half way between goathood and boyhood in terms of his consciousness, seeking his true identity through the achievement of Grant Tutordom. The universe is a university in the novel. In the clash of the New Tammany and Nikolay colleges, between WESCAC and EASCAC computers, it is the mission of Giles to ease the tension by finding out if he is the Giles: Grand Tutorial Ideal, Laboratory Eugenical Specimen. He has to defeat the WESCAC, the Western campus Computer, which rules the campus to declare his Grand Tutorhood. He rejects the condition of being “a regular person” (GGB 123) and chooses to prove himself “less than mortal and more” (GGB 138) to prove himself to be, arriving at the “answer” that will liberate all studentdom. After repeated failures in his descent into the belly of the computer he wrecks the computer to gain the authorization he has sought all along. The discovery is that there is nothing to discover, the answer is that there is no answer. This is not far from the valueless value that Todd settles for or Jake Horner’s road in The End of the Road which does not end. The cover letter of Giles Goat-Boy relates the Nihilistic-
Existential vein that runs through the whole of Barth. "Nothing works... everything only gets worse...in fact we know only more or less ruinous defeats" (12). What he does find is not meaning, but a way of talking about the impossibility of fixing meaning. At the end he states:

Passage was failure, and Failure, Passage: yet, Passage was Passage, failure, Failure! Equally true, none was the Answer; the two were not different, neither were they the same: and true and false, and same and different—Unspeakable! Unnamable! Unimaginable! (GGB 650).

As Max Spielman, Giles' tutor puts it: "self knowledge is always bad news" (GGB 131).

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," (GGB 117) states the Spielman's law in Giles Goat-Boy. Lost in the Funhouse traces the ontological queries in respect of narrative and human phylogeny as it presents the protagonist Ambrose Mench's birth and growth into the ambiguities of life and art. It is a collection of fourteen stories evolving around telling and listening to stories. The first six stories of the collection thematically center on self-conscious, self-referential forms and conventional realistic narratives while the second half involves itself with the issue of authorial voice. This why Max F. Schulz states that, "intrinsic to the thematic development of Lost in the Funhouse is an ontological
conceit; the unending replication of self as organism, as authorial voice and as fiction (word and form)” (6).

As in Doctorow’s Loon Lake and Lives of the Poets, the concerns of literary perception, articulation of human experience and literary technique are so intensely taken up in Lost in the Funhouse in the form of a bildungsroman. From the first story, “Night Sea journey”, the genesis of this duo is implied. The swimming sperm is inundated with queries of the irrelevant voyage amid better-equipped swimmers. The sense of the absurd coupled with literary imagination furnish him for the future Ambrose’s ontological/ epistemological dilemma. “Ambrose His Mark” relates his birth and naming; “Autobiography”, the question of his parentage and identity and “Water-Message”, his boyhood days. In “Petition”, the conflict makes its full-grown appearance as “the incompatibility of instinct and self-scrutiny” (Hinden 195). Here, “Ambrose as observant adolescent at the threshold of learning about life merges with Ambrose as the author of this own story at the beginning stages of learning how to construct a narrative” (Schulz 8). The medley of multidirectional voices merges in the series-concluding stories, “Meneliad” and “Anonymiad”.

The struggle for self-determination is plagued by the nihilistic, existential overtones of their nature. To begin with, the sperms monologue is
one of rejection and repudiation, its fruition to nonexistence. The petitioner half of the Siamese twin pleas for disjunction. "Autobiography" begs to be ended, if there are ones capable of doing it. Ambrose states in Lost in the Funhouse that if there were, "a button you could push to end your life absolutely without pain" (LIF 86), he would go ahead. The whole series is embedded in a frame tale given at the outset, in the form of a Moebius strip: "Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time..." it runs. Moebius strip is a strip of paper twisted a hundred and eighty degrees and pasted at both ends in the form of a spiral, in which the inside and the outside merge into each other defying efforts at differentiation as well as separating the beginning from the end. It is extremely suggestive of the Barthian message of the fluidity of self/consciousness in life/narrative. The enthusiastic weariness that plagues his earlier fiction persists. Just as the ontologically puzzling funhouse of the text surmises the cosmic elusiveness of reality and the ever-receding bounds of individuation, the Moebius strip of the narrative emphasizes the process of slippery signification.

Chimera, a reworking of Arabian and Greek myths, contains "Dunyazadiad", "Perseid" and "Ballerophoniad". Scheherazade has remained Barth's most beloved of figures from the narratives of the past and has been obsessed with her existential situation all along--the tell or
die dilemma. He puts into her tale a feminist bill of complaints, there by offering a reworking of the myth. "Bellerophoniad" sets out to follow a "pattern of Mythic Heroism" (C 140), like in Giles Goat-Boy and The Sot Weed Factor. Bellerophon and Perseus are troubled by the query that bedevil the lives of the protagonists of Giles Goat-Boy and The Sot-Weed Factor--whether actions define a hero or heroes confer greatness on actions--the essence or the existence query.

Letters, a symbiosis of epistolary and self-reflexive techniques, takes Barth’s habit of cross breeding his fiction with his past fiction to greater heights. Barth recalls the protagonists of his earlier fiction and adds Lady Amherst as the only other major figure. Todd Andrews, Jacob Horner, Jerome Bray, Ambrose Mench, A. B. Cooke VI and A. B. Cooke IV--characters recalled from his earlier fiction or the characters’ descendants--not only rehearse the past but relate their current lives. They are as much concerned with the purpose and meaning of their lives as with their capacity to effectively communicate. Often they write letters to themselves as part of their urge to know themselves. The novel carries on with his stock concerns of identity, interpretation, communication and the state of the academe with the added one of the relationship between film and literature. As Stan and Gordon put it, "as to the question of identities, Barth’s play with and the destabilization of such characters as Harold
Bray and Henry Burlingame, among others, reach exaggerated proportions in *Letters*" (160). Andre Castine, for instance, is more protean and ambiguous in conception than Bray or Burlingame. Bea Gorden's protracted name is also suggestive of the shifty contours of identity. Even as the characters of the earlier fiction review their pasts to divine their future, they come to paradoxical conclusions preventing the expected redemption. Todd Andrews can “see patterns everywhere” and is “sceptical of their significance” (L 255). He closes the enquiry asserting “the intrinsic value of everything, even of nothingness” (L 738). This is repeated in the case of the other redreamed characters too. Hence, citing Cynthia Davis, *Letters* “does not celebrate achievement, it celebrates struggle” (228).

A couple, Fenwick Scott Key Turner and Susan Allan Seckler muse on how to plan their future back from a sailing sabbatical in Barth's *Sabbatical*. They are caught in the CIA activities as Fenwick’s twin brother Manfred is lost and he suspects a CIA hand in this presumed death of his brother. An ex-CIA agent, Turner is hated by many for his expose of certain covert operations of the organization in Chile and Iran. Still, at the end of it all, the denouement is artistic and the confusion is cleared up in a desultory manner. Manfred’s ghost appears in a dream mentioning his death of “hypothermia” (S 328). The book once again is
dwelling on the difficulty of arriving at a decision. In other words, the question is which road to take still. The duality of intertwining quest and the duplicity of crises continue.

That double, duality and pairs abound in *Sabbatical* is a forceful comment on the inexorable nature of self/ narrative demarcations. In the novel, Susan and Mim Seckler, Fenwick and Manfred are twins. The aborted of Susan are also a pair. As always, Barth laughs at the extra emphasis on binaries while making excellent use of it for his narrative purposes. The man and his wife are the combined narrators of the book. It oscillates between Fenwick-first person singular and Susan-first person singular, often turning into Fenwick-Susan first person plural. Susan’s specialization as a professor is on twins. Husband is an author and wife, a good reader, forming yet another double. They are confronted with dilemmas and choices. Fen thinks over the problem: “Is Y a fork or a confluence? Does the Chesapeake Channel diverge into York River channel, or do they converge into Chesapeake channel? The one inbound, the other outbound; or, Analysis versus Synthesis; ‘male’ versus ‘female’. Sperm swim up, Ova float down” (S 137). Fenn’s key to sailing is that “to go forward, we must go back” (S 244). True to the motto, the sailing trip never progresses on a linear fashion: “the journey of the sail boat is
endlessly deferred with no destination final” (Stan and Gordon 180). The novel ends as such affirming “the image of our plural selves” (S 332).

The story of the sailing couples’ Moebius strip of a voyage, spirally moving from within to without to within, resume in The Tidewater Tales, aboard the boat “story.” The twin narrators, Peter and Catherine Scheritt Sagamore, are on vacation, waiting for Catherine to come full term. The novel covers a fortnight of sailing on Chesapeake Bay. The duality and binaries explored infinitely in Sabbatical are replicated at another level in Tidewater Tales too. If Peter is 39 years and 8 and a half months old, Kate is 39 years and 8 and a half months pregnant. He is Cartesian and she, Rabelaisian. “Peter’s pet poet is Emily Dickinson: Zero at the bone. Katherine Sheritt’s is Walt Whitman: I contain multitudes (TT 29). In the line of dualities like appearance and reality, life and art, self and other, these two meet and part, tell and listen, listen and tell. They too attempt through “a coupled point of view” (TT 29) to realize a union, as they sail through sexual and textual escapades of indeterminacy. Franklin Key Talbott and Leah Allan Silver Talbott, an important pair of guests on their boat, turn out to be Fenn and Susan of Sabbatical. Thus the intertextual elements again bring to light the device of a frame tale, the ever-expanding concentric layers of connected narrative, one more Moebius strip. As in Sabbatical, in Tidewater Tales
too, it is not a voyage with a destination. It is “without itinerary, timetable or destination...sailing with the wind listeth” (TT 76). Like in The Floating Opera, the goal of the trip is the trip as Katherine feels that “destinations are just excuses for sailing” (TT 76). If Sabbatical ends with the couple’s resolution to extend their life through fiction, Tidewater Tales decides in favour of delivering twins.

From The Floating Opera to Tidewater Tales, thus the binding threads of John Barth’s fiction are the constraints of self-definition in a world of indeterminacy. If on the one hand the major figures are hell bent on seeking the shore of self, the bounds of reality, on the other, they are aware of the elusiveness of the quest. The medium of the quest, language, is an instrument which ever promises to deliver, never quite achieving it. The process becomes the product, the medium, the message. This is the situation of them all. The existential query pushes them into a question of the communicative essence, which in turn thrusts them back into the existential spiral. It is the strange, yet predictable loop that defines Barth’s fiction.
Douglass. R. Hofstadter’s “strange loop” phenomenon occurs “when by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we can find ourselves right back where we started” (10,15). The two components of art and life collide and collude, regressus in infinitum, in the world of Barthian fiction, “turning the terminal into the perpetual, the linear into the cyclical” (Walkiewics 89), making it an ideal site for the phenomenon of narrative and consciousness locked in a strange loop. The Barthian protagonist ceaselessly circulates the self-narrative-society loop in their efforts at construction of identity.

The major figures in Barth’s fiction are all beset with problems of perception and understanding. It handicaps their capacity to lead a rational, satisfactory kind of life. In writing, they embark upon a quest to normatively explore or expiate their lives/errors of their lives, often in an attempt to differentiate what has gone wrong, when, why and how. As Barth puts it, for them, “narrative equals language equals life” (FB 236). They are all author surrogates. It is either their chosen hero hood or the supposedly destined selfhood, which drives them on to authorial investigations. It is true that what his characters are moving through is a spiral of knowing and being since it is life’s complications and an acutely introspective nature tinged with absurdist vision that necessitate the quest
for self-definition. The descent within is always a journey backward, involving a study of the past and as such terminates in an analysis of the genres of history, memoir, autobiography, biography, allegory, letters, diaries, reels etc. This is why Barth’s all major novels are multigenric. They are as much a symptom of the permutations of the consciousness as they are a cause of it. Ultimately none of the modes triumph in the diagnosis and delineation of the core of consciousness.

For Barth, the defining preoccupation of fiction has been self-consciousness. As Marilyn Edenstein points out in a study of Chimera:

Self-consciousness can mean consciousness of a self, of an “I”, of a core unity, or it can refer to the consciousness of itself by an entity, (a person, a novel). In the case of a person, both meanings can come together since consciousness can only presume a self by knowing itself.

If a text flaunts its own artificiality... if it’s authors presence in and not just behind the text is constantly being emphasized, it is commonly called a “self-conscious” text. The cohesive function...inscribed within the text can be considered the “self” of the text. If this textually created self is in some ways analogous to a human self, perhaps the
human self is only a linguistic configuration rather than an ontological entity (99).

A comment by Barth, explaining the way the self-consciousness of his narration/characters and the killing self-consciousness of the existential angst are connected, reflects this sense of fabricatedness of self. He says: "when the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they are in, we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our on existence" (FB 73). The sense of irrcality, hence to some extent, catalyses the self-consciousness of the narrative process. The question as to the real 'I' is an offshoot/reflection of concerns regarding the real. A combination of the linguistic and narrative dilemma lends itself as the perfect vehicle for the existentially insecure individual. The frame tale which Barth repeatedly employs as a pivotal device foregrounds the tension between the story and the storiness of the story. This too accentuates the self-consciousness of the narrative act.

The prime destabiliser in the world of Barth's fiction is linguistic because "Language, for the knower of the self, serves as a kind of trap, and also a kind of instrument, the only one at his disposal. As soon as self-awareness objectifies itself into words, the words stand with their own syntactic order, their own associations, out and away from the self and its awareness" (Edelstein 100). From Todd to the Sagamores, the
cardinal question is as to the inability and necessity of communication, to
one self and to the world. Citing E. P. Walkiewicks, "the quest for the
meaning of making translates into the struggle to make meaning, the
"horned" dilemma of being made to end into the difficulty of making an
end" (104).

Like the ledger of Blue in Doctorow’s first work, Welcome to
Hard Times, Barth’s The Floating Opera is the result of an enquiry
conducted by the protagonist Todd Andrews, regarding his failed
communication with his father. The suicide of his father intrigues him and
he sets out to explore it in the form of an enquiry, which grows into an
enquiry into himself. The polygenric nature of enquiry itself is a
testimony to Todd’s imperfect communication. If at one level The
Floating Opera is the story of a self eternally in the making, at another
level it constitutes the story of a story ever in the making. A letter to his
father, explaining the brittle hold mortality has on him because of his
heart condition, runs into fifty pages and remains incomplete and
undelivered. A complete study of the life of his father and their
relationship, especially of his father’s suicide, three baskets and a
cardboard box of notes, couldn’t take the enquiry anywhere close to
completion. For Todd, even “the genre of legal brief consists …of giving
speculative observation and questionable assumptions the ring of truth, to
give legal fiction the shape of reality, to give rhetoric the shape of legal reality” (Stan and Gordon 44). He could neither be subjective nor wholly be objective too. He is acutely self-conscious and his narrative inclines to be subjective. But he fails in expressing through language the felt life of his. Language, with its associative, connotative burden refuses to play along. The evocative and referential values of language assert at the wrong instants and through confusing means. Todd who exhibits nascent traces of the cosmopsis of Burlingame, the cosmophile, spots significance or the lack of it evenly everywhere. He is lost in the funhouse of ceaselessly bifurcating courses of relevance everywhere. “Good heavens”, Todd Andrews exclaims, “how does one write a novel! I mean, how can anybody stick to the story, if he’s at all sensitive to the significance of things?” (F:O 2).

“Assigning names to things is like assigning roles to people; it is a necessary distortion...(ER 114), Jacob Horner seems to reply in the next novel, The End of the Road. In Jacob Horner, as in every such author-protagonist of Barth, the mythotherapy and scriptotherapy work at loggerheads. Horner, under prescription for cosmopsis, takes mythotherapy as a teacher of prescriptive grammar and steps into yet another role of a writer. But this time, after the elapse of everything, he is narratively attempting a re-enacting of the past through another role, fully
conscious of another failure, conscious that he is failing at every stage of the process of scripting. Like his talisman, Laocoon, he is, "bound like two serpents of knowledge and imagination, which grown great in the fullness of time, no longer tempt but annihilate" (ER 157). At every stage he is aware of the fact that a linguistic construction of self is bound to be fictive as he is aware of the pitfalls involved. "To turn experience into speech--that is to classify, to categorise, to conceptualise, to grammarise, to syntactify it--is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it: but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man" (ER 96).

In the process Homer shifts roles between that of a critic and an author. His convoluted logic often reasons that the ambivalences of his attitude and relationships could be traced to the inherent incapacity of language to communicate: "the apparent ambivalence of Rennie's feelings about me, I'm afraid, like the simultaneous contradictory opinions that I often amuse myself by maintaining, was a pseudo-ambivalence whose source was in the language, not in the concepts symbolized by the language" (ER 59). Composing a life is impossible not just because "the same life lends itself to any number of stories--parallel, concentric, mutually inhabitant, or what you will" (ER 4), but also because, "stories also have something to tell us about themselves, they
always involve self-reflexive and metafictional devices" (Venuti 3). The story has a life and a story of its own too and it begins to get told in the process. Hence the narrative self-definition remains mired in crises of articulation and signification.

Both The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-boy, Barth calls "novels which imitate the form of a Novel, by an author who imitates the role of an Author" (FB 72). The tales-within-tales-within-tales regressus in infinitum of the narrator, who fails to complete a narrative that refuses to close itself, is about to take its genesis here. The Sot-Weed Factor is a commentary about an attempted commentary on a fictional biographical poem of Ebenezer Cooke, titled "Sot-Weed Factor". It is Ebenezer Cooke's and the author's attempt to construct a narrative, as Barth wants, from the narrative tradition of the past. It provides Barth/his protagonist sufficient ground for meandering on a narrative that fragments into literary, historical, philosophical quests. But the final result, in the words of Earl Rovit, "reminds one of a pack of hounds with stuffed noses frantically sniffing out a non-existent covey of quail" (120).

The question of identity, reality and the construction of a narrative are streamlined into that of specifically composing history here. Like in the other novels, here also, a character that attempts an autobiography ends up writing a polygenric account that defies classification. But in The
Sot-Weed Factor, it tends to be a lot more historical. The text embraces various figures and events cutting across the bounds of the fictional and the fantastic. Learning, the prime instrument fostering illusionary certainties, is made fun of pungently in the novel. Even after consulting the whole gamut of historians-scholars, he receives little to cure his void: Herodotus, Polyseius, Aristotle, Augustine, Zeno, Rabelais, Aquinas, and Moore—the whole gallery of stars fail to replenish his exhaustion and, “the stuff of history became in his head no more than stuff of metaphors” (SWF 10).

As he [Ebenezer] loses touch with the realities around him, and as he methodically transcends the boundaries of actual experience, both the reality and experience are converted into mere substrata of art. Ebenezer’s mythopoeic view becomes a lens that distorts reality by refracting it as a potential or actual work of art. The realm of facts becomes by analogy the realm of aesthetic experiences; ... It is more important that in the same process Ebenezer’s whole life is slowly converted into a unique work of art. By letting go of the world and the self he gains the momentary freedom to recreate both as autonomous objects (Puetz 139).
This exercise in linguistically ordering experience repeatedly relapses into a play with the very idea of signification. But this apparent feeling of "verbal perpetual motion" (Walkiewics 48) is not dissimilar to the problem of multiple selves at the bottom. Both are symptomatic of the incapacity to contain and define.

After The Sot Weed Factor's commentary upon commentary, Barth employs another mild kind of framing of his narrative prior to the likes of Lost in the Funhouse, Chimera, and LETTERS etc. If The Sot Weed Factor ends with the author's apology to the reader, Giles Goat-Boy is framed with more elaborate apologies from everybody-author, publisher and editors. It is presented by Stoker Giles, who reads it to a computer WESCAC, which collates and edits it and mixes it with other verifiable matter. This information of the post tape is further questioned and alleged to be spurious by a postscript to the post tape. Post tape, postscript, foot notes--each squashes the argument of the other.

The claims and counter claims push the concept of author-authority into a vortex of narrative and speculative flux. It is this undercurrent of constructiveness, sense of lack of authenticity to the mission in hand, which characterizes the narrative and the quest of Giles. Even after assuming encyclopaedic vastness, it is capable only of failing to deliver anything authoritative. Even the allegory, instead of drawing
parallels, suggests two equal possibilities. As contradiction terminates into paradox, the exercise becomes what Walkiewics calls “an external guessing game that terminates into exhaustion” (73). A quest for ultimate answer, passage, conducted via a narrative which is semantically elusive, arrives at a realm that collapses distinctions, like passage and failure. As Barth states. “The main thing he seems to have learned is that what he’s learned can’t be taught: in his attempts to eff the ineffable, his truths get garbled in transmission, misconstrued, betrayed by verbalisation, institutionalisation” (FB 135). The self-knowledge, if any, he gains is regarding the createdness of his life, the self-consciousness which under compulsive examination yields the result that self could only be the creation of a fabricated consciousness through a conscious narrative.

Lost In the Funhouse definitely marks a milestone in the circuitous journey of the consciousness that foregrounds language and form. It collapses the reigning enigma of Barth into the primary one of being and knowing, of life and art. The fourteen story series involves the conception, birth and growth of the twin concerns of Ambrose’s existence and expression, effecting relentless examination of the question of narrative voice and communicative act. Each story in the series marks a stage simultaneously in the development of the individual, artist and art. “In all of them... the process of narration becomes the content of the
narrative...[most] of them exploit, one way or another, ambiguities of language and narrative viewpoint" (FB 77).

"Echo", "Glossolalia", "Two Meditations", "Autobiography: A self recorded fiction", "Title" and "Life Story"- these are self-conscious fiction in the extreme sense of the term. There are stories like "Water Message" in which the process claims as much significance as the content. "Echo" is the fitting title as well as the symbol for a writer whose works trace infinite regression. Echo is condemned by the queen of heaven to repeat others' voices. The cast of the story features Narcissus and Tiresias, two characters who, with Echo, complete the picture of Barth's Phylum. Narcissus symbolizes the self-obsession while Tiresias the sense of perplexity subsequent to being caught in the evolution of plurality. He has listened to immense number of tales and given plenty, the result being that he is incapable of differentiation. In "Autobiography", a story speaking of itself, a "contentless form" (LIF 33), confesses that it distorts its creator. "Title" is the voice of a narrator tired of his trade, sick of self-consciousness, who has "narrated himself into corner" (LIF 108). "Life Story" targets itself in its critical fury. It suspects that the author's life may be a fictional account. It is a story in which an author takes the world to be a novel and the writer, a character. In "Water Message", the growing boy receives a message in a bottle, a letter that salutes and signs
off, leaving a blank for a body. "Lost In the Funhouse" is the key story which shows Ambrose getting lost during a family outing, in a funhouse "in the endless reflection of his image in the mirrors" (LIF 90). "Glossolalia" has six speakers who share their experience of being misunderstood by the audience. "Meneliad" and "Anonymiad". which explore mid life crises, are equally concerned with self, narration and voice. Meneleaus enquiry into the causes of Helen’s love for "his cipher self" (LIF 151) results in self-negation and turns him to a mere voice, a self-courted fiction. Ambrose attempts multiple voices to reify himself into "regular person" (LIF 93). But, "the whole question of identity in Lost in the Funhouse tentatively (italics added) resolves itself in the capricious immortality of the work of art. Within the cycling of a world at once solipsistic and self-negating, man is artist is work of art is artist is man" (Beinstock 203). But as Beinstock asks later, "who confirms whose existence?" (208).

Chimera invalidates the urge for such affirmations as the attempts to attain world end up in fluid entities. The three novellas, which constitute the novel, are engrossed by queries of voice, authority and composition of literary text. In his latest return to his favourite Arabian Nights, Barth places Dunyazade, sister to Sheherazade, as a listener and voyeur. The sisters are assisted by a Genie, a Barth look like, who
supplies them with stories from another volume. The whole narrative turns on its head, when, at the end, it is revealed to have been a narration by Dunyazadiad to her husband. In Dunyazadiad, the Genie and Sheherazade speculate on what are the seminal problems of Barth’s fiction:

Whether a story might imaginably be framed from the inside, as it were, so that the usual relationship between the container and contained would be reversed and paradoxically reversible— and... what human state of affairs such an odd construction might usefully figure. Or whether one might go beyond the usual tale-within-a-tale, beyond even tales-within-tales-within-tales... (C 32).

“Perseid” is Perseus attempt to narrate himself into existence, addressing Medusa, attempting a verbatim duplication of the same story narrated to Calyxa earlier. He couldn’t get it right when he said to Calyxa and failing memory compels him to receive prompting from a spiral mural Calyxa had painted at Medusa’s direction. The perspective is, hence, a shifting consciousness and frames, many. It ends with the similar affirmation of the tentativeness of everything— life, art, narrative etc. In “Bellerophoniad” as in “Dunyazadiad”, the final twist reveals Polyeidus as Bellerophon’s story. Here too the ending of the story mid sentence
points to similar tentativeness. Failing to be a hero, he attempts to be a story and ends up neither but rather a hybrid. All the three attempt and fail to effect a narrative resolution. Language drifts and detours ceaselessly betraying the man it is intended to represent. Dunyazadiad’s story is unfinished, Perseus can neither hold Medusa nor see his continuing mortal existence and Bellerophone can’t achieve apotheosis” (Davis 224) because, “words, language are simultaneously key and treasure” (Stan and Gordon 139).

Letters, Barth claims, is intended to work at three levels. The title is meant to cover messages, alphabets and literature. The Genie, who decides to counter the dilemma of exhausted possibilities in Chimera by going back to the springs of the narrative, performs it in Letters by weaving together the various narrative strands of his major fiction of the past. Six of his major protagonists or their descendants join the most dynamic creation of the author to date, Lady Germaine Pitt. And as often in Barth, the novel endorses the perpetually stillborn resolution of the ever-emergent crises of signification and existence. The pitch of self-consciousness at its peak, the novel’s narrative convolutions as explorations operate at various levels. It picks up the resolutions of the previous works and twists them further. In tracing the unstated future of the past protagonists, Barth turns the whole of his literary cannon as well
as the critical cannon that feeds on it upside down, disestablishing once again the presumed distinction between key and treasure. All the fictitious characters recruited from past fiction in *Letters* are writers. Though their writing often cuts across the bounds of genres, what they attempt is to succeed in a particular kind of writing. Todd Andrews’ is socio-legal history, Jake Horner’s is supposed to result in a memoir or journal, Jerome Bray aims at *Literature*, Ambrose Mench, novels and Lady Amherst’s Literary history. They all write to explain themselves to themselves primarily, to animate life by feeding [on] art. Their narrative self-reflexivity is often the result of a mythotherapy gone haywire. Even their correspondence is more often than not with themselves or with the dead, the imagined or the absent.

No letter, in each of the three senses meant by Barth earlier, can reflect the contemporary as, every ‘now’, as it is composed, turns in to ‘then’ as they are read. The lapse of time between the conception, composition and reception makes the letters exist in different time frames, not to mention the difference between the actual date of composition and letterhead date, problematising the authenticity and autonomy of the realized selfhood of each narrative. This stretches the list of irritants in the struggle for realization, narrative or otherwise. What is read is not what is written and what is written is what is not meant. The complexities of
teller, tale, the told is further compounded by the alteration time effects on them, not to speak of the reiterated protean burden of the tale, termed signification. Reopening of the past texts rocks the already shaky sense of personhood these protagonist-narrator-questors have. As Schulz puts it: "We have here life and art, reality and artifice, locked in an endless, self-referential creative process" (77).

Running parallel to the narrative of reflexivity is the one of history and that of the history of making history too. Here, "a novelist's perception of history unravels into the conflicting ambiguity that human events and literary genres are as prone to overlap as to stop-frame sequence" (Schulz 52). Various characters in the novel are working with theories of/approaches to history: Todd Andrews's "Tragic View of History and human institutions" (L 880), Jake Horner's "Anniversary view of History" (L 98). A. B. Cooke IV and VI's "Action Historiography" (L 75) and Jerome Bray's fantastic, mythological palimpsest. The Cooke-Burlingame saga is not only an attempt to subvert the recorded and accepted mythologies of the past in history, it equally serves as an evidence of showing the constructedness of it.

Literary and critical stock taking and sailing couple in Sabbatical. The sail traces the growth of this intimacy in the past as it feeds (on) a narrative, which in turn sustains the fictive life. The almost exhausting
and entropic narrative cycles and spirals of the earlier narration alternate between Susan and Fen and sometimes to their combined point of view. But the relentless duplication, at times like an accelerated aversion of Doctorow’s Loon Lake, often derives the chimerical effect of the plurality of the earlier fiction. Fenn feels, “that all the ‘inauthentic… layers of false or unworthy selves’ of his past life gain authenticity only to the extent that they contribute to, figure in and are instrumental in fertilizing and birthing ‘the story… this story, our story’…” (Schulz 134). For Fenn and Susan fiction represents a way to acknowledge indeterminacy and regression and to perceive and impose pattern upon the world. As Barth stated, “Narrating almost literally equals living” (FB 236). But coherence/reason doesn’t emerge as the story they are living is also the story they are writing.

The narrative is heterogeneous and it contains shifty perspectives. It is mixed with Vietnamese poetry, newspaper reports and drama. This is not to mention the many references to literary works, characters and authors. The theme of meaning and inauthenticity of existence form the burden of the song in Sabbatical too. The indeterminacy is not restricted to the matter of narrative only. It informs many other entities in the novel. It affects the definition of relationship and even the geography in it. A case in point is their landing on an island that doesn’t appear on the maps.
The romance comes to an end as they stop sailing to start writing. The termination of their narrative marks the end of their journey—a journey they are sailing through the narrative. The narrative to be effected, “this story, our story” (356), will be plagued by the redundancy of signification, beset with ambivalence in articulation. As Fenn states: “we ourselves may never know one another’s story” (302). The novel ends up finally as a novel about the manner in which it comes to be written.

On the fictional clock Sabbatical ends on Sunday, June 15, 1980, the day on which Tidewater Tales begins. In the next half of the pair, Tidewater Tales, the Romance gives way to a Novel but the narrative navigation remains. Peter and Katherine, on board the sailboat “story”, waits for Katherine to come full term. As the novel composes itself, it relentlessly throws up queries regarding the complexities involved in compressing experience into a literary system. Tidewater Tales presents the problem at many levels—of life defying attempts at integration, of language thwarting attempts at communication, of history and the documents denying the possibility of understanding etc. As is the case of every other text of Barth, the inextricably intertwining spirals of these make up the novel. At times, the whole flotilla, the entire lot of characters, involves themselves, telling and listening to stories. A massive conglomeration of narrative, various wheels working at various speeds.
all contributing to and being part of the machinery of narrative, yet all
threatening to go its own way, resisting integration. In the boat "Story"
too Katherine, Peter, Frank, Leah, their friends, Carla B Silver, Leah’s
mother, May Jump, Katherine’s former lover, not to count Don Quixote,
Scheherazade, Odysseus. Nausica etc, do the same. Supportingly the
book contains discussions, suggestions, playful remarks, and ironic
comments, including attempts to build up a dialogue with the reader. In
what serves as a specimen, Frank discusses at length the way he has
changed real life characters into fictional ones through a change of names.

The theme of indeterminacy resides firmly in the narrative of
Tidewater Tales. Apart from the intertextual and fantastical elements of it,
it is linked to Sabbatical with a curious device of a frame tale. Franklin
Key Talbott and Leah Allan Silver Talbott are the complimentary pair to
Peter and Katherine Sagamore. These are later revealed to be the real
authors of Sabbatical, further diluting the already fluid narrative and
contributing to the overall indeterminacy. Like Ambrose declaring his
authorship of Lost in the Funhouse in Letters, this is a device Barth time
and again adopts in the colossal intertextual weave of his oeuvre in which
more loose ends are added to the already fragile construct. The sheer
volume of repetition recognizes the extent to which duality and doubling
govern our organization of personal and social points of view and
determine as well as dissolve the linguistic comprehension of life. The delicious cacophony is made richer by the criticism they indulge in of the literary texts they have read.

So is the matter of the whole oeuvre. What begins in *The Floating Opera* is sustained through *Tidewater Tales*, severally repeated and variously articulated. "at once exhaustion and replenishment" (TT 654). Todd Andrews, Jake Horner, Ebenezer Cooke, George Giles, Ambrose Mench, Peter, Katherine--they all navigate in their narration, pushing themselves to and fro, in the agony of articulation. Words they seek to commemorate experience strongly jolt them to the restricting reality of the way language constructs experience. "Thus this endless repetition of my story. As both protagonist and author, I thought to overtake with understanding my present paragraph as it were by examining my paged past, and, thus pointed proceed to the futures sentence" (FB 138). Perseus speaks in *Chimera*, representing the whole lot of Barthian self-narrative questors. They move back and forth in the narrative, oscillating between the past and the future, locked in a genuine tension. Life and art constitute the continuum called self, approximating each other, in the approximation called consciousness. Feeding both and hence resisting a resolution, aiding the being-as-becoming-pattern is the social reality they are forced to live in.
In the three authors studied vis-à-vis the struggle of their protagonists in the fiction to overcome the frail sense of self in terms of their existential, linguistic, social inclinations, the evolution of their fiction show varying emphasis of these tendencies. In Faulkner the social/racial problems vie for occupation of the fictional space with the stringent push and pull of the linguistic, articulatory issues and existential dilemmas. In Doctorow, the social concerns often approximate supremacy while the other two arms never really concede the edge. In Barth, the social aspect is explored mainly along two lines—as an adjunct to the concerns of the narrative and through the satiric and ironic vein of the narrative. The sedate and often blended backdrop of the narrative, in one way or the other contributes to the hostile environment of the texts. But what is strongly felt in the early novels of Doctorow and Faulkner, the social aspect, makes its appearance rather late explicitly in Barth. But tangentially, the strain has always existed along with the satiric/parodic vein of the writer from the very beginning. He has off and on commented on the pivotal aspects of his fiction like the extreme self-consciousness, the narrator-as-character structure, frame tale etc which reflect the unstated but submerged social consciousness of the author.
The narrator-protagonists of Barth, in course of their diagnosis of the past, subject to analysis their involvement with the society too. Their stand is acutely critical not only of their self-worth to attempt it, of the narrative tools at hand but of the societal responsibility to the individual too. Society's contribution is found to be equally vital in these "downbringing-novels" (FB 132). This is cardinal in an author who states that "all my readings, my experience, my reflections and intuitions, incline [me] to the tragic view of human institutions, including political systems" (FB 119-120). This is reflected in many ways in Barth's fiction. It might be in the form of being subjected to nihilistic urges of an existentialist environment, like Horner or Todd Andrews; it might take the form of an urge to examine the concept of formal history, as a tool and as a weapon, like Ebenezer Cooke. It can work as an ideological underpinning in the recycling of a supposedly exhausted narrative by using the figure of Scheherazade as a feminist advocate and it might also be fighting the exhaustion generated and perpetuated by the society by prescribing narrative pictures of exhaustion being replenished by further exhaustion.

In *The Floating Opera*, Todd Andrews exists in the world of an expressed consciousness where the problems of articulation and existence outweigh, but not altogether negate, the problems imposed by the society. Todd is a typical product of the modern era. The experience he has been
through has left a sharp imprint on his nascent psyche. At least two defining episodes of his life—the First World War experience and the suicide of his father—are revealing the societal dimensions of his angst. His exposures to the brutalities of the war and the way he has experienced fear, are strong enough even to engulf the amity he builds up with an enemy soldier he befriends. The pathological distrust bred by war rises to such a pitch that it dries up the springs of love in him. He bayonets the man. A hypersensitive man like Todd might be exacerbated by anything, even the most obvious. What causes the suicide of his father is the financial crash of the market in 1929. The loss of the family fortune leaves the man with no other choice. Though Todd’s enquiry does not look into this in detail, they do chart a course for his nascent thought. A persistent weave of Barth’s fictional texture, the composed fictive nature of the supposed factual documents, whether of historical nature or of bureaucratic, has its mild beginning in The Floating Opera. His failure at one stage in the Mack estate lawsuit Todd attributes to the opposing lawyer’s capacity for figurative language. “I believe it was this final metaphor that won Froebel the judgement...even the judge smiled benignly at the trope” (FO 92-3). This reflects not only on the frail capacity of language to contain experience and reality, but also the fragile content of the documents which are constituted by words and figures and held to be supreme reality by the social powers to be.
The End of the Road shifts the historical scenario of the novel from the America of 1937 to that of 1951. Horner resides in the post-war America, struggling for revival in political, moral and economic fronts. Like Todd, he too is an occupant of world bereft of moral and rational institutions to live by, a consequence of corruption and brutality of the state. This in turn contributes to the disintegration of a core consciousness in Barthian figures.

The final affirmation of human existence is Des Carte’s “Cogito ergo sum”. In the present time however the “I” that thinks does so in many roles, many states of being which in turn define the “I” conditionally: the pressures of war, social change, and the integration of most of society into the corporate society require of the citizen an almost chameleon like adaptation the changing social institutional demands upon him. The result is the insecurity of a self that tries for a time to “go along”; then under the pressure of conflicting loyalties, fears, it splinters, escaping into various roles, which Barth calls mythotherapy (Hipkiss 119-120).

Jake Horner is a classic instance of this. Social orientation of more specific kind replaces this general socio-political situation in the later works.
Beginning *The Sot Weed Factor*, Barth imparts a greater role for
the society as he narrows down to particular aspects of it, rather than
projecting the general restrictive scenario. The cannon he adopts is broad
in comparison with the novels which came before, but it lays more
importance on the social scenario. The plots and symbols of the novel are
tied tightly to the history of colonial Maryland. Baltimore and Cooke are
the central figures in the saga of Maryland and they are shifty and
shadowy ones. Maryland of *The Sot Weed Factor* is not a place “of heroic
innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history”
(SWF 22), but is teeming with slavery and exploitation of the Indians. It
has a judiciary in which “nobody gets a verdict he hath not paid for”
(SWF 417).

The New World, he discovers, is a place where all the evils
of the old world persist; commercial intrigue, dishonest and
intriguing governors, hatred and violence between the
separate colonies, mob violence, conspiracy and counter
conspiracy by the French, Indians and the Dutch to seize
various colonies (Noland 24).

But as the making of colonial Maryland unfolds through them,
Ebenezer’s vision of New World recede. The “civilization versus the
abyss of savagery” (SWF 716) theme of colonialism tumbles as the
English men and women act in ways which make the aforesaid distinction invalid, provoking the question: "Does essential savagery lurk beneath the skins of civilization, or does essential civilization lurk beneath the skin of savagery?" (SWF 638). The various fabrics of the society, its history, its language and its scholarship are satirized, often hinting at the truth that in such a society it is not impossible for one Eirkopf to split tick and tock of the clock or for that matter for Burlingame to be a "suitor of totality" (SWF 526) or for Ebenezer to seek herohood in virginity and poethood. At the narrative level, this is an instance where the *regressus in infinitum* works. What Ebenezer seeks is the herohood rampant in the Eighteenth century fiction which the literary society of the period espoused. Hence it is the existence of a pseudo-social faith in the unrealisable, which is made a model of and in the process made fun of in the *The Sot Weed Factor*. The confounded Ebenezer explains: "what glory, to be singer of such sewer!" (SWF 483). The fitting epic for the land is not a "Marylandiad", but *The Sot-Weed Factor*, a satire. Rather than letting the narrative sediment into an identifiable fixed attack on the founding of America or a colony, Barth twists and turns the tale into a protean relation that simultaneously wrecks and means it all, unmasking the submerged pulls of self and society in the narrative consciousness.
Though the vagrant, playful narrative voice ultimately takes control in denying fixity of perspective or purpose, Giles Goat-Boy’s submerged moral interest is reflected in the allegorical framework it accepts and satirises. The numerous parallels it builds between the universe and university, in terms of its events and characters, are reflective of what Sartre has called the moral imperative at the heart of the aesthetic imperative (Tatham 43). Studentdom for humanity, campus riots for world war; east and west campuses for eastern and western world, Enos Enoch for Jesus Christ and so on. Giles hasn’t the capacity to distinguish between the literal and the metaphoric, art and reality. It is important that “graduation”, despite its ambivalent status in the novel, is defined as, “learning not to kill students in the name of studentdom. And the only examination that matters is not any final; it is a plan that you got to answer every minute: am I subtracting from the total misery, or adding to it?” (GGB 92). The ethical tangent of his fiction comes to the fore here. What Barth intends to do in Giles Goat-Boy is “to try to abstract the pattern and then write a novel which would consciously, even self-consciously, follow the patterns, parody the patterns, satirise the patterns, but with good luck transcend the satire a little bit in order to say some of the serious things (italics added) I had in mind to say” (Bellamy 13). The serious things presumably should include not just exposing the irreal paradigms of the literature of the past and the hollowness of the claims of
the narrative exhaustion, but also the difficulty of sustaining faith of any kind in the chaotic world depicted in the novel, "faith in the self or the roles that constitute self" (Hipkiss 96).

In both Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera, on the socio-literary and mythico-literary canvases, the ultimate emphasis falls on the problems of articulation and narrative voice. The world of Ambrose Mench is loaded with the figurative and the ironic to such an extent that even when the rare pause on the family/society occurs, it hardly focuses itself on the essentials of the environment, choosing to be eager to slither on the gliding non-retentiality of signifiers. Chimera shows the traces of the turn for the contentness, which Barth declares he has affected since Lost in the Funhouse. Scheherazade and Dunyazade are made to plot a feminist revenge against centuries of patriarchal "violations at the hands of fathers, husbands, lovers" (Schulz 31). But at the end that frame is broken and it becomes a tale-within-a-tale-within-a-tale.

Letters displays further marked advance as the massive work attempts a panoramic baroque. Much of the surrounding social scenario gets in with less ironic tone than that of say, The Sot Weed Factor or with less satirical-allegorical force than Giles Goat-Boy. The novel presents a socio-economic recreation of the sixties, the America of the Vietnam War years, a period that presents itself for a study of the nation's unenviable
core, the ugly reality at the heart of America. "Letters synthesizes many of the diverse realities at once socio-politically present and historically past known as America and assimilates our multiform national self-image, redenining it as manifest destiny of rebellion and counter rebellion" (Schulz 46). In which, to put it in Doctorow's terms, "the power of regime" and "power of language" ("False Documents" 17) clash, coalesce and come apart. The novel almost sweeps through the major chapters of the making of America, even though the breadth of the canvass denies the social emphasis of a single line of development in Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales. Apart from the metalfictional/frame tale devices, this is the other element which makes the social criticism lose its teeth. Vietnam war, Civil rights movement, diplomatic and military history, federal government dealings and foreign policy matters—all parade through the pages of the text. The petty academic politics is marked off as a chief target of the expose in LETTERS, primarily through Lady Amherst. But working at loggerheads always is the multiple-ironic frame of the text. "As such the text of the LETTERS not only subverts in multiple ways the myth by which they have conducted their lives, but also demythologises the idea of an official, or received, history by showing it in the process of being mythologised" (Schulz 123). This is the prime channel through which Barth effects his stinging attacks on the contemporary powers that be and society. The hesitancy on the part of
critics in legitimising the political content of Barth is reflected in the statement of Stan and Gordon: “Barth is, in one sense, the least political of postmodern writers because he takes up no cause virulently or whole heartedly, but also he is very political in his criticism of those elements that threaten the rights of both individuals and communities” (163).

While I have very little faith in the political institutions and I am not finally deeply interested in the ideological quarrels in the former century neither am I finally cynical about them and I admire most people who are so utterly disillusioned about these things and, yet find reason to attempt to do something in the cause of social justice. So, I still remain in my heart an anarchist, in my head a socialist but finally I have as great faith in the potentiality of any kind of system,

states Barth (Schulz 120-121). In a manner of speaking, Barth has enough reason to admire himself for many of his protagonists subscribe to the dictum of “perfect scepticism in opinions, incorrigible optimism in actions” (Lemon 157). The sailing saga of Fennwick and Susan Sagamore is an attempt by John Barth to engage the theme of social justice in a prominent way. The fake patriotism, which maligns the life of its citizens and the nefarious deals of its federal organizations, is stringently attacked
in the text. With almost Doctorowian energy, Barth pulls up the dearth of justice in the power play of the authorities. A major thread of the plot involves the sinister machinations of the CIA among the issues of feminism and pollution. Fennwick is an ex-CIA agent, who has done an expose of the agency's covert, questionable dealings in particularly Chile and Iran. His twin brother Manfred has been missing and Fenn suspects him to be a victim of CIA skulduggery. Another presumably dead one due to the nefarious dealings of the Agency is Gus, Manfred's son. He has left for Chile with anti-Pinochet exiles and has been missing ever since.

The sterility in question in *Sabbatical* is not only natural but to a great extent social too. The protected self-made world of Fenn and Susan which is also the fictional world they have composed for us, their life story, is besieged by the destructive forces of contemporary society and weakened at its center by self-doubt and indecision. Fenn's involvement with CIA constantly troubles his mind. Being familiar with the retaliatory tactics of the Agency, his life is beset with fear and uncertainty. The crime-laden path he has traversed as part of the organization in the past makes him feel guilty which radiates through his narrative and unsettles his self.
The novel has a generous cast of those tortured, traumatized or supposedly killed by the state machinery's clandestine operations. Gus's mother Carmen is a victim of the Nazi concentration camps in her girlhood. Susan's twin sister Miriam is the target of torture by the Shah of Iran's secret police. To accommodate the startling acts of gross violations of personhood, the narrative often turns to reportage, once incorporating twenty pages excerpted from the *Baltimore Sun*. The journalistic excerpts, after all, only offer contradictory material, as to whether it is suicide, murder, apparent cover up or squelching of an operation. Still the pitch of such stories and the impact of it on him make him feel, "the pinch of one's personal destiny as it spins itself out upon the wheel" (Walkiewics 143). Fenn and Susan going through this kind of life are unable to sort out their personal issues. To be *and* not to be a writer or a teacher confuses them.

In *Sabbatical* Barth intensifies his attack on formal documents through which the state wields its oppressive power on individuals. This time the target is not history, but the information dished out by the federal governmental agencies like CIA and their reliability. Apart from landing on an island the existence of which the CIA has kept under wraps, it also seems to emphasise the fraud played on people by the society. A man whose oeuvre is preoccupied with authority of any kind in any domain of life, *Sabbatical* trains its narrative guns on the falsification of the
verifiable by the politically crooked. The deliberate dis/misinformation always wrecks the living individuals. The interrogation of the social injustice perpetrated by the supposed guardians of public morality finally lands the investigator in to the fictive-factual phenomenon called life, as it is with Joe in Doctorow’s Loon Lake. Every one holds back information, including Fenn and Susan. If at all they all sense success in putting it straight and perfect, the language denies, defies and sabotages the act. They decide to remain, “right at the fork; right at the hub” (S 359).

Peter and Catherine take over not only the voyage of Fenn and Susan in Tidewater Tales. The pressures of contemporary existence also continue to exert its hold on the lives and narrative. The operations of the federal agency and the travails of the global pollution possess a significant space in it. Tidewater Tales has John Arthur Paisley as the disappeared CIA agent. His body, which first floats in on the final page of Letters, floats through Sabbatical and Tidewater Tales, gradually rising to strength in the final appearance. Most of the characters embroiled in the socio-political events in the novel return in Tidewater Tales under new names like Frederick Mansfield Talbott, son Jonathan, Doug Townshend etc. The lethal interference of the government in the lives of these and the rest as well as the distortion and manipulation of communication is unveiled in the novel. The deaths of these people are consequence of the violations mentioned. As Peter states:
What we're against, sentimental stock liberals that we are, is our governments collusion in—not to say its systematic well funded direction of assassination, torture, clandestine warfare, the clandestine undermining of other peoples elected governments, the clandestine harassment of and illegal general scooping upon our own citizens—things like that—you know, by anybody from our intelligence community down to our local cops (TT 238).

Peter and Katherine are politically interested as they are in their narrative and Katherine's anger at the unwarranted imperial intervention of USA in the intellectual affairs of other countries make her form HOOSCA: "Hands Off South And Central America" (TT 66). In a similar vein, the novel confronts the matter of pollution. Making it a dumping ground for waste pollutes the Chesapeake Bay and the surrounding area. Susan's brother and ex-husband are both involved in illegal disposal of waste. The CIA agent Doug Townshend attempts to recruit Peter as "some genuine writer needs to know what's going on" (TT 252). But the more Peter knows about the CIA operations, the less he writes, lapsing into a final silence. Doug Townshend's tragic view of central Intelligence Agency is symptomatic of the social investigation of all the three authors under the study. "Covert government security operations, like organized criminal operations, are cancers in the body democratic. They have in
common that they corrupt and falsify individuals and institutions. They widen the gap between what things represent them to be and what they are. They debase the very language” (TT 261). What is interesting is that the charges against this institutional corruption are precisely the one that is levelled against language and the occupational hazard of working with language.

The social consciousness in John Barth, it is argued, has been slow in awakening to respond assertively to the heinous acts of treachery and denial nakedly espoused by powers that be. But the common critical charge of conspicuous absence of social concern in the works of Barth is greatly because of the inability to fathom the social impulse “disguised by layers of parody”, right from The Floating Opera itself (Bradbury 69). It is the result of the critical tendency to write off the serious import of the satiric/parodic intent that makes commentators thinks of Jane Austin when dealing with Barth. Barth himself has stated the need of acknowledging the significance of the satiric mode of writing, when he states that “the imitation...is something new and may be quite serious and passionate despite its parodic aspect” (FB 72).

“Confluence of potentialities”. Arthur Saltzman’s term for encapsulating the characteristics of Robert Coover’s fiction, can sum up the fictional exercise of John Barth (12). He writes novels which
ceaselessly exfoliate into sub-narratives and supra narratives, the semblance of convergence, confluence, bursting forth into the potentialities, with the generative tension of convergence and divergence always approximating each other. Hence the quest is off/for self, to relate the quest and then to explore the destined failure of it too. Self-language-society-language-self-narrative continuum exists. The endeavour, which begins as the individual is caught in the circular rut of the mind/thoughts, gradually gets embroiled in the traps of language and the life around him. The labyrinth of the self-society-language symbolizes life—the journey as destination. The already existing feelings of being overwhelmed by the failure to take stock of one are intensified by the social betrayal and the failure of communication. But articulation is self-revolt. Barth's characters' incomprehension delivers them into the decision to 'live', extending and supplementing life with art. The initial self-exploratory fervour fades in to narrative saturation, bowing to the infinite spiral of life, infinite deferral of sense. What is sedimented, in Barth's words, is "a spooky simulacrum of sense" (qtd. in Bellamy 19). Geoffrey Harpham considers Doctorow "as a creator of texts whose ambivalences define his central continuing concern, narrative itself, and its relation to power, imagination and belief" (82). The statement effectively encapsulates the fiction of John Barth.