THE SOT-WEED FACTOR'S IRONIC NARRATOR

Since its publication, critics have repeatedly discussed John Barth's flaunting of artifice in *The Sot-Weed Factor,* citing as evidence his complex manipulation of historical material and his parodic use of the eighteenth-century picaresque form. The novel does indeed parody such conventions as the wandering hero struggling to survive in a chaotic world, the circling of characters who disappear and later reenter his life unexpectedly, the hero's loss and eventual reacquisition of his fortune, and the seemingly interminable series of wildly coincidental events. However, it is in his sparse and subtle use of a narrator that Barth reveals most clearly his ironic intentions

Traditionally, the picaresque has been characterized by a large degree of subjectivity that emanates from the language of a first-person narrator While Barth does not grant his picaro the liberty of telling his own story, the author does capture some of the traditional picaresque's intense, individual verbal activity by offering a variety of characters who comment freely on their experiences. However, what initially appears to be a freedom of expression is actually restricted by the nameless narrator who stands behind the work and ultimately controls the presentation of events and even the dialogue of the various characters. His presence is especially obvious in his contributions to the novel's arrangement and presentation of chapters and in his intrusions in the brief conclusion, "The Author Apologizes to His Readers, The Laureate Composes His Epitaph." To better understand his role in the first of these features, one should consider the common practice in eighteenth-century novels of dividing separate actions into convenient chapters, a tendency Philip Stevick acknowledges when suggesting that

> eighteenth-century novelists may write in chapters because experience itself can be said to consist of chapters, because the alternating frustrations and fulfillments of life can be given a powerfully dramatic form simply by the act of segmenting the narrative, because the attention and the imagination of the reader are adaptable to small narrative units rather than to long, unbroken ones, and because the technical demands of writing a novel with its scenic shifts, its omissions, and so on, are easier to meet when the narrative is divided [1]

These comments accurately describe the method of one of Barth's favorite writers, Tobias Smollett, and they hint at still another curious feature of the eighteenth-century novel. In the table of contents to *Roderick Random,* Smollett's narrator presents each chapter with a brief description of its activities, and in a representative section, he writes

> She is interrupted by a bailiff, who arrests and carries her to the Marshalsea – I accompany her – bring witnesses to prove she is not the person named in the writ – The bailiff is fain to give her a present and discharge her – We shift our lodging – She resumes her story, and ends it – My reflections thereupon – She makes me acquainted with the progress of a common woman of the town – resolves to quit that way of life.

Like all the novel's chapters, this one recounts a series of major events but is vague about any philosophical material; whenever such material is mentioned, the narrator uses an abstract term such as "reflections."

In *The Sot-Weed Factor,* Barth uses his narrator to parody these practices by dividing action into nu-

merous chapters and by giving each a ridiculous summation. An early example demonstrates this trait by stating, "Ebenezer Returns to His Companions, Finds Them Fewer by One, Leaves Them Fewer by Another, and Reflects a Reflection." Here, as in *Roderick Random,* the philosophical material is described as a "reflection," but later in the table of contents, the narrator goes a step further by listing in absurd detail the convolutions of one of these reflections.

> The Poet Wonders Whether the Course of Human History Is a Progress, a Drama, a Retrogression, a Cycle, an Undulation, a Vortex, a Right- or Left-Handed Spiral, a Mere Continuum, or What Have You Certain Evidence Is Brought Forward, but of an Ambiguous and Inconclusive Nature.

Similarly, he mocks the attempt to encapsulate a range of action in another description which reads:

> The Laureate Is Exposed to Two Assassinations of Character, a Piracy, a Near-Deflowering, a Near-Mutiny, a Murder, and an Appalling Colloquy Between Captains of the Sea, All Within the Space of a Few Pages

In this case, the anti-climatic ending elicits humor by calling attention to the novel's artifice Without a clearly ironic narrator, Barth could not self-consciously reveal this artificial practice and thus successfully parody such a characteristic feature of the eighteenth-century novel.

More important than these intrusions, however, is the omniscient narrator's appearance in the concluding chapter. Here he both apologizes for his lengthy tale and simultaneously justifies any liberties he has taken with the facts of his characters' lives. He echoes the philosophy of Henry Burlingame III when noting, "We are invent our pasts, more or less, as we go along, at the dictates of Whim and Interest; the happenings of former times are a clay in the present moment that will-we, nill-we, the lot of us must sculpt." Overriding "the rival claims of Fact and Fancy . . . with fair impunity," he proceeds to complete his description of the fates of the work's various characters.

It is his cavalier attitude which further emphasizes the novel's concern with a self-conscious presentation of artifice, and the following remark by Barth defines this attitude in both the author and the narrator, "I still regard literature as a form of pleasure; and while there are lots of pleasures, including the pleasures of vertigo, I myself like a kind of action that if it's going to be self-conscious, is at least comic about its own self-consciousness. Otherwise, self-consciousness can be a bloody bore."[2] Throughout the chapter, the narrator speaks in a completely farcical manner about the hero's ironic fortunes (for instance, after renouncing poetry, Ebenezer Cooke becomes the champion of London with the publication of "The Sot-Weed Factor" and is named Poet Laureate of Maryland by one of the Baltimore heirs) and about his own fickle muse, Clio, whom he feels should be "convict[ed] . . . on the charge of shamelessness."

In this final chapter, the narrator continually forces himself between the reader and the novel's characters and reminds us that whatever we may know about them, he has allowed us to discover. Although he is largely absent from the work, his is a final voice that informs the narrative, a voice that leaves one contemplating Burlingame's contention about history. Burlingame repeatedly warns Ebenezer that what is often taken for

the veracity of historical fact is little more than a subjective interpretation of events and personalities; these are, he argues, "acts of faith, impossible to verify." Similarly, Barth's narrator, through his manipulations of events and characters' lives, emphasizes that historical, as well as fictional, fact can never be proven The point, finally, is to recognize that lack of proof and appreciate the ambiguity and openness of human experience and fictional formulations.

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1 Philip Stevick, "The Theory of Fictional Chapters," in *The Theory of the Novel* (New York, 1967), p 182

2 Joe David Bellamy, "Having it Both Ways," *New American Review*, 15 (1972), p 144

Queries

A satire on F.D.R. – Re "A Stranger Stood at the Gates of Hell." I am trying to run down a copy of the poem of which the first line is given above, and which I understand to be a bit extended.

I enclose a copy of a part of it, which is all my informant remembers, which he learned as a teenager about 1945, and he did not then have the foresight to keep the copy:

A stranger stood at the gates of Hell
And the devil himself had answered the bell
He looked him over from head to toe
And said "My friend, I'd like to know
"What you have done in the line of sin
"To entitle you to come within "

Then Franklin D , with usual smile
Stepped forth and flashed his toothy grin
"When I took charge in '33 a Nation's fate was mine, said he
"I promised this and I promised that
"And I calmed them down with a fireside chat

– *Conn Withers, Withers, Brant & Howard, 17 East Kansas St., Liberty, Missouri 64068*

Authors and Scholars in Old Age – I have recently noted Theodore B. Mitchell, *A Generic Revision of the Megachiline Bees of the Western Hemisphere* (Raleigh, Department of Entomology, North Carolina State University, 1980), a major contribution to the study of the Family Megachilidae. Dr. Mitchell was born on 26 October 1890. There have probably been creative scholars and scientists who produced significant work beyond the age of 90, and it will be interesting to push the date upward. George Bernard Shaw wrote *Buoyant Billions* (1949), a basically unimportant work, at the age of 93. What nonagenarians have been productive after the ages of Dr. Mitchell and G B.S.? - *L.S.T.*

Tizwan – Several years ago, I was in an Indian community in New Mexico and heard a giggling reference to "tizwin." Is this a drug, a sexual reference, or possibly some kind of stimulant? – *James R. Ramirez, Dallas, Texas*