

JOHN BARTH, EBENEZER COOKE,

AND

THE LITERATURE OF EXHAUSTION

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## Preface

Current predictions that the novel is dying are troublesome to contemporary authors who write in that genre. For one contemporary novelist, John Barth, there are two possible responses to this dilemma: To ignore it completely or confront it directly. Barth chooses the second alternative. He feels that the contemporary writer must be aware of the history of his genre without becoming paralyzed by this knowledge. With this history in mind, the author must then write technically up-to-date novels. At the same time, however, the novelist must continue to treat issues of the human heart.

One way to acknowledge the history of literature is to imitate, with ironic intent, an earlier work. Barth does so in The Sot-Weed Factor. By imitating a 1708 poem by Ebenezer Cooke, Barth acknowledges that the history of literature does not begin with himself. And through his embellishments and exaggerations of Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor, Barth creates an absurdly complex novel that satirizes the very work it imitates. The complexity of Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor reflects the complexity of the modern world, thereby speaking to the hearts of its readers. Barth's use of Cooke's life and poem is not an attempt at neo-primitivism. Instead, the novelist creates a new form of literature, the "literature of exhaustion," and extends the life of a genre declared dead.

## Cooke, Barth, and the Plot of The Sot-Weed Factor

In the foreword to his novel The Sot-Weed Factor, John Barth refers to a poem by the same name and to its author, Ebenezer Cooke. This reference is far from casual, for much of Barth's novel is based upon the life and works of this Colonial American poet. Barth's hero, also named Ebenezer Cooke, is a combination of the historical figure and the ludicrous narrator of Cooke's poem, The Sot-Weed Factor, and many of Ebenezer's misadventures have their sources in the poem. The satiric tone of both the eighteenth-century poem and the twentieth-century novel are also very similar. The satiric targets include the characters described, the hero of the action, the British attitude toward Colonial America, and, at times, the reader himself. In order to understand fully Barth's debt to Cooke, one must first examine carefully both Cooke's life and works--specifically his poem, The Sot-Weed Factor.

Concrete facts about Ebenezer Cooke are scarce, but a sketchy account of his life can be pieced together from Maryland historical records and from the poet's published works. Cooke's father's estate in Maryland plays a prominent role in Barth's novel. Therefore it is important to know how Ebenezer's grandfather, Andrew Cooke, acquired these New World holdings. The earliest reference to Andrew Cooke in Maryland occurs in 1661. In this year, he served on a jury panel in St. Mary's City, and he received a license to trade with the Indians and also with settlers throughout Maryland.<sup>1</sup> The following year, he

<sup>1</sup>Edward H. Cohen, Ebenezer Cooke: The Sot-Weed Canon (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 6.

began to engage in land transactions. Andrew Cooke is mentioned in land records in both Kent and Dorchester Counties, Maryland.<sup>2</sup> "In March 1662 he purchased from one Thomas Manning 'five hund<sup>d</sup> Acres of Land called Malden, Lying on the East side of Chesapeack Bay, & on the Branch of a River called Choptanck River,' in Dorchester County."<sup>3</sup> Later transactions increased Cooke's holdings to one thousand acres, and he renamed this estate "Cooke Poynt."<sup>4</sup> There he built a manor house in which he resided. For the next six years, Andrew Cooke continued to increase his holdings in the New World. In 1664, he requested two hundred acres of land in return for transporting four people from England to America. Among these four was another Andrew, presumably the son of the patentee.

This same year, the elder Andrew Cooke returned to England. His son followed him one year later and, on August 1, 1665, in London, married Anne Bowyer.<sup>5</sup> Apparently the couple had two children, Anna and Ebenezer, though the places and dates of their births are uncertain. Most authorities agree that they were probably born within three years

<sup>2</sup>Philip E. Diser, "The Historical Ebenezer Cook," Critique, 10 (Summer, 1968), 49.

<sup>3</sup>Cohen, Cooke, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Lawrence C. Wroth, "The Maryland Muse of Ebenezer Cooke: A Facsimile, with an Introduction," American Antiquarian Society Proceedings, 44 (October, 1934), 270.

of the marriage, but it is not known whether these births occurred in Maryland or England.<sup>6</sup> Barth prefers Maryland, but his preference seems based as much on artistic purpose as on historical fact. The younger Andrew Cooke apparently returned to Maryland where he managed his father's estate throughout the 1660's.<sup>7</sup>

Little is actually known about Ebenezer Cooke's early life. He probably travelled back and forth between England and Maryland and may have prepared for a career in law. His poem The Sot-Weed Factor suggests that he attended Cambridge. The first concrete reference to Ebenezer Cooke occurs in the Archives of Maryland: in 1694, he signed a petition against the removal of the capital from St. Mary's City to Annapolis. In 1708, his poem The Sot-Weed Factor: or, a Voyage to Maryland was published in London.<sup>8</sup>

Ebenezer's father, Andrew Cooke "of the parish of St. Giles in the Fields in the County of Middlesex," died on either December 31, 1711, or January 1, 1712. His will, probated on January 2, bequeathed to Anna and Ebenezer "Cooke Poynt," as well as two houses in London.<sup>9</sup> Because Ebenezer was himself one of the executors, he may have been in England at this time.<sup>10</sup> In 1717, Ebenezer sold his share of "Cooke's Poynt"

<sup>6</sup>Wroth theorizes that Ebenezer was born in England approximately one year after the marriage, while Cohen feels that both children were native Marylanders raised in England.

<sup>7</sup>Cohen, Cooke, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup>Harris E. Starr, ed., DAB, 11 (New York: Scribner's, 1944), p. 190.

<sup>9</sup>Diser, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>Wroth, p. 271.

to Edward Cooke, probably his cousin, and Anna sold her share to Henry Trippe.<sup>11</sup> Ebenezer may or may not have been present in Maryland during this transaction. However, by 1720 he definitely had returned to America, because he then began acting as deputy receiver-general under a commission from Henry Lowe, Jr., marking the beginning of a long relationship between Cooke and the Lowe family. When Henry Lowe died, Cooke held the same position under Bennett Lowe and later under other receivers-general.<sup>12</sup> Cooke's primary responsibility as deputy seems to have been the leasing of lands, and he received substantial commissions from these numerous transactions which most likely provided his livelihood during the early twenties.<sup>13</sup> However, Cooke may also have practiced law during this period. On January 10, 1722/3, John Fox of Virginia, a minor poet, wrote a letter, accompanied by a long poem, to Thomas Bordley, attorney general of Maryland. In this communication, Fox requested that Bordley hire him as a law clerk. To prove that, though a poet, he was qualified to serve in this position, Fox refers to the career of Ebenezer Cooke: "Yet could I hope from his Example/To tread the Rode great Lawyers Trample."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Diser, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup>J. A. Leo Lemay, Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1972), p. 93.

<sup>13</sup>Edward H. Cohen, "The Elegies of Ebenezer Cooke," Early American Literature, 4 (1969), 50.

<sup>14</sup>Lemay, p. 93.



After 1722 Cooke apparently left his position as deputy receiver-general, for his name no longer appears in Maryland land records. Edward Cohen, who has studied Cooke extensively, suggests that "the establishment of the first printing press in Annapolis, in 1726, reawakened Cooke's Muse and coaxed him away from public service."<sup>15</sup> Cooke did retain his interest in public affairs, however, for in 1728 he was admitted to the bar in Prince George County. A single entry in the court records of that county, among the proceedings of the August court in 1728, is the only official record of Cooke's career in law.<sup>16</sup> His poems, however, do reflect a knowledge of Latin and of court procedure.<sup>17</sup> After this reference, Cooke disappears almost entirely from official records. For an account of his later life, historians are almost entirely dependent upon the poet's published works.<sup>18</sup>

Cooke's works first began to be published in this country in 1726 when, in October, William Parks printed "An Elogy on the Death of Thomas Bordley, Esq; late Comissary and Attorney-General, in the Province of Maryland." This work is signed "Ebenezer Cook, Poet Laureate of Maryland."<sup>19</sup> A second elegy, "An Elogy on the Death of the Honourable Nicholas Lowe, Esq." was published in the Maryland Gazette sometime

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, "Elegies," p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> Wroth, p. 272.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, "Elegies," p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

between December 17 and 24, 1728, and was also signed with the mysterious title of Laureate.<sup>20</sup> Where or when Cooke received this title is entirely unknown. Lemay speculates that it could have been bestowed upon him by Thomas Bordley, attorney-general of Maryland. But Lemay adds, as do most Cooke scholars, that the title was most likely a joke.<sup>21</sup>

In discussing the elegy on Nicholas Lowe, critics have speculated over the cause of the subtly satiric tone at the end of the poem when Cooke writes of a married Nicholas Lowe, who died "a Batchelor at Last." There is, in fact, evidence of a personal disagreement between the two men. In the May Term, 1729, of the Provincial Prerogative Court, Mary Young, a spinster of St. Mary's County, argued that Nicholas Lowe's executors had deprived her of "personal chattels" legally bequeathed to her. Among the witnesses called in her behalf was Ebenezer Cooke. Though the precise nature of Cooke's testimony is not known, another witness stated on May 30, 1729, "That sometime before the said Mr. Lowe was telling this Deponent of some scandal raised by one Ebenezer Cooke upon the said Mr. Lowe and one Mary Young that the said Lowe said he did not regard it for his own part so much, but as for the young Woman he was troubled for her he never saw any harm by her--and she did not deserve it, for she had lost her good name in his house & he thought in Conscience he ought to see she had satisfaction made for it."<sup>22</sup> This

<sup>20</sup>Diser, p. 49

<sup>21</sup>Lemay, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup>Cohen, "Elegies," pp. 54-55.

suggestion of a scandal raised by Cooke may have caused his ridicule of Lowe in his elegy. Still further cause is suggested in a letter of Edward Cooke, Ebenezer's uncle. According to the letter, the poet, too, took a fancy to Mary Young. He decided one night to express his affection by climbing in her bedroom window. To his surprise, he found her bed already well-occupied, by Miss Young and Nicholas Lowe. Thus Cooke's "first-hand knowledge of Lowe's personal activities" might well have inspired the lampoon found in the elegy.<sup>23</sup>

Records of the remainder of Cooke's life are scant. In 1730 his Sotweed Redivivus, a discussion of the economic situation in Maryland, was published at Annapolis. In 1731 The Maryland Muse was published, also in Annapolis. This work contains a satiric account of Bacon's Rebellion and a revised, less caustic, version of The Sot-Weed Factor. Evidence suggests that a second edition of this poem had been published earlier, though apparently no copy is extant. An elegy "on the death of the Honorable William Lock, Esq.," the last of Cooke's works signed "laureate," was written in 1732 and is the last known record of Ebenezer Cooke's life. Wroth suggests that the poet, who was sixty or more at the time he wrote this elegy, died soon after its composition.<sup>24</sup> Another elegy, this one to Benedict Leonard Calvert, is also attributed to Cooke, though no date for its composition has been established.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>24</sup>Wroth, p. 274.

<sup>25</sup>Cohen, "Elegies," p. 59.

That John Barth is familiar with Ebenezer Cooke's background is evident from the many parallels between the colonial poet and Barth's character of the same name. Barth admits, in fact, that he had been reading Maryland historical records, which contain many details of the poet's life, before he began writing his novel. He uses these details in several ways. Most of the dates and many of the facts that Barth gives for his character's life are historically accurate. Also, several characters that Ebenezer meets were actual acquaintances of the historical figure.

Though details of Ebenezer Cooke's life are obscure, Barth still manages to incorporate the few known facts into his story. For example, Ebenezer's father tells him that in the summer of 1665 he returned from Maryland to London where he met and married Anne Bowyer. The date historians have established for the actual wedding is August 1, 1665. Barth must invent a childhood for his character, but whenever facts about the historical figure are available, Barth uses them. For example, references in Cooke's poems suggest that he went to Cambridge; Barth's character is first seen as he is about to end his career at that university. The Colonial poet's father was from St. Giles in the Fields; the childhood that Barth creates for Ebenezer is spent in St. Giles. Andrew Cooke owned two houses in London; Barth, likewise, gives such houses to his characters and even provides an address, Plumtree Street, for one of them.

Much of Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor chronicles Ebenezer's search for and attempts to regain his Maryland estate. Like the historical Cooke's estate, Ebenezer's plantation is located on the Choptank River

at Cooke's Point in Maryland. Furthermore, both the historical and the fictional estates were purchased from "One Thomas and Grace his wife,"<sup>26</sup> inherited by Anna and Ebenezer in 1712, and later sold to Henry Trippe and Edward Cooke.

The fictional character's later life also closely resembles the historical Cooke's. Barth's Ebenezer spends this time working for Henry and Bennett Lowe and writing poetry, the same activities that occupied the historical figure, and the poems that the two publish have identical titles. Indeed, the only fact with which Barth's account disagrees is that the historical figure signed a Maryland petition in 1694, before Barth's character would have been able to. Barth accounts for the discrepancy by having Burlingame sign Ebenezer's name to such a petition.

In addition to facts, Barth also borrows acquaintances from Cooke and develops them into characters. For example, the first edition of The Sot-Weed Factor was published in 1708 by B. Bragg of Paternoster Row. Barth's Ebenezer knows a Benjamin Bragg in London, the owner of a stationery shop in Paternoster Row. Ebenezer steals the notebook in which he writes his poetry from Bragg and later, in 1708, after Ebenezer

<sup>26</sup> John Barth, The Sot-Weed Factor (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1967), p. 717. All subsequent references to the novel are from the same edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. The 1967 revised edition is used because it contains revisions made by the author himself. These revisions, which Barth feels makes the "long narrative a quantum swifter and more graceful," are mainly stylistic and have little effect on the subject discussed in this thesis. For a discussion of Barth's revisions, see Enoch P. Jordan, "'A Quantum Swifter and More Graceful' John Barth's revisions of The Sot-Weed Factor," Proof 5 (1977).

writes the poem about his travels in Maryland, Burlingame sends it to Bragg for publication.

Another acquaintance shared by the historical and fictional Cooke is Nicholas Lowe, for whom both write elegies. In Barth's novel, Burlingame frequently impersonates Lowe and, when Ebenezer meets the real Lowe, he still believes him to be his early tutor. According to Barth, the ambiguous tone of the elegy to Lowe results from Ebenezer's own mixed feelings about Burlingame.

Perhaps more interesting than Barth's direct borrowing from Cooke's life are the novelist's embellishments of some of the more obscure facts. For example, since scholars have been unable to determine where or when Ebenezer Cooke and his sister, Anna, were born, Barth provides these details for his characters. In The Sot-Weed Factor, Andrew and Anne Cooke leave for Maryland soon after their marriage. Anne is pregnant when they arrive in the New World. Soon after their arrival, she dies giving birth to twins, Anna and Ebenezer. Barth has his characters born in America for thematic reasons. Much of The Sot-Weed Factor concerns Ebenezer's search for his identity, a search that appropriately leads him back to the place of his birth, Malden. Because of Barth's "clarification" of history, Ebenezer's physical search for his estate parallels his psychological search for his identity. Barth also makes Ebenezer and his sister twins. Again, this embellishment of history helps to develop a theme of the novel. Ebenezer, in searching for his identity, discovers that he has declared himself a virgin in part to battle his incestuous desire for Anna, a desire that Burlingame insists is common among twins. Finally, while scholars are unsure of when

Ebenezer Cooke died, Barth provides his own date of death for his character, the spring of 1732, and he even writes this epitaph:<sup>27</sup>

Here moulds a posing, foppish Actor,  
 Author of THE SOT-WEED FACTOR,  
 Falsely praise'd. Take Heed, who sees this  
 Epitaph; look ye to Jesus!  
 Labour not for Earthly Glory:  
 Fame's a fickle Slut, and whory.  
 From thy Fancy's chast couch drive her:  
 He's a Fool who'll strive to swive her!  
 (pp. 755-76)

Again this embellishment of history helps to develop Barth's theme of confused identity. As shown in the epitaph, Ebenezer ultimately does find the identity for which he has searched throughout the novel--he realizes that he is but a "posing, foppish Actor."

Clearly, Barth was aware of the life of colonial poet Ebenezer Cooke when he wrote The Sot-Weed Factor. The few facts known about Cooke are repeated accurately in Barth's novel. However, Barth seems even more interested in the poet's writing than in his life. Barth draws many incidents in his novel from Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor, and so before one can understand how Barth uses Cooke's poem, one must examine the poem closely.

The first edition of The Sot-Weed Factor, as we have seen, was published in 1708 by B. Bragg of Pater-Noster Row, London. The frontispiece describes the work as "A Satyr. In which is described, The Laws, Government, Courts and Constitutions of the Country; and also the

<sup>27</sup>"John Barth: An Interview," with John J. Enck, Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6 (1965), 8.

Buildings, Feasts, Frolicks, Entertainments and Drunken Humours of the Inhabitants of that Part of America." The poem, written in the style of Samuel Butler's Hudibras particularly appropriate to the story and narrator, relates the misadventures of an English sot-weed factor, or tobacco merchant, on his first visit to the colonies. It begins with an explanation of his reasons for leaving England:

Condemn'd by Fate to wayward Curse,  
Of Friends unkind, and empty Purse;  
Plagues worse than fill'd Pandora's Box<sup>28</sup>  
I took my leave of Albion's Rocks.

The woeful narrator then describes his journey to Maryland, during which he was "For full three Months . . . Shock'd by the Terrours of the Main." The narrator arrives safely in "Piscato-way," but the terrors he finds there are almost equal to those faced at sea. To his surprise, the planters are not proper English gentlemen, but are attired "In Shirts and Drawers of Scotch-cloth Blue./With neither Stockings, Hat nor Shooe" (p. 2). The amazed sot-weed factor describes the planters as:

Figures so strange, no God design'd,  
To be a part of Humane Kind:  
But wanton Nature, void of Rest,  
Moulded the brittle Clay in Jest. (p. 2)

The merchant equates these native Marylanders with Cain and the "detested Race," and condemns Maryland as "that Shoar, where no good Sense is found,/But Conversation's lost, and Manners drown'd" (p. 3).

<sup>28</sup>Ebenezer Cooke, The Sot-Weed Factor, in Early Maryland Poetry, Bernard C. Steiner, ed. (Baltimore, 1900), p. 1. The first edition is used because this is the edition that John Barth uses in his novel The Sot-Weed Factor. All subsequent references to the poem are from the same edition.



Indeed, the lack of good sense in Maryland seems to infect all who set foot on the shore, for the narrator, himself, next crosses a river in a canoe while "standing Erect, with Legs stretch'd wide."

On the far shore, new troubles greet him. There "A ravenous Gang bent on the stroul,/Of Wolves for Prey, began to howl" (p. 3). The fierce wolves, however, are soon discovered to be a herd of cattle being driven home by a young boy. The greenhorn narrator asks the boy where he might find a bed for the night. The "surely Peasant" mistakes him for a runaway servant and asks from whom he is running. The narrator reports:

Surprized at such a saucy Word,  
I instantly lugg'd out my Sword;  
Swearing I was no Fugitive,  
But from Great-Britain did arrive,  
In hopes I better there might Thrive. (p. 3)

The disagreement is resolved without violence and the boy invites the narrator home. The boy's father, a planter, welcomes the sot-weed factor and provides him with bed and board, but the fare is too coarse for the delicate Englishman's palate. Despite his guest's reaction, the planter continues his hospitality, sharing his "Cag of Rum" with him. The merchant gladly imbibes and reports that it "got so soon into my Head/I scarce cou'd find my way to Bed" (p. 5). He is helped to his room by a chamber maid, a "Bedlam-Bess." The narrator questions her and learns how she came to Maryland. She claims that she was kidnapped, brought to America, and forced to work as a servant. After living in America for two years, she escaped. She reports:

Kidnap'd and Fool'd, I hither fled,  
To shun a hated Nuptial Bed,  
And to my cost already find,  
Worse Plagues than those I left behind. (pp. 5-6)

Cooke tells his reader, in a footnote, that this excuse is commonly given by English women who sell themselves or are sold to servant-dealers.

The narrator of the poem also doubts the woman's story:

Whate'er the Wanderer did profess,  
 Good-faith I cou'd not choose but guess.  
 The Cause which brought her to this place,  
 Was supping e'er the Priest said Grace. (p. 6)

The narrator settles down to sleep, but as he is dropping off, a battle begins:

A Puss which in the ashes lay,  
 With grunting Pig began a Fray;  
 And prudent Dog, that Feuds might cease,  
 Most strongly bark'd to keep the Peace.  
 This Quarrel scarcely was decided,  
 By stick that ready lay provided;  
 But Reynard arch and cunning Loon,  
 Broke into my Appartment soon;  
 In hot pursuit of Ducks and Geese,  
 With fell intent the same to seize:  
 Their Cackling Plaints with strange surprize,  
 Chac'd Sleeps thick Vapours from my Eyes:  
 Raging I jump'd upon the Floar,  
 And like a Drunken Saylor Swore;  
 With Sword I fiercely laid about,  
 And soon dispers'd the Feather'd Rout: (p. 6)

The narrator, overheated by his "combat," strolls out into the orchard and lies down on a bank, expecting to pass the remainder of the night there. But Fortune, "that saucy Whore," has other plans. The croaking of the frogs, "Such Peals the Dead to Life would bring" (p. 7), disturbs his sleep even when he stuffs his ears with "Cotten white." He soon learns to be thankful for his hearing, however, when the hissing of a rattlesnake sends him climbing up a tree. He is forced to pass the night hidden in this tree, plagued by "curst Muskitoes." When morning finally arrives, the Englishman returns to his host's house where he breakfasts on bear meat washed down with rum. After breakfast he sets

out for Battletown, guided by the planter's eldest son and carried by the planter's horse. On the way, these two are confronted by an Indian. Cooke's description of this "savage" is colorful:

No mortal Creature can express,  
 His wild fantastick Air and Dress;  
 His painted Skin in colours dy'd  
 His sable Hair in Satchel ty'd,  
 Shew'd savages not free from Pride:  
 His tawny Thighs, and Bosom bare,  
 Disdain'd a useless Coat to wear,  
 Scorn'd Summer's Heat, and Winters Air;  
 His manly Shoulders such as please,  
 Widows and Wives, were bath'd in Grease  
 Of Cub and Bear whose supple Oil  
 Prepare'd his limbs 'gainst Heat or Toil.  
 Thus naked Pict in Battel fought,  
 Or undisguis'd his Mistress sought;  
 And knowing well his Ware was good,  
 Refus'd to screen it with a Hood. (p. 8)

The sot-weed factor tries to flee, but his horse, more familiar with the ways of the New World, refuses to run. So the narrator gives the Indian some rum and goes safely on his way. A debate ensues, between the factor and his guide, over "whether this Race was framed by God/Or whether some Malignant pow'r,/Contriv'd them in an evil hour" (p. 9). The narrator is amused that the Planter's son tries to debate "like a Politician" when he has not had the benefit of "Mother Cambridge Learning" as the narrator presumably has.

The argument continues until the two arrive in Battle-town. There they find "roaring Planters on the ground,/Drinking of Healths in Circle round" (p. 12). A cryer calls court into session, and in the following lines Cooke gives a damning description of how court is conducted in this Colonial town. He describes the lawyers as "wrangling . . . With nonsense, stuff and false quotations,/With brazen Lyes and Allegations"

(p. 12). He tells of a "reverend Judge, who to the shame/Of all the Bench, cou'd write his Name" (p. 12).

The Court session over, the factor seeks lodging for the night. He can find no better place to stay than an "antient Corn-loft," where, exhausted and somewhat drunk, he soon falls asleep. When he wakes, he is faced with a new dilemma:

When waking fresh I sat upright,  
And found my Shoes were vanish'd quite;  
Hat, Wig, and Stockings, all were fled  
From this extended Indian Bed. (p. 13)

The merchant cannot find his clothes, and threatens to fight whoever has taken them. After a quarrel with his host and the servants, he learns that his belongings have been burned. Cooke gives this tongue-in-cheek explanation in a footnote: "'Tis the Custom of the Planters, to throw their own, or any other Person's Hat, Wig, Shooes or Stockings in the Fire" (p. 14). Totally at a loss, the narrator now discovers his guide, naked and with a bloody nose, lying on a table. He too has apparently fallen victim to the planters' strange custom. The factor wakes his guide and sends him in search of his horse, but the roan has escaped, so the planter's son goes after her. Thus, the narrator writes, he "lost both Horse and Man."

One gentleman "more Civil than the rest," seeing the narrator's predicament, invites him to be a guest at his country home. This planter treats him to the same generous hospitality that his first host did, but the narrator is clearly more grateful this time. This planter's style of living is more suited to an Englishman's tastes, for this planter treats him to "Wild Fowl and Fish delicious Meats,/As good as Neptune's Doxy eats," as well as "Venson" and "Turkies wild" (p. 15). And instead

of the rum served by his less prosperous host, this planter provides "Madera strong in flowing Bowls" (p. 16).

Again the narrator indulges a bit too heavily and crawls off to sleep. He wakes in the evening and goes to the fireside where he finds "A jolly Female Crew," the counterparts of the earlier "Bedlam-Bess," "deep engag'd at Lanctre-Looe." The unsuspecting sot-weed factor joins the game. Soon, an argument breaks out among the women, and they accuse each other of prostitution. The narrator leaves them arguing and returns to bed. He wakes the next morning "with aking Head," the beginning of a long illness which he attributes to "seasoning"--his term for the inability to adjust to the new climate. The disease lasts from March to December. When he finally recovers, he turns at last to the main business of his journey to Maryland, to trade his "British ware" for tobacco. He travels to the "Eastern Shoar" where he meets

a Quaker, Yea and Nay;  
A Pious Conscientious Rogue,  
As e'er wear Bonnet or a Brogue,  
Who neither Swore nor kept his Word,  
But cheated in the Fear of God;  
And when his Debts he would not pay,  
By Light within he ran away. (p. 18)

The factor strikes a bargain with the Quaker, but once again inexperience brings about his downfall. He allows the Quaker to take his wares without first gaining possession, himself, of the tobacco. The next morning, the merchant finds "The Bird was newly flown" (p. 18), without paying. Seeking revenge, the narrator takes his case

Unto an ambodexter Quack,  
Who learnedly had got the knock  
Of giving Glisters, making Pills,  
Of filling Bonds, and forging Wills;  
And with a stock of Impudence,  
Supply'd his want of Wit and Sense. (p. 19)

The sot-weed factor pays this man lavishly for his services, so lavishly, in fact,

That he'd have poyson'd half the Parish.  
And hang'd his Father on a Tree,  
For such another tempting Fee. (p. 19)

But the "lawyer" is bribed by the other party, so our narrator finds himself winning only "country pay," or the produce of the Quaker's farm, "Rare Cargo for the English Shoar" (p. 20), in return for his goods. This injustice is the last that the poor Englishman can bear:

Raging with Grief, full speed [he] ran,  
To joyn the Fleet at Kicketan,  
Enbarqu'd and waiting for a Wind,  
[He] left this dreadful Curse behind. (p. 20)

The poem begins with a curse, and so does it end. The sot-weed factor stands aboard the ship, ready to return to England, and wishes all manner of evil upon Maryland. He closes the poem with these lines:

May Wrath Divine then lay those Regions wast  
Where no Man's Faithful, nor a Woman Chast. (p. 21)

Ebenezer Cooke's reputation as a poet rests almost entirely upon this poem. The work is notable for its rowdy wit and its vivid character portrayals. Few critics have studied Cooke seriously, however, and even among those who have examined his work, there is much disagreement about its quality.

One of the first scholars to examine The Sot-Weed Factor in detail was Lawrence C. Wroth in 1934. He views the long narrative as a semi-autobiographical account of Cooke's own first visit to Maryland. He writes: "The vividness of the impressions set down in the narrative

bespeaks a mind and eye fresh to the scene of a new land."<sup>29</sup> Because he sees the poem as a realistic and exaggerated account, Wroth also objects to its thoroughly damning nature. He laments the absence of "an upright or a literate judge, an honest merchant, a decent woman, or a sober planter," and believes that "their deliberate exclusion from the picture is an obvious fault in its composition."<sup>30</sup>

Edward H. Cohen, writing in 1969, agrees with Wroth that the poem is unduly harsh. For Cohen, the overall purpose of the poem is to degrade the character of the colony.<sup>31</sup> Cohen, however, does not feel that Cooke was trying to give an accurate account of what he had seen in Maryland. Instead of realistic narrative, Cohen sees The Sot-Weed Factor as a burlesque and a farce. He writes that Cooke's treatment of the Maryland courts "must be taken as droll ridiculing of the English notion of Colonial lawlessness."<sup>32</sup> Cohen believes that the poem is not only a satire of rude manners in Maryland, but also of the "inadequate English vision of the New World."<sup>33</sup> Cohen furthermore separates Ebenezer Cooke from his narrator so that the satire in the poem is carried yet one step further. The greenhorn sot-weed factor, inadequately prepared for his task in the New World, easily duped by "illiterate

<sup>29</sup>Wroth, p. 274.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>31</sup>Cohen, Cooke, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

planters, sluttish women, half-tame Indians, [and] 'ambodexter' doctor-lawyers," is also ridiculed.<sup>34</sup> Wroth saw the lack of admirable characters as a weakness, but Cohen sees this feature as an essential element in the overall satiric purpose of the poem. According to Cohen a noble adversary for the narrator would also suggest nobility on his part, and thereby weaken the satirical thrust of the work. Cohen writes in final praise of the poem:

Cooke's accomplishment, then, must be regarded as an artistic triumph which rises far above the level of simple imitation of his Augustan forebears. For these elements of farce, coupled with the more peculiarly hudibrastic elements and the satiric subject matter, combine to give The Sot-Weed Factor a greater complexity than any other comic writing of the period.<sup>35</sup>

Another modern critic, Leo Lemay, agrees with Cohen that The Sot-Weed Factor was not intended as an accurate account of life and manners in Maryland. Lemay argues that Ebenezer Cooke would have been familiar with the colony and would have recognized his narrator's observations as false. Unlike Cohen, however, Lemay sees the ridicule of the English attitude toward Maryland as the primary, not the secondary, purpose of the poem. He points out that seventeenth and eighteenth-century Americans were frequently distressed over the "assumption that all America was a wilderness, completely without civilization."<sup>36</sup> To

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 15 and 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Lemay, p. 86.



support his theory, he argues that the narrator of The Sot-Weed Factor is presented as a representative Englishman whose troubles in the New World are caused, not so much by the colony itself, as by his own inability to deal with conditions there.

Lemay sees three episodes--the sot-weed factor's imagining of a pack of wolves, of a rattlesnake (which Lemay insists was really the hum of the mosquitoes), and of hostile Indians--as "microcosms of the poem."<sup>37</sup> He writes: "Just as the sot-weed factor's absurd expectations of America are burlesqued in these anecdotes . . . so in the macrocosm, the poem as a whole, the English reader's expectations of what life is like in the wild frontier of America are burlesqued."<sup>38</sup> Lemay adds still another face to this many-edged satire in The Sot-Weed Factor. He believes that if the reader of the poem does not realize that the English attitude toward America is being burlesqued, "then it only proves that he is the victim of foolish and unbelievable notions, and thus himself a fool."<sup>39</sup> The reader who fails to comprehend Cooke's purpose, then, also becomes an object of satire.

Robert D. Arner shares Lemay's belief that The Sot-Weed Factor is a satire of Maryland life and customs, English attitudes toward Maryland, the narrator, and the reader of the poem. He is especially successful

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

in his explanation of the last of these satiric purposes:

As we readers are deprived of a consistently moral, consistently ethical point of reference within the poem and are forced to reevaluate all the speaker's judgements in an effort to distinguish between indignatio, the traditional ethical and moral impulse of satire, and mere frustration and personal outrage at his failure to make a quick financial killing. This, I believe, is why the speaker's final curse hits us with so powerful an impact; we may have entertained our doubts about his moral stature and motivation earlier in the poem, but when we come upon this comprehensive piece of verbal violence, we can no longer avoid the conclusion that we have been duped by him into accepting a narrow, unfair, and morally off-center point of view.<sup>40</sup>

Arner discusses another specific satiric purpose that Lemay does not. Arner believes that Cooke was satirizing promotional literature that described the New World as a Garden of Eden, a paradise, and points specifically to the sot-weed factor's encounter with the rattlesnake in the garden, forcing him to spend the night in a tree. Clearly the essential iconography of Eden is present; but more importantly, the traditional roles are reversed. Adam, not Eve, is threatened; the tree rescues him from death rather than placing him within death's reach; man, instead of the serpent, is in the tree; and a Fall is not necessary because the men described in the poem are clearly already creatures of the devil. By countering the promotional literature, "Cooke has become

<sup>40</sup>Robert D. Arner, "The Blackness of Darkness: Satire, Romance, and Ebenezer Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor," Tennessee Studies in Literature, 21 (1976), 3.

the first American author to transform completely the American dream into a nightmare."<sup>41</sup>

Because so little is known about Ebenezer Cooke, critics can only speculate about his purpose in writing The Sot-Weed Factor. But whether Cooke intended his poem as an autobiographical account or a satire, the work does illustrate his skill as a lively and entertaining story teller. And whether the narrator is Ebenezer Cooke or a representative Englishman, this well-developed figure does show Cooke's skill as a creator of character. These several critics do agree that The Sot-Weed Factor is more than an imitation of Butler's Hudibras. As Cohen writes:

Ebenezer Cooke's extant verse proves that the period of his lifetime was one in which an iconoclast could direct his ambitions toward the creation of a new literature which may be seen to represent the original genius of the colonies. Thus, while there is in his works an attempt at conscious imitation of Augustan modes, still there is also an equal attempt to achieve a distinctive personal identity, so that in his major poems, especially, one may discern the roots of an American culture.<sup>42</sup>

Ebenezer Cooke is therefore important because one finds in his writings the beginnings of a distinctly national literature.

Among the admirers of Ebenezer Cooke's poetry is John Barth. Evidence from Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor shows that he was familiar with Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor, and that he used the poem in writing

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>42</sup>Cohen, Cooke, pp. 4-5.

his novel. Book Two of The Sot-Weed Factor is, in fact, a greatly embellished and exaggerated retelling of the poem. Barth borrows from this poem in much the same way as he does from history: he draws many of the events and characters for his novel from it. He uses Cooke's poem for a still further purpose--as a model for the poetry that his own Ebenezer Cooke writes.

The narrator of Cooke's poem leaves "Albion's rocks" because of "Friends unkind and empty Purse." Barth's Ebenezer leaves for nearly the same reasons. After a practical joke played on Ebenezer by his supposed friends, the poet's father is notified of Ebenezer's failure to pay a prostitute for her services and also of his failure to advance in his career. Andrew Cooke orders Ebenezer to go to Maryland. Like Cooke's narrator, he must leave England because of his failure to prosper and because of the falseness of friends.

Many of Ebenezer's adventures once he arrives in Maryland are also similar to the sot-weed factor's experiences. For example, after crossing a river in a dugout canoe, Ebenezer is abandoned "in he knew not what wild woods." There he meets a herd of swine which he and his servant mistake for frightening beasts, just as Cooke's narrator had confused cattle with wolves. The person in charge of the swine is not the planter's son of the poem, but Susan Warren, or Joan Toast in disguise. Like the planter's son, however, she invites Ebenezer to her master's home where the poet is treated to a substantial, though homely, feast. Like the sot-weed factor, Ebenezer becomes drunk on his host's rum and is helped to his room to sleep off its effects. In Cooke's poem, the narrator's rest is disturbed by a battle among animals. Ebenezer, too,

is the victim of such a dispute, but he takes a more active role in starting the combat. He slips out of the planter's house for an illicit rendezvous with Susan Warren. As he is entering the barn, their pre-arranged meeting place, "he was obliged to relieve himself then and there before going farther" (p. 322). Typical of his absurdly bad luck, "the hapless Laureat" in relieving himself, "chanced to strike a cat, a half-grown tom not three feet distant that had looked like a gray rock in the dark." And Barth writes, "this small shot in the dark set an entire universe in motion" (p. 322). The battle ends only after the dogs chase Ebenezer up a tree, lose interest in their prey and leave. But as Ebenezer is climbing down from the tree, he hears what he believes to be a rattlesnake and is forced to remain in the tree all night, tormented by mosquitoes and "too frightened even to compose an indignant Hudibrastic" (p. 323). Again Barth's reliance on Cooke for the details of this episode is evident.

The similarities between Cooke's poem and Barth's novel continue as Ebenezer and Burlingame, disguised as Tim Mitchell, the planter's son, travel to Cambridge where they witness a court session. Though Barth's description of the court is clearly based upon Cooke's, Barth's court would shame even Cooke's most degenerate and corrupt judge. Ebenezer is so horrified by the court that he attempts to reform it and, in the process, stupidly signs away his estate. Despite his moral qualms, Ebenezer does join in the merrymaking and is soon very drunk. He is carried away to sleep off the effects of the alcohol. When he wakes, he is in a corncrib without his hat, coat, and breeches. Like Cooke's narrator, Ebenezer learns that his clothes have been burned. Also like

the sot-weed factor, Ebenezer learns that his roan has escaped and that Burlingame has gone after her, so he too is without guide or horse.

Outside of using Cooke's poem as a source for his plot in The Sot-Weed Factor, Barth develops several of his own characters from those in the poem. The most obvious use of Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor in creating character is, of course, the poet and laureate himself. Barth's Ebenezer, like the narrator, brings about most of his own suffering. Both are pretentious and arrogant, yet both are hopelessly naive and gullible. While both like to blame the lack of refinement in Maryland for their own misadventures, these blunders almost always could have been prevented by a more worldly and less self-righteous character.

The character of Susan Warren/Joan Toast is also dependent upon Cooke and his own character, the Bedlam-Bess. Like the Bedlam-Bess, Susan tells a sorrowful story of the treacherous way in which she was brought to Maryland. She also arouses Ebenezer's sexual desires and narrowly escapes being raped, just as the Bedlam-Bess does.

At one point in The Sot-Weed Factor, Ebenezer meets Richard Sowter, a servant-trader, who offers to ferry him to Malden. Sowter, it is later learned, is also a lawyer, a minister, and a doctor. He helps to cheat Ebenezer out of his estate, to marry him against his will, and to nurse him back to health. Clearly Barth draws upon Cooke's "ambodexter Quack" in creating this character.

At Malden, Ebenezer meets another set of characters drawn from Cooke's poem, the lanter-loo-playing women. As in the original The Sot-Weed Factor, these women break into an argument during which they

accuse each other of prostitution. Unlike Cooke, however, Barth recounts a battle which consists of a six-page list of synonyms for the ladies' profession.

Barth uses Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor as a model for his own character's poetry. When Lord Baltimore grants Ebenezer the title of Poet and Laureate of Maryland, Ebenezer announces his plans to write "an epic to out-epic epics" (p. 75). He works on this poem occasionally throughout the novel, and much of it is remarkably similar to Cooke's poem. For example, before Ebenezer sets sail for Maryland, he writes the following lines about the food aboard the ship:

Ye ask, What eat our merry Band  
En Route to lovely Maryland?  
I answer: Ne'er were such Delights  
As met our Sea-sharp'd Appetites  
E'r serv'd to Jove and Junos Breed  
By Vulcan and by Granymede. (p. 177)

Unfortunately reality does not equal this fantasy. Though Cooke never wrote about this particular topic, the form of the poetry is clearly reminiscent of his writing. More specifically, it is patterned after Hudibras, which Cooke himself was imitating. Ebenezer describes the principles of Hudibrastic to Burlingame: "'A Hudibrastic rhyme,' he explained, 'is a rhyme that is close, but not just harmonious'" (p. 380). The two then engage in a contest of Hudibrastics which includes rhymes such as "quarrel and snarl," "quarrel and Sorrel," "quarrel and apparel," and "swelling and colonelling." Most all of Ebenezer's poetry does follow the form he describes to Burlingame, the same form used by the historical Ebenezer Cooke.

Ebenezer's later poetry depends even more heavily upon Cooke's original poem. This poetic description of the Indian that he and Burlingame see en route to Cambridge is a good example:

O'ercoming soon my first Surprize,  
 I set myself to scrutinize  
 His Visage wild, his Form exotick  
 Barb'rous Air, and Dress erotick,  
 His brawny Shoulders, greas'd and bare  
 His Member, all devoid of Hair  
 And swinging free, his painted Skin  
 And naked Chest, inviting Sin  
 With Ladies who, their Beauty faded,  
 Husbands dead, or Pleasures jaded  
 Fly from Virtue's narrow way. (p. 377)

Barth does not use Cooke's poem verbatim here as he does at other times in the novel, but the resemblance of this passage to Cooke's description is evident.

Finally, much embittered by his experience in Maryland, Barth's Ebenezer abandons his original Marylandiad and composes a new poem. Barth gives numerous excerpts from this poem, each word-for-word from the 1708 version of Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor. Though Ebenezer must stay in Maryland, he imagines when writing the poem that he is able to escape to England. His poem therefore ends with the same lines that end the original work.

John Barth uses Ebenezer Cooke's life and poetry as a simple skeleton upon which to build his own complex novel. The first section of The Sot-Weed Factor, "The Momentous Wager," uses Cooke's early life as a foundation. Part Two, "Going to Malden," is a greatly elaborated and embellished retelling of Cooke's own The Sot-Weed Factor. Finally, the third section of Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor, "Malden Earned," uses



the few known facts about Cooke's middle and old age in recounting Ebenezer's own later years.

The Sot-Weed Factor, then, is an imitation of an imitation: John Barth imitates Ebenezer Cooke who imitated Samuel Butler. Cooke, of course, selected a style appropriate to the humorous, satiric tone of his poem. But why did Barth choose an eighteenth-century poem as a source for his twentieth-century novel? In order to answer this question, one must first examine closely Barth's theories about literature and his ideas about the particular genre with which he works.

## John Barth and the Literature of Exhaustion

In an interview with Phyllis Meras, John Barth has said that "One of the interesting things about being a novelist at this hour of the world is that one is working in a form that may be nearing the end of its line."<sup>1</sup> He repeats the idea that the novel is dead or dying in numerous other interviews and essays. This hypothesis does not originate with Barth: it is common to many contemporary writers and critics. For example, Leslie Fiedler, a contemporary critic and novelist and a friend of Barth, believes that the novel has been dying ever since it was first invented. Not until the 1930's, however, did novelists themselves first begin to sense that the novel was reaching its end. At this time, Fiedler believes, writers started to fear that "the fiction of the future might well have to be written on the screen, if it was to survive at all."<sup>2</sup> Fiedler attributes the novel's threatened position to a changing audience, to a mass culture that no longer wants to read novels, and to novelists who have turned toward pleasing this culture.<sup>3</sup> Because of the indifference of the modern audience, today's novelist continues to write without knowing whether anyone will read his work.

<sup>1</sup>Phyllis Meras, "John Barth: A Truffle No Longer," New York Times Book Review, 7 April 1966, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Leslie A Fiedler, Waiting For the End (New York: Stein and Day, 1964), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 177.

Barth is painfully aware of the position of the novel today. He acknowledges that "the realistic novel obviously has shot its bolt,"<sup>4</sup> and that the heroic age of literature, when new installments of Dickens or new works by Dostoevski were awaited with excitement, is definitely over.<sup>5</sup> Yet Barth does not see this situation as a cause for despair. In fact, he regards with contempt those who insist that the novel is passé and that literature has no place in contemporary society. He believes that their despair over "pop apocalypses" is a kind of escape, an easy, "self-indulgent" response.<sup>6</sup> The novel, to Barth, has changed drastically since its beginnings; it may have changed so drastically, in fact, that the genre is threatened with extinction. But one must still go on writing.

For those who choose to continue creating literature, Barth sees two possible responses to the direction that the novel has taken. The first is to ignore the latest technical developments in the art. According to Barth, novelists such as Saul Bellow, John Updike, and Bernard Malamud have chosen this course. They write about contemporary problems and contemporary men in contemporary society. But these novelists' style is more appropriate to the last century than to this

<sup>4</sup>Barth interviewed by Meras, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>"John Barth," interviewed by Frank Gado in First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing (Schenectady, N.Y.: Union College Press, 1973), p. 139.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

one. Though Barth acknowledges that these writers have created valuable literature, he has, personally, "an uneasy feeling about that sort of address."<sup>7</sup>

For Barth, a more valuable and genuine response to the exhausted state of contemporary literature is that taken by such writers as Beckett, Borges, or Nabokov--authors who try to confront the complexity directly. They "have been able to turn this ultimacy against itself in order to produce new work."<sup>8</sup> They take the "used up" condition of literature and employ it as a theme in their own writing. What Barth calls "the literature of exhausted possibility," or, more simply, "the literature of exhaustion," therefore develops out of a paradox. It begins with the assumption that literature is dead or dying and, using this assumption as a major theme, creates a whole new genre of literature.

This second approach seems more valuable to Barth because it is more honest. It grows out of the society in which the writer lives. Barth sees the present as a time of "felt ultimacies, in everything from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanization of society, and the history of the novel."<sup>9</sup> Despite all that has happened in the twentieth century, or perhaps because of it, "an impressive amount of

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Barth interviewed by Meras, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," The Atlantic Monthly, Aug. 1967, p. 30.

American literature of the middle of the twentieth century"<sup>10</sup> retreats to the literary methods of the nineteenth century. The creators of this literature are immobilized by the confusion and complexity of the world around them. Barth feels that such immobility is unnecessary, "that you have to confront the complexity of your own lives and accumulated histories and decide you are by no means paralyzed by that confrontation."<sup>11</sup> The writers that he respects most reflect and deal with "ultimacy, both technically and thematically"<sup>12</sup> in their works. They do not pretend that the twentieth century never happened, but confront it and use it as material for their writing. One of the authors Barth most admires is Borges. Of Borges' story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Barth writes:

Moreover, like all of Borges' work, it illustrates in other of its aspects my subject: how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work--paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world.<sup>13</sup>

The literature of exhaustion, then, is not an escape from the twentieth century and the changes in literature that it has brought. Rather, it is a method of treating the century and the developments directly.

<sup>10</sup>Barth interviewed by Gado, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 138

<sup>12</sup>Barth, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

Barth, like Fiedler, believes that the change in a writer's audience forces him to change the form of what he writes. Barth does not, however, equate change with deterioration. The novel and the novelist exist in history and, therefore, must change. It is the duty of the writer to realize this fact and to be aware of the developments that have occurred in his art. As Barth explains:

We are historical animals and unless an artist is a primitive he comes to the medium through all the history of the medium up to himself. The whole modernist movement is under his belt. So it would take a deliberate artificial primitive or a congenital naivete to go at the writing of novels in the way the 19th or 18th century novels got out.<sup>14</sup>

If the artist and his art are to treat the twentieth century adequately, they must be technically up-to-date. Barth frequently uses the Chartres Cathedral to illustrate this belief. He feels that if that cathedral were built today, it would be embarrassing because the time for such architecture is past. This does not mean that Chartres is not still beautiful or that architects can no longer design churches, but it does mean that architects must try to capture the beauty of Chartres in a technically modern structure. Barth sees his own role as a modern artist this same way:

If I were a composer I would set for myself the goal of assimilating all the historical reasons why one can't compose music now that sounds like Tchaikovsky's music, and at the

<sup>14</sup> Israel Shenker, "Complicated Simple Things," New York Times Book Review, 24 Sept. 1972, p. 37.

same time find a way to write beautiful melodies. If I were a painter I would know all the reasons why painting in 1972 doesn't resemble the painting of 1872 and yet I would find a way to paint beautiful nudes.<sup>15</sup>

Barth does not believe that being technically up-to-date is the most important quality of a writer, but he does believe that being technically out-of-date is a serious artistic defect.<sup>16</sup> One quality he greatly admires in art is technical virtuosity. He prefers the "kind of art that not many people can do,"<sup>17</sup> just as he admires the work of jugglers and acrobats whom he describes as "genuine virtuosi doing things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do."<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, the only way that a writer can remain technically up-to-date is to be aware of the history of his craft. But this knowledge presents the novelist with a serious dilemma because it places him "in competition with the accumulated best of human history."<sup>19</sup> He realizes how late in the history of literature he has come and how difficult it will be for him to create new and original art. In gaining the knowledge that will enable him to write valuable contemporary literature, the novelist simultaneously makes his task far more difficult. Still,

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Barth, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Barth interviewed by Gado, p. 138.

because the task of writing original literature becomes harder and harder the more the writer knows about the history of his art, so does it also "become more and more admirable to manage it successfully."<sup>20</sup> Barth's ideal writer must therefore have a sophisticated awareness of the position of literature in history but must still manage not to be paralyzed by that awareness.<sup>21</sup>

Barth understands his own awkward position as a modern author, and this often gives his writing a tone of self-mockery or embarrassment. But even so, he manages to turn this self-consciousness into a creative vehicle. Aware of the difficulty of creating original literature, Barth responds by imitating older works. To explain this practice, Barth discusses Borges' story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," in which the title character writes several chapters of Cervantes' novel.

Barth comments:

The important thing to observe is that Borges doesn't attribute the Quixote to himself, much less recompose it like Pierre Menard; instead, he writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>22</sup>Barth, p. 31.



In defense of Borges, Barth reminds us that Quixote itself imitated Amadis of Gaul and that Cervantes imitated Hamete Benegeli.<sup>23</sup> The history of the novel is, in fact, a history of imitations. Barth's imitations, however, are not done with "a long face."<sup>24</sup> Instead, they are parodies of the works and the genres that they imitate. They are done with ironic intent and with an awareness, on the writer's part, of the history of literature.

Novelists can imitate genres other than fiction, and novels have long pretended to be many things that they are not. "Don Quixote pretends to be an historical record"; "Richardson's novels pretend to be letters of Pamela or Clarissa"; or a more modern novel, Nabokov's Pale Fire, pretends to be a poem with tedious, scholarly footnotes.<sup>25</sup> Barth explains the difference between these works and his own The Sot-Weed Factor:

I thought it might be interesting to write a novel which simply imitates the form of the novel, rather than imitating all these other kinds of documents. In other words, it pretends to be a piece of fiction.<sup>26</sup>

While some writers imitate other written forms in order to deny the fictional nature of what they create, the literature of exhaustion imitates other forms of fiction and glories in its own artificiality.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>24</sup>"John Barth," an interview by Joe David Bellamy in his The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

Barth feels that this stance might lead contemporary writers "to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature--such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation . . . even characterization. Even plot!"<sup>27</sup> Literature of exhaustion makes unashamed use of traditional elements of fiction to assert, very untraditionally, its own fictional artifice.

Barth is especially attracted by the element of plot or story which he sees as "analogous to melody in music."<sup>28</sup> He believes that the appeal of narrative to the imagination is too valuable to ignore. In fact, he has stated frequently that one of his goals in writing The Sot-Weed Factor was to create a plot more elaborate and complex than that in Tom Jones.

Barth justifies his use of plot by insisting that he does so "without turning his back on the history of what's happened in our medium and in our culture since the decline in realism at the turn of the century."<sup>29</sup> He uses plot neither to return to realism nor to ignore the direction of twentieth century literature. Instead, his plots are so elaborately complex and are filled with so many absurd coincidences that these very stories assert the artificiality of the world that they depict. The preposterousness of Barth's plots frees him "from any obligations not

<sup>27</sup>Barth, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup>Shenker, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

only to probability but to possibility."<sup>30</sup> For Barth, elaborate, artificial plots do more than entertain. They provide another way to employ the complex nature of the modern world in literature. By combining a belief in the absurdity of modern life with an absurd structure, Barth makes his elaborate, unbelievable novels into metaphors for his philosophy.

This "wild inventiveness" is pervasive in the plots of literature of exhaustion. The characters, for example, are often exaggerated and distorted, more caricatures than realistic portraits. The language of these novels, too, reflects absurdity with "'lexical distortions, meaningless puns, and insistent repetition of empty words, clichés, exaggeration, and deliberately misplaced particulars, and juxtaposed incongruous details."<sup>31</sup> Literature of exhaustion sometimes takes on a baroque quality as it carries plot, character, and language to absurd extremes. This tendency can be found in Borges' story "Library of Babel" which Barth sees as a model for literature of exhaustion:

The "Library of Babel" houses every possible combination of alphabetical characters and spaces, and thus every possible book and statement, including your and my refutations and vindications, the history of the actual future, the history of every possible future, and though he doesn't mention it, the encyclopedia not only of Tlön but of every imaginable

<sup>30</sup>Beverly Gross, "The Anti-Novels of John Barth," Chicago Review, 20 (Nov. 1968), 105.

<sup>31</sup>Charles Harris, Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd (New Haven, Conn.: College and Univ. Press, 1971), p. 22.

other world--since, as in Lucretius universe, the number of elements, and so of combinations, is finite (though very large), and the number of instances of each element and combinations of elements is infinite, like the library itself.<sup>32</sup>

The author of literature of exhaustion tries to express all possible permutations and combinations of the ideas it presents.

One valuable format for the writers of literature of exhaustion is the frame tale. Barth admits that he has long had a fondness for such stories, beginning with his discovery of Arabian Nights, and he often uses the "story-within-a-story" technique in his own writing. However, he rarely stops at a double level--a single story with a single frame story--but continues placing tales within tales, creating "infinite regresses" until the reader is almost unable to determine at what level the story is being told. Thus Barth again makes his structure a metaphor for his message. This complex framework mirrors the complexity of the modern world and the "ultimacy" of contemporary literature.

One effect of these techniques is "at first to make 'reality' problematical and then to suggest that the 'real' world has no reality."<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, by creating absurd, impossible worlds, the literature of exhaustion calls reality itself into question. In The Sot-Weed Factor, for instance, Barth irreverently rewrites the story of John Smith and Pocahontas. Like other contemporary writers, he re-invents the world,

<sup>32</sup>Barth, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup>John O. Stark, The Literature of Exhaustion (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), p. 9.

making up alternatives to what he has been taught about history or myth. This process is founded upon the conviction that fact and fiction themselves are blurred. Though some people "can be made very uncomfortable by the recognition of the arbitrariness of physical facts and the inability to accept their finality,"<sup>34</sup> Barth is bothered by the idea that absolutes might indeed exist:

Take France, for example. France is shaped like a tea pot, and Italy is shaped like a boot. Well, okay. But the idea that that's the only way it's ever going to be, that they'll never be shaped like anything else-- that can get to you after a while.<sup>35</sup>

The uneasiness he feels over absolutes, Barth believes, is a "metaphysical emotion" at the heart of true artistic creation. Thus the "impulse to imagine alternatives to the world can become a driving impulse for writers."<sup>36</sup> Writers of the literature of exhaustion try to reinvent as much of the world as possible, to create their own philosophy and their own history.

The lack of absolutes and the inability to distinguish reality from literature are central themes in the literature of exhaustion. As a result, the characters who inhabit these novels face a peculiar and painful dilemma. They are forced to search for value and identity in a

<sup>34</sup>Barth interviewed by Enck, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

world where absolutes do not exist. Like the novelist who must learn about the history of his art without being paralyzed by his knowledge, these characters must learn to assert. If they find it impossible to affirm one particular action, they must arbitrarily select any action, if only to avoid paralysis. The characters rarely accomplish anything of value through their actions, however. After a flurry of activity, they are frequently in their original positions, though immobilized this time by exhaustion instead of paralysis.

Yet Barth still insists that his characters must act. Because of this insistence upon action for its own sake, process in literature of exhaustion is valued over the completion of any process. Men do not have to move toward particular goals, so long as they continue to move. By extension, infinity is treated positively, and any kind of limitation is treated negatively. Thus open systems, in which many alternatives are available, are valued more than closed systems that limit one's choices.<sup>37</sup>

Because Barth rejects absolutes, he also denies the possibility of memory, at least of memory based upon fact. "One who admits the possibility of memory also admits that the real world once did exist, otherwise it could not be remembered."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, when characters in his

<sup>37</sup> Stark, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

novels do remember, they may well remember inaccurately. Often a second character will remember the same event, but describe it quite differently. Such discrepancies suggest that no absolute, correct way of perceiving the world exists.

Along with attacking human perception of reality, the writers of literature of exhaustion must also attack time, a basic concept upon which this perception is founded. Barth, for example, tries to create non-temporal art by writing cyclical stories with beginnings which are also their ends, stories represented by the never-ending Moebius strip at the beginning of Lost in the Funhouse. Or he writes novels with stories within stories, a structure that obviously disrupts the "natural" flow of time.

The literature of exhaustion makes comments on the human condition, but the aim is not social reform. Barth denies that his writing has ever been "engagé," and he admires very few works of literature that are.<sup>39</sup> He ridicules any clear distinction between "pure" and "committed" art, but, if forced to defend one or the other, he would "mount the ramparts for pure art every time."<sup>40</sup> Barth however does not ignore the human quality of art:

One must distinguish between meretricious or gratuitous experiment and genuine experimental writing. The writer who transforms his contrivance into a powerful, effective, and appropriate metaphor for his concerns has made a piece of art, whatever its imperfections.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Barth interviewed by Gado, p. 131.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

Along with being technically up-to-date, then, Barth's ideal author must also communicate his genuine philosophical concerns. Barth puts it more colorfully: "You know what I think about technique. It's about as important in literature as it is in lovemaking; if it's not informed with real passion, it's not much good in either case."<sup>42</sup>

The literature of exhaustion begins with the assumption that literature is "used up." This idea becomes a basic theme for a whole new genre of literature. This genre requires that its creators know about the technical advances that have been made in their art; but, ironically, it often involves imitation and parody of earlier works of literature. These writers glorify the artificiality of their work, and so reflect the absurdity and questionable reality of the modern world. Despite their extreme self-consciousness and technical sophistication, the writers of literature of exhaustion "manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done."<sup>43</sup>

Barth sees his role, and the role of other creators of literature of exhaustion, as a dual one. While fully aware of their position as craftsmen, they must still retain a deep awareness of their obligations as artists.

<sup>42</sup>Douglas M. Davis, "The End Is a Beginning for Barth's 'Funhouse,'" The National Observer, 16 Sept, 1968, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup>Barth, p. 30.



## Barth, Cooke, and the Literature of Exhaustion

Barth uses Ebenezer Cooke as the protagonist in The Sot-Weed Factor in part because Barth himself grew up near Cooke's Point where the real Cooke had his estate. Barth adds, "I set about to untie my hands; I presumptuously felt them tied by the history of the genre and, less presumptuously, by the kinds of things that I myself had been writing before."<sup>1</sup> Combining these two motives, Barth attempted to free himself from the history of literature by imitating one of the earliest American literary works. His imitation, however, is not done "with a long face" but ironically, as a farce.<sup>2</sup> Leslie Fiedler sees The Sot-Weed Factor as "a long commentary on the plight of the artist in the United States" which treats the modern position of the novel with irony rather than self-pity.<sup>3</sup> Others see the novel as a parody, not necessarily of art as a whole, but of the novel form.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, The Sot-Weed

<sup>1</sup>Barth interviewed by Bellamy, p. 6

<sup>2</sup>Harris, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup>Leslie Fiedler, "John Barth: An Eccentric Genius," The New Leader, 44 (13 Feb. 1961), 23.

<sup>4</sup>Gross, p. 104.

Factor parodies the eighteenth-century historical novel by using a ridiculously complex plot full of intrigues, multiple identities, and exaggeration.<sup>5</sup> History, too, is ridiculed.<sup>6</sup> Barth shows the founders of the American colonies to be scoundrels involved in impossible plots and counter-plots, and he irreverently rewrites the journal of Captain John Smith. In another journal, Barth also retells the story of Pocahontas. Finally the novel is a parody of ordinary human pursuits and concerns, showing men searching for meaning in a world where absolutes do not exist.<sup>7</sup> One can see that Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor,

<sup>5</sup>Rovit, pp. 81-82, discusses The Sot-Weed Factor as a parody of eighteenth-century novels, while Richard Kostelanetz, ed., in The New American Arts (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), pp. 205-06, explains more specifically Barth's exaggeration of typical eighteenth-century themes as a means of parody.

<sup>6</sup>For example, Alan Holder, in "What Marvelous Plot . . . Was Afoot? History in Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor," American Quarterly, 20 (1968), 596-604, discusses at length Barth's tendency to "debunk the past" and refers to Barth as a literary Burlingame. Holder, however, is unsure of Barth's reasons for rewriting history. Tony Tanner, in City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 245, also expresses uneasiness over Barth's seeming lack of respect for history. Barbara C. Ewell, in "John Barth: The Artist of History," The Southern Literary Journal, 5 (Spring, 1973), 44, finds Barth's rewriting of the past to be the "centric happiness" of his use of Cooke. Ewell feels, furthermore, that Barth is trying to show that "whenever [the past] is isolated and described, written down and labelled as true, it remains as elusive and incomplete as it was before the attempt."

<sup>7</sup>Both Harris, p. 118; and Alan Trachtenberg, in "Barth and Hawkes: Two Fabulists," Critique, 6 (Fall 1963), 18, see The Sot-Weed Factor as an expression of an absurd universe in which human pursuits have no real meaning. Trachtenberg feels that while Barth's characters are the embodiment of intellectual attitudes, his novel is not an allegory because it is "sufficiently 'realistic' for us to recognize common human behavior." Raymond M. Olderman, in Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), discusses specifically Barth's parody of the traditional search for identity.

though clearly an imitation of a particular eighteenth-century poem and of the eighteenth-century novel in general, is not an attempt at primitivism. It is done, instead, with the history of literature in mind and in an attempt to create a new and vital form of the novel.

In The Sot-Weed Factor, Barth attempted to create a plot that would rival the plot of Tom Jones in complexity and formal perfection.<sup>8</sup> He would seem to have succeeded. The novel is built around two plot lines: Ebenezer's search for and attempt to regain Malden, and Burlingame's search for his ancestry. The two plots are joined not only by the friendship of the two characters, but also through an abundance of near-unbelievable coincidences. For example, when Ebenezer discovers that Colonel Peter Sayer, his traveling companion, is really Henry Burlingame in disguise, he learns also that Lord Baltimore, after granting Ebenezer the title of Poet and Laureate of Maryland, has also asked his aide to accompany the Laureate to the colonies. The aide is, of course, Henry Burlingame. The situation is still further complicated when Burlingame confesses that the Lord Baltimore who granted Ebenezer his commission was, in reality, Burlingame himself in disguise. Later in the novel, Ebenezer and his servant Bertrand are captured by a band of fugitive slaves and Indians. Among the leaders of this band are not only Drapecca, a slave Ebenezer and Bertrand had rescued earlier, and Quassapelagh, the Anacostin king whose life they had saved, but also Chicamec, Burlingame's long-lost father. After being freed from the Indians,

<sup>8</sup> Barth interviewed by Gado, p. 132.

Ebenezer meets Roxanne and Henrietta Russecks who are later discovered to be the same women Burlingame once rescued from a band of pirates. Furthermore, Roxanne is the wet-nurse Andrew Cooke once hired to care for Ebenezer and Anna, and who later became his mistress. Her daughter Henrietta is in fact the twins' half-sister. In still another coincidence, the Church Creek Virgin is identified as Anna Cooke. She has married Billy Rumbley, an Indian and Burlingame's half-brother. The novel is filled with such coincidences. Their frequency in The Sot-Weed Factor helps to accomplish one of the goals of literature of exhaustion--the glorification of the artificiality of fiction. The novel makes no pretense of being realistic or of being anything other than a novel. It also parodies the eighteenth-century novel by carrying the use of coincidence, typical of the genre, to absurd extremes.

The artificiality of The Sot-Weed Factor is further emphasized by the abundance of disguises in the novel. Characters pose as others almost as often as they play themselves. Burlingame, the master of disguise, at various times pretends to be Ebenezer, Bertrand, Colonel Peter Sayer, John Coode, Lord Baltimore, Tim Mitchell, Nicholas Lowe, and Monsieur Casteene. His identity is still further obscured when it is revealed that he has two brothers whose appearance, outside of skin color, is identical to his own. In fact, Burlingame plays so many roles that Ebenezer, who has known him since childhood, remarks that he no longer remembers what the real Burlingame looks like. Burlingame's talent is most clearly illustrated when he changes from Nicholas Lowe into Timothy Mitchell:

His hands were busy as he spoke, and his appearance changed magically. Off came the powdered

periwig, to be replaced by a short black hairpiece; from his mouth he removed a curious device which, it turned out, had held three artificial teeth in position. Most uncannily of all, he seemed able to alter at will the set of his facial muscles: the curve of his cheeks and the flare of his nose changed shape before their eyes; his habitually furrowed brow grew smooth, but crow's-feet appeared where before there were none. Finally his voice deepened and coarsened; he drew in upon himself so as to seem at least two inches shorter; his eyes took on a craftier cast--Nicholas Lowe, in a few miraculous seconds, had become Timothy Mitchell. (p. 728)

At times, the very existence of a real Henry Burlingame is doubted.

For instance, at one point, Bertrand insists that Burlingame is really John Coode. But even this declaration is scant help since Coode himself "hath been Catholic priest, Church-of-England minister, sheriff, captain, colonel, general, and Heav'n alone knows what else" (p. 487).

The other characters in The Sot-Weed Factor, though by no means as skilled as Burlingame, also try their hand at disguise. On the journey from England to Maryland, Bertrand and Ebenezer change roles. When taken prisoner by pirates, however, the two constantly switch names in an attempt to avoid identification. Once in Maryland, Bertrand frequently assumes Ebenezer's character in order to enjoy the glory of his title. Ebenezer, too, though he insists that a disguise is a denial of the selfhood he so earnestly seeks, at various times plays Bertrand, Henry Cook, Edward Cooke, Sir Benjamin Oliver, and John Coode. In fact, nearly every major character in the novel assumes an identity other than his own. Anna poses as her friend Meg Bromly, John McEnvoy as Ebenezer and as the son of Sir Jonathan McEnvoy, Joan Toast as Susan

Warren, and Richard Sowter as John McEnvoy. The ultimate effect of these constantly shifting identities is to cast doubt upon the existence of any absolute identity. The novel suggests that the assumed roles the characters play are as real as the one they claim as their real identity. These roles are at least as genuine as the role of poet and virgin that Ebenezer claims throughout much of the novel. Through this denial that any identity exists, Barth again parodies the eighteenth-century novel in which characters search for "selfhood." Barth shows the absurdity of their search, for they are looking for something that does not exist.

Barth further complicates his plot by using a "story-within-a-story" technique. The plot of the frame story is provided in large part by the life and writings of the historical Ebenezer Cooke. But this plot is continually interrupted by tales told by various characters who participate in it. In fact, almost everyone that Ebenezer encounters has a story to tell. Much of the essential information in the novel is presented in this fashion, and each story is, in some way, related to the main plot line. For example, Burlingame tells of being captured by the pirate, Thomas Pound, and of his rescue of two women from the lustful crew. This same Captain Pound later captures Ebenezer and Bertrand and with the same fun-loving crew, captures a whore ship and rapes all the women, among whom is Joan Toast. The women Burlingame helps to escape are the same Roxanne and Henrietta Russecks whom Ebenezer encounters later in the novel. Susan Warren (Joan Toast) tells of how she was tricked into coming to Maryland as a servant and how she became addicted to opium and afflicted with venereal disease. In this manner, Ebenezer

learns of the great suffering he has caused Joan Toast. In still another story, Mary Mungummary tells of her lover Charlie Matassin, who turns out also to be Burlingame's half-brother. These tales, along with the many others included in the novel, add greatly to its artificiality. Ebenezer is never too busy or in too great peril to spare enough time to hear a story. He listens to them while a prisoner of murderous Indians and runaway slaves; he lends an ear before he sets out to regain the estate he has just given away; and though standing on the banks of a river whose name he does not know in a country of whose title he is not sure, he listens patiently to a filthy swineherd tell her own sad story. Clearly Ebenezer's world is a fictional one, never too filled with intrigue and plots to allow one more to be introduced. By filling this world full of still more fictions, Barth emphasizes the artificial nature of the art he practices.

This story-within-a-story technique also denies the reality of time. The stories continually interrupt the supposedly natural progression of events until the task of placing the many tales in any chronological pattern becomes impossible. In this way, the framework in which one usually places reality, along with that reality itself, is destroyed.

Even Cooke's life and writings, which Barth uses as a frame for these numerous tales, are grossly exaggerated. The simple plot that Barth borrows from Cooke is carried to absurd extremes when he explores all possibilities of every situation. For example, when Ebenezer dresses to visit Lord Baltimore, Barth describes the procedure in minute detail:

Not bothering to trouble his skin with water, he slipped on his best linen drawers, short ones without stirrups, heavily perfumed, and a clean white day-shirt of good frieze holland, voluminous and soft, with a narrow neckband, full sleeves caught at the wrists with black satin ribbon, and small, modestly frilled cuffs. Next he pulled on a pair of untrimmed black velvet knee breeches, close in the thighs and full in the seat, and then his knitted white silk hose, which, following the very latest fashion, he left rolled above the knee in order to display the black ribbon garters that held them up. (p. 70)

Barth continues in this manner for approximately two hundred fifty more words. When Ebenezer and Lord Baltimore do meet, Baltimore's attire is described in the same exhaustive detail. Many other times, Barth describes simple events elaborately, exploring all combinations and permutations of the situation. Before leaving England, for example, Ebenezer visits Benjamin Bragg's stationery shop in order to select a notebook in which to write his poetry. What Ebenezer expects to be a simple procedure turns into a harrowing experience. The newly-named laureate, who has a history of troubles in decision-making, must choose among sixteen possible kinds of notebooks:

A thin plain cardboard folio,  
 A thin plain cardboard quarto,  
 A thin plain leather folio,  
 A thin ruled cardboard folio,  
 A fat plain cardboard folio,  
 A thin plain leather quarto,  
 A thin ruled cardboard quarto,  
 A fat plain cardboard quarto,  
 A thin ruled leather folio,  
 A fat ruled cardboard folio,  
 A fat plain leather folio,  
 A thin ruled leather quarto,  
 A fat ruled cardboard quarto,  
 A fat plain leather quarto,  
 A fat ruled leather folio, or  
 A fat ruled leather quarto. (p. 110)



The poor poet is so flabbergasted by these many options that he pulls his sword on the merchant and steals the store's ledgerbook, the notebook closest to him. Barth uses this same technique later in the novel in describing Ebenezer's encounter with the lanter-loo-playing women. Cooke, in his poem, states simply that these women "Had nicely learn'd to Curse And Swear." Barth, however, chooses to demonstrate their knowledge:

"Whore!" shouted the first.  
 "Bas-cul!" retorted the other.  
 "Frisker!"  
 "Consoeur!"  
 "Trull!"  
 "Friquenelle!"  
 "Sow!"  
 "Usagère!"  
 "Bawd!"  
 "Viagère!" (p. 441-42)

The argument continues in like fashion for approximately six pages. This kind of exaggeration occurs throughout The Sot-Weed Factor. What the historical Cooke described as "Terrorours of the Main" becomes, in Barth's novel, Ebenezer's having to switch identities with his servant, experiencing a severe storm, being washed overboard, nearly being raped, being captured by pirates, and walking the plank. An encounter with a boy herding cattle becomes an encounter with a swineherd who is then involved with Ebenezer throughout the rest of the novel and eventually becomes his wife. What Cooke describes as a simple joke--the stealing of his narrator's clothes--for Barth's Ebenezer leads to his acquaintance with Mary Mungummary who becomes instrumental in bringing about much of the action in the rest of the novel.

Along with adding to the plot's complexity, Barth uses exaggeration to reduce the fictional events described to absurdity. The actual events tend to become lost in the welter of descriptive detail; and the characters who participate in the events, unless they do so ironically, are made to look ridiculous. Thus many activities which Ebenezer views with total seriousness, such as his elaborate preparations to see Lord Baltimore and his selection of a notebook, actually are used to ridicule the poet. Instead of being the noble Laureate, he is the butt of a joke. By extension, those who, like Ebenezer, view themselves without humor are also made to seem ridiculous.

Barth begins with the obscure life of a little-known poet, Ebenezer Cooke, and the rather simple plot of one of his poems, The Sot-Weed Factor. He then embellishes and adds to this information to create a plot that is, indeed, more complex than the plot of Tom Jones. The overall effect of this complexity is to satirize literature. The questing hero is made to seem ridiculous because, though his hardships are nearly always caused by his own bumbling and weakness of character, he views himself with extreme earnestness. Furthermore, the hero's quest is shown to be absurd. While Ebenezer searches desperately for his true identity, Barth demonstrates that no such identity exists.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Or as John C. Stubbs writes in "John Barth as a Novelist of Ideas: The Themes of Value and Identity," Critique, 8 (Winter 1965-66), 108, The Sot-Weed Factor is "purposely artificial . . . Barth exaggerates, if possible, the outlandish coincidences and hidden identities common to the eighteenth-century genre to show the gratuitousness of events and to emphasize the search for identity."

Though Barth satirizes literature, his "anti-novel" form does not advocate the end of the genre.<sup>10</sup> Barth creates an absurdly complex plot, based on a rather simple two-hundred-fifty-year-old poem, and written in the style of an eighteenth-century novel. At the same time he writes a tale which comments on literature itself and reflects the complex modern world. Because he imitates older works, Barth acknowledges the difficulty of creating original literature in the twentieth century. And because his novel also reflects the lack of absolutes in the twentieth century, it has something of value to say to a modern audience that must live in this confusing world.

Because he sets The Sot-Weed Factor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Barth is able to rewrite the past. The novel is in fact a parody of history and the historical novel. According to Barth's version, history is made by selfish scoundrels engaged in complex intrigues. Not even the most respected historical figures are safe from Barth's re-examination. For example, Burlingame as a young student, is acquainted with Sir Thomas More and Sir Isaac Newton. According to his account, they are both homosexuals who help him through Cambridge because they are sexually attracted to him and fight with each other because of sexual jealousy. Eventually, the two learn that Burlingame

<sup>10</sup>Gross discusses Barth's anti-novel technique as a method that "widens the expressive possibility of a genre that has been called dead for the last fifty years" (p. 102).

has been using their jealousy to his own advantage. They then become intimate friends and have Burlingame thrown out of Cambridge.

Captain John Smith receives equally harsh treatment. Barth writes his own version of Smith's journal which he calls "A Secret Historie of the Voiage Up the Bay of Chesapeake From Jamestowne in Virginia." Throughout much of the novel, Burlingame searches for this journal because he believes it holds the secret to his ancestry. The journal is found and does, in fact, discuss Henry Burlingame I, a member of Smith's crew. The two men despised each other, and the journal describes Smith's jealousy of and hatred for Burlingame, emotions hardly worthy of a courageous explorer. The journal also includes the famous story of Pocahontas. Barth's version, however, is quite different from that taught to school children. According to the secret journal, Smith gains his freedom from the Indians not because an Indian maiden pleads for his life, but because he is able to satisfy Pocahontas' previously insatiable sexual appetite and thereby prevent her future disloyalties to her husband, the king. Barth is not satisfied with a single retelling of history, however. He writes another journal, "The Privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame," which tells of the same relationships between Smith and Burlingame and Smith and Pocahontas, but which also presents its putative author in a much more favorable light.

Through his rewriting of history, Barth suggests that history, like identity, has no absolute reality. He imagines the objections that "a certain stodgy variety of squint-minded antiquarians" will have to his treatment of history and replies to them:

In the first place be it remembered, as Burlingame himself observed, that we all 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. Thus Being does make Positivists of us all. Moreover, this Clio was already a scarred and crafty trollop when the Author found her; it wants a nice-honed casuist, with her sort, to separate seducer from seduced. But if despite all, he is convicted at the Public Bar of having forced what slender virtue the strumpet may make claim to, then the Author joins with pleasure the most engaging company imaginable, his fellow fornicators, whose ranks include the noblest in poetry, prose, and politics; condemnation at such a bar, in short, on such a charge, does honor to artist and artifact alike, of the same order of magnitude as election to the Index Librorum Prohibitorum or suppression by the Watch and Ward. (p. 743)

According to Barth, his version of history is just as plausible as that found in history books. For example, The Sot-Weed Factor is written as an historical novel, but it is by no means the only history that could be written about the same period. It is, in fact, a denial that absolutes in history exist at all. Likewise, Barth's version of Ebenezer Cooke's first trip to Maryland is as valid as Cooke's own version. And according to the definition of literature of exhaustion, an infinite number of equally valid accounts could be written.

By emphasizing the artificiality of his novel through an exaggerated, complex plot, and by rewriting history, Barth creates a novel that is a metaphor for his philosophy. The novel's complexity reflects the complexity of the modern world, and its lack of absolutes reflects the same lack in the "real" world.

In The Sot-Weed Factor, Burlingame best illustrates Barth's philosophy. Burlingame expounds what he calls cosmophilism. He insists that one must learn as much of the world as possible and describes himself as "Suitor of Totality, Embracer of Contradictories, Husband to all Creation, the Cosmic Lover!" (p. 497). He claims all the world as his mistress and uses his unlimited sexual interests as an example of how one should properly approach the universe. At one point he advises Ebenezer, who wishes to establish himself as a tutor, to become "Professor of the Nature of the World," and not limit himself to a single subject. Yet Burlingame also acknowledges the impossibility of learning anything absolute and unchanging about the universe. Ebenezer describes his tutor's loathing for any book that pretends to present the way things are. When Burlingame teaches Anna and Ebenezer about history, he presents the subject as part of the children's play acting so that when Ebenezer goes to Cambridge he "took quite the same sort of pleasure in history as in Greek mythology and epic poetry, and made little or no distinction between, say, the geography of atlases and that of fairy-stories" (p. 8). The life Burlingame lives clearly illustrates this philosophy. His own background is vague and undefined. He estimates that he was born about 1654, but does not know who his parents were. Even as an adult, his identity is never established because he constantly changes roles. Burlingame describes himself as a man free from history and claims to be happy with this freedom. Yet he spends much of the novel searching for his father. Though Burlingame claims to be the cosmic lover, he also recognizes the difficulty of living in a world with no absolutes. He attempts to explain this contradiction to Ebenezer:

"Why is't you set such store by innocence and rhyming, and I by searching out my father and battling Coode? One must needs make and seize his soul, and then cleave fast to't, or go babbling into a corner; one must choose his gods and devils on the run, quill his own name upon the universe, and declare, 'Tis I, and the world stands such-a-way!' One must assert, assert, assert, or go screaming mad." (p. 345)

Since absolutes do not exist, one must choose his own values and live by them, if he is to live at all. Ebenezer agrees with his tutor that the only other course is to become paralyzed by the complexity of the world, unable to choose because all alternatives seem equally desirable. The Sot-Weed Factor ridicules typical human pursuits which are motivated by a belief that one can work toward an inherently valuable goal. As Barth illustrates, the only value is that which is arbitrarily assigned.

The Sot-Weed Factor as a whole reflects Barth's philosophy. By rewriting an earlier poem and early Maryland history, Barth demonstrates that other versions of the stories do exist. Through the complexity of the novel and its tendency to carry simple events to absurd extremes, Barth also suggests the value of being conscious of the universe in all of its everchanging vastness. Yet the existence of the novel itself suggests the necessity of "asserting." While acknowledging that alternatives do exist, the novel does present one version of Cooke's The Sot-Weed Factor and Colonial history. Barth, like Ebenezer, avoids paralysis by writing. He cannot write the version of his novel, but he can write a version of it.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Campbell Tatham in "John Barth and the Aesthetics of Artifice," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 12 (1971), 60-73, discusses artistic creation as one method through which men can aesthetically control their experience.

Despite the technical sophistication of The Sot-Weed Factor, Barth does not indulge in gratuitous experimentation. The novel, itself, in all its complexity, is a metaphor for the philosophy it presents. Furthermore, the novel "manages . . . to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions." Admittedly it does not explore any particular social ill. Barth seems consciously to avoid such social comment by choosing an eighteenth-century poem and genre as his models and by refusing to deny that his novel is a work of fiction. But he still creates a character, Ebenezer Cooke, who must learn to survive in a hopelessly complex world. Ebenezer's lack of nobility seems only to enhance the sympathy he evokes. The world, after all, as Barth illustrates through his version of history, contains few who would be considered heroic if the truth about them were known. Ebenezer, like modern man, often feels lost and helpless, face-to-face with the universe. He tells Bertrand, "all men are fools of chance save the suicide, and even he must wager that there is no Hell to fry in" (p. 210). Ebenezer is often so overwhelmed by alternatives that he becomes paralyzed until someone forces him out of his stupor. Yet even this bumbling, ignoble character manages to make his way in the world by choosing a role to play. He declares himself poet and virgin and maintains this role even after, as Roxanne tells him, "'this precious Innocence you cling to hath been picked at and pecked at till you've scarce a tit-bit of't left'" (p. 628). This role makes Ebenezer a much-ridiculed and ludicrous figure throughout most of The Sot-Weed Factor. Yet it does allow him to survive and to retain his sanity, and he abandons the role only after he finds another to take its place.



Barth by no means suggests that all persons should follow Ebenezer's path. Ebenezer, in fact, seems little better off at the end of the novel when immobilized by exhaustion than at the beginning when immobilized by paralysis. Critics sometimes complain of this lack of positive accomplishment;<sup>12</sup> but Barth is a storyteller, not a moralist. He is not trying to show how things should be, but one version of how things are. One might not learn how to live his life by reading Barth's fiction, but through watching this self-proclaimed poet and virgin stumble his way through a very long and complicated novel, as a fellow human who must also learn to survive in his equally confusing universe, one does develop great sympathy for him.<sup>13</sup> In this sympathy lies the appeal to the human heart that Barth believes is so essential to literature.

Barth begins with an eighteenth-century poem, The Sot-Weed Factor, and an eighteenth-century poet, Ebenezer Cooke, and creates a vital work of twentieth-century literature that meets the requirements he himself established for literature of exhaustion. Because it is an imitation of an earlier work, the novel acknowledges the difficulty of creating original fiction in the twentieth century and admits that the history of literature does not begin with Barth. Yet because Barth exaggerates,

<sup>12</sup>For example, Jac Tharpe in John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1974), objects to "the most unpleasant conclusion of the action" because "nothing is accomplished when Ebenezer becomes aware" (p. 45).

<sup>13</sup>See Tatham for a discussion of the problems faced by Barth's characters that still must be faced today.

embellishes, and distorts his models, he satirizes the literature that he imitates and creates a technically up-to-date work of fiction. The complex structure of the novel reflects the complexity of the modern world and is a metaphor for its equally intricate philosophy. Finally, because the novel tells of people struggling to survive in a confusing, unrealistic eighteenth-century world, it appeals to the humanity of its readers who face a similar dilemma in the twentieth century. Barth does all this without becoming socially engagé. Because Barth confronts the "ultimacy" of the modern novel directly, he is able to untie his hands, which were formerly secured by the history of literature. He thereby is free to create a new form of literature and extends the life of a genre that has been declared dead.

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EBENEZER COOKE, JOHN BARTH,

AND

THE LITERATURE OF EXHAUSTION

by

Carolyn W. Brumbaugh

(ABSTRACT)

In 1708 Colonial poet Ebenezer Cooke published a satirical poem entitled The Sot-Weed Factor. The poem, written in the style of Samuel Butler's Hudibras, tells of a tobacco merchant's first visit to Maryland. In 1960 contemporary novelist John Barth wrote a novel, also entitled The Sot-Weed Factor and used Cooke's life and poem as sources.

In order to understand why Barth chose these eighteenth-century sources for his twentieth-century novel, one must first examine his theory of "literature of exhaustion." According to Barth, this literature begins with the realization that the novel is dead or dying and uses this fact as a theme. The writers of this fiction must be aware of the history of the novel and must write technically up-to-date novels, but they must, at the same time, treat matters of the human heart.

One way to accomplish these goals is to imitate earlier works, as Barth does in The Sot-Weed Factor. Because the novel imitates a two-hundred-fifty-year-old poem, it acknowledges that the history of literature does not begin with itself. Yet Barth's imitation parodies his model by embellishing and exaggerating it to a point of absurdity. The novel thereby reflects this same absurdity in the modern world and thus



reaches the hearts of those who must live in it. Thus, though Barth imitates an eighteenth-century poem, he creates a thoroughly modern novel that meets his requirements for literature of exhaustion and gives new life to a moribund genre.