

Demystifying Myth : A Reading of John Barth's *The Sot Weed Factor*

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Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to discuss how John Barth's *The Sot Weed Factor* is centered on rewriting fictions of the past, either "literary" or "historical". Barth has taken the notion of mimesis to its limits as "imitation of the past," through the demystification of History. He views myth with a multiplicity of attitudes, simultaneously praising and mocking, affirming and denying, using and abusing it in order to explore its potential as a satiric device. He also uses myth in a noticeably self-conscious way in order to write about the process of his own composition, and to explore and satirize myth itself and the forms it takes. Barth exploits these tensions in order to generate an ultimate replenishment of the material and a paradoxical renewal of the myths. In *The Sot Weed Factor* Barth returns to the origins of the eighteenth century novel, but this reinvigoration of the eighteenth century tradition is cast in mode of parody.*

Key Words: *Problematic identity, Struggle for existence , Lacunae surrounding.*

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In a 1963 Horizon magazine profile, John Barth asserts, “there are deep metaphysical reasons why we need more fielding like books today, with plots where everybody turns out to be related to everybody else” (“In Print: John Barth” 14). Barth said in an interview, that after writing his first two novels, he realized he was not “writing about values but rather he was merely writing about innocence” (“*John Barth: An Interview*” 22). He also uses myth in a noticeably self-conscious way in order to write about the process of his own composition, and to explore and satirize myth itself and the forms it takes. His views myth a multiplicity of attitudes, simultaneously praising and mocking, affirming and denying, using and abusing it in order to explore its potential as a satiric device. Barth exploits these tensions in order to generate an ultimate replenishment of the material and a paradoxical renewal of the myths. *The Sot-Weed Factor* written by a regional poet, Ebenezer Cooke, whose name Barth occasionally heard as a child while growing up in Cambridge. Then, he was inspired by an idea of writing a novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor* based on Cooke’s poem by employing the poet as his innocent hero. The novel would be about how Ebenezer Cooke came to write a satiric poem, *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

However, the problem we may find most significant in Barth’s is not either its outrageous length or its complicated plot, but rather the whole novel which could be easily confused as a product of the 18th century. Despite its potentially paralyzing and depressing implications about politics and history, and despite its length, *The Sot-Weed Factor* is very enjoyable to read. Its sheer energy exudes from every page and the abundant humor and wit scattered on every page and the cascading words make the reading exhilarating and amusing, maybe except for the ending. Barth affirms myth by reliving the process of myth-making within his stories. It keeps the reader continuously amused while feeding him with some interesting problems of life, whether they are serious or trivial. Indeed, it is not inappropriate to commend Barth’s book in an old-fashioned manner: it amuses while it teaches. But in contrast with Barth’s earlier considerations of the absence of any absolute rational justification for moral values and actions, the tragic view focuses on the recognition that man is condemned to act and on what Barth describes as “the tragic futility of actions” (*The first person: Conversations on Writers and Writing* 137).

Through his parody of eighteenth-century conventions, Barth emphasizes the importance of these “manipulated sequences” in order to assert the difference between textual norms and experience. In terms of plot of *The Sot Weed Factor*, this is most evident in the comic exaggeration of the roles of coincidence and disguised identities. Perhaps the best example in the novel is that of Roxanne Russecks and her daughter, Henrietta. After Roxanne’s unsuccessful attempt to seduce the novel’s

protagonist, Ebenezer Cooke, he learns that she was his wet nurse after his mother's death in child birth; that she was also his father's mistress; and that her daughter is actually Ebenezer's half-sister. In addition, Ebenezer learns that Roxanne and Henrietta, disguised as French nobility, are the same two women who earlier eluded the pirate Captain Pound with the assistance of Ebenezer's former tutor, Henry Burlingame. Finally, Roxanne's first lover, a young farmer named Benjy Long, is later identified with the pirate captain Long Ben Avery. This coincidence of identities is offered as the rationale for Avery's sudden change of heart in realising these women and their fellow captives. Though this example is extensive, it is merely representative of the larger series of confusing coincidence and disguises that pervade the novel. Charles Harris makes perhaps the most expensive claim in this regard by suggesting that *The Sot Weed Factor* is a reflection of "the incipient postmodern Weltanschauung"

(*Contemporary American Novelist of the Absurd* 57). He maintains that the novel's self-conscious order remains us of the fictiveness of our own constructions of reality. Throughout the novel this view of reality is impressed upon Ebenezer by Henry Burlingame, who serves as a counselor and benefactor during Ebenezer's travels in Maryland. Before they embark from England for the New World, Burlingame tells his erstwhile pupil, "The world's indeed a flux, as Heraclitus declared: the very universe is naught but change and motion" (126). In Burlingame's view and man is "Chance's fool the toy of aimless Nature . . . a mayfly flitting down the winds of Chaos" (344-345). But as *The Sot Weed Factor* demonstrate Burlingame's views here and those of Barth's critics address only one half of the issue.

As suggested earlier, Barth's parody of the eighteenth century form involves both a comic exaggeration and an imitation of its conventions. The extensive attention to time and place and the emphasis on circumstantial particularity, or what Roland Barthes describes as the "reality effect," are not exposed as mere conventions in the novel. These elements serve to reinforce the novel's claim to verisimilitude, in contrast with the tendency of comic exaggeration to assert the artifice in the account. Barth thus privileges what is continuous in the realistic tradition over what may be identified as the stylizations of a specific historical period. *The Sot Weed Factor* actually defines the moral basis for Burlingame's assertion through its dramatization of Ebenezer's progress from a tenaciously held innocence to an informed awareness of the world. It is this movement towards understanding that ultimately unites Ebenezer's adventures with the principles of the tragic view that inform the novel overall. As Barth points out, *The Sot Weed Factor* may be distinguished from his earlier novels through its concern with the theme of innocence. When Ebenezer

decides to forego the favors of the prostitute Joan Toast, he writes a "Hymn to Innocence." The last quatrain reads: "Preserv'd, my innocence preserveth. Me from Life, from Time, from Death, from History without it I must breathe Man's mortal Breath: Commence a Life . . . and thus commence my Death!" (59).

Though it is designed as a response to his earlier irresolution, Ebenezer's espousal of innocence represents only a refusal to engage the world. As Burlingame points out a refusal to engage the world, Burlingame points out later in the novel, "What is the difference twixt innocence and ignorance, pray, save that the one is Latin and the other Greek? In substance they are the same: innocence is ignorance" (387). Ebenezer slowly comes to accept this view, and his assertion of a moral value in the face of a contingent reality and the novel's larger dramatization of the tragic view. During a conversation with Mary Mungummory, "the travelling whore of Dorset, "Ebenezer recounts an earlier suggestion he made to Burlingame that human problems "amounted to naught from the aspect of eternity," to which Burlingame replied, "Quite so, Eben: but down here where we live they are mountainous enough and no mistake!" (611). In a subsequent reflection, Ebenezer links Burlingame's assertion with the problems of a devalued existence: "Granted that the earth, as Burlingame was fond of pointing out, it is a dust mote whirling through the night, there was something brave, defiantly human, about the passengers on this mote who perished for some dream of value" (685). Though he recognizes the quixotic aspect of this enterprise, Ebenezer eventually embraces a compassionate responsibility as the only viable responses in a world lacking any absolute rational justification for action.

After their capture by the confederation of Indians and runaway slaves on Bloodsworth Island; Ebenezer and John McEvens are released to find Henry Burlingame in order to ensure the safety of their fellow captives and possibly avert the impending massacre of all the white colonists in Maryland. McEvoy, who was freed at Ebenezer's urging, expresses discontent at being obliged to Ebenezer for his freedom. Ebenezer reproaches him: "A farts for these airy little members of the soul; lays your flesh and blood privates on the line, as i have and we are quit for all eternity!" (582). He then challenges McEvoy:

How is that for a pathway, John McEvoy? I'Christ, 'tis a grande avenue, a camino real, a very boulevard; at one end lies your slough of False Integrity . . . to call it by its name on the Map of truth . . . and at the other stands the storied town . . . where responsibility rears her golden towers. . . . (582)

Though Ebenezer's assertion of a compassionate responsibility *The Sot Weed Factor* provides an effective response to the moral dilemma .Ebenezer is not, at the beginning of the novel, so much a character as he is the mere form or idea of a character; he is such a strange character in part because he is no character at all. He is a figure in a narrative that constantly looks at himself from the narrator's point of view. He sees himself as part of many possible stories, and thus finally as part of no particular story. Cooke's indecision is essentially a result of his ability to look at himself as outside any fixed narration, or fixed role to look at self as so fundamentally a possibility in a story that he ceases to feel the limitations of time and place that we are used to expecting from a character in a novel. Barth clearly illustrates this when Ebenezer is forced to face death after walking the plank of a pirate ship. Death, we learn, is something that Ebenezer has been imaginatively prepared for by his education— but only as the possibility of death, not that of his death.

In terms of its overall narrative structure, *The Sot-Weed Factor* accords with what Northrop Frye describes as an intensely ironic comedy. Anticipating the organizational pattern of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, divided into three major parts, each identifying a particular stage in Ebenezer's progress, and a fourth part which acts as a strong ironic qualification of the novel's comic structure. At the close of Part III, Ebenezer regains the title to his estate that he had earlier given away unwittingly and consummates his marriage with the dying, syphilitic opium-addict Joan Toast. Though the protagonist's happiness is certainly qualified, *The Sot-Weed Factor* does attain a comic resolution in Part III through this marriage and Ebenezer's restoration to her rightful place. Eager to pursue "Curiosity at Form's expense," the narrator then recounts in Part IV the subsequent fates of many of the major figures in the novel (744). He remarks:

. . . it cannot be said that the life of any of our characters was markedly blissful ; some, to be sure, were rather more serene, but others took more or less serious turns for the worse, and a few were terminated far before their time.
(744)

To emphasize *The Sot-Weed Factor's* undermining of the notion that "everything works out," Barth employs his self-conscious narrator in Part IV to draw attention to the role of literary conventions in shaping the preceding comic resolution. In his apology to the reader, the narrator confesses in Part IV that he has "played . . . fast and loose with Clio, the chronicler's muse" (SWF 743). In his own defence, however, he maintains that "the happenings of former times are clay in the present moment that wills we nill we, the lot of us must sculpt" (743). The narrator

then distinguishes between Ebenezer's "story" and his "history" to justify the extension of the narrative in Part IV beyond Ebenezer's marriage to Joan Toast. He comments:

The story of Ebenezer Cooke is told; Drama wants no more than his consent to Joan Toast's terms, their sundry implications being clear To the history, on the other hand, there is so much more . . . all grounded on meager fact and solid fancy (743)

By grounding his history in "meager fact and solid fancy" the narrator blurs the distinction between the common understanding of history and fiction, but he draws attention to the "story" conceived as a dramatic ordering of events and to "history" as those events lying outside this order. While this "history" is no less a part of the pilot of *The Sot-Weed Factor* than anything prior to it in the novel, the narrator's protestations emphasize the importance of dramatic necessity in the conclusion to Part III. He suggests that a fidelity to experience in Part IV is not compromised by literary conventions and that the focus on death, thwarted expectations, and terminal uncertainty in his epilogue is therefore more intensely verisimilar. On the other hand, however, by undermining his own distinction between the fictional status of his "history" and Ebenezer's "story," the narrator also suggests that the fidelity to experience in the preceding comic resolution cannot be entirely discounted. This is consistent with the fact that throughout *The Sot-Weed Factor* Ebenezer's affirmation of a compassionate responsibility is never mocked. As established, the Tragic View emphasizes both the necessity of moral action and the "tragic futility" of such action. By striking a balance between the verisimilar qualities of Ebenezer's "story" and the "history" in Part IV, the narrative structure of Barth's novel aligns itself with *The Sot-Weed Factor's* thematic concerns in upholding the cogency of both the moral affirmation that leads to the comic resolution in Part III and the ultimate recognition of the tragic nature of existence.

This aspect of *The Sot-Weed Factor's* thematic structure is also reinforced by the satiric element in the novel. Throughout *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth employs satire to deflate any idealized understanding of the colonial past. In "The Privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame" and Captain John Smith's "Secret Historie of the Voyage Up the Bay of Chesapeake," for example, both the Pocahontas legend and the early expeditions of John Smith are depicted as no more than adventures in sexual prowess and scatological humour. In effecting what Northrop Frye describes as "a bodily democracy paralleling the democracy of death in the dense macabre,"

Barth's satire is continuous with his use of realism to insist upon the "gross finality" of physical fact (*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* 235). By emphasizing the base motivations and roguish dissembling that characterize the murky and indeterminate political intrigues in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth's satiric treatment of the colonial past also reinforces his dramatization of the Tragic View. It is in this context that Leslie Fiedler's description of Barth as "an existentialist comedian suffering history" is particularly apt ("John Barth: An Eccentric Genius" 327).

The "game of governments" in *The Sot-Weed Factor* finally shows that the effects of human acts are most often equivocal and, in a larger view of their constructive consequences, perhaps futile. In noting that nothing was heard from Burlingame after his return to the Indians on Bloodsworth Island, for example, the narrator simply remarks in Part IV, "Whether owing to his efforts or not, the greatest insurrection did not materialize . . ." (748). But Burlingame's fate is only representative of the uncertainty surrounding the mysterious political intrigues that pervade *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Both Lord Baltimore and John Coode, the two arch-rivals and the source of all political strife, remain elusive figures in the novel. If not "devils and demigods," as Burlingame confesses to Ebenezer, Baltimore and Coode must "have been legended out of reasonable dimension; or it may be they are naught but rumors and tales themselves" (706). The significance of the novel's detailed accounts of these political struggles lies in their indeterminacy, in the inability of either party to bring its cause to fruition. The only certain fact, as the narrator points out in Part IV, is "that John Coode never attained the grand objectives attributed to him, and neither did that shadowy figure presumed to be at the other pole of morality, Lord Baltimore . . . at least not in his lifetime" (751).

By supporting the claims to verisimilitude in the narrator's recounting of these political machinations, the formal structure of *The Sot-Weed Factor* reinforces the novel's thematic insistence on the difficult circumstances of action and its emphasis on the tragic nature of existence. As suggested earlier, however, Ebenezer's assertion of a compassionate responsibility is never mocked in the novel. By insisting on the "gross finality" of Ebenezer's world, the realistic conventions in Barth's narrative also stress both the viability and the necessity of Ebenezer's moral affirmation. In providing a formal correlative for both the recognition that man is condemned to act and tragic understanding of existence, the formal structure of the *The Sot-Weed Factor* reflects the informing principles of the tragic view and demonstrates the full extent of its unity with the novel's thematic concerns.

Moreover, when *The Sot-Weed Factor* does deal with social problems, it is more concerned with treating them as moral issues than it is with translating them into

political issues. Perhaps this is the best evidence for considering *The Sot- Weed Factor's* overt political content “moderately liberal”: it treats moral issues as individual crises, and hesitates to translate these into cultural terms. But, even if this is the case, the book’s metafictional and metahistorical critique cannot be reduced to that political stance. One can just as easily imagine *The Sot-Weed Factor* having more radical implications for some readers, given its emphasis on one’s engagement with history, its deconstruction of traditional notions of historical truth, and its presentation of history as a socially produced textuality, mediated by the purposes and expectations of narrator and audience. The tragic structure of their novels highlights the communities inability to see beyond their patriarchal and circumscribed world and also indicates that there are particular ways of looking at the world and history.

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