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Imagining Iraq and the Cultural Politics of Misreading: John Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*

Wang Jianping

The publication of John Barth's novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (London: 1991) in the midst of the Persian Gulf War has raised certain questions concerning the book's representation of medieval Arabian culture and Barth's political intent on current Middle East affairs. A reworking of the Sindbad story from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the novel invokes the bustling medieval city of Baghdad where much of the novel's action takes place. Scenes shift in the locale of the Persian Gulf, between Baghdad and Basra, names that come rather hauntingly into the news today. Written before Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the first phase of the War (Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990), the book was published in the month when the war was approaching its violent conclusion. As the novel hit the bookstands in the early spring of 1991, allied bombing of Baghdad reached its greatest intensity and coalition forces drove to the very outskirts of Basra itself.

The simultaneous occurrence of the two events may be a historical coincidence. However, the hectic state of Middle East affairs in which the novel came out has forced reading into a vortex of international politics more or less against authorial intentions. Critical evaluations of Barth's political intent and his own theoretical strategies mobilize the field of exchanges in the work's circulation. In an interview in January 1992 at The Johns Hopkins University in the beginning days of the Gulf War,[1] Barth explained away the book's topicality" as "just after-the-fact coincidences," and that the novel was being planned and written back when Saddam Hussein was our ally and Iran was the enemy" (Edelman 2). To readers fresh with memory of the eight-year long crisis, however, the disparity between the exotic once-upon-a-time Baghdad and its modern counterpart devastated by cruise missiles and high tech laser bombs, may not appear nearly so immense. As critic Gregory Wolfe comments, although the novel can hardly be read as an allegory on Saddam Hussein or Islamic absolutism -- the two characters, Sindbad the Sailor and the modern American writer/journalist Simon William Behler are both admirable and villainous, being mirror images of each other -- *Voyage* is, in fact, a story that speaks rather directly about the present. It is a novel about survival, tall tales, lies, plunder, and betrayal" (372). Barth may have welcomed the coincidence of the War as a case in point of the theme of his writing: the problematic relation between fiction and reality. It would not be difficult to bring this same Barthian skepticism on the Persian Gulf War -- Barth has long held that rational systems of thought have failed to help modern man find his place in the cosmos. Barth's method has caused

genuine misgivings: purportedly dealing with cultural issues through a simulated context and facilitation of such by resorting to the fantastic. The book's "metafictional pyrotechnics with a modernistic structure" merely eluded the lowest of fictional expectations (Hagen, 4). Barth's iconoclastic slash at fetishism of selfhood" (de Man) is indeed double-edged. And the book is more directly involved with the desire for and implications of pleasure, dropping the over-concern with politics (Lindsay 156). Mark Edmundson finds Barth's unwillingness to open an ironic gap an instance of Barth's old misplaced iconoclastic energies in indulging racial prejudices. By depicting the Arabs as dim provincials, Barth indulges what is most provincial in himself and, possibly, in his American readers at large: encouraging the unrevised view of the ugly and worn stereotypes of an foreign culture. Thus, the book may be situated squarely within the tradition of cultural perception or misperception that has been called Orientalism." [2] Edmundson concludes with a pernicious indictment of the author himself:

> Barth's work has always been shot through with some measure of misanthropy. In the earlier novels it took the form of a high-spirited derision for the systems -- philosophical, literary, political, social -- by which people tried to force stable meanings into experience. Now it seems that Barth has given up, and become a rancorous rather than a vital misanthrope, indulging ugly prejudices, racial and sexual. (46)

The contentious point seems to be Barth's alleged demonization of Islamic cultural hero Sindbad and the anachronistic view of an antimodern society. It seems to me that if the novel *is* about war, it is about a different kind of war, though the narrator's problematic perception of medieval Arabian culture is taken to insinuate about Barth's own position on Arab culture in general and the Gulf War in particular. The debate offers a case in which much more besides the value set on the literary text is at stake when it circulates, to use Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, beyond its "field of cultural production" (*Field*: 29). Literary products and their aesthetic value, Bourdieu argues, are radically contingent on a very complex and constantly changing set of circumstances involving multiple social and institutional factors. To be fully understood, they must be reinserted in the system of social relations which sustains them. This may explain why writer's efforts to control the reception of their own works are always partially doomed to failure" (*Field*, 31). As even the most autonomous work contains implicit reference to an intellectual universe whose cardinal points are ideological/political positions taken in a given state of the field, once these bearings -- the structures of the field of production" -- are removed the text becomes open to misreading (*Outline*: 1)

Misreading, in its most cultural/political sense, is the subject of Barth's book, a subject that itself is horrendously misread. Its controversiality" bears an index to the socio-political contingence of literary reception. To mediate between Barth's aesthetics and politics, I am going to look at two questions: first, why a writer's aesthetic concern should have led to a reader's moral outrage; Second, whether we can free Barth from aesthetically unsophisticated but politically coercive readings.

The story features Simon William Behler who falls overboard in a storm while retracing the routes of the legendary voyages of Sindbad the Sailor and is rescued by contemporaries of the real Sindbad. The voyage is undertaken in 1981 in company with Tim Severin's *Sohar* in its *Sindbad Voyage Project*, exploring in pure Islamic fashion this Eastern legend of seaworthiness.[3] The couple's two-month cruise begins from Singapore through the Strait of Malacca to the western tip of Sumatra, then across Ceylon and up the Malabar Coast of India to the Arabian penninsula. The site of the accident is subsequently code-named *Serendib*. As Behler reaches for his Julia, he loses consciousness and finds himself miraculously in the time and locale of *The Thousand and One Nights,* medieval Baghdad where Bey el-Loor -- as his name sounds on the Arabian tongue -- starts a storytelling duet with the legendary Sindbad and engages his new friends with his "exotic" tales: boyhood on Maryland's Eastern Shore, first love, early literary success, marriage, and divorce, losses and rescues. In altogether seven installments, replicating the legendary Sindbad's seven voyages, the narrative alternates with Sindbad and Behler jostling for attention: he sail by turns two voyages," says Sindbad, now parallel, now worlds apart, yet at times so close that the voyager may be transported unawares from one ship to the other" (81).

Throughout Behler enjoys Sindbad's great hospitality, with an audience of Arab merchants, guests, investors, housemaids, Vizir Haroun al-Rahid's messenger, and Sindbad's daughter Yasmin, to whose ears Behler's plain civic tale sounds incredibly fantastic. The storytelling competition, carried out pretty much in the public sphere of medieval Baghdad, involves more than stories but politics, business, and the law.[4] They will match tale for tale, voyage for voyage, at the rate of one apiece per night until the twelve voyages become one -- to Serendib, their common starting place. Stakes rise as stories, unfolded through treacherous memory, get increasingly opaque, drawing just about everyone from the audience. Thus, the teller, tale, told are bound to this perilous business: each an investor and a sharp critic, watchful of every single move on the part of the teller who must stand or fall with the story told.[5]

In *Voyage,* narration is more than a medium; it is the site of the most sinister motives at work, the darkest secrecy and the most intense cultural dissonance within the text. The story's structure hinges almost by default on a supernatural event which Behler recounts in Voyage Four. "Hinged" because the balance of the 573-page novel is merely superficial and therefore serves as a pivotal point of analysis. Geographically, Serendib becomes the site of a violent generic disruption on which to hang the entire tale. The book's unsettling content is decided by the frametale in which the narrator initiates the stories in a post-rescue delirium. The initial question to ask about Barth's insertion of the fantastic into a plain realistic story is not only what is the fantastic, how it occurs but why it is there at all, which concerns critics's indignation at Barth's use of "deliberate anachronism" (Borges).

At first sight, Sindbad's survival tales of glory and daring bear little resemblance to repressive narrative. Sindbad experiences it as one but tells it otherwise. The tall tales, which he parades as a homely Islamic brand of realism," are deeply motivated as narration of sin, error, and transgression. The stories fall

into a pattern of the guilt-driven compulsive. On six voyages, each harder and more harrowing than the one before, Sindbad has thought himself sunk and drowned, or cast away beyond hope or rescue. Though each time he loses all investment and despairs of life, he comes back to Baghdad more wealthy than before, entertaining his audience with an extravagance that renders Behler's small tales banal in comparison. However, Sindbad makes a strong claim to realsim:

> The high ground of traditional realism, brothers, is where I stand! Give me familiar, substantial stuff: rocs and rhinoceros, ifrits and genies and flying carpets, such as we all drank in with our mothers' milk and shall drink -- Inshallah -- till our final swallow. Let no outlander imagine that such crazed fabrications as machines that mark the hour or roll themselves down the road [referring to Baylor's *Omega Timex* and locomotive] will ever take the place of our homely Islamic realism, the very capital of narrative -- from which, if I may say so, all interest is generated. (136)

The war being waged here in the name of aesthetics is actually one for discursive supremacy. But, as gradually unfolded through Barth's even-paced narration, the reader is soon allowed to see Sindbad's tales of grandiose adventures and intrepid explorations poorly conceal a murderous history and well-financed piracy. Behind the mystery of Sindbad's survivalhood is a calculated sacrifice of "expendable" lives. Sindbad's almost mechanical pattern of fate often belies a vicious scheme: one stock-in-trade in his seaworthiness is the designed sacrifice of fellow merchant-sailors each time.

In at least half of the book, Sindbad does not appear to be a demoniac character, his voyaging is presented as being both artistic and pathological, admirable and villainous. Sindbad compulsively voyages forth, his past a written dramaturgy that preordains every future act. With repetition inherent in the plotting and a baggage of lessons previously learned, Sindbad's voyages become virtual reenactments of the stories he has previously told. He constantly changes strategies, discarding moral clich's as quickly as he creates them. The procedure of his preparation for each trip is ritualistic, symptomatic of a highly compulsive neurotic mentality, what Agnes Fletcher terms "*the idee fixe*" that oftentimes grips the typical demoniac character in an allegorical fiction for whom freedom of choice hardly exists. "Compulsive behavior is highly orderly; it is supersystematic" (Fletcher 291). Committed to the task of endless meticulous acts, Sindbad's orderliness virtually becomes the demon in his life, and his anxiety is both artistic and pathological. Fear of land and stasis as well of fear of not reaching his goal is even greater than his fear of the particular terrors along the way.

But such compulsive neurotic behavior serving the higher ends of a cultural dream is soon revealed to be thinly disguised cultural barbarism, the undeviating, totally committed, absolutist ethics of characters working in pursuit of high cultural aims, and therefore transcending the bounds of neurosis. Sindbad's goals are ardently pursued but camouflaged with his notorious "Tub of Truth" and "Tub of Last Resort" which serve as carriers of his pirated wealth as well as the moral cliches he spouts. The ritualistic manner in which he goes about organizing those

missions and telling them in nicely packaged stories hardly disguise a history of well-financed piracy. Barth's rendition of Sindbad's self-fashioning would suggest, among other things, that whenever aesthetics and culture are invoked as examples of clarity and control, whenever, in other words, an aesthetic appeal is used as a disguise for the chaotic, a great deal of caution is in order.

Barth gives Behler's story a more consciously literary form, the memoir. This is not a coincidence. As Barth retires from full-time teaching, he has become increasingly aware of the culture of reading his work, particularly readers from overseas, from "developing countries" which he has never visited. "Aesthetic realism, then, is any set of artistic conventions felt by people on a particular level of a particular period .... the difference between the fantasy we call reality and the fantasies we call fantasy has to do with cultural consensus and with one's manner of relating to the concept-structure involved. It goes without saying that one generation's or culture's realism is another's patent artifice" (*Friday* 222). Addressing an international symposium on "the Novel in the Next Century" in 1992, before the publication of *Voyage*, Barth devoted the speech almost exclusively to the topicality of reading. Writing from the center of Academia, he views the field of cultural production through geographical and social formations of his readers within the country and outside it.[6] This awareness of wide cultural spectrum is noticeable in his 90s' work. The autobiographical form, being recuperative of personal and cultural past, has become rather difficult, even anachonistic. "Then you reach age sixty," he told Dave Edelman in a 1992 interview after the book was published, "You really have a feeling perhaps that your readers might not really be so interested anymore [in autobiography]" (Edelman 2). "The phrase, drawing from life," he says later elsewhere, "as always had in my ears the sound of some particularly barbaric capital punishment" (*Time* 283). The awareness of the geopolitical nuances of anachronism may have been behind Barth's suspicion of identity discourse as a "cultural arbitrary" (Bourdieu *Reproduction*, 7) which Behler wields as an imperial idiom. Behler's memoir, his Timex Omega, and the whole mindset, his twentieth-century sea-faring knowledge, are his apparatuses to steer through the alien land. The gradual displacement of Sindbad's unnumbered tales by Behler's numbered ones is an index to his discursive supremacy, the triumph of "the role of imperial scribe" (Said *Orientalism*, 197). Initially, Bey el-Loor's tales, which betray fetishism (i.e. selfhood, cultural identity and technological superiority) are, in the words of Ibn al-Hamra, Sindbad's father-in-law to be, masquerade unswallowable "moral and aesthetic enormities" (247). Sindbad himself, who remains Somebody's harshest critic from beginning to end, suspects that such "false and charmless magic," meaning Behler's 20th century gadgets, mindset, his autobiographical realism, is a lie "to unhinge the jaws of our credulity." In place of real giant serpents presumably presented realistically in his own tales, "the interloper" invents "monstrous improprieties and serpentine insinuations" (190).

In Edgar Allen Poe's story, "One Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade," which satirizes geographical and technological disparity as causes of "Oriental incredulity,"[7] we see how the agency of domination does not reside in the teller but in the told. In rewriting Poe's tale, the way Behler constructs his six

voyages is suggestive of the kind of myth negotiated in the name of *A*uthorship. The notion of the well-penned solitary individual is precisely the aim of his professionalism (518). At Sindbad's household, he perfected a more merchangizable blend of candor and reticence, biographical fact and imaginative projection. Yasmin, however, though impressed by Behler's "authorhood," is ignorant of the book culture he came from and suspicious of its value:

> Raised as she had been in a culture in which autobiography was all but unknown, she found the idea of publishing one's rather ordinary adventures and misadventures (even of the more intimate sort), as if they were exemplary, for the entertainment of strangers, not self-evidently admirable. (519)

Sindbad and Behler are mirror-images of each other, sharing parallels of oedipal crimes and narrative monstrosities (Cf. *Arabian Nights*): Sindbad's incestuous desire for his daughter Yasmin, attempted murder of his adopted son Umar; Somebody's "unsavory" thought for his daughter[8] and his Sindbad-style murder of Julia Moore. The slippage and ellipsis occur when autobiography is mediated by a secretive mode of narration. In confronting transgression, Barth's protagonist seems unable to continue the story that should mediate the erasure. Rather, he short-circuits it with a number of apparent false stunts: "The next thing I knew, I knew nothing" (337). Accompanying Behler's "rite of passage" is a "genesis amnesia." Lacking a flotation vest, Behler was not rescuing Julia Moore so much as half clinging to her to keep himself from going under. He lost hold on Julia's sleeve and panicked off for the rescuing boat (337).

Certainly, Barth has not demonized his protagonist as a mere crony. Initially, Behler's use of a hegemonic discourse is not the only evidence of his "positional mystery"; his twentieth-century mindset enables him to see everywhere the shabbiness of an alien land. In his encounter with the technological backwaters of the East, Behler's first impression is one of abhorrence. The "civilization" is a kind of "third world": "like a shipwrecked sailor to a plank I clung to my belief (by now an ever more desperate hope) that I was in some technological compulsive backwater, one of those third-world pockets where things are still done as they have been done for centuries" (419). He asks,

> In what dark, superconservative Islamic time warp did these people live? Their names were Arabic, not Persian; *Zahir's* home port was Iraqi Basra, not Abadan in the regressive Iran of the Ayatollah Khomeini. I supposed there must be enclaves of studied antimodernity throughout Islam; for that matter, the language barrier, though becoming daily more penetrable, might still be concealing from me some important circumstance of this nuptial voyage: a systematic imitation, perhaps, not only of medieval Arab seafaring but of the medieval Arab mind-set and worldview? (407)

The passage and others have incited some controversial interpretations.[9] While criticism of Barth's inferiorization of Arabian culture based on evidential lack of irony in passages like this one is suspect of doing horrendous injustice to a sophisticated writer,[10] the question should be rephrased. Can we ultimately free

Barth from aesthetically naive but politically coercive readings? If the book were used as testing ground of a resistant ideology at the moment of cultural thresholding, there are at least a number of jumbled knots which are yet to disentangled.

The book ends with Behler's commissioned cruise to Ceylon, simulating Sindbad's good-will trip to the isle, as the couple are sailing beyond boundaries of culture, time and "charted space." [11] His triumph is absolute: by the time he marries Sindbad's daughter and sets on the nuptial cruise, Sindbad is perishing in his waterless tub on Desert Sohara, with his narrative gab exhausted, a rather ironic fate for a sailor who has spent his life exploring four seas of the world. But the Seventh Voyage more and more appears to be a utopian dream. As Barth did not explain the time warp, the reader can not be sure whether it is a dream, a patient's delirium, or a moment of the dying man's life flashing before his eyes, or a mere psychotic episode of the man rescued from salty deep. The narrative *per se,* which begins and ends with the narrator in a post-rescue delirium in the (mental? East Dorset Lunatic Asylum) hospital, invites us to read the story as a hopeful delusion of an incarcerated individual longing for escape. Barth is, after all, still indulging his fabulatory bent to the extent that simulacrum of a cultural engagement distances the reader and the author from real cultural issues and allows for no real ground, either ethical or epistemological, for the reader, while the invisible Author can hide behind his mask of critique by flouting fabricatory storytelling and vandalizing cultural bias. In bracketing the story, Barth provisionalizes the real context of the issues raised in the book and repeals any referential claims made in the name of cultural politics. The book has expertly avoided social\political\economic issues which face the Islamic world today through an easy alternative, without invoking the real context of a discourse of resistance. Endlessly manufactured through his fiction factory, Barth's fabrications of fabrications prevent any realistic calculations of the meaning that can be attached to the actual event that has been revealed to us, and may in the end weaken any proposed cultural critique. But this is only part of the story, there is, in addition, the danger of a failure to take this novelistic indeterminacy at its true sense. While one still admires Barth's knack for coming up with a wild, unpredictable roller-coaster of a plot, and may, perhaps, condone critics for their failure to read irony in the text, it leaves much room for misreading.

As of this writing (December 31, 1998), the Gulf crisis has reached a new phase of tension, closing off the hectic year with a disturbing note. As missiles of Desert Fox blasted Baghdad beginning from December 16, 1998, the U.S. conflict with Iraq seemed right back where it started nearly eight years ago when President George Bush ordered Operation Desert Storm (Janurary 17, 1990). Retrospectively, Barth's novel may have reproduced the scenario of war, politics, and sex that have haunted the terminal decade of the century. It is ironic, though, to remember that the refrain for Baghdad that runs through the book is "the City of Peace" as the narrating couple sails down "the harmless Persian Gulf." Arguably, Barth's book would be easily subject to a politically coercive reading for its much avowed repudiation of Muslim cultural barbarism, for its ironic share in fanfaring the widespread outrage of the American public and part of international society.

Regardless of authorial intention, the book might cater to the public taste for demoralizing the Arabs and insinuates itself into an uneasy complicity with the power politics. Although it is hardly convincing to enlist Barth's own complicity, it would not be difficult to imagine readers from the Arabian culture finding the moral and political overtones of the book outrageously demeaning. While a book's rather contingent political use-value may be dubious, it can be morally misleading for the public as a handle for grasping an incalcitrant culture. It also invites readings from the viewpoint of the politically debatable racialist perceptions or misperceptions of the Islam world, a world that, as Edward Said suggests, has never quite easily been politically encompassed by the West in general, by the post-war United States in particular (*Orientalism* 299). Certainly the Arab nationalism and its openly declared hostility to Western imperialism since World War II, particularly in the past decade, has kicked up a consensus public desire to assert intellectually satisfying things about Islam as a leverage of moral and political retaliation.

"Antimodernity", presented as pervading the land, is at the bottom of the moral outrage. In *Pen and the Sword*, Said suggested: "the idea of killing Arabs and Muslims is legitimized by the popular culture" (87). In 1991, "it was as if an almost metaphysical intention to rout Iraq had sprung into being" as American public media, popular culture, scholarly expertise might be harnessed in a blanket condemnation of the Arabs and in mobilizing a public consensus on the war. (President Bush's speech on Operation Desert Storm is a mixture of American slang and military jargon, "kick ass" and Kissenger's "surgical strikes." In his 1990 speech, "Iraqi Aggression in the Persian gulf" after Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2 1990, President Bush declared the national concern: the war is not about oil, but aggression. However, the talk of new world order and American leadership in suppressing aggression is overshadowed by talk of the budget crisis beginning from in the early 1970s:

> In the final analysis, our ability to meet our responsibilities abroad depends upon political will and consensus at home. This is never easy in democracies, where we govern only with the consent of the governed. And although free people in a free society are bound to have their differences, American traditionally come together in times of adversity and challenge.

Edward Said notices that "for at least a decade movies about American commandos pitted a hulking Rambo or technically whiz-like Delta Force against Arab/Muslim terrorist-desperadoes; (*Imperialism*: 356). [12] The most disheartening aspect about the media portrayal of the Arab world, is that "Arabs only understand force; brutality and violence are part of Arab civilization; Islam is an intolerant, segregationist, '*Medieval'*, fanatic, cruel, anti-woman religion" (*Imperialism*, 357, my emphasis). The past is, indeed, a "foreign country" (title of David Lowenthal's book). From such dissenting point, the view of an untimodern Arab world may well be part of the "legacy of imperialism" in the political economy of memory that exists in the public culture of the West. The prevailing sense is that "Muslims are just mad at

modernity, as if modernity were some vague force that they want to attack and revile in order to go back to the seventh century. That is part of the picture. The descriptions of Islam in the West are part of the very same problem that Muslims throughout the Arabic world and the Islamic world generally, whether in Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Iran, are fighting" (*Pen*, 87). From the even more opposite view, the war could well bolster Saddam's image. "Saddam can emerge as a hero who faced down U.S. imperialism," said Hamid Bayati, spokesman for the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.[13]

Voyage is not an isolated case. The Gulf War and Saddam Hussein reappear rather hauntingly in work written during the period, *Once Upon a Time* (1994) and *On with the Story* (1996).[14] In *On with the Story* (1996), The tension of the Persian Gulf is extended to the other Gulf, the Carribeans, the Gulf Stream, Grand Bahama, Heiti, Rwanda, etc. In a short story, "Waves," Barth tells of two journalists of National Geographic performing such "parental watchfulness" in the "patronizing stereotype," but is self-consciously realizes such role of "the journalistic eye" harnessed by the imperial machine on their routine assignments of inspection of the devastated economy of Grand Bahamas, a Haitian massacre and Rwandan catastrophe. It is reminiscent of Barth's own cruises in the Caribbean in the summers 1990-1992 while the Gulf War is still in progress, the narrators are haunted by Saddam Hussein and Islamic Nationalism. In the midst of the Caribbean! The coupled narrator fantasizes that "their MD-80 ferrying them to St. Barts' on holiday is blown out of the Caribbean sky by Islamic-fundamentalist terrorists"(*Story* 50). "Good-bye to the Fruits" tells the story of a man who agrees to die on the condition that he be permitted to bid good-bye to Earth's fruits that he had particularly enjoyed in his lifetime. The language of fruit is stretched to infinity, a labyrinthine of repetitive, unending signs in Borgesian style.[15] His memory of fruits and their fauna and flora leads to marshes of various cultures beyond the marshland of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, such as those in Graham Swift, Charles Dickens, etc. In the calm urgency of farewell, however, he inadvertently changes his valedictory by conflating the callous despoliation of the natural environment by Saddam Hussein's Baathists (*Story* 199). Then the narrator inexplicably swerves to a quick condemnation of the Arabs as he could not, as he said, leave the subject of marshes without a word of concern for the Marsh Arabs.

> Good-bye, poor hapless Marsh Arabs about to be destroyed in an eyeblink of time while still believing, after four millennia of harmlessly habitating your marshes, that somewhere in their labyrinthine fastness lies the Arabian Nights-like island of Hufaidh, complete with enchanted palaces of gold and crystal, Edenic gardens, and the Sindbaddish aspects of transforming into babbling lunatics any marshfarers who stumble upon it" (Story 197-198, emphasis added).

The Sindbad reference here is again invoked with overtones of a barbaric lunatism. Besides, a number of questions come to mind. Why should Hussein and his southern marsh Iraq be of central concern to the narrator's memory of life's

fruits at the moment of impending death? Why should an image of the undeveloped Moslem state and denigration of its literary past go hand in hand? Finally, is the reference to the Arabs to be destroyed in an eye-blink is a direct hint at the impending strike? These questions are not immediately answerable. My interpretation: Ultimately, within the limits of the story, "the real world" -- U.S. imperialism and Central America's devastated economy -- is not the concern after all. My own impression is that politics is rarely an overt concern, at best a minimalist "narrative striptease" (145, 128). Such minnimalism, one may argue, may have damaged a potentially good story, as the shift from current geo-political affairs to the discussions of chaos, cyberspace, quantum universe deflects attention from what causes the narrator's real bruises.

Given the rather contingent political situation, Barth's novel is likely to have its share of criticism. It seems to exemplify the way in which reading of literary artifact, much as Bourdieu argues, is altered or influenced by its social/political use-value, which, once circulated into the public arena, can be stretched to grotesque proportions. Barth's demonization of the legendary Sindbad may be motivated by aesthetic concerns, but its political ramifications can hardly be limited as such. In that sense, these reviews are not entirely misreadings. Descriptions of the eccentricities of Arabian society, with its odd calendrics, exotic navigational/spatial configurations, its hopelessly strange languages, its seemingly perverse morality, could indeed be seen as encouraging the unrevised view of the Arab society, with possibly the more recent influences of imperialism and ordinary politics. That is, Barth's deliberate use of anachronism -- as I have suggested, the book's entire structure is built on anachronism[16] -- may encourage the suspicion that the West has deliberately read or misread Islamic culture continually anachronistically. (Allen Poe's light satire of the medieval Arabic king's incredulous mindset bears a point). That is, the notion of a technologically backward culture may be kept alive through distance, antiquity, "antimodernity," as the narrator suddenly confronts unimaginable antiquity, inhumanity, boundless distance, and technological backwardness in the Arab society. The book insinuates a coercive note on the Gulf War that such writing as this is symptomatic of the intellectual will to please public, "to tell it what it wants to hear, to say to it that it could go ahead and kill, bomb, and destroy, since what would be being attacked was really negligible, brittle, with no relationship to real people" (*Imperialism*, 360).

All this may sound rather unfair to Barth, who probably has the least intention of messing around with wars and international politics. In 1983 lecture on an outdoor basketball court at the American School in Tangier, Morocco, the city which inspired Rimsky-Korsakov to write his Scheherazade Suite and Matisse to paint his odalisques, Barth denied the connection as absurd: "My long infatuation with Scheherazade has little to do with the egregious Western "Orientalism' deplored by Edward Said and other Arabists: It is simply one storyteller's professional (in this instance, all but inexhaustible) interest in another" (FB 258). Barth put in a kind word for the Western tradition eight years afterwards, lecturing on "arabesque" (FF 319) as one manifestation of more general sympathetic curiosity

on the part of the arts of one time and place concerning the arts of another, an "innocent curiosity." For a writer whose self-claimed "controversiality, such as it is, is fortunately of the aesthetic rather than of the political variety" (Barth *Story*: 9), it is, perhaps, the biggest irony of the book. Trash or praise, Barth has left his readers puzzled and he is busy hashing out new ground.[17] "When they trash this book they're trashing where I was, not where I am" (Edelman "Interview": 2).

Notes

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[1] Interview by Dave Edelman, originally published in *The Johns Hopkins News-Letter*, 1992.

[2] While Edmundson views the encounter between twentieth-century America and medieval Islam as the cause of a dissonance, he leaves open the question of the relation between Barth's fantasies and contemporary American conceptions of Arab States and people, and sees little point in condemning Barth as a "promulgator of a vicious ideology," Edmundson, p. 45.

[3] Timothy Severin, the Irish-American sailor/explorer/writer, and Captain of *Sohar*, recounts *The Sindbad Voyage*, a project started in 1977. It took five years to complete the replica of Sindbad's medieval Arab sailing vessel, to plan and carry out the voyage, and present its results in words, pictures and film. Severin's crew of *Sohar* consists of twenty sailors and specialists, jointly undertaken by Omani sailing crew, British, New Zealand, Pakistani, Danish, Indian, and American experts. The expedition was funded by Oman's Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, the British Bank of the Middle East, branch of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation which served as Sohar's local agent when Sohar reached Hong Kong. The 6000-mile voyage route starts from Sohar, believed to be ranked among the leading ports of the Arab world in the tenth century, Severin, p. 23.

[4] The narrative duet resembles judiciary proceedings, with the Vizir's absent presence, testimonies and witnesses, audience, investers, prosecutors and so on. The speakers are virtually on tiral and penalty is given at the end based on the stories told. There is no proof as to the truthful base of the legal proceedings constructed in the novel.

[5] The structure of the novel is suggested by *The Thousand and One Nights*, in which the vizier's daughter recounts the story of Sindbad of the Sea in Nights 537-566. The group of stories known as "The Voyages of Sindbad of the Sea," as the Arabic version calls him, were supposed to have taken place when Haroun al Rashid was Caliph of Baghdad, between AD 786 and 809 (whose presence is intensely felt throughout the Sindbad-Behler narration of the tales. Sindbad's last voyage was undertaken reluctantly indeed on direct orders from Haroun al-Rashid to Serendib, to deliver a reciprocal gift from the caliph to the island king. See Edward William Lane's version, 1909c.

Severin speculated that the adventures were compiled by a single author in the late 800s or early 900s, using a variety of sources including Arab geography books, travel books, and sailors's tales. *The Sindbad Voyage* project is initiated on this speculation, mostly based on *The Nights*, that the geography books and the Sindbad stories used almost identical sentences to describe particular geographical features, for instance, "Serendeeb," the name the Arabs gave to Ceylon or Scri Lanka, for which the Sindbad Voyage was a happy discovery. Severin, p. 17.

The tension and fraternal link between Sindbad of the Land and Sindbad of the Sea are implicated but remain undeveloped in *The Nights*. In *The Nights*, the stories are told by Sindbad of the Sea to Sindbad of the Land during the rule of Caliph the Prince of the Faithful, Haroun al-Rashid in the city of Baghdad. Sindbad of the Land, overloaded and in extreme fatigue, enters Sindbad's palace through a magic entrance and hears the sailor's recounts of his great voyages. At the end of the tales Sindbad of the Sea bestowed favors upon his by now brother, and makes him his boon-companion, and they will remain together as they both live. In contrast to Barth's novel where Behler stories take the center field, Sindbad of the Land is the sole listener. In *The Nights*, neither their kinship nor the sharing of names are explained, which enhances the mysterious connection, even kinship between them. In Barth's novel, this tension reaches an ironic turn at the end, where Sindbad is sentenced by the caliph to die of old age, ironically, in the desert of the Sahara in his waterless Tub of Last Resort.

[6] *Further Fridays*, p. 359.

[7] In "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade," Poe's Scheherazadian tales of Sindbad's sea-voyages, Scheherazade feels guilty of great indiscretion in withholding from the vizier and her sister the full conclusion of the history of Sinbad the sailor. She henceforth tells the vizier the sequel of this remarkable story and gets killed by the vizier as a consequence. And much of the Sinbad's history remains untold and her brute of a husband has deprived him of many inconceivable adventures. The question Poe's story poses is: why should storytelling, which has saved Scheherazade her life, kill her this time. Part of the answer concerns narrative closure: by telling one more story, Scheherazade brings closure to an open-ended narrative process and to her own life. At the heart of the tale, however, is Poe's complication of the teller-told relationship which concerns the vizier's presence and "oriental incredulity." Poe's story points to one fatal error in Scheherazade's storytelling: in telling the realistic tales of Sinbad's history and discoveries, she has fatally ignored her listener, the vizier, by overstretching the king's credulity which Poe satirizes as "Oriental." While her previous fantastic tales have saved her life, the realistic ones she finally tells take her life. Sindbad's fantastic cultural and scientific discoveries from alien lands confound the incredulous vizier. Poe's irony is that Scheherazade's magic tales of alien cultures are actually based on factual wonders which Poe himself drew from many sources, from current science journals and reviews and used for his fiction. As Poe tells it, the many discoveries of modern scholars and achievements of modern scientists put to shame the magic tales that had delighted the oriental ancestors. Poe's tale in that sense is one important intertext for Barth's parody of Arab culture, the medieval Arab mindset and worldview, together with its enclaves of "studied antimodernity," p. 407. See Poe, *Collected Works*, p. 1151.

[8] Behler tells Daisy, "I named my only begotton daughter after you, without realizing it: Juliette D. Behler, p. 312.

[9] The question of irony is a crucial one here, for the ambivalence in the text itself leads the book's early reviewers to come up with the worse kind of opprobrious readings, seeing Barth himself endorsing cultural prejudices of the most provincial kind. For Edmundson, the absence of irony leads to the conclusion of Barth's misanthropy and racial prejudices. Here Paul de Man's definition of the function of irony is relevant. De Man suggests that irony opens the text to the infinity of reading, "The spirit of irony, if there is such a thing, cannot in itself answer such questions: pursued to the end, an ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain to a stop," *Aesthetic Ideology*, p. 166. Normally, understanding would allow us to control irony. But what if, de Man asks, irony is always of

understanding, if irony always the irony of understanding? De Man here suggests a way of reading this controversial passage and the story as a whole. It even provides a useful perspective on Barth's method.

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[11] There are three moments of such passage in Barth's work so far, all of which three meetings occur by magic or fantastic time warp. The first occurs in "Dunyazadiad" in *Chimera*, where Barth returns as twentieth century Genie to the time and place of *The Thousand and One Nights* to assist the Scheherazade sisters; the second moment occurs in *Tidewater Tales*, in the episode on Scheherazade's visit to Djean's culture. In *Tidewater Tales*, Odysseus strikes a similar chord, declaring that time is the wrong word. He proposes to sail to a place that Circe herself had spoken of during their final night together: "a place where East may be East and West West, but where Past and Future disappear. As he had sailed before out of charted space, he aimed now to sail right out of measured time, to a place called The Place Where Time Stands Still," p. 207.

[12] The movies include *Delta Force*, *Navy Seal*, *True Lies, Iron Eagle, Black Sunday*, etc. *Delta Force* is all about kiling "terrorists" who are Muslim and Arab at the same time. In *Iron Eagle*, an American teenager steals an F-16 in Arzona and somehow flies nonstop to the Middle East, a remarkable achievement. He kills an entire army of fanatical Arabs, who are holding his father hostage. He rescues his father and brings him back to Arizona. *Black Sunday* portrays Arabs who will stoop to nothing in the sinister activity: they want to disrupt and bomb the Superbowl, the Vatican of American culture. In his interview with Said, *The Pen and the Sword*, David Barsamian suggests that in a whole range of American films, Arabs are invariably depicted enormously incompetent: they cannot shoot straight; they cannot operate equipment, with one American or one Israeli holding off a hundred Arab terrorists. In addition, Arabs never have a normal conversation: they scream at one another, bark and shout. The pervading image of the Arabs is "violence" and "sensuality" (*Pen* 88). The pattern continues in recent films. In *Patriot Games*, staring Harrison Ford, IRA terrorists are trained by Libyans in the desert. Another example of the media is television. In January 20 1999 David Letterman's "Late Show" special program on the Review of the Gulf Crisis, Saddam is ridiculed together with Clinton. The program ends with The List of Ten of Saddam Hussein Nicknames, the top of the list are No. 1: Saddamica Lewinski and No. 2. Baghdude, etc. In the photo showing Clinton at congress putting up two fingers forming "V," is taken as saying "The Iraqi place has kept him so busy he has sex with only two interns."

[13] *TIME*, December 28, 1998, p. 27.

[14]The dates are important for two reasons: the debates in congress and public consensus are in progress; and also the period in which Hollywood and the media are most productive on the subject, Cf previous notes on Said.

[15] In "A Secret Miracle," Borges tells the story of a condemned writer to whom God grants, at the precise instance of his execution, another year of life to complete the work he had began. Suspended between life and death, this work is a drama where everything is necessarily repeated.

[16] In a reading of his own work at Johns Hopkins around the time of the book's release, Barth voiced his regret that he had not asked the cover designer to paint a wristwatch on the woman lounging in the foreground as a symbol of the book's central anachronism. See Edelman.

[17] In 1992, Barth was deep into his next book, *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*, to be published in 1994.