

John Barth's *On with the Story: Stories* and the Transformation of American Postmodernist Poetics

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“Endings, endings everywhere; apocalypses large and small.” It is with this subtle rhythmic allusion to a classical masterpiece (Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”) that John Barth, theoretician and practitioner of American postmodernism, starts his latest book *On with the Story: Stories* (1996). The book-length story opens by creating an ironic situation of the “Last Lecture,” with the writer meditating wittily on current theories forecasting the death of postmodernism, these “apocalypses large and small” (15), and on all types of “endisms”—from the end of the artist to the end of the world. He is afraid, as John Keats was, that “he might cease to be before his pen had gleaned his teeming brain” (16). The writer’s new claim is “to rebegin” (14). And this is not only a linguistic joke.

I suggest that *On with the Story: Stories* is the literary manifesto of postmodernism at the end of the century, and examine it in this article in order to engage in the considerable changes American postmodernist poetics has undergone. I argue that what Barth has created in *On with the Story: Stories* is in fact a “rebeginning” of the fundamental quest for Truth in art. His intertextual address to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820) with its basic theme—the tension between our painful sense of transience and our quest for the eternal; and among life, art and death—throws a light of particular importance on the quests of the twentieth-century art.

In an essay entitled “The Novel in the Next Century,” published a short while before *On with the Story: Stories*, Barth had predicted a bright future for the novel and for literature in general. The author had stressed the novel’s essential quality—“significant form” (341)—as a guarantee not only of its survival, but also of its prospective flourishing.

This prophecy and its optimism are symptomatic of a serious change in an author who, as writer and critic, had all his life consistently undermined the conventions of the novel genre, parodying literary tradition by way of *reductio ad absurdum*, through such novels as *The Sot-weed Factor* (1960), *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), *Letters: A Novel* (1979), *Sabbatical* (1982), and *Tidewater Tales: A Novel* (1987). In *On with the Story: Stories*, however, Barth defends the artistic possibilities of the novel and literature in general—yet, in a tone that is deliberately

polemical. He challenges not only T. S. Eliot's contention in "Ulysses, Order and Myth" (1923) that after James Joyce "the novel is a form which will no longer serve" (177), but also the postmodernist view expressed by Ronald Sukenick in the story "The Death of the Novel" (1969).

Parenthetically, what was found in Sukenick was not the novel's funeral, but the sharp realization that the new literature is in a state of formation, of finding new "significant relations," as Sukenick had already put it in 1967 in his *Wallace Stevens* (14). It is noteworthy that the same attribute, "significant," is used by both Barth and Sukenick to characterize the postmodernist situation in letters, although the two approach it from different standpoints.

If for Sukenick in the late 1960s the "death of the novel" meant the liberation of literature from the conventional rules imposed by the novel genre and the possibility of a new search for viable forms in fiction, for Barth at the end of the century this is no longer a vital problem. The novel genre in *his* renewed version (*The Tidewater Tales: A Novel*, 1987; *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, 1991; *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*, 1994) has already opened a new terrain of "significant form" outside of both conventional referentiality and formalistic excesses.

If a *fin-de-siècle* is generally marked by a crisis concerning prevailing values, and an urgent search for new horizons in art and literature, then, accordingly, a *fin-de-millennium*—with a heightened sense of ending envisaging complex transformations in all spheres of life—should be characterized by a search for even more drastic aesthetic changes, by a turnaround in all kinds of literature, and by even more self-conscious art. I suggest that the process of millennial apprehension of such radical changes in the cultural and literary climate has just started, revealing three approaches within the context of American letters. One approach has assumed the task of assessing the critical evaluation of postmodernism in the 1970s, when it was very much in its declarative and provocative stage. A second one focuses on current changes in American letters: it defines the present-day situation either as a period of decline bringing about the death of postmodernism and of literature in general (see Dellamora, Kermode, Kernan, Morawski, and *Proceedings of the First Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies*), or as a period entailing a radical departure from the metafiction which had characterized postmodernism (Bellamy 75) for the benefit of a renaissance of different versions of realism. In fact, some scholars suggest that new terms such as "proto-realism," "lifestyle fiction" (Bellamy 75), "post-post-modernism" (Federman 170), or "neosentimentalism," (Epstein, 145) be coined for the changes that have come about with what appears to be the death of postmodernism. Finally, a third approach, that is a synthesis of the two approaches, adopts a fresh critical strategy, which David Lodge suggests defining as a new "aesthetic compromise" (Note 1) ("The Novelist Today" 207). (Note 2)

According to Joe Bellamy, the American literary landscape today is more contrastive (differences among literary trends being sharper) than before, its “superfiction” showing no sign of changing its “polymorphous formalism” but continuing in the same tradition with “impressive fidelity.” Bellamy stresses the difference between experimentalists and minimalists/realists, the former chiefly interested in a search for new forms, and the latter still believing it possible to discover “new contents” (75, 74, 77). Though debatable, these minted terms reflect the growing realization of a changing literary climate. Yet, scholars seldom wander outside the assumptions of rigidly binary terms such as realism versus experimentalism. After three decades of intense interest, postmodernism has become a thoroughly investigated phenomenon of culture, and its repercussions, though oversimplified and mechanically applied to analysis, are accepted by many scholars. The situation with realism is, however, much more complicated as realism has always been, and still is, the most misleading and, at that, “essentialist” concept of art.

I realize the complexity of studying realism as an aesthetic category, and bear in mind the varieties of approaches to its investigation—from clarifying the degree of faith in the mimetic method as the imitation of essences, the correlation between reality and realism, realistic literature and referential literature to a more broad humanistic concern with the world. I focus nevertheless in the remainder of the article, through an analysis of Barth’s recent work and especially his *On with the Story: Stories*, on the manner in which the new realistic tendencies (sense of reality, authenticity, humanism, etc.) have become signs of postmodernist art at the end of the millennium. I also discuss whether these elements constitute a genuine reaction against postmodernist self-consciousness and are therefore the manifestation of new alternative phenomena, or whether they are the features of *transformed* postmodernist art. I suggest that Barth’s recently published works reveal such new tendencies as the desire to revitalize the intrinsic artistic qualities of psychologism, lyricism, emotionality, and the writer’s involvement with the depiction of the crisis of humanity that postmodernism had earlier suppressed or abandoned. “[T]he emphasis on suffering or feeling, [and the] return to an interest in emotion,” that Bellamy considers to be an obvious aspect of the newest realistic fiction (79), has never been alien to postmodernism with its pluralistically “opened” aesthetics. What has changed now is the degree of saturation of the above-mentioned elements and the *growing* concern with the problems of *truth in art*.

I advance that Barth is attempting in his recent works to overcome a situation of language crisis, the crisis which arises when words do not name reality. Thus, in order to convey different facets of the relation between art and reality, he re-enacts realistic authenticity, utilizing in his story-telling such devices as realistic accounts, sincerity, lyricism, and psychologism. To illustrate, the author’s *Tidewater Tales: A Novel* elicits in the reader’s memory the earlier classical texts from Homer’s *The Odyssey* to Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). (Note 3) In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the universality of

myth is used to evoke different patterns of human nature and behavior, and to accentuate eternal types of human relationships. In the chapter “Nausicaa,” for example, the situation of seduction acquires human dimensions: instead of granting Nausicaa perfect physical attributes, Joyce creates a girl who limps. Again, Penelope’s behavior in the chapter “Penelope” is far from being ideal, in any case not at all that of a devoted, chaste and faithful wife. Barth addresses the classical myth differently: he creates a new, contemporary, extremely personal and human version. His heroes retell in their own words the most popular episodes from *The Odyssey*, creating a new “story-version” of the epic. Unlike Homer, Barth uses highly intimate personal images. In their retelling of *The Odyssey*, the heroes accentuate and enlarge the minute intimate details of the classical text such as “the flashing arms” of Nausicaa, or the reaction of Penelope who turned old in an instant when she found out that her husband stayed with Calypso. The entire atmosphere of Ithaca is described as being that of a large, happy, noisy Mediterranean family. The postmodernist maxim that “life imitates art” is debunked in a comic episode, when naked Nausicaa suddenly sits on a recently written and still wet manuscript. Barth comments that “those splendid buttocks were now befreckled with the ink of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Life had imitated art: the poet’s description of her charms was no longer poetic license” (*Tidewater Tales: A Novel* 267). Thus, *Tidewater Tales: A Novel* is, rather than a parody, an intellectual, witty, and very humane visit to the classical tradition, providing in this manner a reconsideration of the nature of art, that includes the spent postmodernist poetics.

Such re-enactment of literary tradition contains the writer’s belief that this art, the art of narration and literature in general, will never die. The postmodernist writers have never rejected the tradition; they have only been striving to disclose and underline the differences among different cultural texts, and in this *statunascendi* the cultural continuum is aesthetically foregrounded. Barth’s *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* absorbs the essence of tradition and displays his extremely personal and unexpected version of it—and in so doing transforms postmodernism, allowing it to survive. Barth cannot limit *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* to a play with literary tradition, or with narrative structures; he cannot plunge himself totally into the “second” reality and create “simulacrum,” because the “first” reality of human life always finds a unique, individual manifestation in his text (for the idea of “second order simulacra” as the main concept for an understanding of the postmodern, see Baudrillard).

It is important to note that this humanistic impulse, a touchstone for Bellamy’s concept of the newest “realistic” fiction, has always permeated, in varying degrees of concentration, the works of hard-core postmodernist writers, a fact critics failed to underscore, absorbed as they were by more salient aspects of postmodernism. To illustrate, the most lyrical and humane passages of Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland* (1990) describe the annual gathering in Vineland to honour the persistence of love: “The bond between Eula Becker and Jess Traverse, that lay beneath, defined and made sense of them all” (369).

The subject of love has been an undercurrent in all of Barth's books, starting with *The End of the Road* (1958) and continuing in *On with the Story: Stories*. In the latter, this subject gives grounds for questioning anti-humanism, both a prevailing critical concept and a dominant tendency in contemporary literature.

In the center of *On with the Story: Stories*, a story of love and loss (about a desperate, loving couple vacationing at their "last resort") reveals the humanizing power of art. The book opens with a kind of prologue "Check-in," and the first chapter "Ad Infinitum: A Short Story" centers on the dramatic situation of bringing "happiness-ending" news:

The news is bad indeed . . . The news is of that sort that in a stroke eliminates all agreeable plans and expectations—indeed, all prospects of real pleasure from the moment of its communication . . . All that is over now: for her already; for him and for them as soon as she relays the news to him . . . (23)

Nothing is described through an action-plot narrative. Imaginative energy of language and generative intertextuality reveal the tragic story: Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is inscribed both directly and indirectly into Barth's text. The correlation between art and life as the key problem of art is the center of both texts. In the process of storytelling, Barth creates his version of "freeze-framing" art. Yet he does not obliterate life—an action commonly attributed to postmodernism. What the force of his story-telling art does nevertheless obliterate is a real-life ending. In his story, the story-in-process freezes the "happiness-ending news." A woman would never inform her husband, "her partner, lover, best friend and companion" (*On with the Story: Stories* 25), of the "death verdict" contained in the result of his medical examination. The whole story is recognizably human. The narration works on two levels. On one level, it reveals the intensity of the psychological situation when the wife learns the truth. She sees her husband from her room while listening to the—terrible—news on the phone. Her feelings are not described directly but are conveyed through familiar details she sees from the window and the intrusion of the narrator's commonplace remarks, thus revealing the desperateness of the human situation:

There is, however, no assimilating what she has just been told—or, if there is, that assimilation is to be measured in years, even decades, not in moments, days, week, months, seasons. She must now get up from her chair, walk through their modest, pleasant house to the sundeck, cross the lawn to the daylily garden down by the lake or pond, and tell him the news. She regards him for some moments longer, aware that

as he proceeds with gardening, his mind is almost certainly on the phone call . . . (*On with the Story: Stories* 23)

On the second level of narrative, there is her husband's reluctant awareness of the meaning of the phone call, his efforts to overcome the thoughts about it by concentrating on the "intricacy and tenacity of those rhizomes": "With such reflections he distracts himself, or tries or pretends to distract himself, as she steps unhurriedly from the sundeck and begins to cross the lawn, himward" (*On with the Story: Stories* 25).

Such a design of non-ending has a different function from that of metafiction. It is not an alternative method of aesthetic ordering, nor a technique of deliberate ambiguity. The artistic parallelism to Keats's idea of the power of art—"Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair" (l. 20)—emphasizes an important implication in Barth's text. This story, like the Grecian urn, immortalizes life and, in the context of the facts of human existence that are realistically depicted in the story, acquires a new dimension. It is a story about the *saving power* of art: "Forever they'll go on closing the distance between them—as they have in effect been doing . . . since day One of their connection—yet never close it altogether: asymptotic curves that eternally approach but never meet" (*On with the Story: Stories* 27).

Barth uses a rich variety of postmodernist techniques to highlight new problematics. Thus, postmodernist poetics serves a new humanistic content, revitalizing themes that have always been important for art and artists. The postmodernist writer, like Keats, discovers truth within the context of art itself. In Keats's ode, art and life are united by the power of poetic imagination: "What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?/What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?/What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?" (ll. 8-10). Barth re-enacts the same situation: "Where exactly on our planet are these people? . . . What pond or lake is that beyond their pleasant lawn, its olive surface just now marbled with springtime yellow pollen? . . . What sort of telephone solicitors disturb their evidently rural peace?" Reproducing a similar crescendo of questions, he demonstrates that storytelling is also the art capable of saving love, happiness and life: "We need only slow it, delay it, atomize it, flash back in time as the woman strolls forward in space with her terrible news" (*On with the Story: Stories* 29). At that point, Barth creates an artistic parallelism to the "Ode," in which the imagination of the poet makes "Cold Pastoral" (l. 45) equal life.

If Keats at the beginning of the nineteenth century wished to believe that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," (l. 49) then Barth at the end of the millennium, transcending his earlier postmodernist strategy of letting fiction prevail over life, comes to the rediscovery of a significant truth of art, viz. that art is the only saving power in a world of tragic realities. Underscoring the point with dramatic psychological intensity, Barth is accentuating not so much the situation of art as the situation of

humankind and of humanity. This humanistic dimension of *On with the Story: Stories* is important. Barth has internalized the conflict between art and life to the highest degree.

Having differentiated life and art in his story-telling statement (“the story of our life is not our life, it is our story” [*On with the Story: Stories* 30]), Barth blends them throughout the text by creating “story time” and psychologically motivates it by the “human inclination to see our lives as stories” (*On with the Story: Stories* 51). Going beyond the gap between art and life, he suggests a new dichotomy in the face of ultimate extinction, that between *life* and *life-stories*, not stories *about* life: “they rush motionlessly together through the time of their lives, their life-stories meanwhile suspended” (*On with the Story: Stories* 93). There is a “teller” relating the story of his characters, but these live and react as living people being aware that the teller is telling the story of their lives. They learn “to live transcendently” (*On with the Story: Stories* 153), simultaneously in real time and in story time. This situation is very different from what the writer created in *A Floating Opera*, where Todd cannot abstract his “life-story” from the story of his life. In *On with the Stories: Stories*, a work of life-against-death, Barth has created a new aesthetic and generic synthesis; i.e., reality and the story exist simultaneously. Being transcended, reality does not disappear; the reality of the end, the subjection to time (“time unhurriedly but surely killing them”), makes happiness what it is. The story-teller constantly reminds us that there is another “non-narrated life, alas,” and in it, “it is a different story, as in the world of actual tortoises, times and coastlines . . . Our lives are not stories. Now she must tell him the news” (*On with the Stories: Stories* 28, 30). But it will never happen in this life-story book. This humanistic impulse cannot but make us feel that Ortega y Gasset had grounds to wonder whether human life at its most human was not a work of fiction (16).

As can be seen, Barth’s emphasis is today not on aesthetics or the philosophy of art; he is concerned with the correlation between art and life as an ontological issue. His heroes are trying to find the saving truth, questioning “whether people’s lives or their stories have, so to speak, ontological primacy?” (*On with the Stories: Stories* 147). Unexhausted humanity permeates the whole of *On with the Stories: Stories*, from the episode of the woman protagonist kissing her husband’s hand, “Can’t speak. Nuzzles the back of her hand in reply” (4), to the narrator’s direct exclamation, “Unspeakable pity!” (16).

Recently Barth has declared his aesthetic preferences. “I am by temperament much more Aristotelian than Platonist in my attitude to reality, especially as regards us human beings and the things that we do and make” (“Postmodernism Revisited” 31). If in his previous works Barth had been sustaining the attempt to reconcile art and life, in *On with the Stories: Stories* he dramatizes his sweeping perception that art *transcends* the tragic ultimacies of life. If in his previous fiction he had concentrated on the reality of the word and text (*Sot-Weed Factor*, *Lost in*

the Funhouse) as “truer than the fact” (*Chimera* 61), he now constantly manifests the recognizable external reality with love, happiness, and death.

Barth creates, in fact, a new type of artistic thinking—“life-story,” as the author defines it himself (*On with the Story: Stories* 143). By this new term he tries to find an answer to the question that has always troubled him: what is primary, lives or their stories? Barth introduces into literature at the end of the second millennium this vision of human lives as stories where the saving Art might obliterate the end and provide the unending possibility of love.

The evolution of the writer from regarding *story-making techniques* to regarding *story-making humanity* as the only way to transcend the reality of life, aesthetically, emotionally, and psychologically, is obvious. Unlike *Lost in the Funhouse*, where myth dissolves the borderline between fiction and reality, with art (narrative) becoming a substitute for life, *On with the Stories: Stories* does not offer a choice between art and life. The author reveals in this work a new dramatic complexity of the correlation between the two, a complexity made obvious by the aesthetic battles in art fought during the twentieth century. Barth adds to Keats’s statement on the immortality of art an important new trait—the *saving power* of art. For Keats, the sorrows and meaninglessness of life can be overcome if we learn the lesson of the Urn: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (l. 49). For Barth it is important to find yet another dimension, as Art is used-up convention unless it is imbued with human emotions. Thus, his statement that “The story of our life is not our life, it is our story” (*On with the Stories: Stories* 30), when intensified by reference to Keats’s sublime Truth, acquires dramatic significance.

The process of the recuperation of the Real has started and the day has come when postmodernism can be called “the literature of replenishment,” as was predicted by Barth in his 1980 essay of the same title. *On with the Stories: Stories* is a vivid manifestation of the change in his aesthetic views. He can no longer accept either the realistic adage that “art imitates life,” or the postmodernist one that “life imitates art.” In *The End of the Road* Barth had described, with the transparency of the realistic mode, Rennie’s death in abortion as the tragic absurdity of life; in *On with the Stories: Stories* he constructs art as an endless road that transcends the end. Barth’s new approach to art was already noticeable in *Tidewater Tales: A Novel*, where the heroes of his timeless myth float away and time stands still. In *On with the Stories: Stories* the apparent non-end is not a technique of metafictional open-endedness, but the literary manifesto of postmodernism at the end of the century.

This problematic of non-ending art is new for postmodernist literature. Barth seems to be faithful to his once proclaimed aim, to “Re-invent philosophy and the rest—make up your own history of the world. Why should it just be Plato and Aristotle?” (qtd. in Enck 7). He has solved at last his narrative dilemma and has found a way out of a dead-end (see Ziegler, who maintains that, as an artist, Barth was at the end of his road in *The End of the Road* [30]). This postmodernist writer challenges

essential fictional strategies and reveals in his latest work, *On with the Stories: Stories*, new directions in the development of postmodernist literature. The work is, undoubtedly, a remarkable achievement that was guided by his program of synthesis and transcensus outlined already in his “The Literature of Replenishment” essay. The narrator’s entreaty, “An end to endings? Let us begin” (*On with the Story: Stories* 14), while reflecting personal preoccupations concerning the possibility of a new start, could become the slogan of this ongoing transformation.

These changes in postmodernist poetics result from the further development of the inner possibilities of this art, an art of pluralistic openness and productive re-enactment. These features, because usually screened by more conspicuous and more overtly experimentalistic tendencies, are usually overlooked by scholars. Barth has shown postmodernism to be a dynamic mode of literary reality constantly being shaped, and not a mere theoretical construct. Through the dramatic quest for Truth in art and the step-by-step realization of dramatic interconnectedness between art and reality, the postmodernist writer comes to a new content, which he has defined as “the experiencing of human experience” (*Further Fridays* 364). The notions that language is the only universality of man and that it is the only possible content of literature, that are ideas from his previous books, give place to understanding the vital significance of the saving power of art.

If in *Lost in the Funhouse* Barth moved from innovation to extreme daring experiment—where the search overruns the discovery, the formation of the new is only an open laboratory and not yet a result, and experimentation simply abandons the place where it started—then in *On with the Story: Stories* he sets forth the dialectics of experiment and innovation, the interrelation of permanent literary values and innovative transformation. Postmodernist literature at the end of the century is very much in tune with the deep roots of humanistic and personal involvement characteristic of the classical tradition. This proves that postmodernism does not mean dehumanization and/or the immorality of art. Intrinsic humanistic values are ingrained in any *real* art and will be present when an author, a human being, creates literature.

Barth’s *On with the Story: Stories* proves that the epoch of creativity has not ended and the aesthetic desire for Truth, that still “dost tease us out of thought” (Keats l. 44), outlines the current tendency in postmodernist art.

Notes

1 Allan Wilde, on the other hand, considers that American fiction today, in the hands of its most representative postmodernist writers, is neither a compromise nor mediation: it is, rather, a “midfiction” that is opposed to metafiction’s habit of privileging imagination at the expense of the world (26).

2 He had earlier used the term “a crossover fiction” (The Novelist at the Crossroads 12).

3 The attitude of postmodernism toward the classical tradition has always been a conspicuous example of its complicated aesthetic response to intrinsic humanistic values.

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