A Study on John Barth’s LETTERS (IV):
Todd Andrews and The Floating Opera

ジョン・バースの『レターズ』論 IV
トッド・アンドルーズと『ザ・フローティング・オペラ』

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Lady Amherst,1 new to the cast, plays roles that interact with characters already fixed in Barth’s novels from the first (The Floating Opera) in 1956 to the last (Chimera) in 1972 before LETTERS. Most of her letters are addressed to Todd Andrews who, near dead of a cardiac condition at nineteen, experiences his father’s suicide at thirty, contemplates his own suicide, then dies as a character when Barth concludes The Floating Opera, and only comes alive again when LETTERS resurrects him in the years after 1956. Todd’s “Inquiry” into himself is, in a sense, continued when Barth pursues his inquiry into Todd in LETTERS. While this protagonist is a self-conscious first-person narrator in the first novel, in LETTERS he also reappears as the same in his letters as well as a letter-writer. Todd in his letters to his dead father describes an ongoing life, especially his continuing love for Jane Mack. Also, he serves as a commentary on other characters: Lady Amherst and Ambrose Mensch, Reggie Prinz, Jane’s daughter “Bea Golden,” Jane’s son Andrews, and so on. Despite his morbidity as well as his deceptive and slippery characteristics, he is a reliable guide in Barth’s huge fictitious world.

At the end of The Floating Opera, the thirty-seven-year-old Todd Andrews attempts to commit suicide by exploding Captain Adams’ Floating Theater as the fifty-four-year-old Todd as a narrator says to readers. He escorts his probable daughter, little Jeannine Mack on a tour of the Floating Theater with a plan to employ its acetylene stage- and house-lights to his purpose that evening. His decision to explode the theater and bystanders including himself and the Macks, however, meets with failure so that he observes he would live out his life to its natural term because he comes to find finally that there is theoretically no reason to commit suicide than not
to. Consequently it can be said that Todd’s actions and ideas are caused by his nihilistic view of things or his premise that nothing has intrinsic value. This is why The Floating Opera is often called “a comedy of nihilism.”

In 1954 Todd of fifty-four years old narrates this previous story of his own about a day of June 21 or 22, 1937, while in LETTERS Todd of sixty-nine years old, still bachelor lawyer, as his letters to his dead father say, starts to narrate his final story in his last year of life with his new and reverse awareness in this time — “Everything has intrinsic value!”:

I trembled toward a vast new insight, which I was far from confident I could cope with: the virtual opposite of the one I reached in my old memoir. There I premised that “nothing has intrinsic value”; here I began to feel (I can scarcely announce it; have yet to lay hold of its excruciating, enormous implications)...that Nothing has intrinsic value...which is as much as to say: Everything has intrinsic value! (p.96)

He continues to confess: “all the creatures of the past, the present, the future—they all are precious! Were precious! Will be precious!” (p.96). What caused this change of his recognition is explained in his second letter in Part E (II): his encounter with Andrews Mack and Mack’s explosive group on the Choptank Bridge in 1967. Then he forestalled Andrews (comic-ironically named after Todd Andrews by Harrison Mack) from blowing up the new bridge though he had tried such similar terrorism as exploding the Floating Theater in vain forty years before as told in the last of The Floating Opera. In the process to forestall Andrews Mack a strange emotion of courage occurs to him. As the result of this emotion which he has never experienced to have, according to his letter, he “wept for history” (p.96), coming “perilously close to something ‘beyond’ the Tragic View” (p.96). He can be said to have reached an affirmative view of things.

This radical change reminds readers of Todd’s previous negative view of thing in The Floating Opera from the beginning of LETTERS. Todd (in German, “dead”) lets suicide influence his life by his father’s suicide and dictates its meanings as well as its possible end. He asserts that unless religion determines man’s morality, there is no question more pressing than “whether or not to commit suicide...before he can work things out for himself.” He adds that, of course, he is speaking only of people who choose to live rationally. Since most people do not, the question never arises. These words are spoken to a seventy-nine-year-old man, Haecker, who insists that
life itself "has a value, under any circumstances." To which Todd counters: "'Nothing has intrinsic value.'"  

Implicit is the idea that everything must prove itself, which means that life must be filled in or else it has no more value than any object. This is based upon the Existentialism influential all over the world after World War II, but Todd in LETTERS with its direct background in the sixties of what is called a social revolution looks more humanistic, if not sentimental. Some of crucial factors of this change of ideas seem to be his aging and two younger characters, Jeannine and Andrews, characteristic of free sex and terrorism in the sixties.

Todd is in doubt of Jeannine's paternity because of his méage à trois with Mr. and Mrs. Mack that happened thirty-five years ago. Mrs. Jane Mack and Todd had been lovers with her husband's knowledge and compliance for two separate periods including the date of Jeannine's conception. The odds as to whether she is Harrison's or Todd's is said to be "about 50-50" (p.703); but, on the other hand, Todd says: "What I see in her, alas for 'Bea Golden,' is our progenitors, yours and mine: the drawling, cracker Andrewses from down-country" (p.17). Jeannine Paterson Mack Singer Bernstein Golden is at present (1969) a starlet at 35, called "Bea Golden." An actress in the film version of LETTERS, she is its producer Reggie Prinz's love. But her alcoholism often causes her to enter the Remobilization Farm for remedy in vain.

Her brother is Andrews Mack who is regarded as his legal father's true son, "named after Todd's 'conservative-passivist' self"(p.81), though he is ironically a radical activist. He exasperated his parents by dropping his doctoral studies to assist in the Cambridge (Maryland) civil rights demonstrations just as his father had picketed his father's pickle factories back in thirties in his youth. Furthermore, Andrews was disowned by his father who followed the family tradition of disowning a son just as Mack I had done him (Mack II). Andrews married one of his ex-classmates, a black girl, and now has two sons; in 1966 he underwrote the Black Power movement on the Eastern Shore, taking part in it as a radicalist. Then, Todd happens to forestall Andrews and his group from blowing up the bridge. Todd's letter says Andrews is inclined to escalate as a terrorist, but for all his rough radicalism Andrews seems to trust Todd, while he never trusted his true father. For example, when Andrews rioted in the Marshyhope State University commencement, Todd put up bail for him. From such relationship between them, it follows that Andrews may be regarded as a son of Todd in a spiritual sense.

Jane Mack, "a handsome and vigorous 63 and wealthy woman" (p.81), is now Madam
President of Mack Enterprises after her husband’s death. Todd’s love for Jane has continued since 1933 when Jane came naked to him in his bed in her summer cottage as he confesses. But in LETTERS Todd is informed that Jane has her new fiancé “Lord Baltimore,” a French-Canadian descendant of the original Irish proprietary lords of Maryland. Lord Baltimore, a protean character, turns out to be not only André Castine, Lady Amherst’s ex-lover, but also Monsieur Casteene in the Farm and A.B. Cook VI. Todd has a chance to rehold intercourse with Jane once again, and he cannot help feeling that he comes to do “the reenactment of a certain earlier drama” (p.81) of his méage à trois in The Floating Opera. In this sense Todd’s new story in LETTERS is also designed to be a kind of “Reenactment” of his earlier story in The Floating Opera, so are most of the other characters’ stories. In addition the threatened litigation between Jane and Andrews is Lawyer Todd’s current case, which also reminds readers of that between Harrison and his father whose episode is narrated in The Floating Opera. The freezedried shit of the dead Harrison is also designed to be a key to their quarrel over the inheritance. Jane wants the estate to be diverted to her love Lord Baltimore, while Andrews expects it to finance his revolutionary movement. The ending that Jane loses the shit hidden by herself is also made to repeat that of Barth’s first novel.

What the letters of Todd show is in short how to spend the last summer of his life with Jane, Jeannine, and Andrews how to die. A sort of “reenactment” of his earlier “nihilist comedy” starts from his receiving of a visit from Jane, who is threatened with blackmail. Todd is asked to make an investigation into the matter. And the fact that Jane “re-resumed” their affair to the extent of “reseducing” him to have a new méage à trois of another Mack (in this time Lord Baltimore), Todd, and Jane makes Todd feel that his life has also been recycling, or repeating the first, in the first- and the second-cycles. Thus, “His Second Dark Night of the Soul” (p.457), which is designed to be the climax of his life story, leads him to decide “our (Todd and his dead father’s) too long postponed reunion” (p.561): his second decision to commit suicide to follow his first one in The Floating Opera. As to this secret decision, he says as follows:

I shall not, however, attempt this time to take others with me, I think; at least not Innocent Bystanders—though I am unrepentant for having so attempted last time around, and would without compunction destroy certain of the world’s Dreadfuls along with myself if such a happy dénouement could be arranged. Alas, no one conveniently to hand is to my knowledge wicked enough: not even our elected rulers over on the banks of the Potomac.
My final crossing, like my final cruise, looks to be a solo voyage. (p.526)

What he had “attempted last time around” is to explode Captain Adam’s Floating Theater and “Innocent Bystanders” including him to death. This time he implies that he will destroy Marshyhope State University’s “the Tower of Truth” as “certain of the world’s Dreadfuls.” “The Tower of Truth” is said to be a political strategy by John Schott, acting president, “to achieve some ‘national visibility’” (p.9); and it is also rumored that “the LL. D., of course, will go to the governor, or the local congressman” (p.9). Such vulgar authority is to be an object of explosion.

Todd makes a final single handed circuit of his favorite Chesapeake anchorages on his skipjack Osborn Jones before the last decisive action. It is this final circuit that makes him feel: “how splendid the world! How fortunate one’s life!” (p.720). Moreover, he writes that he “remarked that the world was an ongoing miracle and that everything bristled with intrinsic value” (p.720). What causes him a sense of existence or a sort of reconciliation with the matter and life may possibly be said to be his contact or intercourse with his probable daughter as well as with his son in a spiritual sense. Though his new méage à trois turns out to be his self-satisfied dream, his last relationship to Jeannine and Andrews occupies his mind continually.

When he is on the last cruise for the leisurely wrapup of his life, at first, he had Jeannine, who is “a fairly hopeless mid-thirtyish drunk” (p.565), accompany him on the Osborn Jones. For she needs “a place to crash and a trustly shoulder to cry on and maybe a little fatherly advice” (p.565), being disappointed in her love for Prinz and out of the film. Todd’s skipjack named after Captain Osborn in The Floating Opera, who is an eighty-three-year-old retired oyster dredger crippled by arthritis, seems symbolic of Todd’s attitude toward the remaining days of his life. The reason he named his skipjack so may be found in the following passage of the first novel.

I love him, if I love anyone, I think; death for him would be the hyphenated break in a rambling, illiterate monologue, a good way for it to be if you’re most people. He was fooling himself and not fooling himself about it, so that ultimately he wasn’t fooling himself at all, and hence it wasn’t necessary to feel any pity for him. ...; Osborn, on the contrary, sniffed and wheezed and creaked and spat, and cursed and complained, and never knew a gloomy day in his life.7
The fifty-four Todd in “a comedy of nihilism” narrates as the above, while the sixty-nine Todd in LETTERS is designed to reenact Capt. Osborn, spending his last year consciously as another Capt. Osborn, in spite of the tragic view of things in gloomy days in his life. If one of the main themes of his first story is life and death, a solution of the problem could be found in his last one in 1969. At least, his skipjack named after Capt. Osborn suggests Todd’s fundamental attitude toward life and death.

Todd’s father kills himself on Groundhog Day, 1930, in his business suit for the office; he hangs from a cellar beam of his house after running up huge debts in the market crash. On the other hand, Todd has been trying to tell his dead father what occurs to him by unmained letters, what he calls Letter to My Father, the first of which is dated September 22, 1920. After his father’s suicide, Todd starts the Inquiry: “An Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Self-Destruction of Thomas T. Andrews.” The Inquiry was originally begun to delve into the life of his father; this would be a complete study from birth to death. By searching his father’s life, Todd hopes to discover the multiple causes of his father’s suicide; ironically the decision to study the life comes only after he has resolved to examine the death. This study is not only to inquire his father’s life, but also to bridge the gap of their imperfect communication, the latter of which can be thought to be continued also in LETTERS with a meaningful ending. Readers might find that the final answer to the Inquiry is Todd’s own passive suicide, and that his last cruise on the Osborn Jones is a chance to fill the gap of the imperfect communication between what is called fathers and sons. Of course, at this point, Todd is not a son but a sort of father for Jeannine and Andrews. Relating the repeated stories about three generations, in the center of which is Todd as both a son of his dead father and a father for them, Barth seemingly attempts to present a solution as pending repetition.

To return, concerning his probable daughter, it is surprising that his “quasi-incest” (p.730) with her is explained in his letter:

Which was to lead her below, return behind her, draw her down to hands and knees on the cabin sole, apply saliva in lieu of more natural lubrication, rise to a full, fine, and culpable hard-on as I entered her, and bang in six or seven deep strokes to ejaculation: the last sex in this letter and my life. (p.707)

Though they spend pleasantly several days on the Osborn Jones, and Todd seems to have
consoled her, according to his letter, the purpose of their cruise may be interpreted as a happening of their “quasi-incest.” Todd says that, though he enjoys her nudity, his “pleasure was half impersonal and half the finally innocent admiration of a father for his mature and seasoned, still-attractive daughter” (p.699). But after she leaves the skipjack with “tear-swollen faces” (p.707), she is only informed of being still missing. Todd of course feels a great regret at having his last chance to communicate with her that way. Clearly this episode is caused by Todd’s previous ménage à trois with Mr. and Mrs. Mack, but it is as it were a ironic pitfall for a man who “has never presumed to moral perfection” (p.707).

Another ironic answer to the problem about fathers and sons is cautiously prepared at the ending of his life. After Todd spends happily one night eating, drinking, and communicating with Andrews on the skipjack to understand him, he seems to intend to kill himself in “the Tower of Truth” with the bomb Andrews and his group are to set up. Todd’s last hours to death are told about in “Draft codicil to the last will and testament of Todd Andrews” (p.733).

I write this by full-Harvest-Moonlight, almost bright enough to read by (…), in the locked and bolted Observation Belfry of the Morgan Memorial Tower, variously and popularly known as the Schott Tower, the Shit Tower, and the Tower of Truth. Drew Mack and some surviving fellow terrorists —…— got in like burglars a few hours ago to do their work, mugging the night watchman for his keys and his watch-clock. (p.734)

Todd could enter into “the Tower of Truth”, being presented a gold-plated passkey as the Tidewater Foundation’s executive director and former counsel to the University. Writing the draft codicil, he is watching Andrews and his fellow terrorists work to place charges of TNT(trinitrotoluene) for the purpose of destructing “the Tower”. He calls Andrews “my son,” wondering “whether your discovery of my death at your inadvertent hands will prove the first step of your regression from radicalism to good old Stock Bourgeois-Liberal Tragic-Viewing Humanism” (p.735). His hope as a father at the sacrifice of his life is that Andrews will take the first step from radicalism to “good old Stock Bourgeois-Liberal Tragic-Viewing Humanism.” It is on the night just before the dedication ceremonies for “the Tower” that “the last installment of my life’s recycling” (p.735) proceeds as such a tragic drama.

Though he begins to think that “Everything has intrinsic value,” he cannot help holding “the Tragic View of process” (p.93). In LETTERS he explains himself as an old man of
“rationalist-skeptical BLTVHism” (p.96), to which he expects Andrews will take the first step from radicalism. This tragic view of things seems to make the main tone of his narrative more or less gloomy and tragic by contrast with his earlier ironic-comedy in *The Floating Opera*. And why Todd comes to take the tragic view of things in spite of his recognition that everything has intrinsic value is a difficult question, but it seems to be one of reasons that he cannot believe his own life story has intrinsic value, even though he tries to do so through his relationship to Jeannine and Andrews. In other words, his recognition of the intrinsic value of everything except for his own being or life can lead him to meet his death with resignation.

However, Barth completely refuses any explanation of the character and his acts. For example, if readers read the last passage of his letter, we cannot but suspect whether his suicide is made up to be serious or not:

6: 53: Good-Bye, Polly; good-bye, Jane; good-bye, Drew. Hello, Author; hello, Dad. Here comes the sun. Light! Cameras! Action! (p.738)

The bomb set up in “the Tower” is about to explode at seven o’clock, and Todd is thought to die then. But what means “Light! Cameras! Action!” is that Todd’s death is only a scene of the location shooting in the film-within-*LETTERS*. Regarding Todd as a character in an ordinary realistic novel and Todd’s story as a traditional one could lead readers to a wrong way; each story about the “drolls and dreamers” is essentially a game of fiction that imitates, parodies, and transcends reality, at the same time, entangled with it complicatedly. However animated he seems, he is nothing but a figure in the fiction; however realistic his narrating and writing letters sound, they are nothing but fiction. Thus, the probable death of Todd should be regarded at least as his final exit from the huge fictitious space made up by the Author Barth.

Notes

1 Hatayama, Hideaki. “A Study on John Barth’s LETTERS (Ⅲ) ‘The Great Tradition’ as the Muse of Literature.” *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Utsunomiya University*, No. 52, Section 1, March 2002. The used text in the previous and present papers on John Barth’s *LETTERS* is similar: John Barth, *LETTERS* (G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1979; rep. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1982). Reference will be cited by page in the text. All italics in quotations are Barth’s.


Ibid., p.165.

Ibid., p.165.

Ibid., pp.46-47.

Works Consulted


