

A Study on John Barth's *LETTERS* (V): The Capital 'A' Author & Ambrose Mensch

(ジョン・バースの『レターズ』論 (V)
大文字Aの「^{オーサー}創作者」とアンブローズ・メンシュ)

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John Barth's design may be that, after the exchanges of letters among the fictitious correspondents have been finished in 1969, the Author intends to gather up all of them to arrange for a novel version of his *LETTERS*¹ projects. This capital 'A' Author is, in this sense, expected to be a future arranger at the end of the novel. Though Barth himself undoubtedly made up the fiction for himself, he intentionally takes the trouble to invent the entangled layers of fiction and fictitious reality. Thus, the Author should not be regarded as Barth himself but as the role of Barth. As Barth has said about the Author: "He's certainly an authorial chap like me!"², he is not Barth but one of the novelists in *LETTERS*, who are all Barth's own reflected images, as it were, in a mirror maze of his self-consciousness. Even if the Author has the same name of John Barth, he has to be thought to be one of "fictitious drolls and dreamers"² in the fiction, playing the role of a correspondent or planner for the *LETTERS* projects of a film and an epistolary version. In addition, he is assigned to the role of an arranger-to-be of the eighty-eight letters, which means, in Barth's word, an "orchestrator":

I mentioned the word "orchestrator" a while ago. I'm a frustrated musician, someone whose ambition was originally to be not a composer or writer but an orchestrator. I once was a drummer in a jazz band, but even then I was far more interested in becoming an arranger than a performer or a composer. In that context, I would not be distressed if someone were to describe my work as being, in part, a reorchestrating of old melodies. In this sense I'm frequently tempted to, well, reconstruct an old story — something to the effect of "Let's run it through again, but in another key."³

Instead of becoming an orchestrator, Barth as a novelist reorchestrates "old conventions and old melodies," or old literary conventions and stories through the use of the Author's role in his seventh novel. The other six letter writers can be called, as it were, composers of "melodies."

Moreover, the Author is "a fictionist who ... had long since turned his professional back on literary realism in favor of the fabulous unreal, and only in this latest enterprise had projected, not without misgiving, a *détente* with the realistic tradition (p.52). The "*détente* with the realistic tradition" means partly his recycling of the oldest form of the epistles. In the sense that a novel is not real life itself but a mere imitation, or a kind of convention for imitating life, the epistolary fiction can be the most competent copying machine for reality. On this basement of realism, Barth re-orchestrates his previous fictions as reenactments to construct "the fabulous unreal" range of his seventh fiction. It is true, however, that nowadays the genre of the novel is so fallen into obscure pretension or commercialism as to be undermined at its popular base by television or the film. According to the Author, "To be a novelist in 1969 is, I agree, a bit like being in the passenger-railway business in the age of the jumbo jet" (p.189). The use of the earliest form of the epistle in the history of the novel, for such a reason, may possibly leave an impression of more or less anachronism. The Author's *LETTERS* project may also be called a dream of one of "drolls" on the fiction-stage. At least, Barth himself is so aware of the anachronism that he makes the role of the Author as a droll and dreamer; his self-consciousness leaves room for self-parody as is often the case with him. This is one of the reasons Barth calls the Author "an authorial chap like me." The capital 'A' Author is nothing but one of Barth's virtual images without existence as an "orchestrator."

LETTERS, however, is the most ambitious project of his fictions in the respect that Barth intends it for a kind of the revolutionary novel in the postmodern age. Barth's attempt at the novel's renewal, or resurrection, means the second revolution of the novel in the age when the novel is said to have been dead. "*Praeteritas futuras fecundant*" whose meaning is also referred to in Introduction turns out to be his slogan for the second revolution of the novel. But, if this dream reminds us of "the Tower of Truth," it might be called, as it were, his castle made of fragile rocks on the seashore sand in Maryland. Generally speaking, our contemporary fiction could be said to be like an old kinky "queen" in a metaphorical sense, who has been weary of imagining himself pervertedly as a female against reality. Though he must make up himself to construct his fictitious alter ego and dreamy world for himself, to make up his fiction is ironically

to become conscious of his own fictitiousness. His dilemma between reality and fiction, thus, enforces him to deconstruct his fictitiousness. And, it looks like this kind of absurd comical or tragical perversion for every author to make up fiction.

Barth is one of those who are conscious of such absurdity in constructing fiction with printed alphabetical letters: Any fiction is essentially a dream drawn in the blank of a paper. His game of letters in three dimensions of the word *LETTERS* is due to such absurdity with a fundamentally comical tone. *LETTERS* whose form and process are of primary importance is his fiction-making game; it is a sort of farce reenacted by Barth's previous characters as "drolls and dreamers" in this stage of *LETTERS*. If it is true that "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce,"⁴ each of their reenactments as the second half of life can be called a parodic farce. Therefore, Bray's dream for "the revolutionary novel" or Cook' for "the Second American Revolution" are also only vacant nonsense within the fiction as Barth himself knows well.

However, their farcical dreams for revolutions may be said to reflect the spirit or trend of the 1960's, at the same time, parodying that age. Even though the vortex of the cultural, economic, social, political, racial, and national revolutions is to be reduced to its simplest shape, that is to say, a diminutive spiral like the triton shell in Barth's favorite marshes on the Eastern Shore, it is a memento of *LETTERS* for Barth. At the same time, the triton shell can be regarded as his starting point for this fiction.

There's a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes — perhaps I invented him — that makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he goes. That snail's pace has become my pace — but I'm going in circles, following my own trail! ...; I've lost track of who I am; my name's just a jumble of letters; so's the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I've lost the key to.⁵

If this passage, quoted from what the Genie-Barth confesses to Dunyazade in *Chimera*, reveals Barth's true condition as a novelist, it may be said that it implies also his self-parody and starting point for him to challenge fiction-making again while "I've lost track of who I am." His very anguish of fiction-making as an author, in a sense, is made use of to fictionalize to a new work.

Even if Barth turns out to be following his own trail vainly in circles in making fiction, yet, this trail of his is left as a prototype for *LETTERS*'s structure with the first-cycle and second-one like the triton shell. On the other hand, it is his sense of loss of any meaning that leads him to a game of letters. When "the whole body of literature" has become "a jumble of letters," Barth could rediscover the key to "a treasure-house of new fiction" in "strings of letters and empty spaces." *LETTERS* is "a treasure-house of new fiction"⁶ as well as the very key to it.

An amateur writer Ambrose Mensch is characterized as the Author's "sympathy, old altered ego" (p.655). Though he is also called the Author's schoolmate, he should be regarded somewhat Barth's biographical character, more representative of Barth in the real world than the other writers appearing in *LETTERS*. However, he is not a postmodernist but a modernist as an amateur seeking to fill up the blank on the letter paper in a bottle which he found on the seashore of Maryland when he was ten years old.

To begin with, in his letter asking Ambrose's advice and assistance in his *LETTERS* project, the Author says:

Dear Ambrose.

Time was when you and I were so close in our growings-up and literary apprenticeships, so alike in some particulars and antithetical in others, that we served each as the other's alter ego and aesthetic conscience; eventually even as the other's fiction. By any measure it has been an unequal relation: my wife, mercifully, has been so colorless in its modest success, yours so comparatively colorful in what you once called its exemplary failure, that I've had more literary mileage by far than you from our old and long since distanced connection.

(p.653)

Ambrose who "imagines himself actual," originally from Barth's fifth fiction, is an amateur experimenter of art; his penname is "Arthur Morton King," which is further shortly nicknamed "Art." What "Art" is engaged in is his new *Perseus*-making project. According to his love Lady Amherst's letters, his hero Perseus in *Perseus*, middle-aged and ill-married, is designed to reenact his triumphs in the days of his youth; with the help of Medusa whose true gaze can confer immortality instead of death, he defeats his adversaries to become a constellation in the sky, endlessly reenacting their romance there. Ambrose primary intent in the story is "formal: the

working out, in narrative, of logarithmic spiral, 'golden ratio,' Fibonacci series" (p.348). This Perseus will remind the reader of "Perseus" in *Chimera* (1972); a story about "Perseus"-making-process is interposed within *LETTERS* as Ambrose's short story in progress. Considering that its writer is made up to be not Barth but Ambrose here, he is appropriately an "old altered ego" of Barth as called by the Author. While he is such a "last-ditch, provincial Modernist" as is engaged in planning the story, he has become "infatuated" with Lady Amherst embodying "Great Tradition." And, he gets desirous "hopefully, perhaps vainly, to get her one final time with child" (p.767) as explained in "A Study on John Barth's *LETTERS* (III) 'The Great Tradition' as the Muse of Literature."

One of his most important concerns is a filmmaking in which Ambrose takes a part as a scenario writer. But, before the episode of filmmaking within the text is examined, its relation to the text needs to be explained at first: the most significant but hidden story is about *LETTERS*-making process. Even if the eighty-eight letters exchanged among the seven correspondents may tell any story about each of them, the story, parodically made to imitate the dramatic pattern, is of secondary importance. What is of great importance is not an established story but a fiction-making-process itself. It is designed to trace the process to read the fiction so that the reader himself may construct gradually the fiction to magnify its own range of fiction together with the correspondents. To read *LETTERS* is, as it were, to make *LETTERS*; this is the reason Barth takes trouble in making the role of the Author who writes letters asking each of the other six correspondents to take part in his newly planned *LETTERS* project. This is true of the filmmaking: to follow the film-making-process within *LETTERS* leads to make a film version of the same *LETTERS*. The process of the filmmaking which proceeds through the book is another one of *LETTERS*-making, though the medium is different: one is letters, another film. For it is the filmmaking of "at least a kind of Ongoing Latest (he wants to 'anticipate' not only the work in progress since *Funhouse* but even such projected works as *LETTERS*!)" (p.190), "the work in progress" maybe means *Chimera* and "he" Prinz. In short, what Barth tries to do in his seventh fiction is not to represent any story but to reveal the process to make up the very same fiction through the two media of letters and film (of course, not actual film but as an episode of the location shooting told) within the fiction. The more the location shooting advances, accordingly, the more *LETTERS* as a film version turns out to be revealed.

To return to Ambrose as an author, he seems to be designed as an avant-garde modernist. As the nickname of his penname "Art" shows, he is an amateur artist who seeks to create what is

called "Art" through various experiments. For instance, such picture writing is interposed in his letters:

...make an ass of



(p.38)

MYSELF

...for my daughter:



(p.151)

ANGELA

Furthermore, his letter in Part E (II) includes a short story: *THE AMATEUR, or, A CURE for Cancer* by Arthur Morton King: a story of Ambrose and his family narrated in the first person and, next, in the second-person. It is more extensively realistic and explicative of *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). Ambrose has been engaged in the *Perseus*-planning, but he comes to complete the plan at the end; then, he gives up his penname to start another project. The Author's *LETTERS* project is his new work in which he is asked to participate in order to help and advise the Author. The model for *LETTERS* that is in his last letter shows his new start for the *LETTERS* project.

On the other hand, the filmmaking produced by Prinz has involved Ambrose in a great deal of trouble, so that it sets them against each other. Such "old rivalry between page and screen" (p.40) is what Ambrose's letters are mainly concerned with. He and Amherst say about the film as follows:

"Did you know," ... "that James Joyce was terribly interested in the cinema, and had a hand in opening the first movie-house in Dublin? But of course, as his eyesight failed...." And you added, "Curious that Jorge Borges, our other sightless modernist, has always been attracted to the cinema too; I believe he's even done filmscripts, hasn't he?" Yet you had no idea that I was at that moment wrestling with the old rivalry between page and screen, making notes for an unfilmable filmscript, and being tempted by Reg Prinz's invitation to do a screenplay of a certain old friend's new book! (p.40)

"[A] certain old friend's new book" is, of course, *LETTERS*. Although Ambrose and Prinz try to cooperate in filming the new book, whose process is in progress within the book as an episode of location shooting, the purpose, theme, and contents each of them plans are different from one another. Prinz rejects Ambrose's trial draft of the opening, which leads to their antagonism: "I [Ambrose] privately declared war upon the cinema" (p.152). The screenplay written by Ambrose is said to include echoes of Barth's other six works and "anticipations of your [Barth's] work in progress and to come," say, *LETTERS*. Ambrose aims at a summary of Barth's works in writing the screenplay based upon them; on the other hand, what Prinz attempts is to "revise the American Revolution" (p.223). Prinz's film involves such scenes from the War of 1812 in Chesapeake Bay and on the Niagara Frontier as the burning old Fort Erie, the British capture of Fort Niagara, the burning of Buffalo, and so on. The scene of "Burning of Washington," for example, is reported to have been filmed as follows:

As the thunderstorms moved in after dark, the sets representing the capital and the President's House had been fired, coincident by design with a night aerial gunnery exercise on nearby Pone Island (regarded as contiguous with Bloodsworth and maintained by the navy as a target area). While nature's fireworks combined with the navy's and Reg Prinz's,....(p.723)

This passage shows how the scenes of the War of 1812 have been filmed, overlapping the contemporary situation with the past revolutionary age. The theme of the film as a whole, consequently, turns out to be the same with *LETTERS*. All the scenes reported in letters simultaneously have been filmed by Prinz; *LETTERS*'s ending is filmmaking's one. The quarrel and wrestling between Ambrose and Prinz are symbolic of confusion and entanglement between letters and the film.

What is worth noting about the filmmaking is, moreover, that the letter as the form and medium of narrative could be the only unfilmable scene as Ambrose finds: "Unfilmable Sequence!" (p.390). In other words, narrative can convey its contents to the told through the medium of voice more than through the medium of image reflected on the screen. Indeed, there are not a few unwritable scenes, but there is certainly an unfilmable scene: a letter. Thus, *LETTERS* can be considered to have also such a significance as a challenge to the prevailing film.

While Ambrose as an amateur modernist seeks to write "Unfilmable Sequence!" in his

scenario, he finds the theme of his *Perseus*: the second half of one's life. He plans to write Perseus's story about his second half of life as the second-cycle: "the attractions, hazards, rewards, and penalties of a '2nd cycle' isomorphic with the '1st'" (p.656). This results in "Reenactment," and all of the stories in *LETTERS* are based upon this theme of "Reenactment." Both a letter as a medium and "Reenactment" as a theme, which Ambrose comes to find on the processes of the filmmaking and *Perseus*-planning, are designed to be of avail to the Author's *LETTERS* project, and, as the process itself, both of them decisively become the core of *LETTERS*.

Notes

- 1 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.
- 2 Charlie Reilly, "An interview with John Barth," *Interviews With Contemporary Writers*, ed. L. S. Dembo (University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p.332.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp.325-26.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.325.
- 5 John Barth, *Chimera* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp.10-11.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.11.

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