John Barth: From the Eighteenth Century to a New Aesthetic
Philosophy: A Critical Study of "The Sot-Weed Factor"

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JOHN BARTH: FROM THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO A NEW AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE SOT-WEEED FACTOR

A THESIS

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Master of Arts

by

Elizabeth Lindsey Britton

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ABSTRACT

John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* has been attacked by the outspoken Earl Rovit and other critics, because he (Barth) opted for an eighteenth century style rather than a more modern approach. For the most part, it is this "choice for Pope rather than for Poe," more than any inherent quality or lack of it in the novel which motivates these scholars.

But if Barth's traditional style is tangent to some profound aesthetic and ideological end, then it is more than justified.

Thus, in this paper I propose to (and my conclusions follow logically from my intentions): 1) defend Mr. Barth's selection of style, 2) extract his theme in clear terms, 3) demonstrate additionally that there is an inalienable connection between theme and style in the novel, and 4) attempt an artistic defense of the style itself.
JOHN BARTH: FROM THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO A NEW AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY
A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE SOT-WEED FACTOR
The Sot-Weed Factor may be a very disturbing book to any reader who feels uncomfortable in the presence of a possibly nihilistic philosophy. But the more serious difficulty for most critics lies in the fact that its style differs from currently acceptable standards of literary form. In an age when the hovering spirit of Jamesianism in criticism encourages the illusion that the author does not exist at all, John Barth dramatically asserts his authorial presence: "You hear respectable writers, sensible people like Katherine Anne Porter, say the characters just take over. I'm not going to let those scoundrels take over. I am in charge....When writers speak of things like inspiration and characters taking over and space-time grids," it is not, as is often thought, because they are super-intellectual, but rather because "they don't know why they do the things they do." ¹ Barth's adamant and arrogant stance may be at least partially responsible for some of the critical hostility towards his work.

But the greater part of the blame for this antagonism would seem to fall upon many of the critics themselves. It is
Barth's obsolete technique, his "choice for Pope rather than for Poe," more than any inherent quality or lack of it in the novel, which precipitates some of the most vicious attack. Such a choice of style, says Mr. Rovit, the most outspoken of these critics, proclaims "a faith in the limited powers of the human capacity to make abstractions rather than a faith in the irrational urge toward what is unknown and unknowable." Moreover, it becomes, in his opinion, "that kind of imitation which is frozen into the inflexible forms of that which it is meant to ridicule or use as a means of ridicule," suggesting "an eccentric faith in the limitations (rather than the possibilities) of the imagination and the creative process." But an even more serious shortcoming is noted by Denham Sutcliffe in the Kenyon Review: "No moral purpose is discoverable, no arcane 'significance', simply fun." To be sure, Rovit admits, "there are indications that The Sot-Weed Factor attempts a satirical range beyond this [surface humor] .... And yet [it fails] to engage our attentions because of the excessive paraphernalia of authentic antiquarianism in which [it] is smothered."

But for this work, or any other, to be worthy of scholarly attention, one must believe that Barth's choice of the traditional style is tangent to some more profound aesthetic and ideological end. Thus, in this paper I propose to: 1) defend Mr. Barth's selection of the mock epic style; 2) extract this theme in clear terms, hence refuting the assertion of critics that it is not
present at all; 3) demonstrate additionally that it has an inalienable and formal connection with the theme of the novel by citing three eighteenth century works governed by the same form and spirit; and 4) to attempt an artistic defense of the style itself.

I

The mock epic style is first and foremost appropriate for the purposes of humor. Its original thrust derives from both the satiric attitude which is primarily mental and intellectual and from the saturnalian mode, which is physio-emotional in its stress and ironic only in so far as it points up the difference between what is and should be by its own comic excess. Hence the mock epic style is a partial blend of the two: at its core may be found an artistic consciousness necessarily basic to any epic consideration of the world, but surrounding it in the manner of a coarse hull is that propensity toward saturnalia, that roughness which at times is even unnecessary and of a destructive nature. Yet in spite of particular offensive passages throughout the novel, the comic thrust of the style is fundamentally successful. Since no effort is made to distinguish between classes of men, for example, by the manner of their speech, one finds all characters from London whores, to trappers, to Indians and slaves, speaking in virtually the same tongue, which serves to increase our amusement in direct ratio to the disproportion of such a language to the situation in
which it is spoken. Hence there is a humor, which no other style could have contrived, in that scene in which the gawky Ebenezer is pleading eloquently in the following manner upon his knees, one arm clasping the naked but articulate Joan Toast before him, the other (one may imagine) flourishing toward heaven:

I will be thy vassal; I will fly with thee down the coasts of earth; I will deliver soul and body into thy hands for very love; but I will not take thee for my whore while breath is in me!...And know that I love thee for my savior and inspiration!...and n'er till I embraced thee have I been a poet, but a shallow coxcomb and poetaster. With thee, Joan, what deeds could I not accomplish!...Scorn me, Joan, and I shall be a splendid fool, a Don Quixote tilting for his ignorant Dulcinea....Love me, and I swear to thee this: I shall be Poet Laureate of England.

To any age such an exaggeration must have provoked laughter, but for Mr. Barth to write this way in the twentieth century is to suggest a second cause for amusement; we snicker as much or more at the discordant ring of any eighteenth century speech on our own modern ears as we do at the absurdity of Ebenezer Cook.

A second reason for the choice of this style might be its immediacy to both the story Barth wanted to tell and to his concept of art; in light of his purpose, his traditional prejudice becomes clear. "I take the structure pretty seriously," he tells us. "When I started on The Sot-Weed Factor, for instance, I had two intentions. One was to write a large book....The other was to see if I couldn't make up a plot that was fancier than Tom Jones. Tom Jones is one of those novels that you don't want to end; you wish it
could just keep going on and on." Now in a lengthy undertaking of this sort where plot must play an important role, the style is crucial, since a mistake here would bore the hapless reader for some five hundred extra pages. Ulysses is just such a long book, but written in the modern mode, and as a critic has quipped, one does not read it but reads in it. The epic, however, with its insistence on plot and structure provides an obvious means toward the end of maintaining interest: "I think it is a useful thing for young people who are learning to write (like me) [says Barth] to spend a lot of time with the old tales. The element of story--just sheer extraordinary, marvellous story--..." The current emphasis on "personal" truth, however, and the tendency to see events from the outside-in rather than from the inside-out, which is most effectively accomplished by an interior monologue technique can little accommodate the demands of motion and suspense.

Amid the clamor of the newest fads we must not lose our appreciation for the artistry of a story well told, or as Thomas Hardy has said--"a story exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale tellers are all ancient mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping wedding guests unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of the average man and woman." Thus far we have been considering parody solely as an agent of humor and plot; we must now try to see it as an attempt toward a new realism. Beneath the exotic tapestry of The Sot-Weed Factor
lies the impulse to imagine alternatives to the world: "...really what you want to do [says Barth] is re-invent philosophy and the rest--make up your own whole history of the world." This device of historical distortion is only one aspect of the overall spirit of exaggeration which traditionally dominates comedy and serves as a means of distinguishing between reality and appearance. Besides being a major contributor to the humor in the novel, this alteration of the facts as we know them tends to emphasize the gratuitousness of history and of life's real pulse in comparison with the more stable surface currents. In this light, then, Barth's alternatives are amusing not primarily because they did not happen but rather because they could have happened. Thus, the humor is accompanied by an essential irony which lies near the most basic human dilemma--the influence of chance on event in determining what must be reality, and what is only an appearance of it.

Moreover, just as Barth uses irony in his subject matter to achieve a pervasive realism of possibilities, he also uses it stylistically as "a different [from the modern] way to come to terms with the discrepancy between art and the Real Thing." Suffice it to say in this connection that Wayne Booth and others have pointed out the inevitability of artifice in art. Hence, the so-called realistic style, although it is one method of achieving a sort of realism, is not the sole one and probably not the most efficient, since its intensity of depth cannot balance its
narrowness of scope. On the other hand, Barth's contrived "history" and acquired stylistics blend happily into that artifi-
ciality most equipped to extract reality. The modern aesthetic, "a more up to date kind of psychological realism: a higher fi to
human consciousness and unconsciousness," fails by trying to expose as fraudulent an element of artifice and coincidence inherent in
human life. Another and more effective way to deal with the prob-
lem, says Barth is to "make the artifice part of your point....
That would be my way. Schererezade's my avant-gardiste." 14

II

In order to establish a purposeful link between theme and
style in The Sot-Weed Factor, we must first demonstrate that the
book is not solely a grand "academic joke," 15 as Rovit says, but
that its mock epic quality liberally allows for the traditional
mixture of the comic and the profound. Barth is "primarily...a
novelist of ideas....very much interested in 'manipulating' his
material with the 'ulterior motive' of setting clear a particular
body of ideas." 16  "Like Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," Barth's
The Sot-Weed Factor is an essentially comic work which makes an
essentially serious statement about man and society." 17 Because
he is so contemporary, however, these ideas have been scarcely de-

defined, let alone exploited.

Barth himself has called his book the third in a series of
"three nihilistic amusing novels." 18 If this is indeed true the
value we must expect to extract from it is the valuelessness of the universe, the meaningfulness of human life. But curiously Barth has selected a narrative technique popular in an age which presupposed values at the very basis of human existence; stylistically he does not fall back upon the individual consciousness as the sole concrete in an otherwise absurd universe. True satire is, moreover, a genre usually prevalent in times when man accepts particular codes of ideas. It cannot operate in a vacuum; its very existence suggests an alternate system of values. Hence Barth's inability to accept the "arbitrariness of physical facts" may suggest, not an interest in nihilism as a philosophy, but rather as a device of his satire. Thus, we might say that what Barth advocates is an artistic nihilism: "And it seems to me that this emotion, which is a kind of metaphysical emotion, goes almost to the heart of what art is, at least some kinds of art, and this impulse to imagine alternatives to the world can become a driving impulse for writers."20

To demonstrate how this artistic nihilism works I first propose an examination of the characters of Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame who, as foils for each other, express two opposing philosophies and begin the novel with opposite endowments. At the outset of the novel Eben is emotionally paralyzed and unable to act because he, "thanks both to Burlingame and to his natural proclivities, was dizzy with the beauty of the possible; dazzled, he
threw up his hands at choice, and like ungainly flotsam rode half
content the tide of chance." He is in some ways the modern man
caught in the existential dilemma, which he aptly describes in his
own juvenile verses:

Old Plato saw both Mind and Matter;
Thomas Hobbes, naught but the latter.
Now poor Tom's Soul doth fry in Hell:
Shrugs GOD, "Tis immaterial.'22

He cannot choose first because he is paralyzed by the recognition
of life's brevity:

Ah, God...it were an easy Matter to choose a
Calling, had one all Time to live in! I should
be fifty Years a Barrister, fifty a Physician,
fifty a Clergyman, fifty a Soldier! Aye, and
fifty a Thief, and fifty a Judge! All Roads are
fine Roads...none more than another, so that
with one Life to spend I am a man bare-bumm'd at
Taylors with Cash for but one pair of Breeches,
or a Scholar at Bookstalls with Money for a single
Book: to choose ten were no Trouble; to choose
one, impossible! All Trades, all Crafts, all
Professions are wondrous, but none is finer
than the rest together.23

Hence he has, like Meursault in L'Étranger, been brought up to the
abyss of the absurd.

Burlingame, by way of contrast, has been forced not only "to
see the world without an absolute value, to see it at its most
comically absurd...." but also to accept such a world, "...to pull
together what relative value or what hope he can in a world with­
out order."24 To this end he has loved two trades by the opening
of the novel--seamanship and scholarship. He embraces, moreover,
a type of "pan sexuality"--God's whole creation is his mistress,
and he hath for her this selfsame love and boundless curiosity."  

Ostensibly he is in the process of becoming something, yet he lacks the traditional sense of identity which Ebenezer possesses. For him the only responsibility in life is to oneself: "'Twere a noble act, on the face of't, to beg his pardon and take your birching like a man," he says to Eben, "but 'tis no more than an excuse for dropping the reins of your own life. 'Sheart, 'tis a manlier matter to set your goal and swallow the consequences."  

Yet even while Burlingame is denying the relevance of his background: ("Then again I thank Heav'n I'm quit of mine,") he is actually regretting its loss: "Had I a home I'd likely leave it; a family alive or dead I'd likely scorn it; and wander a stranger in alien towns. But what a burden and despair to be a stranger to the world at large, and have no link with history! 'Tis as if I'd sprung de novo like a maggot out of meat, or dropped from the sky. Had I the tongue of angels I ne'er could tell you what a loneliness it is!"  

As several critics have noted in this connection, the search for identity in life is a major theme of the novel.

Of the personal and universal aspects of human identity which Eben and Burlingame each lack respectively, it is relatively easy for the latter to find what he wants—his place in history—both because he does not long deceive himself of its ultimate value and because it is a search concerned largely with exteriors. Cooke, on the other hand, is more seriously at fault in that he does not
know himself. When finally propelled into action by chance more
than choice ("Did I, then, make a choice? Nay, for there was no I
to make it!") he "chooses" innocence as his essence, his mode of
becoming, ironically enough, because:

Preserv'd, my Innocence preserveth Me
From Life, from Time, from Death, from History,
Without it I must breathe Man's mortal Breath;
Commence a Life—and thus commence my Death!  

He errs more seriously, furthermore, by imputing this event to the
forces of majesty innate in the world: "...a noble choice, to
prize my love o'er my lust, and a noble choice bespeaks a noble
chooser....less than mortal and more; not a man, but Mankind!"  

He passes from lethargy, from the existential recognition of the
absurd, to an assumed epic view of the world and reality. To
shield himself from the Abyss he adopts finally what he thinks is
Burlingame's advice--action: "Action be my sanctuary; Initiative
my shield! I shall smite ere I am smitten; clutch Life by his
horns! Patron of poets, thy temple be the Entire Great Real
World...."  

However, as Burlingame later suggests, Eben is still
seeking stability in a world where the only inevitability is that
of becoming: "The world can alter a man entirely...or he can
alter himself; down to his very essence. Did you not by your own
testimony resolve, not that you were, but that you'd be virgin and
poet from that moment hence? Nay, a man must alter willy-nilly
in's flight to the grave; he is a river running seawards, that is
ne'er the same from hour to hour."
Hence, Ebenezer's choice for innocence is but an excuse not to act. In the beginning John McEvoy tells him that he knows nothing of the great, real world, and the fact of the matter is that he does not want to know. He is content, instead, with his dream vision of it, thus assuming that Maryland is a great and glorious land worthy to be sung in epic verse before he even sets foot upon it, or better still as he pens the romantic lines on the beauties of the ocean voyage, little knowing that the apparent absurdity of "With great Poseidon at our Side" would prove comically prophetic. When he is at last forced to recognize that innocence is but another term for ignorance, he will defend it still by asserting that the greatest values are not, after all, real: "Yet the surest thing about Justice, Truth, and Beauty is that they live not in the world, but as transcendent entities, noumenal and pure."35

Therefore, the second major emphasis of The Sot-Weed Factor is the search for real values in a chaotic universe where a tendency to rationalize previously determined standards dominates the fabric of life. In such a situation, truth cannot exist except as the bastard of chance and situation, because the transcendent beauty it derives from an innocent viewpoint is more than overshadowed by the flimsy defenses such "innocence" provides for it. "...Where blind Innocence is judge, the jury is blind Chance! I cannot decide," says Burlingame to Ebenezer, "whether you maintain
your innocence because you hold such notions as this, or hold the
notions to justify your innocence. Hence in the nihilistic
world of the novel which Barth deliberately sets up as a testing
ground for the hypothesis that life has no value, justice, beauty,
and truth cannot exist except as illusions fostered by man's fear
of reality.

So as part of his philosophical experiment Barth forces his
characters to realize that "chance or confusion is the disordering
pulse at the heart of human existence" rather than any ordered
system of values inherent in the nature of things. "We sit here
on a blind rock careening through space; we are all of us rushing
headlong to the grave." We cannot comprehend the inexorability
of natural law, but we must accept it. "The rule of the game...
was that every time the ant trod unwittingly upon a 3 or a 9,
Ebenezer would close his eyes and tap the page thrice, smartly and
randomly, with the point of his quill." The error is uninten-
tional; the consequence of it seemingly illogical. The artif-
ciality of the enterprise testifies to the element of coincidence,
the gratuitousness of events, reflective of a universe governed by
chance. "I cannot collect my wits e'en to think of all the
questions I would ask, much less explore your answers," says
Ebenezer. "What is't you describe, my friend, if not man's lot?...
He is Chance's fool, the toy of aimless Nature--a mayfly flitting
down the winds of Chaos!" It is therefore man's fate to search
for his soul, yet what he finds may be only a piece of that "same black Cosmos whence [he] sprang and through which [he falls]: the infinite wind of space." But "although his role of Deus civi Natura precluded mercy, his sentiments were unequivocally on the side of the ant...[and] The game was profoundly exciting...."

Thus, Ebenezer's eventual abandonment of innocence occurs because it is a relative value inappropriate to his situation, because, in short, he is mortal and must change, while innocence by its very nature opts for the status of changelessness. Since, therefore, it is the result of yearning for a hypothetical state of perfection, it is non-functional and potentially destructive in human life which is imperfect; not only does it prevent Eben from knowing himself, but it also filters out the rays of truth exuded by the real world around him. Lured by this ideal, Joan Toast follows him to Maryland only to die an infected opium addict. The further loss of his ancestral property threatens to shadow his sister's and father's prospects as well. "God curse such innocence!" he says in a fit of anger, realizing that it "is the crime I stand indicted for, the crime of innocence, whereof the Knighthood must bear the burden." The general condition of things is such that he accept the responsibility for "that knowledge—which the Fall itself vouchsafed him." It is not so much, as he concludes, that "Adam learned but that he had to learn;" that is the "true Original sin our souls are born in...." Innocence
in a world of knowledge self-destructs just as an object from the
looking-glass world would actually explode on contact with any ob-
ject of the exactly opposite anatomical consistency from itself.

Yet Ebenezer affirms the value of a different kind of inno-
cence even on the brink of losing his old facade: "'Tis no mere
castle in the air, this second voice says, but a temple of the
mind, Athene's Shrine, where the Intellect seeks refuge from Furies
more terrific than e'er beset Orestes in the play—" This second
innocence is one based on an understanding that "what the cosmos
lacks we must ourselves supply," rather than, like the first,
"...an edifice raised not e'en on sand but on the black and vasty
zephyrs of the Pit," an innocence based on the supposition of a
world which did not even exist. Eventually, as he came to recog-
nize the real ugliness of things to which he had formerly imputed
ideal beauty, this masquerade innocence ceased to exist in any
respect except as the lack of actual experience, symbolized by
virginity amid carnal knowledge. Only in the end, therefore, is
Ebenezer really innocent, when he has come to grips with the true
state of affairs, and having done so, can still extract reasonably
acceptable values, which will not mock him with their insufficiency
to situations. Hence, through a proper mingling of knowledge with
the hope of the ideal one may invent what the cosmos seems to
lack—a system of values to direct human life.

By the same token Barth, speaking through Ebenezer, affirms
the worth of still another ideal—martyrdom—an empty virtue, yes...
"...unnatural since blind Nature has neither codes nor causes," yet in "its very unnaturalness, the vanity, the hubris, as it were, of heroism in general." Perched as we are on our "dust-mote whirling through the night, self-destruction is lunacy, "since death [is] certain, life [is] the only value; "suicide...to escape pain [is]... cowardice," but there is "something brave, defiantly human, about the passengers on this dust-mote who perished for some dream of Value....to die, to risk death, even to raise a finger for any Cause was to pennon one's lance with the Riband of Purpose."47

Thus, for all the freedom which the concept of a valueless universe may offer us, the problems inherent in the belief are more formidable than the compensations therein. "Philosophic liberty...
that comes from a want of history...is both a blessing and a curse, for't means both liberty and lawlessness." So far from denying the existence of any values, therefore, Barth is, in effect, affirming the possibility of all: the complexity of human life is such that the only error is made in attributing a single cause or interpretation to a situation. The search for whole understanding is "fruitless" then, not so much because the universe is chaotic, but because from the total of its unlimited possibilities and capacities, we can only extract an infinitesimal percentage. Even Burlingame who accepts this uncertainty and who functions as well as anyone may within a state of flux, can only do so up to a point.
The freedom of the universe "throws one on his own resources," yes, and is beneficial from this standpoint, but it also "makes every man an orphan...and can as well demoralize as elevate." 48 Hence adrift like seaweed in the tide, the only alternative for man is to "choose his gods and devils on the run, quill his own name upon the universe, and declare, 'tis I, and the world stands such-a-way!' One must assert, assert, assert....What other course remains? 49

Thus, the final values of human life are those we assign it, not what we manufacture but what we invent from among the myriad possibilities already at our disposal—a system of values which must, and will change with every age and condition of man. In the same manner that the ancients erroneously believed that the stars revolved around a static earth, we mistakenly dub our own erratic motions, the chaos of the universe, when, in fact, man's years are "not an eye blink to eternity, and de'il the way he spends 'em—whether steering ships or scribbling verse, or building towns or burning 'em—he dies like a May fly when his day is done, and the stars go round their courses just the same." 50 It is inconsequential, therefore, to argue like Ebenezer from "the analogy of precious stones and metals that the value of commodities increases inversely with their supply where demand is constant...so that mortal time, being infintessimal in supply and virtually infinite in demand, [is], therefore infinitely precious to mortal men." 51
This is but to argue from the point of view of quantity where quality is the more important virtue. The "worms will [not] care, when anon they make a meal of you, whether you spent your moment singing wigless in your chamber, or sacked the golden towns of Montezuma," so long as in whatever occupation you choose, you do not, as Ebenezer's innocence prompts him to do, shirk responsibility for your own life or for your place in history.

Some pages back we suggested that The Sot-Weed Factor began with the concept of Chaos, but, as we have endeavored to show, it does not end here. To admit that man is capable of moulding an infinite variety of forms out of the apparent void around him is to deny nothing but the possibility of nihilism. In short, Barth has gone so far past this philosophical outlook in his affirmation of innocence and heroism as positive values in life, despite the fact that any logical defense of them self destructs because man is doomed to die, that he has unwittingly come full cycle again to the more traditional interpretation of life which the novel is sometimes said to parody. "He [Barth] considers each of the ways in which Western man has attempted to fill his life with value after the death of the old gods--love, liberal and radical politics, the quest for power (the Machiavellian politics of early Maryland), primitivism, (the noble savage and the return of nature), art, and private systems," not to find them all as Richard Noland says "inadequate" but rather necessary as the shattered pieces of
a complete, yet unknowable whole.53

III

The evidence of Barth's numerous borrowings from earlier
fiction has been noted already:

...The Sot-Weed Factor would occasion a field
day among sources and analogues. We might
indicate some of its literary origins and
effects by saying that it was begotten by Don
Quixote upon Fanny Hill; or perhaps with equal
justice that it is by Rabelais out of Moll
Flanders. Completeness would require us to say
that our author had been soused in Sterne and
pickled in Fielding; that we suspect him of
knowing Candide pretty well and of having a
commendable love of Chaucer.54

Yet so far we have said very little about the relationship between
this form and eighteenth century ideology. The book very obvious-
ly relies more heavily on these borrowings than the current
literary productions; however, as Critique notes, the "wide vari-
ety of devices, from the philosophical dialogue to the bawdy
fabliaux,"55 which Barth borrows, are of the generic rather than
the specific type. Hence, the purpose of this section is to dis-
cuss in a very general way the general influence which three of
these analogues, Tom Jones, Candide, and Tristram Shandy, can be
said to have respectively on the form, tone, and idea of The Sot-
Weed Factor.

Formally speaking, as Barth himself admits, the novel has its
greatest affinities with Tom Jones (and to a much lesser extent
with Joseph Andrews). For purposes of identification one might
label all three picaresque in that they deal with heroes who, for one reason or another, are mobile, but although Burlingame and Tom may well fit the description of the traditional picaro, Joseph and Ebenezer are, at least to their own satisfaction, anti-picaros. It is almost as if Barth has placed Fielding's two types of heroes in one novel; Burlingame's pan sexual desire to embrace all of God's creation is similar to Tom's warm personal spirit and compassion for others which often gives rise to his sexual activity, while Eben and Joseph both opt for innocence in virginity.

Furthermore, *Tom Jones* and *The Sot-Weed Factor* are both mock epic in that they attempt to examine the more profound problems of order and propriety which confront mankind through the medium of comedy. Fielding's examination of order is more socially oriented than Barth's. He indicates that men should be judged by their deeds and not by their birth, yet he seems to "compromise" this principle in the end, by making Tom the son, even though illegitimate, of Bridget Allworthy. By doing this and thus making Tom acceptable to society despite the condition of his birth, Fielding introduces the question of the moral* rightness of social standards. In this instance, one would think that "nobility" of birth should not entirely obscure the fact of illegitimacy. It might be said, therefore, that *The Sot-Weed Factor* begins where

*I mean moral in the sense of natural—the way things are.*
Fielding left off: what, if any, link does a man's birth give him with the moral order of the universe? In dealing with this question in the twentieth century Barth could not have avoided the influence of nihilism or existentialism, so that the comedy of his novel is decidedly darker than that in Tom Jones. One knows, for instance, from the beginning that Tom will be successful, whereas one feels instinctively that Eben will always be a misfit, not because there is no order, but rather because his incestuous love for Anna (the twin's longing for physical union indicates a metaphysical desire for universal totality) places him outside the narrower scope of social order and in the realm of cosmic and moral order.

With respect to the tone of the novel, there is an element of the bawdy, the gigantesque, almost grotesque, extremes of fantasy operating within it. Absurd incidents of rape, human defecation, the dangers of the sea voyages, with which the pages of The Sot-Weed Factor are replete, might be erroneously traced to a single source: Roderick Random, Moll Flanders, Fanny Hill. But it is probably more correct to attribute these characteristics to a dominant Rabelaisian or Gargantuan spirit on the part of the author, which is especially prevalent in the later French work, Candide. Essentially this philosophical tale is a literary genre invented by Voltaire, in which the "author creates a set of characters to embody the idea and cognate or opposed ideas; he sets the
characters in motion; their adventures make the philosophical tale;...[in Candide]...the germinal idea is l'optimisme."56 Working on this analogy to The Sot-Weed Factor, Ebenezer incorporates the more traditionalist viewpoint—the assumption that one's place in history is of importance and the further presumption that the epic consideration of life is the most real; he is, in effect, the optimist, while Burlingame represents the skeptic's case of a man whose knowledge extends only so far as an immediate recognition of the ultimate meaninglessness of the universe. Unfortunately, however, the issues are not so clear cut as they are in the original (Candide), not necessarily because the characters are more fully developed in The Sot-Weed Factor, but because Barth imbues both men with a tinge of existentialism—in Eben, the inability to move in face of the absurd, upon which he desires to impose a superfluous order, and in Burlingame, the willingness to overlook the importance of the progress of civilization. Thus, in one sense, optimism, skepticism, and existentialism are all being tested against the backdrop of nihilism, and in effect, what finally happens is that no one of them wins out. Optimism ignores the ugliness of reality, pessimism the beauty of man's imagination, existentialism "that what the cosmos lacks we must ourselves supply."57 The indictment of the latter is made inarguably clear with Burlingame's admission of his need for "orientation" and later, in satiric fashion, when Eben tries to commit suicide, yet cannot for lack of a proper instrument, hence affirming the non-
productive nature of its doctrine: "'Tis the final misfortune,' he answered without raising his head. 'I have no pistol, nor means to purchase one. Ye'll not be widowed this evening, so it seems.'"

Optimism, on the other hand, at least provides the consolation of artistic inspiration. "What is there isn't to sing in epical verse?" Ebenezer asks Burlingame, when he sees the scurviness of Maryland around him, but his friend answers:

Who knows what manner of sloven huts the real Troy was composed of, or cares to know?... 'Tis the genius of the poet to transcend his material; and it wants small eloquence to argue that the meaner the subject, the greater must be the transcension, to effect which merits for the poet an honor commensurate with the difficulty of his achievement.

Moreover, the adventures which Candide suffers, in tone and variety, resemble the picaresque quality of Eben's adventures, while the formal criticisms of religion, the nobility, metaphysics, war, optimism, have definite affinities with the artistic nihilism of Barth, which places all of the social order in question. After having wandered over the entire world, having seen shipwreck, war, rape, piracy, Candide returns to find the woman he had once loved, old and ugly, even as Eben finds Joan Toast ravaged by the pox. The spirit of optimism as expressed by reason has been crushed, because it is absurd in the face of reality; yet this is not so much the defeat of systems of order, but the condemnation of truth (human reason) as an adequate solution to human problems. "Je sais..." says Candide, "qu'il faut cultiver notre jardin."
"...Travailler sans raisonner," dit Martin; "c'est le seul moyen de rendre la vie supportable." As a philosophic statement, this impulse to imagine one's own standard apart from the use of reason approaches Barth's assertion that man must create his values in a universe of incomprehensible order.

Thus, although it is not generally noted, there was afloat in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century a current of skepticism, or in its milder forms, qualified optimism. This is apparent in Sterne and Byron, and to some extent even as early as Pope, where in the Essay on Man, he affirms the existence of a universe, complex to the extent that man cannot fathom its complexities, yet whose seeming discord is "Harmony not understood; All partial Evil, universal Good." Pope's vision in this sense is either an extension or a naive oversimplification of that of Voltaire, in that he presupposes an order at the base of the confusion, yet from man's viewpoint, it is this confusion, this absurdity which is most apparent:

Born but to die, andreasoning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reasonsuch;  
Whether he thinks too little, or too much;  
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;  
Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;  
Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of Truth, in endlessError hurl'd;  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Despite the desire to be optimistic evident in this passage, Pope is well aware of what the twentieth century has dubbed the
absurdity of the human condition, the fact that we are, half man, half god, in a continual state of flux, simply because we are mortal. There is, moreover, in his statement "whatever is, is right" something less than the resigned spirit of optimism it generally passes for.

*Tristram Shandy* is as ideologically similar to *The Sot-Weed Factor* as anything we have mentioned thus far, despite Barth's denial of any thorough knowledge of Shandeism ("I could never finish *Tristram Shandy*") . Sterne's occupation with something other than the "slings and arrows of outraged [mis]fortune" focuses attention on the smaller things of life with which man is emotionally and intellectually equipped to deal. Attempts to control anything else, as Sterne suggests, result in a farcical perversion of events. Hence, the entire Shandy world appears chaotic, chiefly because an effort is made to order human life through human reason and logical method. The association of clock winding and copulation, name giving and word meaning, systematization and education, sex and fortification all point to a mechanistic interpretation of the universe which is doomed to failure from the outset. Life may indeed be logically ordered, but human reason has not yet advanced to a level sufficiently capable of penetrating it; moreover, escape from, rather than understanding of this complexity, is the more important: "the proper study of mankind is man."

Yet *Tristram Shandy* is not really a chaotic book, since despite its confusion, it reaches a fundamental understanding of
truth and the human condition: the relativity of human value systems:

But need I tell you, Sir, that the circumstances with which every thing in this world is begirt, give every thing in this world its size and shape;—and by tightening it, or relaxing it, this way or that, make a thing to be, what it is—great—little—good—bad—indifferent or not indifferent, just as the case happens.64

Therefore, Sterne rejects in part the scientific approach of the age:

SCIENCE MAY BE LEARNED BY ROTE, BUT WISDOM NOT.65

When faced with the imperturbability of the universe, man is forced "to struggle on blindly in his limited sphere for his appointed span, quite incapable of threading his way through to the heart of what Alexander Pope called the 'mighty maze.'" When he acts as if he does understand his destiny and can control it, he is more than usually comical. Human pretension to knowledge of final truths is a constant source of fun in Tristram Shandy.66 Hence Sterne "uses philosophical snarls for more than a satire on systems; [he] uses them as a dramatic device displaying human motives and for creating a world of human relations. And satire verges into comedy when it begins to consider the inescapable human situation."67

The satire in The Sot-Weed Factor works in much the same fashion. Some time earlier I spoke of an artistic nihilism which I defined as an experimental device through which the author.
juxtaposes a variety of philosophical theories against the possibility of ultimate meaningless. The resultant "philosophical snarls" serve the inevitable function of dramatizing the inconsistencies and inadequacies of human systems in general; neither Ebenezer's epic concept nor Burlingame's professed existentialism is of significant value in dealing with the complexity of life. The sole difference between them, and a crucial one for Barth, is that, to assume order and meaning where none exists even if it is a lie, is capable of producing something—i.e. art, which does have intrinsic value, whereas, the contrary supposition that nothing exists in the void will inevitably obscure what meaning may be unwittingly there. But in the final analysis, Barth, like Sterne, denies the relevance of philosophy to immediate problems, and in so doing, exposes the folly of the men who formulate such principles as fools who take themselves too seriously. The final irony of the situation is, therefore, that it is both inescapable and incomprehensible.

Sterne, moreover, uses the term "Hobby-Horse" to designate the manner in which man diverts his attention from these eternal and baffling mysteries he may never solve; Byron chooses the more common metaphor of intoxication, but whatever the phrase, it is much the same thing that Barth is describing in Ebenezer's preoccupation with poetry and virginity—the only means toward the stability for which he yearns. Thus, all three writers are alike in their recognition and confrontation of the inability "to find and accept an
intellectual basis for existence as an absolutist" and the emotional incapacity to subscribe "to relativism as a position for an essentially positive view of existence." Their being "seems to reflect a fundamental split between skepticism and the impulse to believe and belong."68

Hence, if one wants to use the term nihilism with regard to The Sot-Weed Factor, one must apply it solely to that lack of formal philosophy which Barth suggests as a partial solution to the human dilemma. Instead of moaning over the possible loss of value and rationalizing meanings of empty things, one would do better to laugh at the abyss and imagine one's own alternatives to the world instead. After all, regardless of what dire charges one may level against Nature, whatever she has done was done as a joke:

Figures, so strange, no GOD design'd
To be a Part of Human-kind,
But wanton Nature, void of Rest,
Moulded the brittle Clay in Jest....69

Yet notwithstanding this seeming gratuitousness of life and fortune, there is an inherent and perverse concatenation in the fabric of circumstance which binds everything together in a strange parody of the Renaissance chain of being, but regardless of travesty, the chain is none the less surely there:

The whole history of his twenty-eight years it was that had brought him to the present place at the present time; and had not this history taken its particular pattern, in large measure, from the influence of all the people with whom he'd ever dealt, and whose lives in turn had been shaped by the influence of countless others? Was he not, in short, bound to his post not merely by the sum
of human history, but even by the history of the entire universe, as by a chain of numberless links, no one of which was more culpable than any other?

For this reason man is the "jest" and "riddle" of the world, because he is manipulated by it; but more importantly, he becomes its "glory" when he manipulates the world to suit the purposes of art and the demands of the creative imagination.

IV

Having presented thus far a thesis of the usual and acceptable sort, I will now do what I have not emphasized before—defend Barth's style. Whether one is willing to admit it or not, all human opinions derive ultimately from some personal and highly subjective taste, and while it is frequently advisable to weed out those arguments based too obviously and too heavily upon such impulses, it is also dangerous to ignore their existence altogether. Moreover, it is only within recent years that men have felt compelled to defend their preferences by statements which imply no value judgment. In the sixteenth century Sidney was free to assert that poetry was superior, that the poet was a "monarch," and as late as the beginning of this century Shaw was permitted the leeway of dubbing comedy the greatest of literary arts. But humanistic trends mirror rather closely the other currents of a civilization, so that one now formulates artistic and philosophic doctrine within the strict confines of an objectivism somewhat scientifically
imposed. It is possible, in a great piece such as The Sot-Weed Factor, to extract evidence appropriate to proving any number of opposing theories, and to do it, moreover, in a manner which fairly reeks of "rightness" solely because the points are clearly organized and the exposition stripped of the taint of errant opinion.

In the same manner that it is unscholarly to offer a subjective judgment, it is now taboo to evaluate generically, to suggest that any one thing is inherently better than any other. For this reason, one must judge each work of art by its own merits, on its own terms, and most critics would admit the efficacy of dipping into historical background as a means of exposing all of the factors contingent upon the production of a masterpiece. All literary genres are of equal value; the determining factor should be the quality with which the intention is carried off, with the exception that James is more equal than Fielding; "showing" is naturally superior to "telling," or so many scholars and writers now claim. Yet the chief virtue of showing—the ability to focus in upon the consciousness of a single character—may be incorporated in the telling technique, since it is the more encompassing of the two. Moreover, by telling one affirms the artifice in art, which is ultimately inescapable, and in doing so, has a better go at "reality" because one may continually manipulate his wheels of focus—breath and depth—until by alternate method he extracts all-exterior and interior—truth.

But it is a mistake incipiently to assume that "reality" is a
goal to be grasped at altogether; to do so is both to place an unwarranted value judgment on it as a commodity and to overlook the complexity of what we are seeking. There is something to be said, and a place in criticism to say it (or should well be), against the trend to realize or to romanticize at the exclusion of the alternative. One is loathe to admit what is merely an inevitable fact of his mortal condition: that the pendulum will swing in the opposite direction tomorrow: that Shakespeare's sun will set and some one else's will rise. It is a shame, after all, to quibble over terms—time is so short, and there is so much to be done; it is unfortunate, indeed, that those who preach equality and liberality neglect their own advice, that they like Mr. Rovit can condemn the technique, yet admit the quality of a novel such as The Sot-Weed Factor.

Now as many have emphasized, the writer has a responsibility to himself, which if neglected, he is no more than the proverbial hack; but what is too often overlooked, however, is his equal responsibility to the reader. It is a mistake to apply the word "interest" in this connection, because that word has already been unfavorably prejudiced by careless usage. Let us say instead that any style or genre must be consistent within itself, that it must be finally governed by the slippery but infallible rule of sane judgment. When Horace claimed for poetry the dual role of pleasing and teaching, he assumed that first duty of art—which is now too often forgot—to communicate. The tedium of life may be expressed
in some other way than bidding on audience "wait" for two hours; a novel might be expected to have something rather "extraordinary" to say, or what is its initial purpose in being written? A more fitting distinction should be made between art and reality— that the former concerns itself with those aspects of life one may designate as unusual or wonderful. The current passion for "truth" is hopefully but a passing fad—for to extract this "truth" from the immediate situation is to ignore the rest of the great real world. There are, indeed, more wonders in this universe than are dreamt of at present and a better way of finding them out than by self-sufficient, literary snobbery whose unjustifiable judgments arbitrarily exclude the better part of the reading public. Audience certainly should and will never compromise the truly great writer; similarly the writer should not compromise his audience.

To conclude, there is a place for every style and every mode, provided that it is well-executed and free from the folly of excess. The greatest works of literature must be those which have integrated most perfectly their form and idea, having mastered and manipulated both by an inner consistency—not that they ignore either what has been or what is, but that they extract the best qualities from each and incorporate them in a well-shaped and expressive whole. One must praise the experiment for its audacity, its ingenuity, and its flair, but one should not be beguiled into thinking novelty in itself a virtue. It is only when this same novelty is melded into the entire body literary, when it assumes
before and after, without and within the demands of the tradition from which it came in addition to its own standards, that it can stand, on its own, as something more than novelty.

_Ulysses_ should be remembered as a bold experiment; it should be lauded perhaps for its cleverness of organization, its attempt at reality, but in the final analysis its shortcomings are of a more serious nature than its virtues. It substitutes a warped aesthetic in place of a vital consistency; at the price of dramatizing the lapses of communication it fails of itself to communicate; it intrigues by its uniqueness rather than pleases for its substantiability; it suggests a problem yet provides no answer. To be sure there are many great works of art which perhaps fall short in one of these latter demands—particularly the last, since answers are difficult to find,—but to fail in all of these respects, is a difficulty which cannot be overlooked. The eighteenth century, could it have had the opportunity of learning from the moderns, would surely have admitted, that there is something to learn, but I am not as certain that many of the moderns, since they, in fact, have the advantage of both, recognize what is to be admired and emulated in the older tradition. The present standard of "quality" would be an infallible aesthetic, if only writers and critics alike would adhere in practice to what they preach in theory. I cannot countenance the duplicity and shallowness of a Mr. Rovit; I can only hope there will be increasingly few of his prejudice.
V.

In the beginning I stated my intention of proving four theses; at the end, only the fourth remains "unproven" in the acceptable sense, yet it is, to my mind, the most certain, since it is based, not on whim, or opinion, but on fact, whose authority the world may one day again admit. Nevertheless, I have demonstrated that Barth must have intended and did actually write a novel of some substance, a novel profound enough to confront the problems which plague us today and which have always faced mankind. His choice of an older style is happy, moreover, because of the breadth and depth it allows, but this "authentic antiquarianism" does not stifle the influence of the twentieth century. I have also suggested his links with his own age. The impact of modern psychology, the philosophy of the absurd and nihilism have influenced The Sot-Weed Factor, one should say, in a negative fashion, since the final statement of the book is neither traditionally existentialistic or nihilistic.

At the very core of The Sot-Weed Factor is the "impulse to believe and belong" despite the recognition that it is difficult to find an order or principle to which one might adhere or belong. As I have pointed out, this recognition of the absurd is not a new phenomena; only the attitude with which modern man greets it has changed in the passage of years. In contemporary dialect, Tristram Shandy is a novel of the absurd, in the same sense as L'Etranger, because both are essentially concerned with the
discovery of the "abyss". Likewise, Caligula and The Sot-Weed Factor are extensions of this type of exploration. They deal in turn with man's manner of reaction to the absurd around him. "Les hommes meurent, et ils ne sont pas heureux"71 is the sole truth Caligula has found, but he develops no further, as do Eben and Henry, exchanging this truth for an existential "lie" (i.e. life is essentially meaningful) which is but an extended version of another and more fruitful reality (informed skepticism). This is why I stated earlier that Barth did not ignore the twentieth century; it is not that he has failed to advance past eighteenth century modes of thought; instead his own "philosophic" bent has carried him far beyond contemporary beliefs to a truth somewhat akin to that Sterne recognized some years ago. In this respect the choice of the style is an amiable one, the idea, moreover, a substantial one, whether one agrees with it or not.

The question of Barth's debt to the eighteenth century proper is, of course, a more complex one, and calls for a higher degree of cohesive subjectivism than is usually admitted, to answer it thoroughly. There is certainly something to be said for the cyclical orientation of processes which formulate idea, and it may well be that Barth prefigures a contemporary movement in the direction of a more eighteenth century type of philosophy. Man is never long satisfied with the reason that there is no reason, or even with the suggestion that he may make his own values where none
exist. Instinctively he grasps out for and clutches something which has intrinsic worth, even at the risk of its being absurd in the face of the facts as he knows them. The very suspicion that martyrdom is valuable because it forces one to "pennion his lance with the Ribbon of Purpose" suggests an ultimate belief in an entity above and beyond human comprehension; earthly life is absurd on the face of it, simply, because man is mortal and must die, yet it is difficult to escape for long the haunting rationalization that the universe is not equally meaningless:

Here moulds a posing, foppish Actor,
Author of THE SOT-WEED FACTOR,
Falsely prais'd. Take Heed, who sees this
Epitaph; look ye to Jesus!
Labour not for Earthly Glory:
Fame's a fickle Slut, and whory.
From thy Fancy's chast Couch drive her:
He's a Fool who'll strive to swive her!

Man cannot long avoid the hopeful belief that something beyond his earthly condition might be found: "look ye to Jesus!" The qualifying adjective "earthly" suggests that there is another type of glory for which one may labor. Ultimately the buoyancy of the human spirit drives men unconsciously toward a qualified optimism; it is the only way "de rendre la vie supportable." In the final analysis as Burlingame suggests, "Being makes Positivists of us all."
NOTES


3. Rovit, p. 79.

4. Rovit, p. 82.

5. Rovit, p. 77.


7. Rovit, pp. 82-83.


15. Rovit, p. 77.


Notes to pages 8-14

18 Barth interview, p. 11.
19 Barth interview, p. 8.
20 Barth interview, p. 8.
21 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 21.
22 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 20.
23 Barth, Sot-Weed, pp. 20-21.
25 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 347.
26 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 41.
27 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 42.
28 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 146.
29 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 71.
30 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 71.
31 Barth, Sot-Weed, pp. 71-72.
32 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 82.
33 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 140.
34 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 205.
35 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 408.
36 Barth, Sot-Weed, pp. 408-409.
37 Rovit, p. 84.
38 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 36.
39 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 54.
40 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 364.
41 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 364.
42 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 54.
43 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 463.
44 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 788.
45 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 742.
46 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 670 (all quotes in this paragraph are taken from p. 670)
47 Barth, Sot-Weed, pp. 731-732.
48 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 181.
49 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 365.
50 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 568.
51 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 568.
52 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 36.
54 Sutcliffe, p. 181.
57 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 670.
58 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 493.
59 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 407.

62 Pope, pp. 55-56.

63 Barth interview, p. 4.


65 Sterne, p. 393.


67 Traugott, p. 5.


69 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 139.

70 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 579.


72 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 806.

73 Barth, Sot-Weed, p. 793.
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