

JOHN BARTH *Sabbatical: A Romance*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1982. PP. 366. \$14.95.

Ever since *Chimera* Barth has been recycling his favorite theme—the predominance of the imagination—both in his novels and apparently in his life. His latest novel, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, is no exception; yet the author claims that *Sabbatical* is realistic and that it is at the same time not an autobiographical novel.<sup>1</sup> What he seems to imply is that *Sabbatical* is a realistic novel exploring the possibilities of imaginative life. As the subtitle states, the novel is *A Romance*. The term “romance” here refers both to the grotesque romance of mystery and the magical romance of the fairy tale. Yet for Barth, both these imaginative realms serve the primal experiences of life. Thus, the story’s literary can become its literal ancestors. Edgar Allan Poe is resurrected in the story as Edgar Allan Ho, baby son of Eastwood Ho, a refugee Vietnamese poet. Edgar Allan Ho is Susan’s (the protagonist’s) nephew by a twin sister Miriam, like Susan a putative descendant of Poe. The ancestry is a little dubious, given the fact that Poe was childless when he died in Baltimore. Nevertheless, Carmen B. Seckler (Susan and Miriam’s mother), who represents the capacity for present-day magic in the novel, declares that children are never derived from their immediate progenitors anyway. Thus, Baltimorean Edgar Allan Ho (or his Author John Barth) might be the truest heir of Edgar Allan Poe conceivable in terms of literary genes, so to speak.

In Poe’s fiction, the undetected and the mysterious are ever inseparable. The mysterious may be an undiscovered and thus, in terms of fiction, undiscoverable crime. Barth’s Key Island in Chesapeake Bay, where the two protagonists Fenwick and Susan anchor after a sudden storm (reminiscent of the “rushing and mighty, but soundless winds” at the end of the *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*), cannot be detected on any nautical chart. Perhaps it does not “really” exist; perhaps it is a training center and hideout for the CIA, by which agency both Fenwick and his recently disappeared twin brother Manfred were formerly employed. Its political ambivalence makes Key Island also reminiscent of Francis Scott Key and his late, if rather bemused patriotism, which inspired his “Defense of Fort M’Henry,” later retitled “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Fenwick Scott Key Turner is believed to be a descendant of the author of the national anthem. Accordingly, Fenwick and Susan’s boat is named *Pokey*, and whenever they return to Baltimore after any prolonged absence, they visit both Fort McHenry and Old Westminster Churchyard where Poe was buried. Thus, a literary ancestry is treated by the protagonists as a literal patrimony, requiring physical homage to the material things of the ancestors’ domain. But this is not to suggest that Barth is merely having his fictional characters take up the real interests of his life, that life turns into art. The relation between character motivation and the events of literary and political history that have influenced the author is complex: neither the fictive nor the historical is privileged. In this way, Barth once more calls the distinction between art and life into question. And as always in his novels, the key that turns the lock to the mystery of how the distinction between art and life can be overcome is the idea of the story; for Barth, the imagination defines and inhabits the realm where genuine stories of life are told. Fenwick therefore functions as the “Turner” playing at the distinction’s very threshold:

I see now what we’re about. It’s the story! . . . It will be our story. What’s more . . . this story, our story, it’s our house and our child . . . We’ll have made it . . . and we’ll live in it. We’ll even live by it. It doesn’t have to be *about*

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<sup>1</sup>As maintained in an interview with Curt Supplee, “The Barth Factor,” in the *International Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1982, p. 14.

us—children aren't about their parents. But our love will be in it, and our friendship too. This boat ride will be in it, somehow. It'll be about things coming around to where they started and then going on a little farther in a different way. It should have ancestry in it and offspring; Once upon a time to Happily ever after. (pp. 356-57)

For Fenwick the challenge is clear: to tell a story is (we might even say "performs") the life he and Susan want to live; to tell a story that is not *about* anyone, does not represent anything by referring to another reality outside itself. In short, Fenwick wants to use the language of storytelling to live in the world, not merely to refer to the things of the world.

Barth has always tried to have it both ways, to tell and live stories. The ambivalent use of language required of Fenwick's enterprise—for he and Susan must appropriate language and yet live through language's disclosiveness—is evidenced in Susan's ethnic mispronunciation of the word "flashback" as "fleshbeck." Susan's *Flesh beckons* to Fenwick; also, the word names each and every female's flesh beckoning to her male since Adam and Eve. Susan's transformation of the word, then, establishes a conceptual link between the couple's private conversation, their physical intimacy, and their cultural and biological functions; it relates their private story to all stories beginning with "Once upon a time" and ending, hopefully, with "Happily ever after." In this inferential way, the story of Fenwick and Susan comes to partake of the romance of fairy tale as well as of the romance of mystery. And to establish this kind of romance is Susan's obligation, "because flashbacks, Fenwick mildly asserts, may be said to be 'female,' following his notion of forks and confluences: rafting down the stream of time, they retrace what, coming up, were dilemmas, choices, channel-forks" (p. 173).

There *are* dilemmas and choices as well as channel-forks that Fenwick and Susan have to face on their extended sabbatical cruise. Fenwick, an aspiring writer who was dismissed by the CIA after having published *Kudove*, an exposé of the agency's Clandestine Services division, is divorced and fifteen years older than his second wife Susan. She is thirty-five, an associate professor of American literature and creative writing at Washington College, Chestertown, Md. Fenwick has a cardiac problem<sup>2</sup> and for himself wants no more children. Susan is torn between her desire to have children and her ambition to continue her academic career. When they *are* going to have a child, Susan has it aborted.<sup>3</sup> Thus, their attempt at a "normal" life fails. After a visit to their respective families, Fenwick and Susan return to their boat, presumably to finish their sabbatical cruise.

This is the story line which Fenwick decides to turn into *their* storyline—with the story substituting for the child and a permanent home. Fenwick's final discovery—that the story of one's life can be turned into a life-story—has, however, been one of Barth's insights ever since *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). That the author should have Susan and Fenwick employing his own narrative principle is intriguing—especially since the rhythm of their story resembles the rise and fall of the tides, the ebb and flow of Barth's own career. Thus, the story assumes a cyclical pattern, Fenwick's preoccupation at the end of the story is the condition for its beginning. The impossibility of distinguishing the beginning from the end further suggests that the Author and protagonist(s) are identical, that the world is "a seamless web" where writing and loving, art and life, cannot be separated or understood in terms of cause and effect. There is a clear analogy here to Poe's narrative of

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<sup>2</sup>Like Barth's first hero, Todd Andrews, in *The Floating Opera*.

<sup>3</sup>The Author has Susan discover later that the birth would have been twins.

Arthur Gordon Pym, where the question arises of how Pym, in facing the maelstrom at the end of the story, could ever have come to set the latter down. Unless one assumes that it might have been the interruption of the writing which ended the story rather than the end of the story which interrupted the writing, there can be no answer. Any choice of priorities between life and art would endanger Fenwick and Susan's romance. Susan says, looking at Fenwick: "If that's going to be our story, then let's begin it at the end and end at the beginning, so we can go on forever. Begin with our living happily ever after" (p. 365).

Every romance, however, feeds on a disregard for reality, and the three participants of the story (Fenwick, Susan, the Author) know it. This is where the "twin" theme, *Sabbatical's* decisive leitmotif, comes to bear on the story.<sup>4</sup> Manfred and Miriam, Fenwick and Susan's twins, expiate whatever guilt the happiness of their twins creates in the Author. Manfred—like CIA nuclear weapons expert, John Arthur Paisley—disappeared while on a cruise on the Chesapeake Bay. Miriam, raped by a motorcycle gang, then by her rescuer, and finally by a pickup truck driver, is later tortured by "Savak." Before the foil of the parallel but inverted story of Manfred and Miriam the romance of Fenwick and Susan appears to be at best precarious. Precariousness, however, has always been the main condition of Barth's heroes. And the heroic parallels quoted in *Sabbatical* substantiate this claim. Thus, Fenwick is likened to Virgil's Aeneas who meets Dido in the interval between being the representative of Troy's past and Rome's future glory. Susan is afraid that she might be Fenwick's Dido instead of his Lavinia. Here, legend threatens to overtake life, for Barth believes that "our very homely, far-from-heroic personal experiences—simply because they are human experiences—contain the general pattern and connect with the great myths."<sup>5</sup>

Romance, as *Sabbatical* reminds us, can never escape realism; at best it can hope to be wedded to realism. The thematic importance of "forks and confluences" throughout the novel confirms this notion. It finds emblematic expression on the title page of the book: a circle, divided into three equal pie-shaped wedges, forming a Y, the center of which is occupied by another circle. The inner circle has a double meaning. It represents, first, the egg which, after having come down one of the two Fallopian tubes is to be met by the sperm coming up the vagina; second, it comes to mean the story as substitute for the child which would have been the outcome of the conjunction between egg and sperm. Consequently, the narrative point of view is the conjoined view of Fenwick and Susan (the story seen from the vantage point of "we") plus the semi-omniscient view of the Author ("what we can't do as Fenn and Susan, we can do as Author"; p. 135), who defines the present position of the protagonists as a confluence of their past and their future.

This conjunction of points of view, however, results in a hermetic effect which dominates, in this reader's opinion at least, one's reading of the novel. Perhaps this effect accounts for the mixed reviews Barth's latest novel has received so far; for it disregards one vital point of view, scorning with mock footnotes and mock titles: **THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE READER.**

Excluding the reader by playing off the problems of the story as well as of storytelling solely between the Author and his double alter ego represents a questionable technical decision. Fenwick and Susan's problems are not uncommon; yet the reader can never "really" enter into their exclusive realm of discourse, since

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<sup>4</sup>It is, moreover, a leitmotif in all the author's fiction. He has used it before in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), and *LETTERS* (1979). The sexual triangles in *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* are early versions of the same motif. Also, the author happens to be a twin himself.

<sup>5</sup>Barth's interview with Curt Supplee; p. 14.

his grasp of the situation is always being deferred. Barth at present is at work on a book which he plans to call *The Tidewater Tales: A Novel* and which he hopes will be a complement to *Sabbatical*. Perhaps *Sabbatical*, besides deepening Barth's previous explorations into the mysterious and magical domain where art and life become inseparable, can be seen as a foil against which a future embrace of the reader's concern will take place.

Heide Ziegler  
*The University of Texas at Austin*