

**“ASTRAY IN TIME’S FUNHOUSE”:  
ONCE UPON A TIME. A FLOATING OPERA**

Raluca ȘERBAN

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**Abstract**

*This article deals with John Barth’s most autobiographic book, Once Upon a Time. A Floating Opera. The genre is subverted, as autobiographic parts are carefully balanced by imagined situations or characters. What results, despite its author’s firm refusal to admit to inserting any autobiographic elements in it, is a “postmodern”, or a “fictional autobiography”, one that could be approached, at least partly, via psychoanalytic criticism, again despite the author’s irony vis-à-vis such possibility.*

**Keywords:** postmodern autobiography, fictional autobiography, parody, coaxial esemplasy, mise-en-abyme

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***Fiction or autobiography?***

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The author who confessed in one of his “Letters” that “for autobiographical ‘fiction’ I have only disdain”(Barth, 1979: 51) seems now to turn to this very same type of writing. However, when he does so, the autobiographic genre is subverted, as Barth never really leaves parody behind. The result is what one might paradoxically label as a fictional autobiography, one in which unambiguous autobiographic parts are carefully balanced by imagined elements, that is, situations or characters, as acknowledged and made plain by the author himself, who calls *Once Upon a Time* in his Program Note “a memoir bottled in a novel”, not *the* story, but *a* story of his life. Despite the author’s constant preoccupation with persuading us that *this* is a novel, fiction, first and foremost, the reader will be nevertheless inclined to read it, conversely, as an autobiography, first and foremost.

That Barth would like to deter us from reading this as an autobiography is immediately apparent as we open the book, from its *paratexte / peritexte*, to use Gerard Genette’s terms<sup>1</sup> (Genette, 1982: 9), which warn the reader all the way through that *this* is fiction, beyond the shadow of a doubt: the book is labeled ‘fiction’, the bibliographical description is as clear as it can be, and it expands into the author’s warning: “This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or, if real, are used

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<sup>1</sup> That is, the bordering elements outside the text proper, in and outside the novel, but in the book.

fictitiously", later repeated in the text itself: "it's no autobiography" (*Once Upon a Time*, 384), or, with respect to the text's geography:

*However autobiographical in manner and trappings, this 'overture' and any opera following it are in fact fiction: a story of my life, by no means the. Chesapeake Bay is real enough, Maryland's Eastern Shore, the Chester River and the creek making off it where Mr. and Mrs. Narrator abide. But there is no 'Potamock Island' on any of those, no 'Potamock Point'. (Barth, 1994: 8-9)*

Naturally, there should be no reason for readers to doubt or ignore this type of messages from the writer. Yet, a "Barth aficionado" (Bowen, 1999: 195), as they have been called, accustomed to his way of playing with us, to his pleasure in misleading us, might be tempted to take all this as an antiphrasis. Regardless of this clear labeling of the novel and despite the author's warnings, how could we forget the fact that the same author invited us to fancy himself as "fictitious" (in *Letters*)?

It has been observed that Barth manages to offer, once more, "a very entertaining book" in which the author's "meticulousness for structure" meets his "sense of playfulness", a book "whose central subject is his vocation as a writer, and which offers precious insights into his life from childhood to the present with a reorchestration in a new key of the inspirational motifs of his work" (Bartocci, 2010: 1).

To the above list of clues, Bartocci added the story incipit "once upon a time", given utmost importance as it became the title, the structure of the novel, which is the structure of an opera, that is, "hybrid art, calling for the suspension of the audience's sense of reality". With all these hints in mind, Bartocci concluded that *Once Upon a Time*, "a very particular type of autobiography", or perhaps "a very particular type of novel", can be read as a postmodern autobiography, one that is heterogeneous, hybrid, and open, one in which real people as well as the author are fictionalized. Yet, I would add that we should keep in mind that this is a tendency in his theoretical writing too, in several essays collected in *Further Fridays*. It is a general tendency with Barth, that cannot be ignored, and which, by itself, cannot help us pinpoint some of his writings clearly as "fiction".

What we shall get is no traditional autobiography, indeed. Conventions are subverted all the way through: some characters are completely fictional: Jerome Schreiber / Jay Wordsworth Scribner, for example, while those who exist in reality are, as we have seen, declared to be fictionalized. Another atypical detail is the insertion of retrospective prose accounts. As Bartocci noticed, the account of the formation of the writer's personality is encapsulated in a fictitious story-within-the-story, more real than the frame, which is presented as 'real', as if in an inverted photograph. Moreover, past is projected as future: the period October 12 1990 - 1992, the time of the actual writing of the novel precedes the time of the action: the plot begins on October 12, 1992. To all these we should also add, perhaps we

should have started with, the heavy load of pure fiction, adventures proper, that make the reader think about the voyage-tale subgenre.

Similarly, Bowen noted that what comes out of this process of mingling fictional and real elements is a “semifictionalized autobiography”, “a magnificent autobiographical statement on his all-encompassing creative process”. Quite remarkably, it is not an exercise in “self-aggrandizement”, similar to that of “politicians, movie stars, and their angry offspring, semiliterate sportspeople”, though to many except “totally committed Bartheans” it might seem so. This alone would be a good enough reason for Barth to deny having attempted the genre. However, while all autobiography is partly fictional, in that it “contains elements of personalized self-fiction”, *Once Upon a Time* is different:

*The difference with Once upon a Time is that few writers since Dante have embarked on a semifictionalized biography, making themselves relatively unexceptional subjects [...] at the same time allowing the present fiction and creativity to speak for itself, even while the writer’s past fictional work is intertwined and explicated as a part of the writer’s own ‘Heart-mysteries’.* (Bowen, 1999: 198)

Bowen tries to answer, among other questions, how much of the life-slice we are offered – infancy to the beginning of the 1970s – we are to believe, as it “confirms some scholarly speculation, while exciting more, and includes much that Barth has already detailed in articles, interviews, and dialogues between his characters” (id.)

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### ***Fictional elements in Once Upon a Time.***

#### ***Insertion of fictional characters***

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Let us explore the fictional elements in the *Opera* in more detail before coming back to the question whether or not *Once Upon a Time* can be read as autobiographic. One important ingredient that helps fictionalize the whole are the fictional characters, such as Jay Scribner/Jerry Schreiber or his wife, in connection to whom the author declares:

*Nothing in our literal life and tidewater neighborhood corresponds to the portentously named ‘Jerome Schreiber/Jay Wordsworth Scribner’, his companion Beth Duer, their erstwhile ‘eco-ketch’ American Century, and its skipper’s remarkable project of resailing in reverse Columbus’s first voyage’s first half, not to mention his improbable extension of that reenactment into the eastern Mediterranean, up the Nile, and overland into the African Rift Valley. All fiction.* (Barth, 1994: 9)

Jerry Schreiber is indeed a very important character in the ‘novel’. So important that one might be tempted to suspect that Barth is actually camouflaging a ‘real’ character behind the fictional one. He is present throughout Act 1, that is, the

author's memories about his early childhood and development, including the crucial ones related to the birth of his vocation. With the exception of a few snapshots of very early childhood, commented by author and his twin sister, every single important autobiographic moment is contaminated by the fictitious presence of Jerry.

Among the first, one can count the (hi)story of the twins' stolen tricycle. The author credits Jerry Schreiber as the "hero" of that scene, that is, as the thief, brought back to the sidewalk of 301 Aurora (the twins' home), with the stolen tricycle, by an elder sister, while Barth's twin sister rejects this as not 'the real thing', in a persistent correction some pages to follow, 'for the record':

*Jill objects as the scene dissolves: 'Something's wrong here. It wasn't our tricycles that got stolen; it was our Goodyear junior bikes, so we have to've been seven or eight, not five or six. And it wasn't Jerry Schreiber that took them. There wasn't any Jerry Schreiber yet, back then'. (Barth, 1994: 168)*

to which she adds, "I don't remember this story that way. I don't remember our tricycles at all" (Barth, 1994: 172) and later concludes, "You're making up a cockamamie story now, I think. I don't remember any of this." (Barth, 1994: 178)

If it weren't for the author's overt identification of Jerry as fictional, one wouldn't suspect that, as he is, together with the writer himself, the most prominent of the 'characters' in this 'novel'. The reader learns virtually anything about him, from details about his family (not flattering at all, they include a constantly drunk and abusive father, a careless mother and elder sisters, desperate to flee home as soon as they could), to his household (a poor, pretty unattended house, "a Poor Family's house", "stripped to hard-use essentials like [...] a college fraternity's make-out room", 188) and his room, "not much more than twice the size of its single bed", with "no dresser or desk, not even a chair, only the unmade bed on its low iron frame", "a small doorless closet with a clothes rod and two stacked orange crates by way of shelf storage", with a stained and torn roller blind – pretty appalling view for the 301 Aurora boy, who nevertheless envies the privacy of his friend's room when he still has to share his with his twin sister:

*The fact is that while I was appalled at the cramped and squalid place, I rather envied my friend his privacy. To the growing embarrassment of my sister and myself, JackandJill still shared the same twin bedroom. (Barth, 1994: 189)*

We also get to know that Jerry and JackandJill were the best in their class, and that Jerry, in addition, was very quick at learning and teaching the "facts of life", most certainly from pornographic brochures, "two by fours"; that both boys, at the end of their graduate-school years, "were determined to become 'significant' writers (we never used the adjectives 'great' and 'famous'), and had decided after much

discussion of alternatives to support ourselves by teaching as we pursued our larger goal” (Barth, 1994: 126), which enables one to interpret Jerry, as it has been done, as the author’s alter-ego.

It is particularly interesting that in the midst of such fragments, imaginary as they revolve around a fictional character, the reader finds obvious autobiographic insights, like in the example below. Once the two boys decided to be teachers, and “only half joking”, Jack vowed to devote his academic life

*to saying and resaying to my students ‘all the things that go without saying’ about their subject; to staring down its presuppositions and first principles until, defamiliarized, they take on a renewed, higher-order interest. What is literature? What is fiction? What is a story, and why is it what it is, rather than some other thing? (Barth, 1994: 126)*

Almost entirely Act 1 is dedicated to remembering Jack and Jerry’s childhood. The author constantly embroiders his own (hi)story on the fictional canvas provided by Jerry’s story. No one can deny the countless autobiographical details that this part is scattered with and that we shall come back to.

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### ***Fictional adventures***

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Before that, let us dwell some more on the fictional character of *Once Upon a Time*. It is not entirely given, as one might suspect, by the insertion of fictitious characters. In addition, the narrated events are most of the times presented as adventures of old-time novel heroes. For the beginning, the two “main characters”, author and wife, get lost at sea, after sailing into a tropical storm which they manage, at long last, to avoid: “We strain to see landmarks to starboard, where the island must be: navigation buoys, anything identifiable [...] we really don’t know where we are” (Barth, 1994: 87). To add to the story-flavor of these paragraphs, the author also alludes to the reader: “And the storm, which has stormed for too many pages already, shows no signs of sharing our fatigue. How to short-cut it, for the reader’s sake and ours?” (Barth, 1994: 88)

The stormy weather is so fierce, that it is credited with the power and wickedness of a threatening monster, the danger factor, the obstacle that is always present in stories and that must be surmounted, as the author will acknowledge himself:

*Nature, wow: The thunderbolts rain down like lightening; the seas, confused as storm-mixed metaphors by conflicting winds, no longer roll, but slop in crazy peaks and pits. We flinch at the terrifying racket; we can feel electricity in the air. Not much to be done except hang on [...] a stunning bolt now strikes very close by indeed [...] We can smell that lightning! Can it actually have struck US?”(Barth, 1994: 96)*

Moreover, to show the reader how things can get increasingly complicated to the hero, once lost on the map, he gets lost from his mate and boat *US*, that are left behind and never reached back: every minute will build an invisible wall between them to add to the more apparent wall of vegetation in the maze of channels that the author had decided to explore in the dinghy, despite knowing all too well that he is "absentminded":

*right left left (and it was right left left), retraced, means right right left, no two ways about it, and this is my right hand and this is my left. Even so, I pause at each turn and stand to orient myself with the pine grove, which, now that I'm headed this way, has to be over there. Well, it isn't.* (Barth, 1994: 109)

The author proves once more very knowledgeable in his trade, masterfully building suspense and capturing the reader along this chain of foolish choices. We know, we *feel* from the beginning that something is terribly wrong, that what lies ahead is a maze of channels and that our hero is so absentminded that he actually cannot recall which of the family's cars he is driving, thus constantly driving up the wrong side of the gasoline pump (Barth, 1994: 109). We hardly resist the temptation to start an argument, just like the author's wife, over the wrong choices he drags us all into.

Finally, for the complication of these adventures to be complete, the author must suffer one final loss, of the dinghy itself, which is left behind, "back yonder somewhere, as are my wife and *US*". Yet, this place in which the author is lost is all too familiar:

*I know this place. From where? Well, from my fiction, to be sure: In at least three of the later novels, very possibly in earlier ones as well, a setting like this – I'll even say this setting – is the mise-en-scène for critical disorientations of the main characters. Typically, they wake to find here stranded.* (Barth, 1994: 113)

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### ***Fictionalized reality***

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Paradoxically, these adventures that bring the "hero" in the setting of his fictions push him out of fiction and back to his "birth-marshes", that is, back to his "real" origins. Where exactly he finds himself at the end of this extended maze-search: nowhere. But this "nowhere" is a privileged place, as it allows him to take a plunge in the vast sea of his memories, one in which he is at once story-teller and "character", as the use of pronouns suggests: "as the crew of *US* has speculated, they may well be in the vast Dorchester wetlands themselves, or the vestibule to some Beyond, or nowhere. They'll learn, by going where I'll have them go..." (Barth, 1994: 103)

The real people of this story are no longer “real”, they appear to be fictionalized. This is achieved not only by their simultaneity with completely fictional characters, like Jerry Schreiber, but also by the more subtle way of employing pronouns, as seen above. The writer and his wife, as they appear depicted in their daily routines as well as in their adventures at sea in the overture of the *Opera*, somehow dwell on a strange ground, in-between reality and fiction, a fact signaled by the oscillation in the use of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns, at times dispensed with and substituted by a more novelistic 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun. This results in the reader’s perception that they are something in-between “real” people and fully fictional characters. Here is one example of how the 1<sup>st</sup> person fades into the 3<sup>rd</sup>, in a paragraph on domestic fights:

*I know that now we’re in love and trouble, is about all – the love abiding, the trouble not – and that in this couple’s chemistry, neither of those precludes the other. Given the closeness of their connection, the differences between them, the amount of time they spend in each other’s company, and the very little time they spend apart, these domestic storms used to beset them once or twice per season, interstitched with passionate reconciliation and overarched with indubitable love [...]; time, experience, fatigue, and reciprocal understanding have happily decreased the frequency, duration, and damage (if not the occasional intensity) of such in-house blowups. (Barth, 1994: 81)*

Towards the conclusion of this argument, and in the midst of a tropical storm that author and wife sail themselves into, the same narrating voice notices:

*Passing through the cockpit en route forward, I believe I see tears mix with rain on your cheeks, and at once his heart goes out to her, to us. Although the worst of our literal weather may lie ahead, for him our storm is over. (Barth, 1994: 86)*

and later, after the worst of their “literal weather” passed, “He wonders, calmly, where we are; what he has gotten us into, what lies ahead” (Barth, 1994: 101), once again combining 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns with the narrative 3<sup>rd</sup>, in other words, merging “real” life and story, or rather, managing to convert the former into the latter, by the simplest device at hand, language. However, the persistence of the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns might also indicate the resistance of the “real”, its refusal to give in, to submit to fiction. If such is the case, then the reader’s tendency to read this “novel” as autobiographic might be after all legitimate.

This transformation of life into fiction, or, if we look at this relationship the other way around, this springing of life from fiction, is not in disagreement with the author’s own belief that people are actually made of words:

*I understand that the people and objects in these scenes are, from our point of view at least, mere images, projections insubstantial as light – although something tells me it’s words they are made of.* (Barth, 1994: 143-4)

This comment is made in connection to the images that the author’s “new old pen” brings to life, his memories, that is, but on a different level of generalization, the statement is still in accordance with Barth’s own writing philosophy.

His tendency to narrate the events of his life, even while living them, is traced back to childhood, though in a fragment deeply contaminated by the presence of fictional Jerry Scribner: when visiting his friend, for the first and last time, terribly frightened by the latter’s dogs, young Jack finds himself *telling his story*, as if not there, as if from a distance, narrative distance. The fragment is indeed crucial, as it epitomizes the birth of his vocation, his birth as a story-teller and, later, writer:

*As I write these lines [...] I can still summon to tactile memory the feel of my left palm upon the coarse end grain of the pointed gatepost as he steeled himself (I found myself narrating to myself), lifted off the makeshift rope-loop latch, and stepped forward to confront the raging beasts, come what may”* (Barth, 1994: 187)

in other words, the reader is offered “the ordeal that the Main Character must surmount if he is to remain the hero of his own story” (Barth, 1994: 187).

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### ***Autobiographic enclaves.***

#### ***The birthstained, “hero” – a hero with a vocation***

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With this, we move onto a second level of our reading: the “novel” that Barth presents us, relentlessly labeling it as fiction, includes clearly autobiographic enclaves, which mainly gravitate around the theme of the writer’s vocation, better understood in his thirties, though guessed long before, when he felt “an utter and unequivocal authorial calling” (Barth, 1994: 118). The author himself admits vocation is the guiding line of this particular autobiographic novel:

*What drives this opera is vocation; the ineffable, indispensable upper-case Calling. Life-experience, shaped by memory and shaping memory, molding imagination and by imagination molded in coaxial esemplasy – is called forth into language by the fortuitous confluence of inner gift, assiduous practice and training (especially self-training), and temperamental vocation: the Calling, in itself nothing, but without which nothing.* (Barth, 1994: 143)

That he had a vocation, and that this particular vocation was connected to writing, was noticeable for those around him much earlier, as a child, or rather, given the fact that the one who notices this is an imaginary character, Jay Schreiber, one



might conjecture that this was obvious for Jack the youngster, and maybe for no one else at that time:

*'You've always been a fairly unconscious guy. Maybe a side effect of all that JackandJillery: like you're only half there.'* To soften this criticism (for we were close friends then), he added, *'Maybe that'll be the making of you as a writer, somehow or other'*. (Barth, 1994: 203)

As we have seen above, the birth of his vocation is traced back to the visit Jack paid to the same fictitious best friend:

*"Ever since that episode with the Schreiber dogs, an invisible narrator had taken up residence in my head to recount Voice Over the ongoing story of my life, third-person anonymous: To discipline himself for the rigors ahead, this voice would intone, he had taken secretly to wearing a leather belt strapped tightly around his chest, under his clothing, and he never removed it day or night except briefly at bathtime (I had in fact done this for a week or so in September, having read somewhere of initiatory ordeals undergone by boys in certain Indian tribes)..."* (Barth, 1994: 206)

What could pass – perhaps even passed for a while – unnoticed, or undervalued as normal child fantasizing, eventually proved to have been a true writer's vocation.

Interestingly, there is one more element in this equation that ultimately led to a full writing career, to *the* writing career we now know: the author's birthmark, invisible by adolescence, but which tormented him quite intensely as a child:

*In the myths of wandering heroes, the child sustains an early, life-imperiling wound that leaves a scar (or limp, or both) by which he will be recognized in full herohood when he emerges transformed from his harrowing adventures in the otherworld. With us birthmarked, the scar precedes the wound, as the self precedes self-consciousness. Among several other causes of my becoming not only 'a writer' but the author of my particular writings, I give some weight to my birthmark, once the world called it to my attention: the Flaw made manifest.* (Barth, 1994: 209-210)

It is not the mark itself, the oatmeal birthstain, that hurt the child's feelings, but its misinterpretations, its power to alter Jack's relationships and his positioning in relationships, most importantly in that with his twin sister, and in the world, at large:

*I did nothing to deserve it, nor anything to be shriven of it. Mercifully, the exterior blemish faded before I reached 'dating' age, but together with its misassociations it left an inner mark on the adolescent and the man. [...] The man would remain fascinated with marks and scars, without before now understanding quite why.* (Barth, 1994: 222-3)

The author cannot resist the temptation to analyze its implications, so he goes on to develop on its consequences in the formation of the adolescent's, and later man's, personality:

*We would be shy (though not unsuccessful) with women, tending even in that quarter toward a kind of solipsism à deux with obvious harmonics of JackandJillery. Indeed, we would be shy and private generally, though not unsuccessful, and in latter decades even a bit reclusive, as if there were something to conceal when in fact there was not. (Barth, 1994: 223)*

Finally, the last connection to be made is between the birthmark and the narratorial voice in Jack's head, so interconnected that they could not exist in the absence of the other: "*And although that italicizing, third-personating narrator in his head mercifully faded along with his birthmark, our passive protagonist would never, ever, learn to enjoy oatmeal*" (Barth, 1994: 223), or maybe, one could add, faded for a while, since, as we can see, this "third-personating" narrating voice is alive and well, at least in *Once Upon a Time*.

The same voice takes over from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person recount at times, as we have seen. However, it is in this 1<sup>st</sup> / 2<sup>nd</sup> person confession-like narration that the author introduces what I have called the obvious autobiographic parts of the "novel", while the "third-personating" one functions mainly as a fictionalizing device. From the first pages the reader gets to know intimate details about an author character that very closely resembles "real" John Barth, his wife, their relationship, his former marriage and present family. Passages like the one below are recurrent especially in the "Overture" of the *Opera*:

*"Aware enough, after a score-and-more years together, of our separate and joint shortcomings, we nonetheless prize each other wholeheartedly, as many couples do not. Unlike most of the world's population, we are comfortably well-off. Our health, by and large, is as of this sentence sound. We enjoy our callings and practice them with success. If we happen in recent years to have no particularly close friends, neither have we any known enemies; our professional lives afford us ample cordial acquaintance, and we enjoy large doses of each other's company. We maintain an agreeable small house in the city as well as this year-round rural waterfront retreat, where we spend long weekends and entire summers. I would call us pretty well traveled"* (Barth, 1994: 7)

- important passages in which the reader finds out intimate details of the author's life, career included. Especially relevant for one interested in the writer John Barth are those parts that depict his writing life and his professorship, in one word, his career. Spicy details are always at hand, again, from the first pages. For instance, we are confided that the publisher's advance for *The Floating Opera* was \$750 gross, "agent's commission \$75. Net \$675", confession followed by the stinging comment below:

*By the standards of successful commercial novelists or even of more commercially successful 'literary' novelists, those subtotals are unimpressive. Given the nature of what I write, however, and the largely aliterary culture in which I write it, I find them as gratifying in their way as the circumstance that that first novel – turned down by eight or nine publishers before Appleton-Century-Crofts took an entry-level flyer on it – is, unlike its first publisher, still afloat. That one's books, at least most of them, not disappear before their author does: For a 'serious' writer in late-twentieth-century America, that is success aplenty. (Barth, 1994: 24)*

The autobiographic parts go back in time to Jack's early childhood and beyond, as we get to know family history, as far back as still known, that is, to 1881,

*when fifteen-year-old Herman B. leaves the village of Schmölln, in the Herzogtum of Sachsen-Altenburg, and crosses unescorted on North German Lloyd's from Bremerhaven to Baltimore – steerage fare twenty dollars, bring your own food except for a barrel of pickles at one end of the deck and a barrel of salt herring at the other [...] no family records or transmitted memories earlier than that (Barth, 1994: 149).*

Parts of this (hi)story closely resemble similar episodes in earlier novels, for instance the crossing of the Atlantic somehow reminds the reader Ebenezer's own crossing, not necessarily in its details, but in the flavor of the recount.

The family (hi)story is resumed, and we also learn that “young Herm the First is more or less adopted by German-Americans on Aliceanna Street in Fells Point in Baltimore and apprenticed to the stonecutting trade” (ibid.149), and that he marries a girl from that neighborhood – Dee-Pop and Dee-Mom. That he starts a prosperous stonecutting business of his own and that he had six children, among whom JackandJill's Dad, Whitey, his “Number Two Son”, who quits school and, unlike the favorites “Uncle Herman and Aunt Roon”, stays home:

*Dropout Whitey comes home from military service next door in Virginia, opens his own soda fountain uptown, marries a local hatmaker, buys a house next door to the corner house, and dutifully sees his parents through their old age. (Barth, 1994: 150)*

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### ***A tense father-son relationship***

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The father's story brings back the unsaid and unthought, an avalanche of accusations, that starts mildly with the author's observation that what his grandparents felt for and showed their children and grandchildren was “*duty* more than love”, to which he adds “I don't remember any *warmth* from that pair when we were kids” (Barth, 1994: 151), which is going to extend over the memories of his father. Although he praises the hard work, especially during and after the Great

Depression when the family lost all their savings: "the guy worked and worked and worked, and despite his deafness became a fixture in the community", also a "volunteer fireman" (Barth, 1994: 152), and although he appreciates the general atmosphere in the house: "Between our parents, although surely they must have had serious disagreements from time to time, never a quarrel that any of us can remember; no bickering or cold silences; not even brief displays of exasperation", "only consistent goodwill and good humor" (Barth, 1994: 153) as well as his parents' care and investment in the children's education (the mom "saw to it that we three were supplied with expensive encyclopedias") – despite all that, what follows is criticism as bitter as unannounced by anything so far.

What follows is a plethora of accusations, which mainly target the father: who could not manage the growing sibling rivalry between twins Jack and Jill and their elder brother, hence, "John Jacob's children still pay the price of his incapacities"; with whom "we never had a real conversation", mainly because of his deafness, due to which "our raised-voice verbal transactions were necessarily minimal: reports, requests, notifications" (Barth, 1994: 157), due to which the children were unable to share their "worries, problems, opinions, inclinations and speculations" with their Dad. However, the author is prompt with clarifying that this distance was not "merely oral": as a young adult, he never receives replies to the letters he writes to his father, in a late attempt to genuinely communicate with him. And the reproaching goes on and on for quite a few pages:

*Men of his time and place and class, just as busy and no wealthier, managed to do more with their families than share dinner and take Sunday drives. Dad's deafness excused – was permitted to excuse – a distance, a mild indifference, even a selfishness, to which I suspect he inclined in any case, or in any case inclined once afforded that cover. (Barth, 1994: 158)*

and on and on, also in relation to his carelessness in financial matters, that eventually came to affect, once more, the three siblings:

*'It all goes to your mother,' he had let Jill know, who presided over our parents' last age. But 'it all' comprised no more than the Aurora Street house in which the couple had spent their entire married life (a high-upkeep, uninsulated, termite-troubled frame structure in need of serious renovation top to bottom, inside and out), a savings balance inadequate to the house's and the widow's maintenance, and three well-enough-off grown children – who willingly took up the financial slack, but with whom he had not troubled to discuss their probable need to do so. (Barth, 1994: 159)*

Last but not least, this bitter criticism targets the cruel discriminatory sending of his sister to secretarial school, although "her high-school academic record had been consistently better than mine", while "I studied Latin and Spanish and literature and trigonometry in the 'Academic' curriculum and aspired to some undefined

future distinction”, based on the prejudice common back then that “Jack would have a family to support; Jill would have a husband to support her” (Barth, 1994: 161).

As a consequence, this part of the (hi)story is concluded with “deeply mixed” feelings, though it does not end here: it has already triggered the author’s deeply-ingrained fear of being like his father, one that he is aware of, as we can see in the aftermath of this indictment: “Do I sound, in that innocence and distance, unadmirably like my father?” (Barth, 1994: 160)

After reading this part of Act 1, it is indeed tempting to shift perspective altogether, even for a short while, to psychoanalytic criticism (Anzieu, 2004), which claims that an important work of art, literature in our case, can only be created through opposition to and the imaginary murdering of a symbolic Father:

*A crea înseamnă, întotdeauna, a ucide, imaginar sau simbolic, pe cineva, procesul fiind facilitat dacă acest cineva tocmai a murit, căci acum el poate fi omorât cu sentimente de cușpabilitate mai reduse [...] Opera se construiește pe distrugerea uneia dintre figurile care alcătuiesc Supraeul, figură nu numai inhibantă și damnantă, ci și, poate chiar mai ales, de o imposibil de depășit fecunditate. (Anzieu, 2004: 38)*

Anzieu goes on to establish an analogy between psychoanalysis proper and the creative process, writing: what a creator demands from his work of art is precisely what a patient expects from his psychoanalyst, namely to provide him with a unifying order, different from the one offered by his father, yet a paternal type of order. Hence, the writer’s oscillation between the son’s gratitude towards the fatherly example, who offered him the access to the code (language, together with moral values, always received from the outside), and revulsion for the same father, who did not offer the child the right code, since another’s code can never be the right code (Anzieu, 2004: 94).

Coming back to Barth, even the author goes on to *analyze* himself, in a way reminiscent of psychoanalytical criticism:

*I was, however, accustomed to a posture of militant defense in my relation with my brother, and to the more or less dominant-male role in our JackandJillery; a bit of a mama’s boy, perhaps, but Georgia’s easygoing passivity was nowise emasculative, and my ‘identification’ was unreservedly with my father, whose name I shared and whose benign authority I unquestioningly respected. (Barth, 1994:205)*

He also analyzes his strengths and weaknesses, as a result of his being brought up in this environment, by these parents, whom he nevertheless loves and appreciates:

*Thank you, Whitey in particular, for what wits I have and for my inclination to apply them to telling stories. Thank you, Georgia in*

*particular, for whatever gentleness is mine and whatever capacity for giving love as well as accepting it. (Barth, 1994:162)*

and although the shortcomings especially are felt as a direct influence of his parents:

*I'm short on thoughtfulness, empathetic sensitivity, tact, subtlety, interest in others – How do we suppose I came by those deficiencies? I'm terrible at gift-giving, at remembering details of even my children's and grandchildren's news; they and we see one another far less often than we all agree we should... (Barth, 1994:162)*

the reader encounters a Barth who imitates the deafness of his father:

*In a word, if I am not selfish, I am decidedly self-centered; inclined, if not to narcissism, most certainly to that sort of solipsism aforesung. My father's son and the Jack of Jack and Jill, although I do not think myself immodest (Who does?), I am gratified by audience attention and applause and by my moderate literary success, mildly envious but unresentful of those with more. As I draft this insistent aria in my old binder with my old pen in our Baltimore house on a sunny end-of-October forenoon, I wear the wax earplugs with which I imitate Dad's deafness, and with affectionate loyalty I sing ... myself. (Barth, 1994:163)*

- a paragraph that, alone, could account for the writer's inclination toward the persistent use of *la mise-en-abyme*. Let us remember the connections that have been made (and above detailed in Chapter 2) between the psychoanalytic concept of "transference" – namely, the affective relationship that develops between patient and psychoanalyst during the cure, which allows the former to unconsciously project certain positive or, maybe especially, negative details onto the analyst – and the literary technique *la mise-en-abyme*: just as transference, *la mise-en-abyme* produces an intermediate region between illness (fiction) and reality, allowing the projection of the traumatic experience at the level of the text, that is, in a hybrid space in which the author can eventually get cured.

Indeed, it would be particularly interesting to further look into this part of *Once Upon a Time* from this perspective, but once more, the author himself deters us from taking serious things seriously by quickly turning to his half ironic, half funny style. One example: the attempt at resuscitating his voyage log, stolen by burglars in the Grand Cayman and discarded in the pool:

*Mirabile, mirabile dictu! Not washed in from the sea, quite, but beside the beachside pool, at the bottom of the Jacuzzi – into which they have been dumped in disgust – there they were: the eyeglass case and my precious travelog, quite soaked. More than soaked: marinated, simmered for hours in heavily chlorinated water at 100°F. [...] At midday I changed the paper-*

*towel bandage on my massively hemorrhaged pagelets, resqueezed and rewrapped their erstwhile binder as one might reswathe a mummy.* (Barth, 1994:50-51)

The same style, although half bitter now, is used to “sing” the garbage that the sea washes regularly on the beach of the author’s seafront retreat:

*Have I sung the mere litter that periodically we must pick? The discarded beverage cans and bottles, plastic jugs and bags, Styrofoam scrap, deflated helium balloons fortunately missed by turtles, crabbers’ busted baskets, single socks and shoes, used condoms?* (Barth, 1994:38)

Among such examples, one could also enumerate instances of the twin siblings’ sexual innocence, more than once avowed in the *Opera*, probably as a consequence of outside mis-interpretative pressure that the child perceived. This time too the paragraph is more funny than serious, despite its point:

*I managed still not quite to know what the F-word really meant. Not fabliaux. Don’t I remember you and me agreeing in the third grade or thereabouts that it probably meant that the husband puts his Tommy up against his wife’s Susie, or she holds it there between her legs somehow, and they both pee? ‘I’m not saying a word.’ We agreed it sounded icky, and we had no interest in trying it – certainly not with each other, far less with some outsider. We were innocent!* (Barth, 1994:179)

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### ***The brighter side***

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On the brighter side of these memories, we learn the writer’s first memory, which is “visual, but not photographic”, dating from very early childhood, though at least the accuracy of the description suggests the partial overlapping with some later memory when the child, maybe even adult, would carefully observe the setting:

*I’m on the front porch of 301 Aurora, summertime, either on the glider or in a baby carriage, anyhow lying on my back in the corner of the porch where the glider always was. I’m looking up and out through the porch screen at the leaves of the big silver maples of Aurora Street moving in a breeze, their dark green tops and light undersides. It’s an agreeable memory, Jill, from God knows how early: tranquil, crystal clear, and empty of significance. The flickering leaves have caught my eye. I’m not thinking anything about them; I’m just comfortably registering them there on the glider, mesmerized, as my mind’s eye’s doing right here right now. And it’s the opening deposit in my memory bank. Did I ever tell you that I have flying-dreams maybe once a year?* (Barth, 1994:141-2)

For somebody who constantly complains about his bad, even terrible memory, requiring loads of logs and binders to record memories otherwise lost forever, this extremely early image indicates quite the contrary. In that case, the author’s persistent whining about his poor recollection of things may be just springing from an exacerbated attention to detail and consequent wish, urge to register everything.

We also get to know the place where he grew up, from the general description of Chesapeake and the Dorchester marshes, to the writer’s native street, Aurora, East Cambridge, Maryland, which “runs its five small-town blocks from what used to be the East Cambridge Elementary School at its head down to what very much still is the Great Choptank River at its foot”. The mature writer acquiesces the importance of the river in shaping his interests as a child, with consequences later in his writing (let us remember the multitude of bottled messages adrift in his novels), in his unmistakable, half serious half playful, sometimes ironic, style:

*My parents’ house was #301 through my childhood (fourth block down from the school) [...] we were but one mapled, clapboarded block from the tidal Choptank, nearly two miles wide at that point, whose bush-grown banks and pebbly brown beaches called like the Hamelin piper to East Cambridge children as soon as we were old enough to range afield. We played endlessly down there in every season; alone, in pairs, in troupes; at games and amusements innumerable, most innocent, some not [...] we fished for perch with bamboo poles, wrestled, sneaked cigarettes and firecrackers, masturbated, killed innocent sparrows and floating booze bottles with Daisy BB-guns... (Barth, 1994:42)*

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### ***The “story” of the writer’s vocation***

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These autobiographic parts are molded, nevertheless, in a story format. What Barth proposes is the “story” of the birth of his vocation, one in which prominent characters, are not only his family, not only his friends, real and fictional, as we have already seen, but also his pens, the first, a Sheaffer, and the second, a Parker, his imaginary “new old pen”, his binders and other writing paraphernalia. The stories about losing and gaining these writing objects are truly meant to touch one’s heart; the loss of his first pen, during an extended trip throughout Europe, for instance:

*‘while this old binder and that young goat-boy were stowed safely in some cranny of the Microbus, my Sheaffer rode as always in shirt pocket and travel notebook, logging my impressions of Europe [...] and the small adventures and misadventures of young American innocents abroad en famille, until some random bodily movement [...] pressed my shirt pocket between my chest and something solid, and cracked the Sheaffer’s barrel quite in half. I doubt I wept; we Kraut-extracted WASPs can be stoical to*



*the point of stolidity. But I felt like weeping and ought to have done so, not only because, as Virgil says, sunt lacrimae rerum – ‘Such things are what tears are for’ – but also because... Never mind.’ (Barth, 1994:27)*

Losing a pen, and this is more transparent with the fictional loss of the second pen, is losing identity. An extension of the writer’s hand and mind, the pen is writing and writing is the author; author without pen simply cannot be:

*‘my good pen [...] I hold it up, uncapped and in position in my writing hand, for both of us to regard. How perfectly fitted to my fingers, my hand and arm, mind, life! And they to it, through which they flow, not always so effortlessly as does their instrument.’ (Barth, 1994: 55)*

It is understandable that the loss of the Parker, the author’s second pen, fictional as it is (Barth admits to “its fictive loss and restoration”, 138), equals complete tragedy, as it entangles a loss of identity:

*Buzz of nerves! As in that moment between when you see that you’ve just cut yourself, seriously, and the arrival of blood and pain [...] It is not there now. Stradivarius of pens! My instrument! Partnership older than my marriage, and in its peculiar way as close! My hand is on my heart, my heart as full as the pocket over is empty. Chagrin at my double folly! Anger at myself [...] I’m sweating. (Barth, 1994:61)*

To come to terms with the loss of the pen, only a literally suicidal thrust of the author into the eye of a tropical storm can help. To offset the identity loss (let us remember that at the beginning of Act 1 the author is literally *lost* in a maze of channels, to help the reader visualize this symbolical loss), what is needed is a plunge back in time, to the origins of the author, to his literal birth and to his birth as a writer, going “back before we go forward” (Barth, 1994:140).

It is not only the writing instruments that Barth identifies with, it is his books, too. In other words, once more we are confirmed the hypothesis that he is first and foremost not the wandering hero, not the husband, not the father, not even the son, but the writer, who simply does not exist in the absence of writing and storytelling, the writer, who finds who he is by writing, who finds where he has to go simply by going there, hence, the fascination with the Ur-myth:

*The sentences get written, the books, the books. Don’t ask me who their author is; I just work here, pushing this Parker. That’s who I am, you might say, almost; you might almost say that I know who I am after all: penner of this and that and this, although they may bear titles like *Lost in the Funhouse* and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, and their Ur-theme (equally their ‘subtext’) might be said to be the penner’s quest for just that item of knowledge: who in the fluxing world he is [...] As for me, till I see what I say I can’t tell who I am. (Barth, 1994:323-4)*

The analogy life-story is a constant of the *Opera*. On the one hand, the author admits that “lives are stories”:

*‘more exactly, that each of our lives is a story-in-progress, whereof each of us is perforce the central, if not necessarily the dominant, character. We may be Ishmael to some Captain Ahab or Moby-Dick, Nick Carraway to some Great Gatsby; nevertheless it’s we who are the ‘receptive lucidity’ about whom our life-story finally is.’* (Barth, 1994:169),

while on the other he clarifies it that “our lives are *not* stories, although we make stories of them”, in other words, “our lives are not inherently dramatical, not intrinsically meaningful. In most instances, our little victories and vicissitudes – even our mighty triumphs and disasters – are, from the dramaturgical point of view, meaningless, their only coherence the circumstance that they all happened to us, the central character, with or without our agency” (Barth, 1994:169). This may explain the author’s need to make a story of his life, to get some coherence: “‘Why are you singing me all this?’ asks Jill. I could reply: In hopes of making art of what I can’t make sense – i.e., what we’re doing here; what this opera is all about.” (Barth, 1994:171)

Moreover, the reader is permitted more insight into what the making of such a story from one’s life would presuppose, based on a legitimate analogy life-myth, life-story, and more than that, insight into the making of *this* particular story:

*How could one write what is, after all, a maturation novel without echoing the literal or metaphorical rituals of passage? Don’t all children regard their fathers as god/kings, more or less, their mothers as royal virgins [...]? Don’t we all have thresholds to cross, monsters and ogres to battle, pitfalls to avoid, princesses to rescue (if we happen to be male heterosexuals; otherwise, mutatis mutandis), and various helpers (those princesses included) to abet our triumph? Mustn’t we all lose our way and ourselves, go down into darkness, return transfigured to the daylight world [...] rout pretenders, proclaim and establish our administration, beget and minister for a time – and then inevitably fall from favor [...]? It is this ubiquitous correspondence to our ordinary lives [...] that validates the myth, I came to understand, even as the myth validates our ordinary lives.* (Barth, 1994:116)

The story we are offered in *Once Upon a Time*, the framing cruise during which the writer loses his pen is hinted at repeatedly as not real: the loss of the Parker is fictional, parts of the geography, too, not to mention the end of the *Opera*, which thrusts a new light on the whole: everything had been a dream. Quite early in the “Overture”, the reader is offered a glimpse of the gestation of the “story”, one of an significant series of instances of *la mise-en-abyme* put to work, and also a fragment in which the real and the imaginary are juxtaposed:

*Despite the fair-weather forecast, I rather imagine a very considerable storm as an early complication of our plot [...] No point in worrying my mate in advance, but voyage-tale's complete without tempest or equivalent? Loss of way (On the Chesapeake?), loss of ship (We're ensured; anyhow, you can bet that no actual boat of ours bears a hockey name like US), loss of shipmates (Heaven forfend!), loss of identity, even; encounters with symbol-fraught obstacles, temptations, adversaries, tasks, enchanted islands – all these old standbys are standing by, of the voyage-tale genre as worked both by myself in novels past and by my innumerable predecessors over four thousand years of written literature and the untold millennia of the oral narrative tradition. (Barth, 1994:18)*

But this fictional frame includes a “story” in which we find embedded most of the autobiographical elements discussed above. Sometimes the “real” and the fictional parts intermingle, they coexist in an in-between territory, with a dizzying effect, examples ranging from the mere enumeration of both real and imaginary travellers: “a journey into the unknown like all our journeys, from Sindbad’s and Columbus’s to every airline- and commuter-train passenger’s” (Barth, 1994:18-9), to recurrent briefings on the world’s important events that happened simultaneously with the story, plus the extra spice of commenting on the making of the story, as in the following paragraph which ends with another example of *la mise-en-abyme*:

*Between our first “Becalmed” duet, sung last October, and this Maytime reprise, much has happened on the earth and not a little in our house: Iraq has all but destroyed Kuwait; the U.S.-led coalition has all but destroyed Iraq; a typhoon in the Bay of Bengal, dwarfing our ‘Tropical Storm Jerry,’ has quite destroyed much of Bangladesh and killed maybe 200,000 people. Infinitely luckier, my comrade and I have lecture-toured through Italy, book-toured through the United States, and vacationed in the Caribbean and Hawaii, as well as teaching our respective classes [...] and (one of us, who will presently seek the other’s readerly reaction) making this overture. (Barth, 1994:102)*

Interestingly, the writer recognizes the mutual shaping of fiction and reality, namely, of his story and his imagination, a paradox best explained as “coaxial esemplasy”, that is “the ongoing, reciprocal shaping of our story (in this case, a story of our life) by our imagination, and of our imagination by our story thus far” (20). This sounds very similar with what we have seen Gide understood by “retroaction”, the simultaneous influence of novel and author in the process of creation (better explained in Chapter 2).

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### *La mise-en-abyme in the Opera*

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The fact that the setting of this *Opera*'s opening parts is the marshes of the author's birthplace, the "Dorchester wetlands", as well as the setting of his waterfront retreat called "our marsh" and insistently described in a whole aria (Barth, 1994:32) is not fortuitous. Once more author and reader must bear in mind the subtle connection between these *paludes* and Gide, and once we think about Gide, we cannot ignore the abundance of instances of *la mise-en-abyme* exploited in *Once Upon a Time*, at least as in its "Overture", as much as in Barth's earlier novels – some of which we have already looked into. The author is very much aware of the importance, as well as symbolism, of his natal Dorchester marshes:

*Neither dry land nor sea, as the Chesapeake is neither salt nor fresh; emblematic equally of stagnation and regeneration, of death and new life – these inbetweenlands are my imagination's mise-en-scène. I understood that, I believe, before I understood myself to be a storyteller, and I doubt the authority of any story of mine in which they do not figure, one way or another. (Barth, 1994:35)*

Examples of comments on the novel and its making / reading abound in the text and the larger context of its production, as in the following paragraph. Speaking of his old binder, Barth remarks that he "first-drafted" every single page of his writing:

*(...) from that undergraduate apprentice-work to this piece in progress: more than ten thousand manuscript pages, I estimate. It still has few vintage-1940s dividers in it, their tabs long since worn off. The fat first section, half an inch or so of fresh white looseleaf paper on the right, a growing sheaf of black-scribbled pages on the left, is for work in progress – just now, *Once Upon a Time*. When this overture is drafted, out it will go into a younger binder already labeled OUT and waiting, to free up this one for the first draft of (I suppose) Act One, while the Overture moves through its several word-processed drafts to come. (Barth, 1994:23)*

Moreover, the novel self-reflexively comments on itself, or rather, the author wonders about the technicalities of composing it. One particularly interesting detail that is evaluated in this way is the absence of a setting in Acts 1 and 2 (the bulk of the novel). The novel is actually built just as explained in the more theoretical fragments quoted above – "Mustn't we all lose our way and ourselves, go down into darkness, return transfigured to the daylight world": Barth the author presents Barth the character who, having lost his way in a maze of channels, his mate and the boat, *US*, having lost his "good pen", unthoughtfully brought aboard despite the routine, and together with it, his identity, finds himself in the middle of nowhere, a familiar place – "a setting like this – I'll even say *this setting* – is the *mise-en-scène*

for critical disorientations of the main characters” (Barth, 1994:113). Literally in the darkness:

*‘What I’ve noticed, reader, is that there seems to be no scene between-the-scenes; no theater, so to speak, where this show is taking place. My sister and I stroll amid these tableaux vivants and freeze-frames of our East Cambridge childhood as though through some high-tech lifesize 3-D projection of a sort not yet invented as I draft this aria (Columbus Day eve, 1991). We are at once in the scenes and apart from them: an ongoing ‘out-of-body experience’ in which the bodies are ours (and the family’s) of the 1930s, speeding from scene to scene through their black-and-white lives more swiftly than figures in an old silent movie’. (Barth, 1994:142)*

he must struggle his way out by paradoxically going back, plunging in a sea of memories, to move forward, assisted, guided by his sister in Act 1 and by drowned Jerry Schreiber in Act 2:

*‘(...) we are where we find ourselves – in this bepisséd grove, Jay means, where he’ll linger now for a bit while my twin sees me through the ‘first reel of my replay’ or first ‘island’ of my ‘voyage’ and thereafter remeet me in time to steer me through my second (of three, I might want to make a note)...’ (Barth, 1994:127)*

Thanks to the same literary technique, the reader is granted access to the less bright part of writing *this* story, the difficulties, maybe the impossibility, of cramming it all in a three-act opera, which makes the author panic:

*‘What I had in mind, I think, when I began the hang and cubiture of this floating opera, was something like maybe three acts, no more: twenty narrative yearsworth each, say, to fetch yours truly tidily up to the present point of his pen. I.e., I hope and presume, back to old US and home [...] ‘But?’ But look: It has taken me one full real-time year and two hundred Parkered pages to get the show overtured, another year-and-a-half and a hundred-and-a-half to trek from birth through our fifth-grade brawlbrat brawl...’ (Barth, 1994:226)*

If to all this we add the incredible amount of comments on writing in general, on particular literary works, including quite a lot of technicalities, the literary and wider, cultural, allusions, including references to and extended comments on Barth’s own earlier, and future, works, we shall get the bigger picture of a text that self-reflexively turns onto writing and onto itself.

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**Conclusion**

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If we think about the frame story, then we should be able to locate the "floating opera" on the writer's boat aboard which part of the story takes place, *US*, and consequently we shall be tempted to read between the lines and identify the opera itself as the author's life, or at least his *living* there, including sleeping, observing wildlife and peering on leaving neighbors, his domestic fights, his sailing, his adventures, his worries, his struggles, his writing, even his writing this particular novel. Is it then a novel, is it maybe pure autobiography afforded its author precisely because disguised this way? All the elements that we looked into allow us to read it as an autobiographic novel, or, as it has been called, a postmodern autobiography, one that subverts its conventions, from within, one that dwells on the in-between land, neither entirely real, nor completely fictional, of the author's own consciousness.

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**The author**

**Raluca Șerban** is currently a lecturer with The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies and teaches Business English and Professional Communication. Specialized in American Studies, she is at present working on a PhD thesis in this field - "Representations of Authorship in the Postmodern American Novel. Self-fictionalization in John Barth's Writing". She has published several articles in academic journals and has co-authored three textbooks: *Talking Business*, for 1<sup>st</sup> year Public Administration students, *First Steps into Marketing*, for 1<sup>st</sup> year Marketing students and *English for Marketing Students*, for 2<sup>nd</sup> year students. Her main research interests include American cultural studies, literary theory and postmodern literature.