

Spring 1984

The Function of Self-Consciousness in John Barth's Chimera

Marilyn Edelstein

Santa Clara University, medelstein@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Edelstein, M. (1984). The Function of Self-Consciousness in John Barth's Chimera. *Studies in American Fiction*, 12(1), 99–108.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.1984.0007>

Copyright © 1984 the Johns Hopkins University Press. This article first appeared in *Studies in American Fiction* 12:1 (1984), 99-108. Reprinted with permission by Johns Hopkins University Press.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

THE FUNCTION OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN JOHN BARTH'S *CHIMERA*

Marilyn Edelstein
Youngstown State University

Much recent American fiction has become increasingly self-conscious, displaying an awareness of itself as fiction, as artifice that diminishes the role of a central human consciousness or self in the fiction. The fictional *process* is in the foreground of much contemporary fiction where the narrative human *presence* once was. Yet, both fictional process and human presence serve similar structural functions within the text, which suggests that the creation of a fiction resembles the creation of a human self, real or imaginary. The provisional reality of self-conscious fiction is like the provisional reality of the "post-modern" self, prone to self-questioning, constituted by process rather than substance, multiple, changeable, perhaps even illusory.

John Barth's novel *Chimera* is a supremely self-conscious fiction. Barth's use of the three central narrators in the three sections of the novel—the "Dunyazadiad," the "Perseid," and the "Bellerophoniad"—foregrounds the relationship between diffusion of identity and artistic self-consciousness within the novel. Although an individual, by definition, should not be susceptible to division or separation into parts without losing its identity, the narrators in *Chimera*, like the novel's sections, are all divisible, incomplete, or inter-changeable. Definitions of identity often include elements such as continuity, functional unity, consciousness, recognitive memory, personality, or awareness. Yet, there is still a question about the relation of a self so constituted to *self-conscious* fiction.

Both "self" and "identity" are dual terms, used both to indicate a presumed psychological center or unity and as reflexive, even mathematical terms. "Self-consciousness" can mean consciousness of a Self, of an "I," of a core unity, or it can refer to the consciousness of itself by an entity (a person, a novel). In the case of a person, both meanings can come together, since consciousness can only presume a self by knowing itself. In the case of a text, reconciling both meanings becomes more problematic. If a text flaunts its own artificiality, if its even provisional reality is constantly being undercut, if its author's presence *in* and not just *behind* the text is constantly being emphasized, it is commonly called a "self-conscious" text. The cohesive function, the underlying, organizing intelligence, whether of the author or of the narrator, inscribed within the text can be considered the "self" of the text. If this textually created self is in some ways analogous to a human self, perhaps the human self is only a "linguistic configuration rather than an ontological entity."¹

Prior to the advent of modernism, neither the existence of a substantial human self nor the value of the literary project itself was generally questioned explicitly within a work of fiction (except in precociously self-conscious novels such as *Don Quixote* or *Tristram Shandy*). The twentieth-century suspicion of the concept of stable identity was bound to have profound effects on the shape of fiction. While many modernist works explored the human self and human consciousness in bold new ways, in many “post-modernist” works an intensified linguistic and artistic self-consciousness seems to have supplanted concern with human self-consciousness. Yet, in the work of a writer like John Barth, the two concerns frequently intersect.

The issue of representation itself is raised when one tries to understand the relationship of a human self (or even a human being) to its seeming counterpart in the fictional character. Obviously, a three-dimensional physical organism bears little overt relation to a series of written signs. In fact, one of the reservations a writer like Barth has about the usual depiction of human beings as characters in fiction derives from his awareness of the reductionism implicit in linguistic formulations of experience. As Albert Cook has written, “language, for the knower of the self, serves as a kind of trap, and also as a kind of instrument, the only one at his disposal. As soon as a self-awareness objectifies itself into words, the words stand with their own syntactic order, their own associations, out and away from the self and its awareness.”²

The novel as a genre assumed some of the characteristics of the autobiography, with its insistence on, and assertion of, the “self” of the autobiographer. Because the novel developed from a story-telling, narrative tradition, it has always consisted essentially of the telling of a story by one “person” to another, who may exist within the fiction as another character or outside the fiction as the reader. The use of a first-person narrator as the central percipient was one means of obviating certain epistemological problems because, as Barth noted in an interview, “[we] still imagine ourselves to be characters, and our lives are influenced by other people around us whom we see as characters and our relations to whom we perceive in a dramatic, in a dramatical, way.”³ Since most people feel their own consciousness at the center of their perceptions, the use of a first-person narrator within the novel can create at least a fictional self within the work. People can go on believing in a concept of subjectivity, seemingly discredited by philosophers and theoreticians, just as they live their own lives in “calendar and clock time” and believe in cause and effect, even if physicists or philosophers have discredited both concepts.⁴

It may be impossible to get rid of the last remnant of the subject, as the selecting, shaping, interpreting consciousness behind the work, without creating pure chaos (unorganized phonemes, complete nonsense), al-

though a conscious, language-using creature might not be able to create pure randomness anyway. Recent writers like Robbe-Grillet or Barthelme may attempt to reduce this human presence to a minimum, rejecting the anthropocentrism of earlier fiction in a struggle for linguistic or phenomenological purity (although, as Barth has very astutely pointed out, Robbe-Grillet and others may merely be replacing earlier versions of realism with a far “hipper” “epistemological realism”).⁵ Barth, however, wants the novel to be technically innovative but also, as the Genie puts it in *Chimera*, “‘seriously, even passionately, *about* some things as well.’”⁶ Barth considers Beckett and Borges as among those few current writers “whose artistic thinking is as hip as any French new-novelist’s, but who manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done.”⁷ Barth considers Marquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* a postmodernist masterpiece precisely because it is “not only artistically admirable but humanly wise, lovable, literally marvelous.”⁸ Barth himself, at his best, manages to be eloquent, wise, and artistically sophisticated.

Self-consciousness thus becomes both a philosophical and a technical concern in *Chimera*. Barth uses named, finally recognizable, if not always stable or unified, first-person central narrators in the novel. First-person narration, in addition to solving epistemological problems, generally gives the reader a sense of familiarity, an expectation that a story is being told by a person with whose experience the reader can perhaps identify, in whose reality the reader can believe, at least for the duration of the fiction. Yet, Barth uses Protean characters (like the shape-shifter Polyeidus), multiple layers of narrative structure, differing perspectives on the same events (as in Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*), shifting narrators, and changing names for the same characters (as in many of Beckett’s works) to inhibit this complacent process of identification, to force the reader to grapple with the complexities of life and language as Barth himself has. The reader’s role is complicated when the writer’s role is complicated, as it is in *Chimera*, in which the narrators are painfully aware of themselves as the “writers” of the books that are being read. Yet, each tale within the work has more than one writer (and speaker) in it; the authorship of the Text must finally be attributed to the ultimate puppeteer, Barth. Fictional “reality” thus becomes as problematic as “reality” itself (if, in fact, the two are different, which Barth has contested).

The tales in *Chimera* are being told in retrospect, to the reader and to another character within each tale. The stories are told as if they are taking place in the present tense, although the central events in the story have already taken place (all except the outermost frame, which occurs in the “present”). Memory thus plays a primary role in the narrative structure of

the novel, and it is also an integral aspect of most definitions of the self. As Louis Dupré has noted, “the self can only be remembered. It is present merely as the *re-* of representation.”⁹ Thus the self assumes the status of any signified, fated always to be re-presented, never simply present.

The transcendence of time through art becomes an especially poignant problem in a novel two-thirds of which (the “Perseid” and the “Bellerophoniad”) concern the heroes’ attempts in mid-life to recover, renew, and write about their pasts. The first section (the “Dunyazadiad”) makes the connection between story-telling and mortality even more explicit, for the archetypal story-teller Scheherezade can only live as long as she can tell new tales (and within the “Dunyazadiad,” she can only “live” as long as her new master Barth deigns to continue his story of her). The characters themselves try to negate time, aging, and the imminence of death through love (and through story-telling). The analogy Barth draws in the novel between the narrative process and a love relation reveals once again how he explores “human” concerns through narrative technique.

Chimera, though ostensibly a set of tales, is really a novel “whose ‘plot’ is not the continuity of what happens to a sustained character, but what happens to the story-teller himself as he moves through the series.”¹⁰ Like the mythical chimera, part lion, goat, and serpent, the novel is composed of three vitally connected, if at first seemingly disparate, parts. Each of the three tales is self-referential and mutually referential; each has one or more frame tales and one or more tales-within-tales; each tale reflects on artifice, on mortality, on the nature of fiction, on the nature of love, and on the nature of “reality” (a term Barth almost always uses with quotation marks). Both Bellerophon and Perseus are supposed to be extra-fictionally immortal, Perseus as a constellation and Bellerophon as the text of the “Bellerophoniad”; Dunyazade and her sister Scheherezade are immortal story-tellers. Of course, all of the characters are immortal because they are transfigured into art (and inscribed in language) by Barth. Perseus and Bellerophon, especially, seem to have more linguistic reality than “human” reality, even within the world of the novel. The characters themselves call their own “reality” into question, wondering if they do exist only in words. Scheherezade says,

“Little Doony . . . pretend this whole situation is the plot of a story we’re reading, and you and I and Daddy and the King are all fictional characters. In this story, Scheherezade finds a way to change the King’s mind about women and turn him into a gentle, loving husband. It’s not hard to imagine such a story, is it? Now, no matter what way she finds—whether it’s a magic spell or a magic story with the answer in it or a magic anything—it comes down to particular words in the story we’re reading, right? And those words are made from the letters of our alphabet: a couple-dozen squiggles we can draw with this pen. This is the key, Doony! And the treasure, too, if we can only get our hands on it! It’s as if—as if the key to the treasure *is* the treasure!” (p. 8).

At these properly enigmatic words, the Genie (Barth) appears, for he has had the same revelation at the same moment, while trying to find his way out of a writer's block. This is how all magic formulae (if not all words) operate, the magic syllables make the absent thing present. This magic operation may, in fact, be the key (to the treasure) that is itself the treasure. The words make Barth and Scheherazade one, for they are both conscious of exactly the same thought at exactly the same moment. The words produce action, however, as well as thought; thus, the magical potency of words is implicitly affirmed, even though elsewhere in the book it may be explicitly denied. The tale of Bellerophon tells "how he rode the heroic cycle and was recycled. Loosed at last from mortal speech, he turned into written words: Bellerophonic letters afloat between two worlds, forever betraying, in combinations and recombinations, the man they forever represent" (p. 138). The power of letters both to betray and to re-present, make present once again, is here asserted.

Christopher Morris delineates two important motifs in Barth's work: first, "the wholly contingent nature of naming (a condition into which, as Barth reiterates, one is born without choice); second, the rupture between the visual and perceptible world, centered in the self, and the world of language, which exists without a center."¹¹ The power of language to reveal and to conceal, to trap and to re-present, to make illusions and to shatter them gives it its dual character as presence and absence. Perseus and Medusa, at the end of the "Perseid," now both constellations, are at ease with the condition of their representation. Perseus says, "I'm content. So with this issue, our net estate: to have become, like the noted music of our tongue, these silent, visible signs; to *be* the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise you up forever and know that our story will never be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars" (pp. 133-34). Perseus is preserved, conserved in signs; he can be "read" by stargazers; he is satisfied. Yet, Bellerophon also kills the Chimera with a pencil; words can be weapons and destroyers, too. Words can also bring self-knowledge (even knowledge that one's self consists of words).

In *Chimera*, as in much contemporary fiction, "the self is not to be found in the personality of the author or narrator or reader but rather . . . in the interrelationship of the three a new collective identity is created."¹² Using mythic characters in two of the three tales, and legendary characters (and legendary story-tellers) in the first, is a means of reinforcing this transpersonal vision of the self. As Hans Meyerhoff notes, "the quest for mythical roots may not be a quest for personal identity but for an identification with mankind in general. Myths may convey a sense of temporal continuity and structural unity for the 'self' of man."¹³

Chimera is truly a meta-novel, a novel about its own creation, a parable and parody of its own coming into being. The characters are supremely, almost paralyzingly self-conscious, as is the fiction as a whole. The narrators are aware of themselves as telling stories within stories within stories. It is difficult to tell which are the largest frame layers and which merely subtexts. Barth himself makes repeated appearances (as the Genie, as Jerome B. Bray). The “Bellerophoniad” begins with the reading of the “Perseid.” Parts of the stories repeat motifs and even whole sentences from Barth’s earlier works. The Text and the subtexts all discourse on themselves. Bellerophon even becomes the pages of his own story floating down onto Barth’s Maryland marshes. Barth’s Genie in the “Dunyazadiad” speculates on whether a clever writer might “ ‘conceive a series of, say, *seven* concentric stories-within-stories, so arranged that the climax of the innermost would precipitate that of the next tale out, and that of the next, et cetera’ ” (p. 24). Barth himself writes this imagined text in *Chimera*. The novel truly is a chimera, a grotesque and incongruous artistic work, an absurd creation of the imagination. All its narrative tricks serve to emphasize the artifice of the work, the hand of the author wielding his pencil over the blank pages. Barth tries to decipher the essence of story-telling *through* the act of story-telling. The repetition and patterning essential in myth, and necessary for any systematic construction, dominate in this novel.

Perseus is a true mythic hero, even though he and his story are self-centered and involuted. He renews his life by re-living it ironically (and by re-telling it ironically). His heroic immortality is assured, first by his having been made a constellation, then by having the story of his story become part of a story by Barth. Bellerophon is a failed hero; in fact, his heroic identity is found to be a lie when he discovers that he is not the demigod Bellerus but his human brother Deliades; the “Bellerophoniad” is about a phony Bellerophon. Mirroring his failed heroic career, his stories fail, his lovemaking generally fails, and, finally, Barth’s own “Bellerophoniad” seems to fail (perhaps intentionally, to extend the reflected Bellerophonic failure as far as possible). Dunyazade is aware of herself as a runner-up to her sister’s title as story-teller extraordinaire. Barth is interested in the struggle of a person, or a fictional character, to become what he or she is by recognizing what he or she has (or has not) been, and where he or she is going (or failing to go). Perseus says to Calyxa, “ ‘thus this endless repetition of my story: as both protagonist and author, so to speak, I thought to overtake with understanding my present paragraph as it were by examining my paged past, and thus pointed, proceed serene to the future’s sentence’ ” (pp. 80–81). Barth seems to have viewed his *Chimera*-writing as a similar process for himself at mid-life.

Perseus' story is a spiral because he does transcend his past and realize his immortal aesthetic identity; Bellerophon's story is a circle because he "never does transcend himself, merely repeats himself rather than recycles."¹⁴ Just as Todd and Jacob, in Barth's first two novels, are disabled by excessive habits of self-reflection, so Bellerophon's phonic involution disables him.

The one hope for escape from disabling self-consciousness in *Chimera* seems to be in the relational world of love. The first story involves Dunyazade and her spouse Shah Zaman, and Scheherezade and her spouse, King Shahryar. The penultimate frame of the story involves Dunyazade telling the other stories to the man she loves. The tale of Perseus involves his love for Calyxa and Andromeda and, finally, Medusa (who can turn men to stone but with whom Perseus is turned into stars and words). Bellerophon is involved, rather unsuccessfully, in various love affairs (with Melanippe and Philonoë, primarily) but seems incapable of transcending his self-absorption in order to love genuinely. With the increase in self-consciousness (of both characters and text) from the first tale to the last comes a decrease in the characters' capacity for monogamy, an increase in the number of lovers, a decrease in the number of genuinely loved. The "Dunyazadiad" consists almost exclusively of dialogue, of conversations between lovers; there seems to be almost no frame until the very end of the tale, when a writer (most likely Barth himself) appears. Perseus addresses Medusa, his beloved, from their stars at the end of the tale, while Bellerophon addresses the reader (in fact, becoming the text in mid-sentence).

Scheherezade and Barth seem to be having a love affair, too. He gives her the stories that save her life for 1,001 nights; actually, her stories allow him to write *this* text, thus enabling him to "live" in words. He collapses time by re-presenting himself as the master of an ancient well-beloved predecessor. The text itself collapses the distance between it and the reader, by involving the reader in the love-relation of interpretation. As the Genie says to Scheherezade,

"narrative, in short—and here they were again in full agreement—was a love-relation, not a rape: its success depended upon the reader's consent and cooperation, which she could withhold or at any moment withdraw; also upon her own combination of experience and talent for the enterprise, and the author's ability to arouse, sustain, and satisfy her interest—an ability on which his figurative life hung as surely as Scheherezade's literal" (p. 26).

Perhaps because Perseus *can* love, can enter into true relation to another, he becomes both words and star, forever able to live with his beloved Medusa. Bellerophon becomes a text, a fiction, because he is so aware of his own self-creation, so perpetually concerned with his own metaphorical existence, that he is incapable of relating to an Other. He says, at the end

of the novel, "I hate this, World! It's not at all what I had in mind for Bellerophon. It's a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longueurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor—" (p. 308). Bellerophon often speaks of himself in the third person; he objectifies his own existence in his obsessive search for its meaning. He makes his own consciousness a text for consciousness to read, but he cannot avoid the trap of solipsism.

Yet, the self-consciousness of the novel itself, apart from contributing to an extremely funny and brilliant book, serves a purpose and does not finally disable the fiction. Barth believes one should "acknowledge and embrace the artificial aspect of art, which you can't get rid of anyway."¹⁵ He also refers to a well-known statement by Borges that "those moments in literature when the characters within a work begin to comment on, or be aware of, the fiction that they're in disturb us because such moments remind us of the fiction that *we're* in."¹⁶ As Tony Tanner has said of Barth's novels, "if there is no one fixed 'reality' then the self can improvise a theoretically endless succession of roles to play *in* the world, just as the author can invent an 'endless succession of names' *for* the world."¹⁷ The endless spirallings of a reflexive fictional creation produce the sense of a world with infinite possibilities, both within and without the fiction. As John Stark notes, "the main kind of process in Barth's work is artistic. Because of their meandering plots and talkative narrators his books seem to be open-ended almost as if they were being created right before the reader."¹⁸ They *are* being created in front of the reader; the process of fictional creation is made as transparent as possible (given the great number of tricks the Genie Barth has up his sleeve) in order to reveal a mind at work, shaping language, creating fictional equivalents of human selves, mimicking gods making worlds and peopling them.

As Robert Alter has pointed out, the creation of art, even self-conscious art, is still a gesture demonstrating "human order against a background of chaos and darkness, and it is the tension between artifice and that which annihilates artifice that gives the finest self-conscious novels their urgency in the midst of play."¹⁹ In recent fiction, self-consciousness within the text engages issues outside the text. As Frederick J. Hoffman notes, "the modern philosophical hero is almost invariably a split self: the self who exists and the self who reflects upon his role as an existing being."²⁰ Similarly, the work of fiction both exists as an aesthetically enjoyable object to be read and experienced, and also comments upon its existence as such an object; by so doing, perhaps it can encourage its readers to reflect on their own existence, to explore the relations between self-creation and aesthetic creation. As Barth himself has written, art "may both inspire and reflect" cultural changes.²¹ Barth manages to explore larger personal, philosophical, psychological, and cultural concerns (love, sexual roles, aging, youthful ideals, mortality) through literary innovation.

By creating works wherein the very identities of the characters are in constant doubt or flux or self-questioning, books whose sequences of events yield and require multiple interpretations, whose multiple layers of narrative both hide and manifest multiple layers of reality, writers like Barth explore the need for self-definition, for creation of individually meaningful existence, for individually defined reality. Readers must create unity, sense, and structure from the text, just as they must from their own experience. As participants in the hermeneutical act required by a work such as *Chimera*, which manifests its own processes of creation, readers are assisted in their own processes of self-creation.

Notes

¹Robert Detweiler, "Theological Trends of Postmodern Fiction," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44 (1976), 229.

²Albert Cook, *Prisms: Studies in Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1967), p. 152.

³Joe David Bellamy, "Having It Both Ways," *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 15–16.

⁴Bellamy, p. 16.

⁵Bellamy, p. 15.

⁶John Barth, *Chimera* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 28. All further references to this work appear in the text.

⁷John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The American Novel Since World War II*, ed. Marcus Klein (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1969), p. 270.

⁸John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," *Atlantic Monthly* (Jan., 1980), p. 71.

⁹Louis Dupré, "Alienation and Redemption Through Time and Memory: An Essay on Religious Time Consciousness," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 43 (1975), 675.

¹⁰Frank D. McConnell, *Four Postwar American Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth, and Pynchon* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 118–19.

¹¹Christopher Morris, "Barth and Lacan: The World of the Moebius Strip," *Critique*, 17 (1975), 71.

¹²Detweiler, p. 230.

¹³Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960), p. 82.

¹⁴David Morrell, *John Barth: An Introduction* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 151.

¹⁵Bellamy, p. 15.

¹⁶Bellamy, p. 10. The reference is to Jorge Luis Borges, "Magies partielles due *Quichotte*," *Les temps modernes*, 10 (1955), 2130; the passage Barth cites has been translated in numerous works.

¹⁷Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 230.

¹⁸John O. Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), p. 148.

¹⁹Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 235.

²⁰Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 319.

²¹"Literature of Replenishment," p. 69.