Making it clean

Logical progression

Writing about something that the book is (somewhat) about

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*Chimera*: Perseid

American Literature

Mr. Baker

Immortality of Stories

It is a commonly held assertion that human life does not exist in the fog of perpetuity, but the belief that stories can outlive literal human consciousness is the dim light that provides hope of permanent impact on the world. An example of this lasting impact can be unearthed in studying classical literature, when one stumbles upon Greek mythology, with which many people today are familiar. John Barth noted the longevity in these twenty-five hundred year old sagas, and he illustrates this lasting nature of mythical storytelling in his novel entitled *Chimera*. Barth uses his postmodernist belvedere to investigate the permanence of mythology, integrating cleanly aspects of the far past with elements of the almost-present while maintaining the structural (i.e. thematic) integrity of the tale. In *Perseid* (a novella within *Chimera*), Perseus gains immortality through the eponymous constellation and it becomes clear that his story will outlast his conscious, mortal life, because his story is encapsulated in his newly created star. **Although "stories last longer than men" (59), the conclusion of the novella suggests that stories are only as strong as the lesser of either the media on which they are constructed (e.g. stars or human lives) or the longevity of the beings that consume these stories; thus Perseus' purported immortality is an analytical paradox and does not last forever.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

In their celestial forms, Perseus and Andromeda share thoughts with one another at the end of Barth's *Perseid*; when Perseus questions Andromeda about his (and her) moral correspondent in Perseus' story, Andromeda cannot oblige because unlike the immortal part, "those parts are private... not for publication" (133). Andromeda continues to convey the vast unimportance of their mortal lives through her utter ambivalence concerning them: "down there our mortal lives are living themselves out, or've long since done -- together or apart, comic tragic, beautiful ugly" (133). Andromeda pushes the reader towards the realization that the specific characters that *Perseid* covers are completely immaterial to the importance of understanding the story; she is uncertain if the characters' conscious lives remain existing "or've long since done" (134). This transfer of the story's essence from specific characters to immortal entities changes the medium on which the story is contained, from which medium the story can be absorbed into the consciousness of others. The reader is made to realize that Andromeda emphasizes the importance of the story rather than its specific characters; on a deeper level, the ending of *Perseid* consists of merely a dialogue between two stars that lack humanity (i.e. specific human characters) by definition. Andromeda continues describing Perseus' and her transformation into stars, divulging, "we commenced our immortality [as stars]" (134). This systemic and utter removal of particular human characters in the story suggests that the essence of the story is no longer written upon the medium that is the characters' lives; rather, the story is contained within the stars' alleged immortality.

When Andromeda questions if Perseus is content with the way that his story plays out in *Perseid*, there is an "infinite pause" (134) before he says, "this story... my love, it's an epilogue, always ending, never ended" (134). This expression of infinite time corroborates the aforementioned notion that the stories are forever preserved in the immortality of the stars, rather than the distinct mortality of the human characters. Barth toys with the notion of stories lasting for unlimited timespans by placing a pause of infinite length within the chronology of Perseus and Andromeda's dialogue. This paradoxical usage of infinity within a discrete timeline of a discussion suggests that perhaps this pause of infinite length is merely a pause of indefinite length, after which events occur. Even after this pause Perseus asserts that although "this story" (134) continues "never ended" (134), he acknowledges that the story is at a discrete point (e.g. the ending rather than the beginning or at any other point) within the context of itself; if the story exists perpetually at the "ending" (134), it is unable to have any other parts for the ending fills Perseus' timeline to infinity.

Just after Perseus' claim to a never-ending story after a pause that is infinite, he becomes inextricably twisted in the story when he claims to "be the tale" (134) that his mortal counterpart spent the previous section of *Perseid* living out. He further muddies the nature of his (and by extension, his stories') immortal nature by creating a tie to "those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret" (134), who are explicitly mortal and bounded from the limits of infinite life. Perseus claims "to raise [his story] up forever and know that [the] story will never be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars" (134). Within the very same sentence, Perseus reaffirms his previous sentiment that he will "raise [his story] up forever" (134) and subsequently limits forever to "as long as men and women read the stars" (134). With this final qualification to his shakily established notion of infinity, Perseus makes the duration that the story will last explicitly non-absolute because it now merely exists "as long as" a specific finite event continues to happen. In addition to circumscribing the longevity of his story to the nature of the medium on which it is inscribed, Perseus implies the practical nonexistence of his story without any "men and women" (134) to observe it. Along with infinity's previous paradoxical usages (in that an infinity exists within a chronology, amongst others), this upper limit to infinity rests at the level of mortal humans, without whom Perseus' story is implicitly nonexistent.

With a plethora of limits on the longevity of Perseus' story, the (albeit paradoxical) insistence that it persists with immortality in infinity may appear surprising to a distracted reader. However, the end of *Perseid* circles back in reference to the novella's opening line, where Barth assures readers that "stories last longer than men, stones than stories, stars than stones" (59). This opening line perhaps suggests an alternate interpretation to the seemingly clean-cut definition of infinity in the context of perspective. Barth places stories, stones, and stars in a continuum of longevity, assigning non-specific values for each. Because stars simply have *more* duration than stones, from the perspective of a stone that has just shimmered out of existence, the star exists infinitely longer. This is to say a 'living' star survives exists infinitely longer than a now non-existent stone that can no longer measure the star's longevity due to the stone's present non-existence (in the same that the value one is infinitely greater than the value zero). Barth's paradoxical dealings with infinity and immortality is perhaps a subtle suggestion that infinity has meaning only in a specific frame of reference instead of referring to a consummation of a universal timeline.

1. Moreover, this paradox suggests that infinity is perhaps relative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)