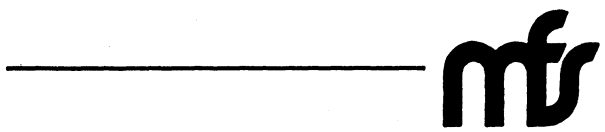
# THE FICTION OF CORRESPONDENCE: *LETTERS* AND HISTORY



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WERE HE FRENCH, JOHN BARTH might have titled his 1979 novel *LETTERS* with a similarly self-reflexive pun to emphasize its preoccupation with textuality and the American past: "histoire."[1] English may demand that we choose between "history" and "story," but the French term broad-mindedly embraces both, extends the range of signification even to "idle story, untruth, falsehood," and suspends questions of verifiability or referentiality. History, in *LETTERS*, plays across this entire range of textual possibility even as it spans three centuries of American revolution and social unrest, Indian conspiracy, diplomatic intrigue, and civil rights struggle, and crosses and recrosses borders from the Niagara Frontier and Chesapeake backwaters to Elba and St. Helena. "While I don't conceive the work in hand to be a historical novel," writes the Author to one of the seven characters whose correspondence constitutes *LETTERS*, "I evidently do have capital-*H* History on my mind" (431)—a history at

[1]French author Claude Simon has indeed written a novel titled *Histoire*. Although I do not know the original text, Allen Thiher's discussion of it in *Words in Reflection* suggests interesting parallels with John Barth's *LETTERS*.

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once carnivalesque and tragic, national and personal, ambiguous, disruptive, but above all, the function of "letters"—of language.

Just as the reflexive narrative structure of *LETTERS* engages the mimetic foundation of belles-lettres in a postmodern critique, so the novel challenges traditional notions of history that assume a prior object to which the text simply corresponds and referentially reconstitutes. In the domain of *LETTERS*, fiction and history engage intertextually as competing forms of lettered construction, just as the script for Reg Prinz's film "reenacts and recreates events and images from 'the [Author's] books,' which do likewise from life and history and even among themselves . . ." (383). As one correspondent writes to Author Barth, "History is a code which, laboriously and at ruinous cost, deciphers into *HISTORY*" (332)—the novel, movie, TV docudrama. It becomes a text that necessarily offers itself for continued decipherment and reencodement: "[H]istory really is that bird you [Barth] mention somewhere," suggests another correspondent, "who flies in ever diminishing circles until it disappears up its own fundament" (381).

Yet Barth himself does not fully endorse the notion that history self-deconstructs, leaving only the faintest of traces. As Charles Harris observes, although "*LETTERS* seems to insist upon its status as *mise en abym*, a Derridean plexus of intertextual traces . . . Barth is not quite ready to cast literary tradition into the ahistorical abyss of the deconstructionists" (165). Literary and historical discourse, in Barth's terms, derives not simply from the free play of signification but instead evolves within the confines of a complex historical archive—"an entire set of cultural rules [that] determine the production, distribution, and consumption of the discourse" and "effectively delimit the flight of the signifier."[2] As we shall see, it is with these rules and this production that *LETTERS* reflexively engages, for its particular concern is to expose how America, as narrative and object, is called into being by competing discourses, and how these, in turn, regulate the institutions, behaviors, and social and political practices of those who articulate and are articulated by these discourses.

The novel's title and structure have tempted some critics to read *LETTERS* as a clever but solipsistic formalist game. "LETTERS" signifies a text comprised of eighty-eight letters (epistles) written over a seven-month span (but reaching back two hundred years) by seven correspondents—one character to correspond to each of the alphabetical

[2]This quotation and several of my terms are borrowed from Vincent B. Leitch's discussion of Michel Foucault (148-150). In particular, Leitch distinguishes Foucault from the deconstructionists by observing that "Foucault exercises a limiting theory of the signifier and text, providing discourse with a determinable, though highly differentiated and reticulated, historical context" (150). Barth's postmodern reflexivity can be distinguished from the aleatory extreme of some of his contemporaries in a similar manner.

letters (characters) that the word "LETTERS" (reflexively) signifies. Six of these seven correspondents are "autoplagiarized" from the six earlier texts of Barth's oeuvre, and as each meditates upon the significance of his life to date—his history—the Author participates in a similar review by composing *LETTERS*—a narrative that seeks "neither to repeat nor to repudiate [his] career thus far" (767). But just as this enterprise narrows dangerously into a hermetic illustration of the exhaustion of the postmodern writer, Barth introduces the structural conceit of the epistolary form itself; with it, he turns his reflexive scrutiny not simply upon his own authorship nor upon traditional belles-lettres, but upon the processes by which generations of people have "lettered" their experience. Even as the epistolary form takes *LETTERS* back to the mimetic origins of the novel genre, it draws the text forward to a poststructuralist revelation of the persistent and necessary textualization of the past—of its inscription within letters written from a distinct moment in time and thus within a more or less identifiable historical archive. As Barth remarks in an interview:

> I am fascinated with the fact that so many of the adventures of the novels in Europe and Britain were documentary novels, that is epistolary novels, novels in the form of journals, diaries, etc. . . . These early novels seemed to have this lively sense that what they are imitating, what they are dealing with finally, are words on a page, are visual symbols on a page, and not life experienced directly, that what they chose to imitate was not life directly but its documentary phenomenon, journals, diaries, etc. (Glaser-Wöhrer 231)

Extolling the self-revealing "textual" qualities of epistolary conventions over their more traditionally-valued mimetic powers, Barth asserts the value (from a postmodern perspective) of letters over "direct" narration precisely because they disclose themselves as words on a page, as conscious textualizations. The letter is no longer valued as a document—a mimetic textual substitute for an absent past. Rather it becomes the site and mechanism of encodement and containment with which each writer has organized and made coherent past experience through a particular discourse, and its clearly "textual" status—both alphabetical and epistolary—reflexively betrays the processes and assumptions by which its discourse constitutes those objects to which it appears to refer. Barth's novel itself participates in this same disclosure; *LETTERS*, writes the author, "will preoccupy itself with, among other things, the role of epistles—real letters, forged and doctored letters—in the history of History. It will also be concerned with, and of course constituted of, alphabetical letters: the atoms of which the written universe is made . . ." (654).

Barth's text takes great and wide-ranging pleasure in exposing the "lettered" quality of the American past. One device that offers a particularly literal demonstration of this phenomenon is his location of historic moments in which the ontologically "separate" world of text imposes itself upon the apparently "prior" phenomenal world. In one set of cor-

respondence emerging from events constituting the War of 1812, Barth devises a dizzying array of intertextual manipulations of history. Delayed, doctored, and misplaced letters affect the outcome of the Battle of Baltimore Harbor; the "Henry Letters," which may be forgeries, drive the Madison administration into war with the British; "the slowness and unpredictability of the mails," claims one writer, "have alter'd and realter'd the course of history more than Bonaparte" (280), although, as we shall see, Barth's Bonaparte himself desires to reinscribe history with his pen, not his sword.

Many of these epistolary plots are the work of the Cook-Burlingame dynasty, initially hatched in Barth's *The Sot-weed Factor*. In *LETTERS'* version of American history, the interfamilial rivalries of seven generations of these revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries have fueled nearly every American conflict from the French and Indian Wars and the "Second Revolution" (aka "The War of 1812") to the antiwar protests and Quebeçois separatist movements of the late 1960s. The clan instigates political transformation through textual manipulation—or what they call "action historiography," "the *making* of history as if it were an avant-garde species of narrative" (73). Often such sabotage means simply posting a doctored letter. Barth slyly suggests that the power of a Cook-Burlingame text to manipulate phenomenal circumstance derives from its reader's naïve faith in mimesis. Andrew Cook IV works one of the greatest coups of his espionage career by exploiting such trust: just as the British General Prevost begins his invasion of Plattsburgh in 1814 to commence a battle his "14,000 British veterans" are sure to win, he intercepts a letter to his American enemy telling of "massive reinforcements en route to his [the American's] aid" (517). Prevost immediately retreats—before an American army reinforced by 10,000 soldiers who are but characters on a page, for "the U.S. Secret Service has forged the letter and entrusted its delivery to . . . a double agent [who] dutifully betrays them" (517). Had he recognized the "double agency" of the epistolary form itself, its reflexive and referential powers, Prevost might have averted disaster. Instead, he falls victim to a linguistic naïveté that one of Barth's own characters warns against: "the acceptation of 'historical documents' as authentic is also an act of faith—a provisional suspension of incredulity not dissimilar, at bottom, to our complicity with Rabelais, Cervantes, or George III's beloved Fielding" (298).

That "false" letters wield such power regardless of their referential status betrays the "fiction" of correspondence—of the assumption that textual authority derives from a priori reality. No longer the agent of a truth or fact that preexists it, "history" becomes a locus of power that may enter into correspondence *with* the world of experience but does not correspond *to* it. Instead it brings that world into being. A Frenchman ahead of his age, Barth's "Napoleon Boneparte" rejects Cook's sugges-

tion that he escape from St. Helena to initiate a new campaign on the American frontier; instead, he opts to engage in an even more revolutionary activity—a powerful, because "fictional," correspondence with the past: "What better chance, then, to bend the world in his favor than to turn his exile into public martyrdom by writing his memoirs on St. Helena and smuggling them out for publication? He had made history; he could now remake and revise it to his pleasure!" (605).

Certainly Barth acknowledges the radical nature of his challenge to traditional historic teleology and the desire for a recoverable past of uninterrupted continuities. He taunts these desires openly, as if to evoke the very objection which issues from critic Gerald Graff: "For a novel with so much history in it, *LETTERS* is unhistorical." "That's not to say," continues Graff, "that *LETTERS* is formless or disorganized. It teems, in fact, with symmetries. But these symmetries are all pointless—or rather their point is precisely in their pointlessness. To put it more charitably, their point is not in any ultimate synthesis that we can make out of history, but in the process of trying, even of trying and failing" (160, 162). To critics such as Graff who desire a recoverable, continuous past, Barth mockingly offers the "Anniversary View" of history with which correspondent Jake Horner opens each letter:

> 4/3/69 . . . To Marlon Brando, Doris Day, Henry IV, George Herbert, Washington Irving, happy birthday. Dante has found himself lost in the Wood. Napoleon is occupying Rome. . . . Passover began at sunset. The Pony Express commences mail service today between Sacramento and St. J____, Missouri. James Earl Ray is appealing his 99-year sentence. . . . The U.S. has opened warfare against Chief Black Hawk. . . . The Vietnamese peace talks have resumed in Paris. . . . (98)

"Factoids" such as these proliferate in *LETTERS*, tempting us to "play the game of Portentious Coincidences or Arresting but Meaningless Patterns" (384) and assign them a final place and significance in a continuum stretching from past to present. Yet these details multiply so rapidly that the very notion of "ultimate synthesis" reveals itself as arbitrary and the principles upon which we construct a unity are exposed as normative containments, not as inevitable or ultimate. And as these "factoids" recur and echo, it becomes apparent that each has, itself, already been called into being within a distinct discursive field which has pre-scribed its significance. More productive to take the measure of this discursive field, Barth suggests, than to seek some ultimate synthesis or to declare the point pointlessness.

Barth's correspondent Germaine reaches a similar conclusion after witnessing the effectiveness of the Cook-Burlingame "action historiography": "André has indeed 'made history,' as one might make a poem—and to no other end! Little wonder I have difficulty accepting any document at all, however innocuous, as 'naive': I look for hidden messages in freshman compositions and interoffice memoranda; I can no

longer be at ease with the documentary source materials of my own research . . ." (202). What Germaine acknowledges in her search for "hidden messages" is that the true power of the text derives from the discursive system through which it calls its world into being; what remains "hidden," as a sort of mastercode written in invisible ink, are the rules that systematically delimit that discourse and inevitably shape its object. And as Germaine begins to realize, to accept a document as naïve is to surrender unwittingly to those controls and structures.

Here Barth's reflexive "histoire" echoes the poststructuralist history of Michel Foucault. Barth's narrative seems to assert, with Foucault, that "we should no longer treat discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (*Archaeology* 49). The "action-historiography" by which Andrew Cook constitutes his paper soldiers at the Battle of Plattsburgh is an ironically literal manifestation of this authority. However, Barth moves beyond simple satire when his reflexive play initiates the fictional equivalent of the analysis by which Foucault seeks "to substitute for the enigmatic treasure of 'things' anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse . . . [and to relate them] to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance" (*Archaeology* 45). For, like Foucault, Barth recognizes in the play of discourse a play of power. Vincent Leitch observes that "Foucault demonstrates that archival discourse expands, divides, and deploys knowledge in the interest of social control, [so that] the rules of discourse, particularly the exclusionary ones, direct powerful, though often unnoticed, socio-political practices" (154). In a parallel manner, Barth's reflexive lens scrutinizes the discourses of his correspondents, and, as each engages in a representative act of "lettering" the past, Barth reflexively reveals the power of each discourse to shape, justify, and verify an entire field of possible truths that maintain distinct loci of power. Moreover, where Foucault examines the power of discourse to mediate between madness and sanity, sickness and health, institutionally manifested in the madhouse and clinic, Barth particularly contemplates the relationship between power and knowledge institutionalized in the American university system. On this site, he locates the struggle between the clashing rhetorics of Drew Mack's "Marshyhope Maoists" and Andrew Cook VI's right-wing patriots, and between the competing dialects of film, belles-lettres, avant-garde narrative, and historiography, as all lay claim to the right to inscribe contemporary America's narrative of self and past within a distinct discursive field.

The letter that opens *LETTERS*, initiating reflexive and referential plot alike, offers a sustained example of the mechanisms and implication of Barth's reflexive critique. Written from the "Faculty of Letters" of

"Marshyhope State University" by Germaine G. Pitt, "Acting Provost," the letter invokes the powers of the American academy with its initial discourse. To the sovereignty of the Western intellectual tradition asserted by the letterhead, Germaine adds economic authority by recounting her institution's monumental growth: "In that brief time [seven years] we have grown from a private vocational training school . . . to our present status (effective a month hence at the beginning of the next fiscal year) as a full-fledged university centre with a projected population of 50,000 by 1976" (3). Having established the prominence of her domain through tradition and statistics, Provost Pitt gets down to business, inviting the letter's recipient—"Mr John Barth, Esq., Author"—to join her on the height. "To mark this new [institutional] elevation," she offers Barth "the highest distinction that Marshyhope can confer"—"the degree of Doctor of Letters, *Honoris Causa*" (3). The letter is perfunctory, official, altogether unremarkable—thousands like it must pass ritualistically through the U.S. mails each year in the months preceding the spring rite of commencement.

But Germaine is only *acting* provost, suggesting that she can remove herself at will from the discursive field in which she has just engaged. Moreover, as we have seen above, her relationship with the Cook-Burlingame dynasty has taught her that "hidden messages" can be discerned within even the most innocuous office correspondence. Signing off as "Yours sincerely, Germaine G. Pitt," she abandons her provostial role as agent of the Marshyhope "Tower of Truth." Instead she becomes its saboteur, deconstructing in her handwritten postscript what she has just articulated in the official typescript. That she changes graphic modes along with her discourse suggests how fully she mistrusts the institution through which her prior authority has been articulated—"some things I cannot entrust to my 'good right hand' of a secretary (a hand dependent . . . more from the arm of our esteemed acting president than from my arm, on which she'd like nothing better . . . than to put the finger)" (4). In the subversive addendum, over twenty times the length of the official text, Germaine exposes the rules of exclusion and privilege that underlie her seemingly innocuous academics discourse and, in doing so, demonstrates the will to power that drives the apparently innocent "will to knowledge" manifested in Marshyhope State University. Unmasking the "Faculty of Letters" as a "Factory of Letters," and Marshyhope as "a toadstool blown overnight from this ordurous swamp to broadcast doctorates like spores," Germaine urges Barth to take "the highest honour that Marshyhope can bestow"—but "not take it seriously" (5). She explains that he is being engaged as a compromise candidate in an ideological struggle over the very nature of the university—"a seven-year battle between the most conservative elements in the state" and "the most 'liberal' . . . who in higher latitudes would be adjudged cautious moderates at best" (6). The projected growth of Marshyhope, which Barth's honorary doctorate

is intended to celebrate, has been presided over by President John Schott, "locally famous right-winger," and is clearly a bid to consolidate academic power with economic and political power into a single conglomerate, the center of which will be marked by "The Tower of Truth." Germaine paraphrases Schott's rhetoric as a combination of JC boosterism and Bloomian intellectual conservatism:

> Fill in sevenfold more marshy acreage; make seven times over the fortunes of wetland realtors and building contractors; septuple the jobs available to Dorchester's labour force; build on Redmans Neck a veritable city of learning more populous . . . than any of the peninsula's actual municipalities! And from its centre let there rise, as a symbol (and advertisement) of the whole, Marshyhope's beacon to the world: a great white tower, the Tower of Truth! By day the university's main library . . . let it be by night floodlit and visible from clear across the Chesapeake—from (in Schott's own pregnant phrase) "Annapolis at least, maybe even Washington." (7)

Although Germaine summarizes the liberal counterargument with obvious sympathy (the institution would become unmanageably large, overburdening the ecology and sociology of the rural county), the more fundamental revelation of her postscript is its disclosure of the pervasive relationship between power and knowledge. The privilege of naming the site of the "Tower of Truth" is a function of the discourse prevailing at the center of the American academy circa 1968, and Germaine reminds us that "Truth" and its physical marker have been called into being, within these particular historic conditions, through an archive that deploys knowledge in the interest of social control. Building on the apparently neutral foundations of the Western intellectual tradition's disinterested search for truth, Schott's calcification of Truth into a single phallic locus becomes a way of consolidating and fortifying its power of exclusion in the service of conservative ideology and of constructing an edifice that can organize and police even the nonacademic landscape for miles around through its institutional gaze. The comprehensiveness of this gaze has been extended through the financial support of the conglomerate "Mack Enterprises," whose interests range "from chemical fertilizers and freeze-dried foods . . . into certain classified research in the chemical-warfare way" (87). The corporation's munificence is, in turn, repaid by Marshyhope's education of future Mack Enterprise workers (as Germaine reminds us, Marshyhope was founded as a "private vocational training school") under the watchful eye of the Tower of Truth that, predictably, forbids "a professor's right to lecture upon the history of revolution" (6).

Although hardly a panopticon, Barth's farcical "Tower of Truth" focuses our attention on the relationship between power and knowledge, asserted most forcefully in what Foucault calls the "will to truth." Foucault suggests "that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and distributed according to a certain number of procedures," and chief among these governing "systems of exclusion"

is "the will to truth." In the will to truth, Foucault "discern[s] something like a system of exclusion (historical, modifiable, institutionally constraining)" that is capable of "impos[ing] upon the knowing subject . . . a certain position, a certain viewpoint, and a certain function." Like other systems of exclusion, this will to truth depends upon institutional support, and "it is both reinforced and accompanied by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy—naturally—the book-system, publishing, libraries, such as the learned societies in the past, and laboratories today. But it is probably even more profoundly accompanied by the manner in which knowledge is employed in a society, the way in which it is exploited, divided and, in some ways, attributed" ("Discourse" 216-219).

Thus Germaine's letter initiates the central action of *LETTERS*—a turf battle over the field of this "Truth" and its discursive and nondiscursive powers and formulations—even as the letter's reflexive postscript reveals the rules of exclusion working in her own provostial use of academic discourse, and thus initiates the reader's critique of all subsequent letterings. As our analysis locates the body of rules driving each epistolary inscription, we begin to recognize the powers of a given discourse to call objects into being and to "impose upon the knowing subject" a certain position and viewpoint. Each "local" discursive act partakes of a broader system of exclusion. Whereas the initial domain of "Truth" may be the lowly swamps of Marshyhope, Schott plots to push back the boundaries to "Annapolis at least, maybe even Washington" through the judicious widening of its discursive field. He fortifies his edifice with a library, musters distinguished allies by adding honorary Doctors of Letters to his Faculty of Letters, and even engages the literary services of "A. B. Cook VI, self-styled Laureate of Maryland" to hymn its ascendancy and add patriotic, perhaps religious, authorization to its claim: "Fight, Marylanders, nail and tooth, / For John Schott and his Tow'r of Truth" (6). But inevitably the Tower of Truth becomes the site of a profound cultural power struggle, as the would-be revolutionary Drew Mack and his group of activists-turned-terrorists seek to explode the superstructure once and for all in the name of those (Blacks, Native Americans, student dissenters) who have been systematically excluded from its construction. Meanwhile, and typical of Barth's farcical treatment of even the most serious subjects, the "Tower of Truth" is sinking slowly into the mire, the victim of faulty foundations constructed on the presumption of the absolute objectivity of scientific knowledge. The footers have been poured by an honest stonemason according to deliberately falsified specifications, in yet another manipulation of knowledge by power.

However absurd the action, Barth has planted language—letters—at the center of this emblematic struggle for social and political power to demonstrate how particular discursive practices inscribe institutions, behaviors, values, and histories. Battles waged over the exclusionary boun-

daries of discursive fields in the present inevitably find ground and authority in a simultaneous revision of the past. Thus reenactments, revisions, recyclings, and revolutions (the latter in a metaphoric as well as political sense) lend the letters of *LETTERS* genuine urgency, as each correspondent struggles to edit the first half of his or her life story, as Barth reviews his own *oeuvre* and literary inheritance, and as all collaborate in the reinscription of American history, given the radical political and social upheavals of the decade in which they write. To broaden the local implications of the struggle for the Marshyhope Tower of Truth and to render public the significance of the correspondents' private efforts at autobiography, Barth places the tercentennial celebration of Maryland's founding in the present of his narration (March-September 1969) with the American Bicentennial looming nigh. He thus directs our attention to the battle of codes, simultaneously ideological and narrative, public and private, contesting the discursive field within which the object "America" is to be composed, and he demonstrates how fundamental the validity of that object is to the validity of the subjects that inscribe it.

As fundamental acts of autobiography, these letters become attempts at both personal and national self-authorization, and they can be read as metaphoric efforts to translate the motto shared significantly by Marshyhope State University, Mack Enterprises, and, one might argue, *LETTERS* itself: "*Praeteritas futuras stercorant.*" To translate this phrase becomes as ambiguous and problematic an activity as inscribing the past, as Todd Andrews confides to The Author: "Not just my merely legal Latin, but my experience of life . . . makes me wonder whether the past (a) fertilizes the future, (b) turns into shit in the future, or (c) turns the future into shit. This year—my 70th, sir—the past has crowded in on me apace (cropped up? rained down?), faster than I can . . . um . . . digest it" (80-81, ellipses original). Given the postmodern fall into language, Barth demonstrates throughout *LETTERS* that a singular translation of the past remains (for Todd as it would seem for Gerald Graff) impossible and self-deluding.

That there is neither singularity nor inevitability in the historical narrative inherited by many Americans is slyly disclosed by Barth's subversive rendering of a key scene at the heart of American historiography, itself a fundamental act of mythography. A Baltimore lawyer, wandering accidently into a skirmish during the Second American Revolution, gets himself taken prisoner by British officers whom he "is disposed to admire" as "gentlemen of culture" (515). He is stranded on the enemy vessel during the incidental bombardment of a garrison in the harbor of his hometown, and as an amateur poet, he idly passes the time by penning an ode which he modestly hopes to publish in the local press. But immediately after his release, the "lyrics of *Defense of Fort M'Henry* have been run off in handbill form, rerun by the Baltimore *Patriot & Evening Advertiser*,

rererun by presses in other towns, taken up by the tavern crowd'' until soon ''Americans from Castine (Maine) to Barataria [Louisiana] are straining their high registers for the rockets' *red glare* and the la-and of the *free*'' (522). So profoundly and persistently do Americans adopt—and adapt—Key's discourse, that Barth implies that Key was no more its sole author than his ode was a mimetic representation of the event he witnessed. Rather, Barth's Key seems to have been drawn almost haplessly into the play of ideological forces that employ his pen to compose the locus for their articulation. ''The Defense of Fort M'Henry'' becomes the deed and charter of the discursive field at the center of one version of an emerging American mythos, and so powerful is the originary narrative Key devises that its militaristic patriotism can be heard to articulate and justify parts of the national autobiography into the present. ''The Star-Spangled Banner'' is thus revealed as an object called into being by a specific historic archive that has become, in turn, a key mechanism in a discursive field through which various social and ideological forces continue to justify and extend themselves.

Barth discovers a more tragic illustration of the pervasive ideological powers wielded by those who command the discursive field authoring ''America'' when he examines the struggles of those who have been systematically denied a voice in its articulation. Andrew Cook IV writes that when the inevitability of first cultural and then literal genocide of the Native American people becomes obvious to the Shawnee chief Tecumseh, his final guerrilla act is to plant a sort of narratologic time bomb at the base of the Euro-American Tower of Truth: the Native American ''cause was lost in any case; . . . [therefore] their future lay not in history but, as it were, in myth, . . . their only victory would be in valiant tho futile resistance'' (320). Both literal and metaphoric act, Tecumseh's resistance becomes a moment of action historiography; his cause is lost, but through courageous actions (which are strategically questionable because Tecumseh spurns the European weapons that could give his people a fighting chance) he hopes to render more emphatic the narrative of the genocide of the Native American people by underlining the pluralism and autonomy of cultures fundamentally antithetic to the Euro-American: ''That the Indians perhaps had only different ways to lose meant to Tecumseh that the choice of ways was all the more important. Hence his preference for the tomahawk, for example, together with his recognition that only British artillery might truly drive back American artillery. Hence his tireless exhortations to the chiefs *not* to forget their differences, which were as old & 'natural' as those between hawk and hare'' (313). Faced with defeat, Tecumseh can yet leave traces of the Native American narrative on the national text by marking the absence of these diverse and thriving cultures in the official history of democratic America. It is a discursive sabotage that, Barth seems to suggest, is even

more effective than that literal charge which Drew Mack and his student activists (Marshyhope Maoists disguised as Choptank Indians) place at the base of the literal Tower of Truth at novel's end, for it remains a profoundly critical and cautionary tale of "otherness" destroyed: "as Lord Amherst infected the Indians with smallpox, Pontiac [and Tecumseh] infected white Americans with Myth, at least as contagious and insusceptible to cure" (127).

Whereas the central action of *LETTERS* is the farcical exposure of the vulnerability of any Tower of Truth of American history to the ongoing battle of codes and to sabotage by those excluded from its construction, Barth seems equally concerned with the profound personal implications of the act of "lettering" the past for each individual correspondent. If the collective narratives of nations are shaped by exclusionary practices sustained within and through an authorizing discourse, then private narratives of self are equally inscribed, and *LETTERS* exposes the self-engendering act of "lettering" by which each individual correspondent constitutes text, self, and world. Just as the novel never allows us to forget that history is a function of letters, it continually reminds us that its characters are composed of characters—that what we "are dealing with finally, are words on a page" (Glaser-Wöhrer 231). If the historical battle of the codes is waged in *LETTERS* by various individual subjects, it is clear that they, too, have been constituted as objects within those discourses for which they are agents. It is here that Barth hints at the potentially sinister self-replicating powers of any given discourse if it is employed unself-critically, for several of his characters *do* forget, to their peril, that they are but the words within which they inscribe themselves. For example, as the good bourgeois Todd Andrews recounts the menus consumed during his fortnight's sail on the Chesapeake in a familiarly self-satisfied code—"BBQ filet mignon, salad, Fr bread, gd modest Bordeaux (Château La Tour de By '62)" (568)—its complacency modulates easily to regulate a sexual encounter with profoundly disorienting potential: "[Jeannine's] visit had been an unexpected little bonus; possible incest or not, I could muster no more guilt about her seducing me than a small salt of extra pleasure" (705). So fully sated is Todd by the power of his discourse, that it can easily regulate even the extremes of his experience: incest becomes a small frisson. The language of consumption that marks his composition has so completely inscribed him, even as he employs it (unwittingly) to compose his letters, that he cannot read beyond its margins to recognize other inscriptions of his actions.

Even more myopic are the letters written in the computer-driven argot of avant-gardist Jerome Bray. Doped with "honey-dust," Bray is essentially transformed into the device by which his discourse writes itself into being; he is a textualizing machine run completely—because unself-critically—amuck: "1. 9/23/4004 B.C.: *World began, 9:00 A.M. EDST.*

LILYVAC II's LANG & PUNCT circuitry entirely regenerated; we can even sing now like Katy did. Excuse our conjunctions. O LIL! O Granama! O see RESET *Quel artison!*" (755). In contrast, it is clear that Germaine remains closely attuned to the power language itself wields in the construction of tale and teller, for not only does she constantly modulate from one discourse to another (as we have seen in her opening letter), she observes, reflexively, at the end of another epistle; "Thus has chronicling transformed the chronicler, and I see that neither Werner Heisenberg nor your [Barth's] character Jacob Horner went far enough: not only is there no 'non-disturbing observation,' there is no non-disturbing historiography. Take warning sir: to put things into words works changes, not only upon the events narrated but upon their narrator" (80).

The fates of Todd and Bray suggest the individual necessity, then, of the dizzying spiral of reflexive self-scrutiny that marks, for Barth, the postmodern fall into language, just as the totalitarian dangers of Schott's Tower of Truth demand a reflexive critique of the inscription of history. "Literature like language is seldom simply but always also about itself" (*Friday* xii), Barth reminds us in more than one place—a notion characters, readers, and writers of history or literature forget at their own peril. Barth significantly attributes the phrase, as well as the design of *LETTERS* itself, to Ambrose Mensch, the most intimate of Barth's six avatars in the novel and the character to whom he lends significant autobiographical detail. Ambrose self-consciously conspires with the Author in designing the text within which he is a character; late in the novel he suggests, à propos the Author's work in progress: "Dates (of letters) should also 'count' [in the proposed epistolary novel]: alphabetics + calendrics + serial scansion through seven several correspondents = a form that spells itself while spelling out much more and (one hopes) spellbinding along the way, as language is always also but seldom simply about itself" (767). It is upon Ambrose, of course, that Barth has projected his own aesthetic and epistemological struggles with poststructuralist notions of language. In *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), the collection in which Ambrose first appears, Barth initially portrays the dilemma in psychological terms, for Ambrose must confront "a birth certificate whereon [his] surname was preceded by a blank" ("Ambrose His Mark" 34) and attempt to fill the blank of self with the infinitely mutable structures of language. When adolescent Ambrose receives his "call to art"—in an obvious postmodern parody of Stephen Dedalus' high Modernist vocation—the dilemma becomes aesthetic; Ambrose discovers a bottle floating on the Chesapeake tide that contains a similarly haunting (wordless) imperative: "On the top line was penned in deep red ink: TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN [.] On the next-to-bottom: YOURS TRULY [.] The lines between were blank as was the space beneath the complimentary close" ("Water Message" 56). In *Lost in the Funhouse* as well as the later *Chimera* (which, according to

*LETTERS*, Ambrose has ostensibly written), the desperately virtuoso reflexivity seems driven by Barth's/Ambrose's desire to recover narrative possibility for postmodern fiction, to escape the deadening repetitions of past literary forms that characterize the frozen textualizing of failed avant-gardist Bray (and his avatar Bellerophon) and thus to avoid the dead-end of postmodern cynicism and despair.

We find the adult Ambrose still struggling in *LETTERS* to inscribe himself within "that damning, damnéd blank message which confirms both his dearest hope—that there are signs—and his deepest fear—that they are not for him" (168). His collaboration with film director Reg Prinz on a project that portrays, among other things, events from the "Second American Revolution" as these parallel the revolutionary activities on Marshyhope's campus in 1967, becomes a *mise en abîme* of *LETTERS*, for the project explores the implications of the postmodern fall into language as the pair debate the relative values of two antagonistic narrative discourses in a "*mano a mano* between Author and Director, Fiction and Film" (453). As Prinz's range-finder broadens its field to encompass John Barth's fictional *oeuvre*, the revolutionary, tercentennial, and bicentennial activities in *LETTERS*, and the battle of codes waging at the base of the Tower of Truth, the film contemplates the problematics of various semiotic and narrative systems for "redreaming history, reenacting the past" (453). The parallels with Barth's own narrative innovations are apparent: just as Barth's fiction "is at most the *occasion* of the film" (445) in which Prinz and Mensch fight out their particular battle of codes, so history for Barth becomes the occasion for History—an encounter between various discourses over the field of containment and veridication within which the objects of the American past can be constructed.

In John Barth's book, history (like literature and language) is seldom simply, but always also, about itself, and it is within the dialogue between "history" and "story"—dialogue simultaneously reflexive and referential—that *LETTERS* reveals Barth's strategy for reinscribing history into the postmodern novel. *LETTERS*' reflexive play parodies the modernist nostalgia for lost origins, sabotaging all desire to recover the past in the stability of an aesthetic artifact or in a historic moment prior to discourse. In a parallel manner, its continual dismantling of its own codes and structures subverts the very notion of an "ultimate synthesis that we can make out of history," for the erection of any such tower of truth becomes, for Barth, the occasion for potential totalitarianism and profound territorial struggle. As Ambrose jauntily reminds us: "Closed-circuit history is for compulsives. Perseus and I are into spirals, presumably outbound" (429).

Barth's reflexive manipulation of history as a collection of letters reveals the mechanisms by which various discursive fields render their historic objects and begins to suggest the constitutive rules that govern

the construction of America in what Foucault might term our "episteme" (*Archaeology* 191). And it may not stretch the analogy that I have been drawing too far to suggest that *LETTERS* is an "archaeological history" in fictional form: an attempt to map the "intersections of a range of discourses," to "uncover the play of analogies and differences appearing in their rules of formation," and to reveal the "relations between discursive formations and non-discursive domains (institutions, political events, economic practices and processes)" (*Archaeology* 159-162). Like *LETTERS*, such archeology "deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates that temporal unity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history; it breaks the thread of transcendental theologies" (*Archaeology* 131).

Presumably Barth would agree: "All of these retracements, recapitulations, rehearsals, and reenactments really would be simply regressive if they didn't issue in reorientation from which new work can proceed" ("Replenishment" 70), and it is precisely this reorientation—of narrative form and of his readers' historical conceptualizations—that Barth is trying to achieve. As a fictional "archaeology," *LETTERS* reveals the prohibitions, values, exclusions, and behaviors that are inscribed within the competing discourses of the text of the American past and forces the reader into a necessarily self-critical position from which to continue this narrative. Although Barth seems to recognize, with Foucault, the impossibility of ever finally "describ[ing] our own archives, since it is from within these rules that we speak, since it is that which gives to us what we can say" (*Archaeology* 131), Barth nonetheless insists that we recognize the very existence of such an archive, and he urges us to begin an analysis which he recognizes we can never complete. Do we inscribe the American autobiography with the rocket's red glare of physical courage or the xenophobia that left Native American culture but a trace in the national text? How should we read the relationship between the American past and American letters, institutionalized in libraries, aesthetic traditions, literary canons, and universities? Through the patriotic effusions of Andrew Cook VI, who rhapsodizes Americans "raising from the swamp primordial great cities, lofty cathedrals, towers of learning. How were the fenny origins invoked of Rome! How *learning* was rhymed with *yearning, Tow'r of Truth* with *Flow'r of Youth!* . . . [How the university becomes] castle keep of the past!" (8)? Or through the antiliterate iconoclasm of Prinz's film "Frames," which represents the American past as a mindlessly recurrent skirmish that climaxes with the incineration of the Library of Congress during the War of 1812?

In his much-cited "The Literature of Replenishment," John Barth asserts that "the ideal post-modernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction." Keeping "one

foot always in the narrative past" and "one foot in the Parisian [post-?] structuralist present" (as Barth describes the fiction of Italo Calvino), *LETTERS* "aspires to a fiction that is more democratic in its appeal" than its modernist precursors, "without lapsing into moral or artistic simplism . . . or either false or real naivete" (70). By reflexively contemplating "the role of epistles—real, forged, and doctored letters—in the history of History . . . [and being] concerned with, and of course constituted of, alphabetical letters: the atoms of which the written universe is made" (654), *LETTERS* reinvents the possibility of history for the postmodern narrative, neither by recounting the battles, intrigues, heroes, and heroines that constitute the traditional autobiography of America, nor by repudiating them. Instead, *LETTERS* brings under archaeological scrutiny the array of ideological, aesthetic, and social codes by which such narratives have entered the text of national identity and thus begins to describe the play of power that governs the construction of the object America. At novel's end, Barth suggests that the "Tower of Truth" will be exploded—its concrete manifestation destroyed by the charges Drew Mack places at its base; its linguistic foundations by the poststructuralist charges *LETTERS* lays against the composition of history.

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