

The Author's Metamorphosis:
The Location of "the Author" in John Barth's *LETTERS*

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Abstract

1979年に発表されたジョン・バースの浩瀚な小説『レターズ』は、トマス・ピンチョンの『重力の虹』と並び、アメリカ文学におけるポストモダン小説の極点として考えられている。『レターズ』をリアリズムと（ポスト）モダニズム的言語実験との総合を試みる小説とする議論を踏まえながら、この論文は、それ以前のバース作品に特徴的な自己言及的メタフィクションが問題とした、「作者」の位置についての矛盾との関係において『レターズ』の達成を捉える。そしてそのメタフィクションの矛盾からの脱却が、小説の構造的なレベルだけでなく物語内容のレベルにおいても、作中に登場する「作者」の正体を巡る謎解きのプロットとして表れていることを示す。手紙の書き手の一人である「作者」こそが、物語中での不在の息子ヘンリー・バーリングゲーム7世にほかならず、その両者がテキストの内部と外部を行き来する作者の「変身」によって特徴づけられているのである。従来の研究ではこの小説における「作者」の正体（と小説の構造との関係）を十分に突き止められてはおらず、その点でこの『レターズ』論は一つの新たな作品解釈の提示であり、同時に、小説における「作者」の位置づけを巡る考察でもある。

Key Words: author, metafiction, presence/absence, realism, postmodernism

1. Introduction

John Barth is a highly self-conscious writer. From the beginning of his career, his fiction has shown a distinctive self-referential nature. In his first novel, *The Floating Opera*, Todd Andrews mourns the dilemma of writing his own story in a Tristram Shandy-like manner: "Good heavens, how does one write a novel! I mean, how can anybody stick to the story, if he's at all sensitive to the significances of things?...[E]very new sentence I set down is full of figures and implications that I'd love nothing better than to chase to their dens with you, but such chasing would involve new figures and new chases, so that I'm sure we'd never get the story started, much less ended, if I let my inclinations run unleashed" (2). He realizes that it is impossible to tell the story completely. Telling a story holds an inevitable difference between the telling and the told.

His self-reflective fictions derive from this acknowledgement of painful resignation.

In his career as a writer, Barth's orientation toward a self-referential structure is inextricably interwoven with his failed effort to write an autobiographical novel. After publishing his first two companion novels, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, in the 1950s, he tried writing an autobiographical novel, *The Seeker* (or *The Amateur*), while also writing a notable historiographical novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor*. In contrast to the success of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, he finally abandoned *The Seeker* in 1960. This decisive failure to write an autobiographical novel made a great impact on his following career, as David Morrell examines in detail through his correspondence with Barth. In *Giles-Goat Boy*, Barth's fourth novel, started after abandoning *The Seeker*, there is a reference to *The Seeker*. The signature of "Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher" (a letter toward imaginary editors) reads: "This regenerate Seeker after Answers, / J. B" (xxxix).

Furthermore, according to Morrell, Barth's fifth book, *Lost in the Funhouse*, also is deeply related to the failed autobiographical novel. The character Ambrose Mensch in *Funhouse* "was also the main character in *The Seeker* or *The Amateur*...that novel Barth...never completed." Two short stories, "Ambrose His Mark" and "Water-Message," were "salvaged" from *The Seeker*.¹⁾ The third Ambrose story, "Lost in the Funhouse," which depicts Ambrose's experience of being lost in the funhouse of an amusement park, can also be considered in this context. As some critics have argued, this story metaphorically describes the narrator's detachment from life or reality.²⁾ The various metafictional³⁾ and experimental devices which are foregrounded most thoroughly in *Funhouse* can be seen as Barth's disenchanted response to his failed *The Seeker*. In this sense, *Funhouse* is "the peak or nadir" (Tobin 84), or the turning point of Barth's metafictional aesthetics which leads him to a new standpoint by pressing his longstanding obsessive motifs toward their limitations.

When Barth overcame a writer's block by finishing *Funhouse* and *Chimera*, he "began to envision the possibility of a new work" (*Funhouse* 197), and set out again to utilize autobiographical realism in his next fiction, *LETTERS*.⁴⁾ This substantial novel, published in 1979, took Barth almost ten years to write. He reconsidered his position as "a fictionist who...had long since turned his professional back on literary realism in favor of the fabulous unreal" and he attempted to make "a détente with the realistic tradition" and go "back to *LETTERS*, to history, to 'realism,'" thinking that "it is as if Reality, a mistress too long ignored, must now settle scores with her errant lover" (*LETTERS* 49; 52). In *LETTERS*, he achieved the location of the transcendental "Author" and reached a position to write about his own stories by constructing a polyphonic novel. The following, through a reading of *LETTERS*, examines how Barth succeeded in reconstructing the position of the "author."

2. *LETTERS* and postmodernist synthesis

LETTERS was not only a tidemark in Barth's career, but also the high-water mark of American postmodern fiction. In fact, since it contains almost all of the themes in postmodernism such as reality, revolution, the father, the mother, the sixties, and self-reference, it is sometimes called a postmodern epic. Critics often mention *LETTERS* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as the two most significant postmodernist "big" fictions during the 1970s.⁵⁾

Under the strong influence of "The Literature of Replenishment," also written in 1979, *LETTERS* has often been connected with Barth's own argument in the essay (Harris 160-1; Schulz 183-5; Tobin 18-20). "The Literature of Replenishment" is a kind of reply to the debate surrounding the meaning of the word "postmodernism," in which Barth and others are "praised or damned as postmodernists" (196). He tries to define the term "postmodernism" in his own way, as a synthesis of premodernism and modernism. The passage below works both as a summary of his statement and as a self-commentary on *LETTERS*:

In my view, the proper program for postmodernism is neither a mere extension of the modernist program as described above, nor a mere intensification of certain aspects of modernism, nor on the contrary a wholesale subversion or repudiation of either modernism or what I'm calling premodernism: "traditional" bourgeois realism. [...] A worthy program for postmodernist fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing. My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back. [...] The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and "contentism," pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction. (*Friday* 201-3)

It is possible to read *LETTERS* from the above perspective as a work of "synthesis or transcension of these antitheses" such as premodernism/modernism, realism/irrealism, formalism/contentism, pure literature/committed literature, and coterie fiction/junk fiction. Actually, the themes represented in this list are eccentrically located in *LETTERS*. Therefore it seems reasonable to say that *LETTERS* represents Barth's theory of postmodernism in practice which he outlined in "The Literature of Replenishment."

Furthermore, the tendency to see his fiction in the light of his own essay is reinforced by the aesthetic and cultural connection between *Lost in the Funhouse* and "The Literature of Exhaustion." Thus, Barth's progress as a writer can be measured in light of his theoretical development from "exhaustion" to "replenishment." C. B. Harris writes that "[s]ignificantly, from

the corpus of his own work Barth cites *LETTERS* as an example of postmodernism, which suggests that ‘The Literature of Replenishment’ will prove as indispensable a guide through the intricacies of this novel as ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ has for *Lost in the Funhouse*” (161). In this way, “Replenishment” can be seen as “the theoretical counterpart to *LETTERS*” (Carmichael 66).⁶⁾

However, this presumption can be questioned. Most critics implicitly accept this premise and make the assertion that *LETTERS* is a synthesis of both Barth’s precedent works and the varieties of the literary tradition. Yet, is it really a “synthesis or transcension”? Even though it may be, in what sense is it a synthesis? *LETTERS* is an ensemble that consists of various themes and literary styles. For instance, when it comes to the issue of literary style, the characters in *LETTERS* employ different kinds of narratives: the realist narratives (Todd Andrews, Germaine Pitt), irrealist narratives (Jerome Bray, Ambrose Mensch), schizophrenic narratives (Jacob Horner), historical narratives (Andrews Cook IV and VI), and metafictional narratives (“the Author”) all are juxtaposed within the style of the epistolary novel. Yet it cannot be concluded from this point that *LETTERS* succeeds as a synthesis. It can only be seen as a juxtaposition, not a synthesis.

Similarly, the arguments that try to find the value of this novel in the individual narratives of the characters are also unacceptable. Again, Harris follows this line. He states, for example, that Ambrose Mensch alone can achieve the vision of mutuality between world and word, while all of the other characters fail to embrace the vision respectively and fall into “representational thinking” (190-2). Then he attributes Ambrose’s realization directly to “Barth’s own epistemological-ethical-esthetic stance in *LETTERS*” (193). Although his conclusion that “the world, Barth has come to realize, does not exist *in* so much as *through* the word” (194) does not seem incorrect, his argument passes over a significant point in *LETTERS*: the existence of “the Author” in the text.

To find the true achievement of *LETTERS*, it is necessary to discuss the strange location of “the Author” in this novel. The location of the Author here should not be considered just a typical metafictional device. Rather, the location of the Author has an indispensable function in the composition of both the story and form of *LETTERS*. Because of the existence of “the Author” in the text, the diverse narratives, themes, and literary styles in this novel function as a postmodernist synthesis instead of a juxtaposition. The achievement of *LETTERS* resides in the metamorphosis of “the Author.” Therefore, the basic questions are: Who is “the Author”? Where is he? What time does he live in? Both on the level of form and content, or of narrative and meta-narrative, *LETTERS* is no less than a detective story about “the Author’s identity.”

3. Dualization of the Author

LETTERS is an epistolary novel which consists of the letters written by seven characters. The time in the story is from March to September in 1969. The main story describes a series of events that occur around Marshyhope State University, an imaginary university in Maryland. Five out of seven writers are re-introduced from Barth's earlier fictions: Todd Andrews from *The Floating Opera*, Jacob Horner from *The End of the Road*, Andrews Burlingame Cook VI, who is a descendant of Henry Burlingame III in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and Jerome Bray who is also a descendant of Harold Bray in *Giles-Goat Boy*. Germaine Pitt (Lady Amherst), a descendent of Madame de Staël, is introduced as a new character. The last character is "the Author," who is working on a novel entitled "LETTERS." In this novel "the Author" sends letters to each character and asks them to be characters in his novel. Their interplay, in the process of the Author's project, "LETTERS," comprises the story of *LETTERS*. In short, this novel is a kind of "self-begetting novel" which describes "the making of *LETTERS*."⁷⁾ The presence of the Author also gives this novel a metafictional feature.

This kind of metafictional device is far from innovative. The devices such as the intervention of the author into the text, and conversations between the author and characters can be seen as a kind of cliché of postmodern metafiction. Instead, it is one of the distinctive styles already found in the high-modernism of the early twentieth century. As "the Author" self-consciously writes, "a Pirandelloish or Gide-like debate between Author and Characters were regressive, at least quaint, at this hour of the world, as naïve literary realism: a Middle-Modernist affectation, as dated now as Bauhaus design" (191). From contemporary readers who are accustomed to self-referential metafiction, this style of *LETTERS* might be seen as an obsolete technique that has already been seen too many times.

However, the position of "the Author" in *LETTERS* is more complicated than what can be found in typical metafiction. Facing the impasse of infinite metafictional chains in *Funhouse*, Barth is fully conscious of the serious paradox of metafiction. As Patricia Waugh puts it, the problem of metafictional structure appears in its location of the author:

The author attempts desperately to hang on to his or her "real" identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens, however, when he or she enters it is that his or her own reality is also called into question. The "author" discovers that the language of the text produces him or her as much as he or she produces the language of the text. The reader is made aware that, paradoxically, the "author" is situated in the text at the very point where "he" asserts "his" identity outside it. [...] Roland Barthes has made familiar the concept of "the death of the author." It is a paradoxical concept, as metafiction shows. The more the author appears, the less he or she exists. The more

the author flaunts his or her *presence* in the novel, the more noticeable is his or her *absence* outside it. (133-4)

When the author intervenes in the text and inserts an outside voice, his/her identity outside the text is erased because of the act of performance. In this sense, the author's presence inside the text is nothing but his/her absence outside it. Then the assertion of his/her "real" identity as creator of the text makes no sense. This is exactly the same observation that Barth describes in "Life-Story" in *Funhouse*, a story about an author who writes a story about an author. In *LETTERS*, conscious of this fundamental paradox of metafiction, Barth uses a different style. He no longer uses the simple pattern of the intervention of the "live voice" of the author.

The structure of *LETTERS* reflects the fact that "the Author" in the text, named "John Barth," and John Barth, are never identical. In other words, Barth takes advantage of the metafictional paradox rather than suffering from it. By doing this he manipulates the effect of the presence of the absent author outside the text. This strategy appears in that Barth gives "the Author" a position as "one of the characters." In fact, "the Author" does not seem to have any authority over the other characters. "The Author" is not really a creator of other characters; the five characters recycled from Barth's precedent fictions are different from those in the fictions of "the Author." In *LETTERS*, "the Author" has written fictions modeled after those people who really exist (in the same fictional world as "the Author"). Letters from the characters reveal that they are outside the Author's fictional universe: Todd Andrews tells "the Author" about his "mixed feelings" for being his model in *The Floating Opera* (85); Jerome Bray requests counsel from the lawyer Todd in an action of plagiarism against "the Author" (27-30). He insists that "the Author" plagiarizes Bray's "Revolutionary NOVEL" (30) in his fictions and tries to explain how the stories are unnaturally similar. Also, "the Author" and Ambrose Mensch are college friends who "were so close in our growing-up and literary apprenticeships" (653) and they both become novelists. In this sense, it is clear that *LETTERS* intentionally foregrounds the fundamental difference between "the Author" inside the text and John Barth (Stonehill 161). The two are simply different persons except that they are both named John Barth.

The difference between the character John Barth ("the Author") and the real author John Barth is already obvious in the structural devices of *LETTERS*: the date of eighty-eight letters in this novel are determined by the alphabetical shape of the each word "L" "E" "T" "T" "E" "R" "S," as the front page of each chapter shows (1, 55, 195, 343, 433, 537, 657). In contrast to the basic realism of the letters, the date when each character writes a letter is structurally controlled by Barth's design. Following this design, "the Author" writes all of his letters only on Sunday. Here again, the "characterization" of "the Author" by Barth is revealed. This characterization of the Author functions as an implication to the reader that there is another author outside the text.⁸⁾

“The Author” is not the author. Then, who is he?

This “dualization” of the author (Schulz 71-89) is declared in the subtitle of this novel. It reads: “an old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls & dreamers, each of which imagines himself actual” (49). It is clear that the “seven fictitious drolls & dreamers” includes “the Author” (Stonehill 161). In short, the first step that Barth takes in *LETTERS* is to dualize or divide “the Author” by making him a character inside the fiction instead of trying to insert the live voice of the creator outside the narrative.

Yet this “dualization” is merely a first step. Once he divides “the Author” into two by utilizing metafictional paradox as an important aesthetic of the novel, he then intentionally combines the two. In this way, “the Author” in *LETTERS* is both present and absent at the same time. Among the eighteen letters that “the Author” writes, there are several that do not address any character inside the story. He writes two letters to “the Reader” and another to “Whom It May Concern.” In these letters, “the Author” ceases to be a character inside the fiction and performs as the author outside the novel by violating the rules about time and space. In the letter of “March 2, 1969,” “the Author” states:

If “now” were the date above, I should be writing this from Buffalo, New York, when Lake Erie is still frozen and the winter’s heaviest snowfall yet ahead. [...] It is not March 2, 1969: when I began this letter it was October 30, 1973: an inclement Tuesday morning in Baltimore, Maryland. The Viet Nam War was “over.” [...] Now it’s not 10/30/73 any longer, either. In the time between my first setting down “March 2, 1969” and now, “now” has become January 1974. Nixon won’t go away [...] (42-5)

By describing real world affairs in his letters, “the Author” violates the rules of letter dating which the author sets. If “the Author” is completely one of the characters inside the story, he cannot write about future affairs, for “the Author” writes this letter on “March 2, 1969.” The date enclosed in quotation marks (“March 2, 1969” [42]) indicates that “the Author” deliberately manipulates the time. In addition, this letter has no return address. The other letters of “the Author” have signs of his address, like “Department of English, Annex B/ State University of New York at Buffalo/ Buffalo, New York 14214,” or “Chautauqua, New York.” Yet there is no description of place in the letters to “the Reader.” From where, in what time, does “the Author” write them? This question easily leads to the answer that “the Author” who writes the letters cannot be identical with “the Author” who writes to other characters. By definition, a character cannot write a letter to the reader. Nevertheless, “the Author” does. This is the second strategy about the location of author which Barth employs in *LETTERS*. Barth ingeniously combines and disguises the two (fundamentally different) locations of “the Author” by utilizing an identical

name. Unlike the narrators in *Funhouse*, who are encapsulated within metafictional infinite chains, “the Author” stands both inside and outside, present and absent at the same time in *LETTERS*.

Here the settlement of the metafictional paradox can be seen by means of novelistic aesthetics. In short, Barth never tries to eliminate the difference between the two levels of the author in *LETTERS*. Rather, he utilizes the difference as a crucial means to design a novel. Of course he is fully conscious of the difference. Yet once he self-consciously problematizes it as an object to describe, he cannot escape the infinite metafictional chain such as “the author who writes about the author who writes about the author.” Therefore, Barth intends to dissolve the differences of the dualized author into one. The peculiar location of “the Author” in *LETTERS* is a product of the necessity of Barth’s strategy.

4. Who is “the Author”?

The strange location of the Author in *LETTERS* is seen not just in the form or style. The location of “the Author” is also the central theme of the narrative content. The true achievement of this novel lies in its combination of the two. In the fictional world of *LETTERS*, too, “the Author” is both absent and present.

In the story that takes place in 1969, while “the Author” really lives in Buffalo as a professor in the department of English, and openly communicates with other characters in the letters, he never appears in the story, i.e., no one meets him. When Germaine Pitt visits his cottage at Chautauqua Lake, “the Author” is literally absent (361-2). She also calls him many times but cannot get through (363). Ambrose alone speaks with him, yet it is only over the phone (“my Saturday night’s phone call” [651]) and the contents of the conversation are never represented in the text. “The Author,” who constantly appears in the letters, somehow never shows himself as a physical figure.

This thoroughly strange absence of “the Author” in the story serves as a clue for the plot of *LETTERS* which surrounds the mystery of a man. As Harris states, “[a]t its narrative level, *LETTERS* functions very much like a detective story” (180). It is a detective story about the mystery of the identity of Andrew Burlingame Cook VI and his missing son Henry Burlingame VII. Yet what is important here (and what Harris overlooks) is that the mystery about the identity of the Cook/Burlingame father-son pair is inseparable from the mystery of the strange absence of “the Author.” In short, “the Author,” who is both present and absent in *LETTERS*, is Henry Burlingame VII, who has somehow disappeared from his father.

A. B. Cook VI, who is one of the seven writers of the letters, is a “self-styled Laureate of Maryland” (6). Writing bad poetry to praise Maryland, he attracts support from conservative right-wing people around Tidewater, including the President of Marshyhope State University,

John Schott. He is a descendant of Ebenezer Cook, the original “self-styled Laureate of Maryland” from the seventeenth century, and Henry Burlingame III, the private teacher of Ebenezer. Since he is “a strange man; a dangerous man; a buffoon who is no fool” (79), the other characters who know him often wonder about his background and his real intentions. Todd Andrews and Joe Morgan talk about “what if anything underlay [Cook’s] oafish masquerade” (218). Todd thinks he is “a wealthy, eccentric, heartfelt reactionary,” while Joe thinks he is a “terrorist,” “a threat not from the right but from...the Far Left” (218-9). Germaine wonders whether A. B. Cook and her French ex-lover Andre Castine are in fact the same person. In short, Cook is represented as an “enigma” in the narrative.

At the same time, Cook VI also functions as a “Prime Mover” (475). He cleverly manipulates other characters and situations, and controls the story. In fact, a number of events in the narrative are caused by Cook for the sake of his “Second American Revolution” project. Harris enumerates his role as “Prime Mover”:

He is responsible for moving the Remobilization Farm from Pennsylvania to Fort Erie and for bringing Joe Morgan the Farm. He is also responsible for bringing Lady Amherst to Marshyhope U as well as for her firing and eventual rehiring. He has gained control of Reg Prinz’s film, a “project” he plans to turn to his “own purposes” (583), and Bray’s production of Honey Dust, which he plans to use in financing his Seven-Year Plan. Moreover, it is claimed or intimated that he has arranged the deaths of, among others, the Doctor, Joe Morgan, Reg Prinz, and his father, Henry Burlingame VI; the projected deaths of Ambrose, Todd Andrews, Bray, and possibly his own son; and the presumably fake deaths of M. Casteen[e] and A. B. Cook VI, which is to say, of himself. These apparent facts are scattered, in true detective story fashion, throughout the lengthy narrative. (Harris 180-1)

His control over these people and events is due to the supernatural ability of his “metamorphosis,” which he inherits from his ancestor Henry Burlingame III. By vertiginously transforming between three different personalities—Andrew Burlingame Cook VI, Monsieur Casteene, and Baron Andre Castine—he drives the narrative and proceeds with his own project. His metamorphosis is the only unrealistic factor in the narrative content of *LETTERS* (except for the existence of “the Author”). For the reader as well as the other characters, the issue of the identity of these three different figures, whether they are really the same person or not, is the central enigmatic mystery in the narrative of *LETTERS*.

At least for the reader, this mystery of Cook is finally solved. In the letter to his missing son, A. B. Cook VI explains the role of his three personalities respectively (583-4). Yet when this mystery about Cook’s metamorphosis is solved, another mystery appears: his strange death. Cook,

as Baron Andre Castine (or Lord Baltimore), makes a promise of remarriage to Jane Mack, the president of Mack Enterprise. Though this is part of his project, he has to put forward the date of remarriage against his will. To deal with this unscheduled event, Cook/Casteene/Castine decides to kill his personality as Andrew Burlingame Cook VI. He causes the “accidental” death of Cook VI under the pretext of an explosion of the ammunition chamber at Fort McHenry. Two days later, he also “kills” Andre Castine to cancel the remarriage with Jane. After the “death,” Cook/Casteene/Castine disappears from the narrative. The mystery of his death is whether or not he is really dead. Like the mystery about his missing son, the narrative does not clearly reveal this point.

However, it is not valid to say that “the real culprit will remain forever undisclosed” and that therefore “*LETTERS* functions as an anti-detective story,” criticizing the Western predilection “to view the world *meta-ta-physika*” with the view that “narrative complications, no matter how tangled, will be resolved at the novel’s end” (Harris 181-2). If the ending of *LETTERS* is merely open-ended and indeterminate, then, this novel is no more than a typical example of numerous second-class postmodern metafiction. However, the success of *LETTERS* as a novel resides in the achievement of the necessary connection between the mystery about the strange location of “the Author” and the mystery about Cook VI who transforms himself into the Author by his death. This also means that Cook succeeds in his project of searching for his missing son Henry, whose alias name is “the Author.”

To support this point, it is necessary to examine another mystery that surrounds Henry (Henri) Burlingame VII. This theme is expressed in the plot that involves A. B. Cook VI and Germaine Pitt who both search for their missing son. When Cook discovers and reads a series of letters written by his great-great-grandfather A. B. Cook IV, which are addressed to his future son or daughter, he realizes the pattern of the history of the Cook/Burlingame clan. Cook VI wishes to convey the “striking pattern of filial rebellion” (407) of the Cook/Burlingame clan to his son Henry Burlingame VII, but he is unable to locate Henry. Germaine Pitt also wishes to meet her son Henri and accidentally sees him twice, but she cannot speak a word with him, so the situation of her son remains unknown to the end.

It is possible to identify doubleness in the absence of Henry Burlingame VII and that of “the Author.” In fact, there is something more than mere similarity between them. The clue to solving the mystery about Henry/Henri is in the delivery of the letters. While seeking his son, Cook VI receives a “laconic message” from his son, though the “undated, no return address” letter does not appear in the text (478), and he knows that his son “somehow acquired and read” his “great-great-great-grandfather’s four letters to his unborn heirs,” i.e., the letters of A. B. Cook IV (478). Cook wonders how his son got these letters which were written by their ancestor. He writes

to his unknown son: “[h]ow am I to reply, when...you do not mention which texts you read or how you came by them (the originals, authentic indeed, are in my possession, awaiting your firsthand examination; I have copied them only twice: once for a certain historian, again for a certain novelist; we shall see which you saw)” (478). Germaine Pitt is “a certain historian” to whom he has sent a copy of the letters, and “the Author” is “a certain novelist.” Cook (as the revolutionist Andre Castine) sends a copy of these letters to Germaine in order to ask her to edit and publish them as a historical document so that their son Henri/Henry can read it (254). Also, he (as Laureate of Maryland, Andrew Burlingame Cook VI) sends the other copy to “the Author” who requests from him some historical information about the Cook/Burlingame clan (406). Excluding the possibility that Henry/Henri received these letters from Germaine Pitt, Cook speculates on the possible relation of “John Barth (‘the Author’)” to Henry and writes:

Lady A. [Germaine] and I have no further business. (Mr. B [“the Author”] and I do: was it he whose path somehow crossed yours, and who showed you what I neither granted nor explicitly denied him permission to share? I should like to know. Indeed, as I plan to send him summaries of these “posthumous” letters too, I here ask him directly: Are you, sir, in some sort of correspondence with my son, Henry Burlingame VII? If you sent him the four “prenatal” epistles, will you kindly forward this as well, and the ones perhaps to follow? *And tell me where he is!*) (479)

Cook’s conjecture that “the Author” has had some sort of correspondence with his son reveals that the relationship between “the Author” and Henry is much closer than the mere symbolic similarity in their “absence.” Rather, by an accident which occurs around these “posthumous” letters of Cook IV, it is clear that their similarity comes from the fact that they are the same person.

On the wedding day of Germaine Pitt and Ambrose Mensch (who is the “altered ego” of “the Author” [653]), Cook suddenly hands a “Francis Scott Key Letter” to Ambrose (he portrays Key in a film), and tells him that it is “an unfinished personal letter to his son, which he’ll want back when the filming’s done, but ’twill do for the purpose” (684). After he receives the letter from Cook, Ambrose puts it in the pocket of Key’s costume, together with the other “unopened letter” that he had received from “the Author” (682). When he takes off the costume after the shooting of the film, he leaves the two letters in the pocket of the costume. Later, recalling that “the ‘F. S. Key’ letter given [Ambrose] by Cook had been described by its giver as ‘in fact a letter to [his] son,’ which he would want back,” Ambrose “hurries to the dressing room barracks for his costume coat... and finds that Cook’s letter is no longer in it: only yours [the Author’s]—its envelope neatly slit, its return address neatly snipped” (688). Here the mystery arises: who stole Cook’s letter, opened the envelope, and cut off the return address of “the Author”? From the

letters of Germaine, the reader gets no answer.

However, we get a decisive clue in the postscript attached to Cook VI's last letter written by his son Henry Burlingame VII. The "true culprit" is Henry. This postscript is significant because Henry suggests that all of the precedent letters from Cook VI are forgeries (752). This remark by the son performs an anti-climactic function, implying the possibility that the entire historical narrative of Cook VI is no more than a fabricated fiction. Yet what is more important is his statement that in fact Henry attended the wedding scene "in sufficient disguise" and heard Cook "mention that the document representing the 'Francis Scott Key Letter' was in fact a letter in progress from himself to his son." According to Henry, "Cook so declared it, of course, for my benefit, assuming or hoping that I was within earshot." Again, he could do this owing to the supernatural ability of his metamorphosis: "I could have passed for the mayor, the best man, the groom himself if I'd needed to—even as the 'father of the bride'" (752). Henry also confesses that he took the letter "to let Cook know I was on hand...without otherwise revealing myself to him." Furthermore, he makes another strange observation:

In the pocket of "Francis Scott Key's" jacket, together with Cook's letter to me, was yours to the newlywed Mr and Mrs Ambrose Mensch, which you must excuse my opening to see whether it was another of Cook's stratagems. I took the additional liberty (I was hurried) of tearing off your return address, then replaced the letter, unaltered, in its envelope, the envelope in the pocket. For reasons of my own I subsequently decided to send you a deciphered copy not only of the foregoing but of those "posthumous letters of A.B. Cook IV," as well as of "my father's" to me of 10 September last, urging me to join him at McHenry. (754)

According to Henry, he accidentally opened the Author's letter and tore off the return address by mistake. His excuse for the mistake is that "he is hurried." What is revealed by this obviously unnatural excuse is the fact that it is by no means an accident; he deliberately tore it off. For Henry, the address of "the Author" is something that must be concealed. He had to tear it off because Henry was "the Author." As long as these passages are carefully read, it is almost impossible to give another reasonable explanation. One might think that Henry needs the Author's address to send the postscript to the Author, but that cannot explain his "reasons of my own," or why he has to make an excuse to cut out the return address "against his will." Since Henry is "the Author," he has to send the postscript to himself to disguise the truth.

It might be possible to assert that the identification of Henry and "the Author" does not fit the text. For instance, considering the fact that "the Author" was born around 1930 (for he is a college friend of Ambrose who was born in 1930), "the Author" cannot be Henry/Henri in the real world, since Germaine Pitt gave birth to Henri in 1940. Yet since Henry has the ability of

metamorphosis, he is allowed to perform as “the Author” in the design of the novel. If he could pass for “the mayor, the best man, the groom himself...even as the ‘father of the bride’” (752), then, he could also pass for “the Author.”

Moreover, in *LETTERS*, “the Author” himself is located both inside and outside the text by disguising the irreconcilable differences between “the Author” as a character and John Barth as a real author. “The Author” metamorphoses himself by writing a letter to “the Reader.” Because of this transformation, Barth dissolves the metafictional paradox about the location of the author. In this sense, both “Henry” and “the Author” have the ability of metamorphosis. “The Author,” therefore, must be a descendant of the Cook/Burlingame clan.

5. Father-Son/the Author-“the Author” Conflict

In this light, it can be explained why “the Author” gets angry with A. B. Cook when Cook makes the (half intentional) mistake of referring to himself as a “collaborator” of *LETTERS* instead of a “character” in it (405-6; 533). Basically, “the Author” does not really care when Jerome Bray accuses him of plagiarism (530-1), or when Jacob Horner rejects his offer to be a character in *LETTERS* (532). Regarding Ambrose Mensch, “the Author” is willing to ask him to collaborate on the design of *LETTERS* (653-55). Yet he refuses Cook’s suggestion to collaborate in the writing of the novel, playing “a role of the Author” (405). By considering the identification of “the Author” and Henry, we can understand that the exceptional resentment of “the Author” to Cook is caused by Henry’s conflict with his father. As the historical documents of A. B. Cook IV show, the pattern of the history of the Cook/Burlingame clan consists of the conflict between the sons and the fathers: “Every first born son in the line has himself against what he takes to have been his absent father’s objectives, and in so doing has allied himself, knowingly or otherwise, with his grandfather” (407). In this sense, *LETTERS* is also a story about the father-son conflict. In fact, the conflict between sons and fathers is represented in the letters of almost all of the main characters. As a critic states, “these letters are an attempt to make one’s peace with generational conflict. Almost every character in this book seeks communication with either parent or child, or both” (Roemer 43-4). Todd Andrews, for instance, continues to write letters to his dead father who had committed suicide in 1930. Ambrose Mensch also writes to an invisible “Other” named “Yours Truly” who had sent him a blank letter in “Water-Message” (651). Their conflicts with “Father” can be seen as variations of the conflict between Cook and Henry, or the Author and “the Author.”

With all of the above considered, it is finally possible to “solve” the mystery about Cook’s strange death. By his symbolic death, Cook transforms into “the Author.” At the same time, he is united with his son Henry. The identification of Cook and “the Author” through his death means

the dissolution of the father-son conflict between Cook and Henry. As the foundation for this conclusion, it is necessary to compare the last letter of Cook with the last letter of “the Author” addressed to “the Reader.” Near the end of the letter, Cook tells his son that he changed his plan to meet Henry for a “Second Revolution.” After performing his “death,” he wakes up in some alien world.

I shall say only that I died at Fort McHenry. That is this morning, three days later, I woke, as it were, half tranced on a point of dry ground between two creeklets, in the steaming shade of loblolly pines, realizing where I was but not, at once, why I was there. As in a dream I reached for my watchpocket, to fetch forth and wind my ancestors’ watch...and, as if vouchsafed a vision, I understood that I must not nor need not reappear publicly in any guise. (751-2)

He wanders into a dream-like other world after his “death.” He receives “a vision” there, and realizes that he must disappear for good. Where he is located, and the reason why he realizes the vision are not described here. Strangely enough, however, there is a similar passage in the letters of “the Author” to “the Reader.” In this last letter, again, “the Author” violates the rules of dates and enumerates many real world affairs in his letter. Among the topical news in the real world outside the text, there appears an odd passage. Compare the following with what is quoted above:

He [the Author] makes out in the hazy distance what appear to be familiar loblolly pines, a certain point of dry ground between creeklets, a steaming tidewater noon, someone walking half tranced, knowing where he is but not at first who, or why he’s there. He yawns and shivers, blinks and looks about. He reaches to check and wind his pocketwatch. (771)

This is a repetition of Cook’s letter from the viewpoint of “the Author.” He sees “someone,” and there is no doubt that it must be A. B. Cook VI, “walking half tranced.” The dream-like other world Cook wanders into is no less than “the real world” where “the Author” outside the text lives. Cook comes to the same location as “the Author.” In other words, Cook dies inside the text and is transferred to outside the text. At the end of the novel, Cook has a final disguise as a “collaborator.”

This means that Cook also succeeds in collaborating with his son Henry. By disappearing outside the text, the father collaborates with the son. Toward Henry, he declares: “*You*, Henry, if my letters have done their work, are henceforth my disguise. [...] You must imagine me present in my ancestor to that aforementioned certain distance: watching from some Castines Hundred or Bloods-worth Island of the imagination” (752).

Therefore, the father disappears. The place mentioned as a “certain distance” is outside the text, where the Author stands. This declaration of collaboration between father and son can also

be understood as the author's voice which collaborates with "the Author" as a character inside the text. The Author/Cook is united with "the Author"/Henry.

6. Conclusion

The dead end of self-conscious metafiction which Barth faced in *Funhouse* is the irreconcilable difference between "the Author" and the Author. No matter how hard he tried to assert his identity outside the text, Barth could not write a narrative where he located himself as the origin/father. In *LETTERS*, however, he relativizes the impasse and does not try to eliminate the difference. Rather, utilizing the difference as the central mystery of the detective plot in the novel, he dissolves the impasse into a father-son collaborative disguise. The inevitable conflict between Father-Son/the Author-"the Author" is synthesized here. "The Author" is transformed into the Author. Through this metamorphosis of "the Author," he can stand both inside and outside, watching "seven fictitious dolls & dreamers" within the realm of literary imagination. *LETTERS* is proof that John Barth metamorphoses himself, beyond being just one of many postmodernist metafiction writers, into a real novelist.

Notes

- 1) Morrell also describes what kind of story *The Seeker* was. He states: "*The Seeker*...was about a man so detached from life that he stayed in the top room of a high tower, spying down on human affairs through a giant camera obscura as well as every kind of telescope and microscope" (88).
- 2) There are many critics who suggest this point. For a recent example, see Worthington 124-31.
- 3) The most typical definition of the term "metafiction" is: "fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (Hutcheon 1). Or, according to Inger Christensen, "metafiction is regarded as fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making" (11). In this paper, however, the preferred definition is formulated by Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. She states: "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). What Waugh correctly emphasizes is the fact that metafiction intends to "pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality."
- 4) Barth has often stated that he had a serious writer's block in the late 1960s. As Richard Bradbury explains, "the recognition of this block led to a turn in a new direction; to the writing of *LETTERS*" (61).
- 5) See McCaffery and Karl 444-87.
- 6) It is interesting to note that this kind of dominant approach is shared even by the critics who complain about *LETTERS*. Asserting that "[f]or a novel with so much history in it, *LETTERS* is oddly unhistorical,"

Gerald Graff demonstrates his criticism on the basis that “*LETTERS* is the kind of novel one might expect to come out of the view of twentieth-century history presented in ‘The Literature of Replenishment,’ history seen as an inventory of events without a coherent tendency” (160-1). Johnny Payne follows this line, quoting Graff’s influential essay. His point is that *LETTERS* is as politically conservative as “Replenishment,” and although there are many descriptions of the revolutionary movement in the 1960s, “Barth’s narrative works assiduously through artifice toward an ultimately uncritical affirmation of the liberal-republican ideal” (201).

7) Steven G. Kellman employs this term for his book about the self-reflective narrative form of “the modern French, British, and American novel.” According to Kellman, the “self-begetting novel” is fiction that “projects the illusion of art creating itself” (3).

8) Thomas LeClair writes that this “godlike control behind the text” by the author is “Barth’s limitation” (185). By this performance, according to LeClair, Barth secures his transcendental authority.

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