

Fiction and Reality: John Barth's Philosophy

Isono Arai

John Barth is against realism and he has a theory that the essence of a novel lies in its fictitiousness, and he has put this theory into practice in his writings. It is proved in the devices of his works, such as stories within stories, the "reorchestration," and a kind of word game. How does Barth consider fiction, and why?

In an interview Barth says, "unlike those critics who regard realism as what literature has been aiming at all along, I tend to regard it as a kind of aberration in the history of literature"(Bellamy, 4). Instead of realism he thinks that "irrealism" is the main current of literature—the word "irrealism" being derived from Jorge Luis Borges's "irrealist." It should be noted that though Barth raises an objection to realism, he does not deny reality itself, or rather he seems to admit reality. This is reflected in the words of Fenwick, who is discussing with Susan what a story should be, in order to write their story: "I won't have our story be unadulterated realism. Reality is wonderful; reality is dreadful; reality is what it is. But realism is a fucking bore" (*Sabbatical*, 136). Moreover, Barth says that one of Borges's favorite fictional devices is "the contamination of reality by dream," by irreality, and he approves it as the best device for a literary work.

Those facts seem to show that Barth's objection to realism does not lie in reality itself but in the attitude of realists toward works of literature. As the mimetic theory regards art as an imitation of aspects of the universe, realists attempt to offer us a view of this universe. Consequently, they become imitators of the universe, and

their works are imitations of it.

On the contrary, Barth has a notion that "a novel is not a view of this universe, but a universe itself; that the novelist is not an imitator, but a maker of universes." This concept that a novel is an invention and should be a fictive world seems partly to come from his questions as to whether this world is real, whether reality, fact, or truth really exists, and, first of all what reality is. These questions lead to the conception that although in the light of reality reality is reality and a dream a dream, but in a different view, that is, in the light of a dream, a dream is reality and reality is a dream. This conception is expressed in the letter from Jerome B. Bray to Todd Andrews in "Bellerophoniad":

Inasmuch as concepts, including the concepts fiction and necessity, are more or less necessary fictions, fiction is more or less necessary. Butterflies exist in our imagination, along with existence, imagination, and the rest. Archimedeses, we lever reality by conceiving ourselves apart from its other things, them from one another, the whole from unreality. Thus Art is as natural an artifice as Nature; the truth of fiction is that Fact is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world. (Chimera, 256)

In this sense, it is impossible to draw a definite line between reality and fiction, as Susan says: "simple truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, loyalty and disloyalty, may be as difficult to distinguish" (*Sabbatical*, 113).

The impossibility to distinguish reality from fiction is linked with Barth's attempt to change reality into fiction. It finds expression in his words that "the universe is a novel; God is a novelist!" instead of saying that a novel is a universe and a novelist is God (*The Friday Book*, 23). John Stark also touches upon the subject of reality and

fiction, and states that in fictive world reality becomes unreality:

• • • things in fiction that seem to be part of the real world because of their similarity to things one knows about the author actually belong to fictive world. That is, despite their previous status they become unreal when they appear in the world of art
• • • Barth's use of autobiography thus leads to a suggestion that at best life is no more real than art, and perhaps it is not real at all. (Stark, 129 – 130)

The conception that the world of art is unreal, and life itself also is unreal, appears in Barth's works in the idea that life is a story. For example, Barth creates Ebenezer Cooke as a character who looks at life "always from the *storyteller's* point of view," and, therefore, "lives are stories, he assumed; that stories end he allowed-how else could one begin another?" (*The Sot-Weed Factor*, 294) Moreover, this idea also finds expression in Ebenezer's father's words, when he rescues a young lady who has attempted suicide: "How is't ye wish to end what you've scarce begun?' I asked her. 'Many's the merry tale hath a bad beginning'" (*The Sot-Weed Factor*, 37).

Barth's "tendency to treat life as a work of fiction," as Robert A. Hipkiss claims (Hipkiss, 109), leads to Barth's optimistic view of life as a play, which is expressed in the Doctor's words to Jacob Horner:

Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story • • • •
Suppose you're an usher in a wedding • • • From your viewpoint, the wedding is a minor episode in the very interesting history of *your* life, and the bride and groom both are minor figures. What you've done is choose to *play the part* of a minor character.
• • • So in this sense fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life.

(*The End of the Road*, 88–89)

Because the existence of reality itself is uncertain, reality becomes possible to be invented. As the result, reality and fiction are reversed, and it becomes impossible to distinguish reality from fiction. This is a reason why Barth pursues fictitiousness so passionately in his writings. How does Barth think fiction is, and what it ought to be?

His theory of fiction is connected with his philosophy of “as if.” The narrator of “Anonymiad” explains fiction as follows:

I gloried in my isolation and seeded the waters with its get, what I came to call *fiction*. That is, I found that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not, and that people existed who didn't, I could achieve a lovely truth which actuality obscures — especially when I learned to abandon myth and pattern my fabrications on actual people and events: Menelaus, Helen, the Trojan War. It was *as if* there were this minstrel and this milkmaid, et cetera; one could I believe draw a whole philosophy from that *as if*. (*Lost in the Funhouse*, 186)

Fiction is the world of “as if,” and this philosophy is repeated in *Chimera*, and it becomes one of the themes of this story. Lee T. Lemon points out:

That “as if” and its need is what gives the most moving of Barth's tales their poignance. For Scheherazade and the Author, the favorite words are “*as if it were*”; the “as if” permits them not only to dream their fictions and to talk their craft, but to craft their lives. In other fictions also, the “as if,” whether present by name or not, permits not only metaphors, but life itself. (Lemon, 169)

The theory of "as if," which makes even life fiction, produces Barth's notion that a work of art is an invention, in contrast to realists' notion of a literary work that it offers us a view of real life.

His opinion that a work of art should be an invention is expressed in his words: "I'm a storyteller. Which is to say, a professional liar" (*The Friday Book*, 16). This opinion is reflected in a statement of his characters, Editor B, in "Publisher's Disclaimer": "Plot, for the young novelists we applaud, is a naughty word, as it was for their fathers; *story* to them means invention, invention artifice, artifice dishonesty" (*Giles Goat-Boy*, XV). In addition, it should not be overlooked that through Todd's phrase, in the beginning of *The Floating Opera*, Barth claims that fiction is artifice and entertainment, not a serious product.

In fact, Barth makes his universe pure fiction by giving it the form of the text within the text. Furthermore, it is said that there is endlessness in the story of *Chimera*, and that Barth does not put a period at the end of its final sentence, emphasizing fiction, if we listen to Seki Setsuya: "I cannot tell whether an infinitude really exists or not. Perhaps infinitude is fiction" (Seki, 17). Barth's optimistic view that reality is fiction makes his universe a world of pure fiction.

Works Cited

- Barth, John. *The Floating Opera*. Rev. ed., 1967; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1980.
- _____. *The End of the Road*. Rev. ed., 1967; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.
- _____. *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Rev. ed., 1967; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1980.

- _____. *Giles Goat-Boy*. Rev. ed., 1966; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.
- _____. *Lost in the Funhouse*. 1968; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.
- _____. *Chimera*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1972.
- _____. *Sabbatical: A Romance*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1982.
- _____. *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984.
- Bellamy, Joe David. "John Barth." In his *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974, pp. 1-18.
- Hipkiss, Robert A. *The American Absurd*. New York: National University Publications Associated Faculty Press, 1984.
- Lemon, Lee T. *Portraits of the Artist in Contemporary Fiction*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Setsuys, Seki. *Ningen to Sūgaku*. Asahi sensho, 1976.
- Stark, John. *The Literature of Exhaustion*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1974.