Your webfoot amphibious marsh-nurtured writer will likely by mere reflex regard many conventional boundaries and distinctions as arbitrary, fluid, negotiable: form versus content, realism versus irrealism, fact versus fiction, life versus art. His favorite mark of punctuation will be the semicolon.

—John Barth, “Some Reasons Why I Tell the Stories I Tell the Way I Tell Them Rather Than Some Other Sort of Stories Some Other Way”

Any cell—man, animal, fish, fowl, or insect—given the chance and under the right conditions, brought into contact with any other cell, however foreign, will fuse with it. Cytoplasm will flow easily from one to the other, the nuclei will combine, and it will become, for a time anyway, a single cell with two complete, alien genomes, ready to dance, ready to multiply. It is a Chimera, a Griffon, a Sphinx, a Ganesha, a Peruvian god, a Ch'i-lin, an omen of good fortune, a wish for the world.

—Lewis Thomas, The Lives of a Cell
John Barth's fictive world is one of fluid borders and boundaries. Like those of Hawthorne and Faulkner, it is a realm where one moves easily from the real to the magical and mythical, from dreams of waking to waking dreams. And also like theirs it is a world that derives its originating impulse from a strong sense of place. Barth remarks that "when a writer like Mark Twain, or Hawthorne, or Faulkner—and I hope myself—finds part of his or her imaginative energy in a place, it's likely to be because that place, consciously or intuitively, is a kind of metaphor for the author's real concerns. And these concerns are likely to be just what Aristotle tells us literature should be about: human life, its happiness and its misery. . . . One way you get at those, as Faulkner does, and I. B. Singer does, and Mark Twain did, and the rest, is through your intimate knowledge of a particular region." And in another place he goes on to add that "if between twins as they get older less and less goes without saying, in a good marriage between a man and a woman or a writer and his place, so much more every season goes without saying that should I grow as old and wise as Sophocles I'll never get it all said."1

The ambitious and brilliant Letters is Barth's attempt to say what he sees as he looks at his place as a practicing novelist in the 1970s in the United States, having returned at midlife and midcareer to his origins in tidewater Maryland. And what he sees as he surveys the "spreading field, the human scene" (PL, 7), is a marvelous panorama that includes the writer's own history, that of his country, and that of the novel as a genre. For, like Hawthorne and Faulkner, Barth's starting point as a novelist is with inherited materials: the twice-told tale, the old-time legend, old world conventions; and the magic of his art is that of re-energizing and giving new life to time-worn materials. "At heart I am an arranger," he writes, "whose chiefest literary pleasure is to take a received melody—an old narrative poem, a classical myth, a shopworn literary convention, a shard of my experience. . . . and, improvising like a jazzman within its constraints, reorchestrate it to present purpose."2 Letters is his
attempt to "reorchestrate some early conventions of the Novel," in particular the "epistolary novel, already worked to death by the end of the eighteenth century." As a "Doctor of Letters," the Author of Letters writes that "I take it as among my functions to administer artificial resuscitation to the apparently dead" (L, 654). And the phenomenon of the "Death-of-the-Novel" and the "End-of-Letters" (438) is a dominant theme in Letters. Both the Author and his characters nostalgically lament the "fallen state of Literature" (58) and the passing of the "heroic period of the genre" (52) that has "fallen into obscure pretension on the one hand and cynical commercialism on the other" (84). With "its popular base usurped, fiction has become a pleasure for special tastes, like poetry, archery, churchgoing" (33).

To be a novelist in 1969 is [the Author writes] a bit like being in the passenger-railroad business in the age of the jumbo jet: our dilapidated rolling stock creaks over the weed-grown right-of-ways, carrying four winos, six Viet Nam draftees, three black welfare families, two nuns, and one incorrigible railroad buff, ever less conveniently, between the crumbling Art Deco cathedrals where once paused the gleaming Twentieth Century Limited. Like that railroad buff, we deplore the shallow "attractions" of the media that have supplanted us, even while we endeavor, necessarily and to our cost, to accommodate to that ruinous competition by reducing even further our amenities: fewer runs, fewer stops, fewer passengers, higher fares. Yet we grind on, tears and cinders in our eyes, hoping against hope that history will turn our way again. (191)

The Author, however, possesses a magical power that will revive the past, bring the dead letter to life, redeem the character of the written character. In the same way that "heat + pressure + time turn dead leaves into diamonds," he will employ a "metaphorical physics to turn stones into stars" (652), an "alchemy" (429) to transform "paralyzing self-consciousness [into] enabling self-awareness" (348). Faced with the fragmented ruins that disenchant Hawthorne and the stony silence that
paralyzes Melville he turns to a “tender physics” that can change “petrifaction” into “estellation” (348). That turn, however, is not made without struggles and doubts. Letters follows (and records) a period marked by false starts and self-questionings that echo those suffered by Barth’s American precursors. Before he can construct the spacious structure of Letters he must free himself from the dark corridors of the funhouse and the mire of marshy tides, places where, as Tony Tanner has said, one is unable to “disentangle dreaming from doing.”* From within these mazes the letters project seems a “vast morass of plans, notes, false starts, in which I grew mired with every attempt to extricate myself” (C, 202). Suffering from “Writer’s Block” (202), the Author loses “track of who I am; my name’s just a jumble of letters; so’s the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code I’ve lost the key to” (10–11). Like Melville and Hawthorne at crucial stages of their careers, Barth seems momentarily to lose the sense of the value of fictions and any conviction that they may be significantly related to his experience of reality.5 He is tormented by visions of stories that fail, by a sense that his own work is drifting back to him devoid of meaning, and is haunted by a corrosive doubt concerning identity and its relation to language.

I think I’m dead. I think I’m spooked. I’m full of voices, all mine, none me; I can’t keep straight who’s speaking, as I used to. It’s not my wish to be obscure or difficult; I’d hoped at least to entertain, if not inspire. But put it that one has had visions of an order complex unto madness: Now and again, like mazy marshways glimpsed from Pegasus at top-flight, the design is clear... Between, one’s swamped; the craft goes on, but its way seems arbitrary, seems insane. (C, 147)

It is partially in an attempt to identify the “voices” who tell his “tale” and to gain a perspective on his life and craft that the Author of Letters, like the Genie in “Dunyazadiad,” decides to “learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing
where I’ve been—where we’ve all been” (C, 10). Hence the novel springs from the marsh, the “swamp primordial” (L, 8), “source of life” (526), its foundations resting “ineluctably on the loam of the Eastern Shore” (178) of Maryland. Ironically, however, the creative energy that the “marsh-nurtured writer” discovers when he returns to his fertile sources, an energy that restores his “imaginative potency” (C, 202), is “an altogether impersonal principle of literary aesthetics. . . . the Principle of Metaphoric Means, by which I intend the investiture by the writer of as many of the elements and aspects of his fiction as possible with emblematic as well as dramatic value: not only the ‘form’ of the story, the narrative viewpoint, the tone, and such, but, where manageable, the particular genre, the mode and medium, the very process of narration— even the fact of the artifact itself” (203). It is this Principle that frees the Author from the mire of the plans, notes, false starts of a “complicated project, a novel called Letters” (202) and allows a “transcension of paralyzing self-consciousness to productive self-awareness” (L, 652). And the nature of the relationship between a formal principle and the spellbinding power of story, between wonder and enlightenment, between the magic in the web of narrative and the complexity of its weave is a primary concern of LETTERS. Like James, Barth begins with a “kind of plan or form” that precedes the story itself, but he is able to avoid the Jamesian sense that the “ado” of the plot somehow violates and trivializes the purity of the form. For Barth the artist need not forsake the “world for language, language for the processes of narration, and those processes for the abstract possibilities of form.” He may instead be “enabled to love the narrative through the form, the language through the narrative, even the world through the language” (650). Hence the complex form of LETTERS, a novel that consists of seven stories told in letters and arranged so that they gradually entwine in such a way that the exposition, complication, and climax of each is implicated in and echoes that of all the others. “There are, in fact in LETTERS,” according to Barth, “seven more or less parallel narratives that you can imagine going across the time of the novel like the bars
of music in a concert score, and they do intertwine as do the bars of music on a concert score. But a reader who happened, for example, to like Lady Amherst, my middle-aged British gentlewoman in reduced circumstances, and who didn’t want to interrupt her story, should just go through and read all her letters. It’ll make sense that way, too. This is a novel that could make sense either in parallel form or serial form.”

The pattern for the dramatic action is itself echoed by the elaborate design of the novel which consists of eighty-eight letters each of which is assigned a letter of the alphabet so that when arranged on a calendar for the seven months of the action according to the dates of their composition, they spell out the subtitle as well as form the title, LETTERS. The seven correspondents of Barth’s seventh book consists of characters from his six previous books plus one invented for this work and each contributes “not only the letters that comprise the story but elements of its theme and form.” The book, therefore, will “echo its predecessors in [Barth’s] bibliography, while at the same time extending that bibliography and living its independent life” (L, 431). That is to say it will move forward by going backward, a movement that is echoed by the plot which “like waves of a rising tide . . . will surge forward, recede, surge farther forward, recede less far, et cetera to its climax and dénouement” (49).

As an epistolary novel written in the late 1970s, LETTERS itself suggests an attempt to move forward by going backward, or as Barth puts it, “to go back and look at the origins of the novel in the English language tradition . . . and see whether I could reorchestrate some of the old conventions to contemporary purposes.” This strategy is consistent with his analysis of the direction of postmodernist fiction in his suggestive essay, “The Literature of Replenishment.” For Barth the contemporary novelist need not repudiate or imitate either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He is free to “rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and ‘contentism,’ pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction.” “My most
recent novel, Letters," he writes, "is postmodernist by my own definition, not however, without traces or taints of the modernist mode, even of the premodernist mode." And indeed Letters is an attempt to synthesize "straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and non-political artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror," an attempt to bridge the gap between the novel as a work of art and the novel as a conveyor of real human passions, between storytelling understood formalistically and the story in its moving immediacy: "alphabetics + calendrics + serial scan- sion through seven several correspondents = a form that spells itself while spelling out more and (one hopes) spellbinding along the way, as language is always also but seldom simply about itself" (L, 767). It is a book about real-life kinds of characters who are also written characters, at once "actual people" (97) and "hommes de lettres" (526) who come together in promiscuous yokings that scatter both children and meanings and hatch schemes and plots that produce both stories and anagrams, and its abstract or formal elements echo and figure the emotional rhythms that the stories generate in the reader in such a way that the act of reading becomes a process of interpreting the relation between the literal and figurative, the dramatic and em- blematic value of the stories. Hence the "similarity between conventional dramatic structure—its exposition, rising action, climax, and dénouement—and the rhythm of sexual intercourse from foreplay through coitus to orgasm and release" as well as the "popularity of love (and combat, the darker side of the same rupee) as a theme for narrative, the lovers' embrace as its culmi- nation, and post-coital lassitude as its natural ground" (C, 24-25). Moreover, the "relation between the teller and the told [is] by na- ture erotic," (25), with the "teller's role . . . regardless of his ac- tual gender . . . masculine, the listener's or reader's feminine, and the tale . . . .the medium of their intercourse" (25-26). This is not to suggest, however, that the reader's role is a passive or inferior one; a "good reader of cunning tales work[s] in her way as busily as their author" (26). Narrative, therefore, is a
“love relation, not a rape: its success depends[s] upon the reader’s consent and cooperation, which she [can] withhold or at any time withdraw; also upon her own combination of experience and talent for the enterprise, and the author’s ability to arouse, sustain and satisfy her interest” (26) And like all love relations, that between reader and author is “potentially fertile for both partners. . . . The reader is likely to find herself pregnant with new images,” and the “storyteller may find himself pregnant too” (26).

This play of images, a process of reception and interpretation, is initiated in Letters by the Author's account of his “three concentric dreams of waking” (L, 46), for these dreams, in spite of their arbitrary boundaries and “marshy equivocations” (636), are dreams of origins and as such offer the reader several versions of the Author’s “self” as well as a sort of “history” of the text. But unlike the concentric circles of a tree trunk that move out from a central point, these seem at first to suggest a “concentricity of pretensions, at best a succession of improvisations and self-ignorances” (187). For these dreams, like the marshland that is their setting, confuse and blur conventional distinctions. Fictive and historical events, persons, and places; actual and invented worlds; real and imagined selves seem to flow together as the Author attempts a narrative that will be the story of his story.

The narrative begins with an account of the relation between the self and its signs, echoing in the process Ambrose Mensch's “ambivalent reflections on the phenomenon of proper names: 'I and my sign . . . neither one nor quite two'” (166); for in the three dreams of waking there are multiple I's and a variety of signs that tend to blend together without ever completely merging and to make it difficult to say which is the first or second, the origin or the image. The dreams, of course, exist in the form of a letter (the eighth of the eighty-eight that constitute the novel and the only one addressed by the Author to “Whom it may concern”) and as a written, textual object it immediately raises the question of who is writing and to whom. Moreover, as
words, or a “recorded” (47) dream, the letter suggests a double interpretive problem, the first deriving from the Author’s decoding of his dream images and the other from the relation between the words of the dreamer and an analytic interpreter. As Lady Amherst will “later” remind the Author, “to put things into words changes, not only upon the events narrated, but upon their narrator” (80). To write, in short, is to change the world and the self, for life and its signs are “symbiotic” (341). The dreams, then, offer a tangled genealogy of self that is explained by the Author in terms of the development of his writing career, projects finished and unfinished, but their “content” is hardly as “clear” (47) for the reader as for the Author since it depends upon the form of the relation of this eighth letter to the eighty others that form its context.

For the Author, the recurring dream seems to offer a way of affirming meaning and establishing his authority, but for the reader “concerned” with its relation to letters and to letters the “dream must be reread” (484), and this process has the effect of suggesting that the Author can never be unequivocally himself and hence cannot have an unquestioned authority over his own life and work. However, this discovery does not allow the “concerned” reader—call him/her critic—to speak authoritatively about the text, to find a central I and unequivocal meaning in its labyrinth of echoing voices. For words here disclose other words that jostle and echo each other in a way that suggests the presence of a private code or cipher that must be solved before the reader can engage in a meaningful dialogue with the text.

“I woke half tranced, understanding where I was but not at once who, or why I was there, or for how long I’d slept” (46), the Author begins and thereby suggests that the “T” for him, as for Ambrose in Lost in the Funhouse, is a mere mark or “hieroglyph and gibber” (LIF; 34) without context or content. However, these are slowly supplied as the sun and his watch signify that “it was yet midsummer midafternoon, a few hours into Cancer” and other “sign[s] of life”—“two turkey buzzards . . .
a stand of loblolly pines . . . the hum of millions upon millions of insects . . . bees above all" (L, 46) identify the place as the marsh. Self-awareness begins with a half unconscious movement to kill a mosquito (represented in the Author’s account by its scientific sign, *Aedes sollicitans*), but with it comes a set of confusing memories.

I recognized that before consulting my wristwatch I’d felt for a pocketwatch—a silver Breguet with “barleycorn” engine-turning on the case, steel moon hands, and a white enameled face with the seconds dial offset at VII, the maker’s name engraved in secret cursive under XII, and my father’s monogram, HB, similarly scribed before the appropriate Roman Numeral IV—a watch which I did not possess, had never possessed, which could not with that monogram be my father’s, which did not so far as I know exist! Reached for it (in the watch pocket of the vest I didn’t wear, didn’t own) with more reflexive a motion than then turned my left wrist. (46)

This passage is remarkable in a number of ways. It focuses on the relation between a self and its signs, in this case a gesture and an object, but in a way that disturbs the connection. The spontaneous, unconscious gesture of reaching for his father’s watch seems to confirm his identity and place by providing him with an origin against which he can define and fix himself. And yet that familiar object, which appears to him with surprising specificity, apparently belongs to the world of dreams. Although he is now more fully awake, he feels “one foot in distant time or dreams.” And his confusion is matched by that of the reader who comes to the passage for the first time. For on first reading we can say only that it is the verbal representation of a dream image whose content is not clear. And the reader’s uncertainty grows as the dream of waking continues to trouble the Author’s sense of selfhood.

I knew “myself,” come briefly down under Mason and Dixon’s to visit certain cattailed, blue-crabbed, oystered haunts
of—aye, there was the rub: I had been going to say "my youth," but what that term referred to, like dim stars and ghost crabs, I could not resolve when I looked straight at it. And when I looked away . . . from my mind's eye-corner I could just perceive, not one, but several "youths," all leading—but by different paths, in different ages!—to this point of high ground between two creeklets where I lay, stiff as if I'd slept for twenty decades or centuries instead of minutes. There was the neutral, sleep-wrapped, most familiar youth, neither happy nor unhappy, begun in Gemini 1930, raised up in sunny ignorance through the Great Depression, Second War, and small town Southern public schools. I knew that chap, all right . . . his was the history most contiguous with the hour I'd waked to.

But beside it, like a still-sleeping leg that its wakened twin can recognize, was another history, a prior youth, to whom that pocketwatch and vest and a brave biography belonged. They shared one name's initial: bee-beta-beth, the Kabbalist's letter of Creation, whence derived, like life itself from the marsh primordial, both the alphabet and the universe it described by its recombinations . . .

Then what was this third, faint-bumbling B, most shadowy of all, but obscured more by mythic leagues of time than by self-effacement or disguise? And not retreated to the midday marsh, but fallen into it as though from heaven. (46-47)

As the details of the dream accumulate a certain design or pattern begins to emerge. The self who wakes "half tranced" in the haunts of his youth is a disturbingly multiple one, for present to the eye of his memory are three quite different youths who share only the common experience of falling asleep in the marsh and a common initial. And yet neither figure seems to exist independently of the other two. Each seems somehow to indicate or refer to the others and to be in that sense a sign, hence something other than itself. But if there is a "family Pattern" (481) suggested by the relationship between the "several 'youths,'" the details of its design are not immediately obvious even though the Author fully awake in his study in Buffalo,
John Barth

New York, maintains that both the origins and the "content" of his dream are "clear" (47). It derives, he believes, from his desire to write a *Marylandiad* with a hero who "would live the first half of his life in the first three dozen years of the republic . . . and the second half in its 'last' . . . with a 128-year nap between" (47), a project that he put aside for *Letters*. The images of his dream, in short, echo and to some extent anticipate the details of his waking world, for when the dream recurs five years later, he finds himself "back in the Old Line state," having "put by Buffalo for Baltimore" (49) and other works for *Letters*. The pattern of his life and work, then, echoes the pattern of his dream: "Having decided in 1968 that the 'Author' character in *Letters* would be offered an honorary doctorate of letters from a Maryland university, I receive in 1969 just such an invitation in the mail. And presuming in 1969 to imagine . . . a 'hero'. . . who falls from mythic irreality into the present-day Maryland marshes—I find myself back in the Old Line state" (48-49).

The "I" in these passages, of course, refers at once to at least two "characters," the "Author" in *Letters* and the author of *Letters* who seem somehow to be different forms of the same self since both are signified by the written character "I." ("He's certainly an authorial chap like me," Barth admits in an interview.11) However, neither Author nor author will be found outside of *Letters*, standing unambiguously as its explanatory origin, for the self cannot be reduced to one signification. Each of the selves that the "youths" of the Author's dream becomes will be created by the work itself. The "neutral, sleep-wrapped, most familiar youth" (46), "would-be writer" (80), and mediocre drummer who becomes "John Barth, Esq., Author" (3) is born out of the exchange of letters between the Author and his characters, an exchange that takes the form of a fictional history of the works of John Barth, a "story" (338) of his stories. And as that story is told in *Letters* by letters, we follow the movements of "John Barth" from Cambridge to Johns Hopkins, to Pennsylvania, to Buffalo,
to Baltimore and watch as a “local lad” (83) makes good and becomes a Doctor of Letters.

As the Author admits, this is a story of a life “colorless in its modest success” (653), and its hero is a shadowy and passive figure at best. He is represented as the “unnamed other laborer on Mensch’s castle” (188) in Ambrose Mensch’s autobiographical fragment, *The Amateur*; as a curious college student and would-be writer in Todd Andrews’s account of a New Year’s Eve party at the Cambridge Yacht Club in 1954, a party that the Author is unable to “recall” (191) in 1969, and as a fellow author and “esteemed collaborator” (408) in a letter by A. B. Cook that is “dictat[ed] . . . by telephone, from notes, into [his] secretary’s machine” and “transcribe[d] by her” (408) and sent to the Author, a relationship that the Author vigorously denies. And he appears, too, as the author of eighteen unsigned letters and as the addressee of thirty-one others written to him by fictional characters who believe themselves to be factual. His “presence,” in short, is “duly reported” (345) but his “factual existence” remains “more than usually inferential” (533). At times he appears as a “thundering silence” (348), at others as an “epistolary echo” (533) or as a “Near But Distant Neighbor” (440) who is represented by Lady Amherst’s description of a “modest cottage” on Lake Chautauqua with “no one at home” (352).

But if the life of the Author’s “most familiar youth” is sparsely and colorlessly rendered, the story of the “prior youth to whom the pocketwatch and vest . . . belonged” (47) is told in exciting and flamboyant detail. And this, too, is a story of letters told in letters, a story of A.B.C. IV told in the form of four letters from the hero to his unborn child and five posthumous letters to his widow. And as is the case with all the stories in *Letters*, it begins and ends in “marshy equivocation” (636) and is marked by genealogical tangles and dreamy confusions. From the time that Henry Burlingame III is found as a baby floating in a canoe on the Chesapeake, his name “label’d in red ochre on his chest” (24) the Cook/Burlingame line is troubled by ques-
tions of paternity and identity. And these genealogical confusions are echoed in the Author’s “Three concentric dreams of waking” that involve him in the tangles of that “family... thicket” (130). The pocket watch for which he instinctively reaches in his “half tranced” (47) state, we learn from later letters, is that of Henry Burlingame IV, “father” of A. B. Cook IV, who is, of course, as one of the characters in Letters, also engendered by the Author. Indeed, the tangles of the dream become increasingly complex as the reader comes to view the letters that constitute the novel in a comparative fashion. Letters is the Author’s creation, his “delivered child” (431) and he is “in a sense,” to use Todd Andrews’s word, the “engenderer” (97) of all its characters. However, this metaphor of physical engenderment that implies that what the artist makes is his child or offspring is partially subverted by the Author’s dreamlike sense that the characters he has created have in some way fathered him, since they have become a part of his self-history. When A. B. Cook VI writes to the Author in response to an “invitation to participate in a work in progress” (430), he describes the family watch in words that echo equivocably those that represent it in the “three concentric dreams of waking.”

He [Ebenezer Burling] also encloses, by way of proof of his identity, a pocketwatch which he claims was similarly and belatedly given him by his own father: a silver Breguet with “barleycorn” engine-turning on the case, steel moon hands, and a white enameled face with the seconds dial offset at the VII, the maker’s name engraved in secret cursive under the XII, and the monogram similarly scribed before the appropriate numeral IV. I have this watch before me as I speak. (413)

In Cook’s account, the watch is offered as evidence that “Ebenezer Burling,” writing to his twin children in 1827 is actually A. B. Cook IV, their father, who had been reported killed by an errant Congreve rocket just before dawn on September 14, 1814, during the British bombardment of Fort McHenry in Baltimore
Harbor, and the watch reappears in a letter written to the Author by Lady Amherst, where she describes it as being found just before dawn on September 14, 1969, after an explosion “below the ramparts on the West Branch side” (687) of Fort McHenry leaves behind the “shattered remains of an adult male body, clothed in early-19th-Century costume and bearing a miraculously undamaged 18th-Century pocketwatch, still ticking” (688). There is, Lady Amherst maintains, “no reason to doubt that it was [A. B. Cook VI who] went to smithereens where his ancestor did, but less equivocally” (688), and yet there later appears in the text a letter from A. B. Cook VI, addressed to his son and dated 17 September, 1969, in which he describes his own equivocal dream of waking.

I shall only say that I died at Fort McHenry. That 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 re-appear publicly in any guise. (751)

Henry Burlingame VII, Cook’s “son,” of course, in a postscript to the Author will maintain that “this letter, like its author, is a fraud” (752) and go on to add, again equivocably, that the “man who died at Fort McHenry was not my father” (754). And the textual tangle is further snarled when we recall A. B. Cook VI’s earlier description of the experience of his ancestor, A. B. Cook IV.

“On a point of dry ground between two creeklets, in the shade of a stand of loblolly pines,” he rests; he dozes; he dreams . . .

Of what? We are not told; only that he woke “half tranced, understanding where [he] was but not, at once, why [he] was there” . . . that he was—odd feeling for a Cook, A Burling-
ame, but I myself am no stranger to it—“a different person” from the one who had drowsed off. He fetches forth and winds the pocketwatch sent to him so long ago in France by “H.B. IV”—and suddenly the meaning of his unrecorded dream comes clear, as surprising as it is ambiguous. He must find his father, and bring that father to Castines Hundred, to his grandchildren! (483)

This passage illustrates nicely the pattern of displacement that decenters the “brave biography” of A. B. Cook IV as well as those of his ancestors and descendants in the Cook/Burlingame line. The passage is taken from A. B. Cook VI’s “digest of [his] decipherment of the first of Andrew Cook IV’s ‘posthumous’ letters: three removes from an original . . . whose author’s own wife would not accept as bona fide” (480), and it echoes ambiguously other texts scattered throughout Letters. Although the family letters ostensibly are written to represent, explain, and protect parental authority so that the child “(guided by these letters, which must be your scripture if aught should take us from you)” (323) may be freed from the “dismal pattern” (286) of rebellion that dominates the history of the Cook/Burlingame line, they in fact have just the opposite effect. Any sense of an originating authority is undermined by the activities of translating, transcribing, quoting, and editing that occur as they pass from hand to hand, so that they become finally merely words on a page, but, it is important to add, “words that . . . make the wordless happen” (332), for they form a wonderful story with plots and counter-plots, a story of “bravura, intrigue and derring do, sophistication and disguise” (47).

Still the story does not reveal the figure of “John Barth” any less equivocably than does the account of the “most familiar” youth. His presence is suggested by a series of echoes as the crucial details of his dreams of origins reappear as constitutive elements of the Cook/Burlingame history. But as the passages cited above suggest, neither the motif of the dream of waking nor the image of the family watch functions as a key that will
unlock the meaning of the Author’s dreams of selfhood. To the retrospective eye of the reader, the “original” appearance of the textual elements is equivocated as they become part of a design, that makes them signs that refer to later episodes, and hence to something other than themselves. The result is a situation “richer in associations than in meanings” (385). One obvious implication of the Author’s “three concentric dreams of waking” is that his identity is both nourished and troubled by the character that he has created, a character with whom he shares at least “one name’s initial: bee-beta-beth, the Kabbalist’s letter of Creation, whence derived, like life itself from the marsh primordial, both the alphabet and the universe it described by its recombinations” (47). That character, moreover, is represented in the text by a series of equivocal family letters that are in the possession of his descendant, A. B. Cook VI, who, like his ancestor A. B. Cook IV and the Author, is a “fictitious” dreamer who “imagines himself to be factual.” What the dreams point to, in other words, is not some “Pirondelloish or Gide-like debate between Author and Characters” a conceit “as regressive, at least quaint, at this hour of the world, as naive literary realism” (191), but rather to the fact that all of the characters are “hommes de lettres” (526), products of a “novelsworth of letters” (24), and that the illusion of their “factual existence” (533) depends upon the power of words to “make the wordless happen” (332).

Hence, the third “most shadowy” version of the Author’s youth appears in the punning form of a “faint-bumbling B,” suggesting perhaps that “John Barth” has “come to believe that virtually everyone with his initial” (143) is some version of himself. Certainly the swarming “bees” of the marsh “going about their business” (46) are a “reduplicated image, punning on [“Barth’s”] initial” (113) and Burlingame’s as well as those of Jerome Bonaparte Bray and Bellerophon, both of whom are suggested by that “blind, lame, vatic figure afloat on the tepid tide” reminding us too, perhaps, of the Bruguet, Buffalo, Baltimore and bomb burst” (47), in short, hinting that the common center of the three dreams is the letter B., the “instrument of creation, the
mother of letters and of the world" (328). Not surprisingly, the Author’s relation to this shadowy self is an especially interesting one. Barth has said that he hopes that Bray, whom he labels one of the “more fantastic characters,” will “elicit a certain amount of sympathy by the novel’s close,” and there is no doubt that the connection between the Author and this character “who might be a large insect of some kind” is a particularly provocative and problematic one.13

If the character of A. B. Cook IV entangles the Author’s personal history with that of his country and knots the act of writing to the practice of “the making of history as if it were an avant-garde species of narrative” (73), the “blind, lame, vatic figure” (47) ensnares “Barth’s” life with that of the “wandering heroes of myth” (531) and fiction-making with the “writing out for public sale a kind of myths called novels” (C, 248). Jerome Bray first appears in “Bellerophoniad” where he drives a “mechanical Pegasus named V. W. Beetle” and lives at Lilydale, “an entire polis of seers and sibyls” (248), and he maintains his mythic status in LETTERS. His grandfather, son of a Tuscaroran Chief, claims to have “conceived” Bray’s father “upon a wild Appoloosa mare” (L, 423) and the child is found by H. C. Burlingame VI, “an orphan of the storm . . . rescued from his bulrush basket and raised up in the marsh as though he were [his own] despite his bad foot” (425).

Barth writes in Chimera that “myths . . . are . . . poetic distillations of our ordinary psychic experience and therefore point always to daily reality” (199) and “Bellerophoniad” and “Persiad” are reorchestrations of classical myths in terms of the themes and conventions for the traditional novel and the forms and structures of modernist fiction. In LETTERS this process of transformation becomes a metaphor for one of the Author’s central concerns. The fact that he finds himself transported from Buffalo “back in the Old Line State” after imagining “a ‘hero’ . . . who falls from mythic irreality into the present-day Maryland marshes” and “put[ting] by LETTERS in pursuit of a new chimera called Chimera” (L, 49) suggests a process that we might call (paraphrasing
Barth in "The Literature of Exhaustion") the contamination of reality by myth. As Herbert Schneidau has noted, "one primary attribute of mythology is its communicability and tendency to spread. . . . Myths seem to pass between certain kinds of cultures even through the most evanescent contact, almost as if they were infectious."14 It is this aspect of myth that leads A. B. Cook IV to maintain that the "future" of the Indian "lay not in history but, as it were, in myth" (320), that "as Lord Amherst infected the Indians with smallpox, Pontiac infected white Americans with Myth, at least as contagious & insusceptible to cure," an infection that results in the "gradual 'reddening' of the whites" (127).

The Indian survives in the present time action of Letters in the hybrid figure of Jerome Bonaparte Bray, who possesses a complex genealogy that suggests the mixed forms of life in mythology. Claiming kinship with the Bonapartes, the Iroquois Nation, as well as with the animal and insect worlds, Bray seems to the other characters to be "real" but "mad as a hatter" (368), a "horny maniac," a "lecherous . . . lunatic" (540), the most "hair-raisingly creepish male animal upon this planet" (766). And indeed the text leaves open the possibility that he is responsible for most of the violent acts that mark the ending of the novel: the possible rapes of five women; the drone attack on Bloodsworth Island; and the destruction of the Baratarian and its crew, among others. However, since all of the events in Letters are textual rather than performative ones the usual relation between the text and the circumstances or context that it represents is missing, and this absence leaves all issues of origins, authority and authorship open to question and makes it difficult to say unequivocably what exactly is being textually represented at any particular point. In spite of his assertions to the contrary, Bray too is "an homme de lettres" (36) and his history and story are implicated in those of the "swarm of hommes de lettres" (526) that constitute the novel. The result is that questions concerning the origins and meaning of events and selves are "idle ontologies" (107) that may lead to "illumination" but
never to "solutions" (768). One example will illustrate the point. In the final section of the novel Todd Andrews, writing to his "fictitious forebear" (692) concerning his last cruise on the skip-jack, Osborn Jones, describes an experience of August 28, his "Last Night Out" (728), which occurs in the "magic Sawmill Cove: high-banked, entirely wooded, houseless, snug, primeval ... a place to make one miss the world" (728).

In the early hours my sleep was broken by a shocking noise: from somewhere alongshore, very nearby, as feral a snarling as I've ever heard, and the frantic squeals of victims. A fox or farm dog it must have been, savaging on a brood of young something-or-others. For endless minutes it went on, blood-chilling. Insatiable predator! Prey that shrieked and splashed but for some reason could not escape, their number diminishing one by pathetic one! I rushed on deck with the 7 x 50's, shouted out into the pitch-darkness (the moon had set), but could see and do nothing. The last little victim screamed and died. Baby herons? Frogs? Their killer's roaring lowered to an even growl, one final terrible snarling coup de grace, then almost a purr. There was a rustling up into the woods, followed by awful silence. Long moments later a crow croaked; a cicada answered; a fish jumped; the night wood business resumed.

I stood trembling in my sweat. Nature bloody in fang and claw! Under me, over me, 'round about me, everything killing everything! I had dined that evening on crabs boiled alive and picked from their exoskeletons; as I ate I'd heard the day’s news: Judge Boyle denies Kennedy request to cross-examine Kopechne inquest witnesses; last of the first 25,000 U.S. troops withdrawn from Viet Nam; U.S.S.R. acknowledges danger of war with China. And Drew would become a terrorist, only accidentally killing others. And you, sir, killed yourself, the only lesson you ever taught me. Horrific nature; horrific world; out, out! (728-29)

No other section in LETTERS deals so movingly with "human life, its happiness and misery," than does Andrews's account of his final cruise, and this passage, in particular, renders with a
The Romance of the Word

Shakespearean intensity the horrifying grimness of reality, a reality that resists Todd’s attempt to understand it and leaves him at the last “mystified, chagrined, and pooped” (692) and with the suspicion that he may be the victim of an “elaborate conspiracy” (727), a victim of friend and enemy alike. For him there will be no “winding up of business,” no “illuminating of mysteries” (730) before ending his life. And yet the pathos of Todd’s representation of his failed life is disturbed by the antirepresentational mode of Jerome Bray’s final letter which echoes and questions the illusion of reality that characterizes Todd’s account.

Dear Granama,

O see kin, “G.IIIs” bottled dumps—oily shite!—which he squalidly hauled from his toilet’s last gleanings. 5 broads stripped and, bride-starred, screwed their pearly ass right on our ram-part! You watched? Heard our growls and their screamings? Now Bea Golden (“G’s” heir)’s Honey-Dusted 4-square: grave food for her bright hatch of maggots next year! Our females are all seeded; our enemies are not alive; so, dear Granama, take me to the hum of your hive! (755)

This passage, of course, reminds us of the “squeals,” “screams,” and “growl” that disturb Todd’s sleep on 28 August and invokes a number of the events that threaten and mystify him but in a way that textualizes them and robs them of their horrifying immediacy. The comic rhymes, the outrageous parody of the National Anthem function as antirepresentational elements that disturb our illusion that the characters of the novel are actual, authentic people, engaged in real life problems, each with his or her own needs and desires. Read in the context of Bray’s letter, Todd’s words lose their reality effect and become merely written signs that echo others that displace them. Todd, we recall, like Bray, insists that “I’m not a homme de lettres: my dealings are with the actual lives of actual people” (97); he “rapes” Jeannine a.k.a. Bea Golden “a tergo, puppy-dog style”
(707) recalling both Bray's fascination with bees and Honey dust as well as his search for women to "take delivery in the rear" (426); and Todd's Freudian identification of himself and Jane Mack with the man and woman in the 1921 "advertisement for Arrow shirts" (463)—"It is after all an Arrow shirt, and she is its willing target" (464)—suggests Bray and his venemous "barb" (426). Todd's words, in short, disclose Bray's words as well as real life events as the play of repetition overcomes the magic of representation.

However this disturbing infectiousness is in keeping with Bray's American Indian and mythological antecedents since he does possess "abilities, capacities, as extraordinary" (746) and unusual as those ascribed to his ancestors. For example, Levi-Strauss points to the fact that marriage between animals and humans was commonly accepted by the American Indian.

We know what the animals do, what are the needs of the beaver, the bear, the salmon, and other creatures, because long ago men married them and acquired this knowledge from their animal wives. Today the priests say we lie, but we know better. The white man has been only a short time in this country and knows very little about the animals; we have lived here thousands of years and were taught long ago by the animals themselves. The white man writes everything down in a book so that it will not be forgotten; but our ancestors married the animals, learned all their ways, and passed on the knowledge from one generation to another. 15

Schneidau, who cites this passage, goes on to note that "by mythological expectations the unions of humans with animals might produce human beings who can transform themselves into many shapes. [One of Bray's remarkable abilities.] Metamorphosis emphasizes not the monstrosity of hybirds but the kinship that underlies all forms of life" (94). This characteristic of myth makes it an appropriate metaphor for one of the Author's concerns in his "three concentric dreams of waking," namely, the form of his relation to a mythic self, figured in letters in the
enigmatic character of Bray who shares not one but two names' initials with "John Barth." This is not a heroic self, but a self that is a parody of the hero, an "imperfect mimicry" (L, 638) of the mythic figure Bellerophon, "who believes he can achieve mythic herohood by perfectly imitating the Heroic Pattern and who learns that by doing so what one becomes is a perfect imitation of a mythic hero" (637). This "blind, lame, vatic figure" (47) undermines through parody the success stories of the other two youths, but the author nevertheless implies that it too stands, perhaps obliquely, for an aspect of himself.

Bray represents the presence of "mythic irreality" (49) in the realistic world of letters, and insectlike he infects that world with his trance-inducing drug, Honey Dust, which with its seven magical ingredients, including the "freeze dried feces of G. III" (758), is as "spellbinding" (767) as the Author's seven-part narrative. The mode of Bray's relation to the Author, in other words, is that of mimicry. The titles in his bibliography mimic those in "Barth's," and he accuses the Author of plagiarism, an accusation that the Author responds to in the following way:

Like those book reviewers who choose to mimic (and attempt to surpass) the author under review, you have seen fit to address me in the manner of my novel, as though you were one of its characters nursing a grievance against your author.

Such mimics and allegations are best left unacknowledged: Claw a churl by the breech, an Elizabethan proverb warns, and get a handful of shite. (351)

This passage describes nicely the form of the relationship between the Author and the characters in Letters. Although, as Lady Amherst puts it, the Author is "not held in universal admiration" (373)—A. B. Cook VI offers "to arrange [his] assassination for Joe Morgan" (373) and he is the object of Bray's threatening vehemence, he refuses (with one exception) to acknowledge any personal relation to the characters who help to represent him even though they all seek direct access to him. He
John Barth

insists that their “connection be not only strictly verbal, but epistolary” (52). The one exception is Ambrose Mensch, his one-time “alter ego” (653) with whom he was “close in our growings up and literary apprenticeship” (653). But his connection is an “old and long since distanced” (653) one, and it like the others is “symbolic but not merely symbolic” (551), for in a “sense” the “dialogue” is a “monologue” since “capital-A Authors are ultimately, ineluctably, and forever talking to ourselves. If our correspondence is after all a fiction, we like, we need that fiction: it makes our job less lonely” (655). The distinction that this passage makes between Author and character provides a way of understanding the relation between Jerome Bray and “John Barth.” As I have suggested, the figure of “John Barth, Author” in Letters is an indication that John Barth himself, the author of Letters, insofar as the reader can know him in his writing, is the tendency always to dream himself as an imaginary someone else who is, at the same time, an expression of himself.16 This relationship is figured in the tendency of his fiction to be “mildly prophetic” (48) so that “what has been fiction becomes idle fact, invention history,” the “fabulous irreal” a part of the “realistic tradition” (52). From Jerome Bray’s side of the “fun-house mirror” (52) of fictive language “John Barth” seems to have plagiarized from Bray’s “writings” which were never the “fictions they represented themselves as being, but ciphered replies to . . . parental communications” (34), and from the Author’s side, Bray seems to mimic or parody “John Barth’s” imaginative creations. This relationship suggests at once the formal play and “spellbinding” seriousness that characterizes the world of Letters, a place of waking dreams and dreams of waking.

However, these dreams are in the form of letters to “concerned readers” and as such call attention to the fact of writing and the act of reading, and in so doing they disturb the conventional boundaries between the status of the events and characters within the novel and the “reality” that they are supposed to represent. The result is a “sense of mediated immediacy that provokes interpretation”17 by fixing attention on the nature of
language itself and putting into question its referential functions. This does not mean, however, that the relation between writer and reader will be controlled by a set of “tired Modernist tricks” (199), for Barth “works hard to keep his work interesting and literate.” He recognizes that “most people read novels for entertainment and delight . . . and most novels are read only once.” Nevertheless, if serious fiction like serious music is “ravishing the first time through,” the reader will become “enthused and curious and will return to the piece again and again.” 18

Hence the Author of Letters initially conceives of the novel as “an open (love) letter to Whom It May Concern, from Yours Truly” (53), and, in its final form, its main plot concerns a torrid love affair that combines “good-humored prurience,” “gentle salaciousness” (65) with an equally entertaining emblematic import. The story of Lady Amherst’s and Ambrose Mensch’s affair, with its “novelistic symmetry” (668) echoes another “pervasive attraction” (66), that of the Author for “Reality, a mistress too long ignored,” who must now “settle scores with her errant lover” (52). Indeed, the Amherst/Mensch story is the major vehicle for the communication of the emotional and intellectual rhythms the novel excites in the reader, for it at once dramatizes and emblematises the primary concerns of Letters.

As I noted earlier, the Author enjoys a special relationship with Mensch, each having served as the other’s “alter ego” and “aesthetic conscience; eventually even as the other’s fiction” (653). Mensch, formalist and author of “keyless codes . . . chain letter narratives with missing links . . . edible anecdotes” (39), at once the Author’s “comrade and contrary” (165), supplies the “bare bone sketch” (165) that becomes the Ambrose sequence in Lost in the Funhouse, the “ground plan,” “notes,” and “alphabetized instructions” for Chimera, as well as the design for Letters; and the Author, in turn, helps to build Mensch’s castle and later takes his aborted autobiographical novel, The Amateur, or, A Cure for Cancer, gives it new life, and brings it to completion in Letters. Indeed, the story of the Menschhaus, of the broken seawall, the cracked castle, the Mensch “firm . . . and in-
firma"

The Amateur, "an early effort, abortive, on the part of 'Arthur Morton King'" (149), Mensch's "fanciful nom de plume" (240), to "come to terms with conventional narrative and himself" (149), recapitulates and dramatizes the problem of "personal literature" (188) and the postmodern writer. Ambrose adopts his "corny nom de plume" because, not being sure of who exactly he is, he is unable "to write straightforwardly under his own name" (551). Tormented by the "possibly fancied ambiguity of his siring" (240)—he takes his pen name from his mother, Andrea King Mensch, a descendant of the King family "whose ancestors a century and a half ago conspired on behalf of their friend Jerome Bonapart to spirit Napoleon from St. Helena to Maryland" (240)—and paralyzed by the blank message he receives in a bottle as an eleven-year-old child, he spends his life "laboring to fill in the blanks," seeking "a way to get the story told and rejoin [his] family" (188). However, the story that he attempts to tell is one of a world that is "winding down" (186), a story of a "broken seawall," a "cracked castle," and "sinking tower" (151), one with characters beset by "wasting diseases" (208), its "femme fatale [Ambrose's mother] now potbellied, shrunken, half deaf, gone in the teeth—a sweetless hive of swarming cells" (241). For the Mensch family "Cancer is the reigning sign; petrifaction the prevailing state" (528). Like Pierre and Absalom, Absalom!, The Amateur is the account of the collapse of a family; and, like Thomas Sutpen, Thomas Mensch, the "unmoved mover" of the family, is a man about whose "fathering . . . nothing certain is known" (157). It is he who builds the "retaining seawall . . . which like an individual work of art he signed and dated at each end in wet concrete" (158) and establishes the Mensch Memorial Monument Company. But with his death the creative energy of the Mensch family begins to dissipate. Significantly it is not this original author of the family line who builds the cracked castle or who provides the authority for the narrative account of its fall. For this story is another one that questions the relation between family lines.
and narrative lines. Like *Tristram Shandy*, *The Amateur* is *ab ovo* (153), but the egg from which it is hatched is an intentional rather than a natural object, a marvelous Easter egg with a magical interior that is given to Ambrose's Aunt Rosa by her husband. Like Faulkner's Rosa Coldfield, Rosa Mensch goes to "her grave unfructified" (153), but from her Easter egg with its "magical interior" (170) is hatched the vision that produces the story of Menschhaus. For this egg, with its "wondrous innards" (154), its "emerald landscape," with a "Lorelei, begaused and pensive," its "grey-green castle turrets . . . velveted with lichen" (170) is an image for the realm of romance, and it generates in Ambrose a Hawthornian desire to "dream strange things and make them look like truth" (*SL*, 31). As he watches the "play of shadows on the ceiling" of his bedroom, "where the streetlamp shown through the catalpa leaves" (170), he invents mysterious origins for his brother Peter, whom he imagines has been fathered by Colonel Morton "upon a European baroness" (169) who will not "forget the issue of her star-crossed passion" but eventually "claim Peter for her own" and take him back to be "master of the castle" (170). And even the more prosaic Peter also has his life shaped by the "miracle inside" (174) the egg; inspired by the vision of his "Grandpa's castle in the egg" (174), he uses his inheritance to buy a section of Erdman's Cornlot and to build a stone house complete with tower for the family to inhabit.

But Peter's efforts only serve to reveal the distance between imagination and perception. The Cornlot is an ironic echo of Camelot (as is Bray's Comalot), and the house, built on the soft "loam of the Eastern Shore" (178), is held together with mortar made from "one part lime to three sand" (188), its construction contaminated by Ambrose's guilt over his affair with his brother's fiancée, the partially completed house having been their "trysting place" (186). And "as the stone house [rises] up about them" (387) on the "shifting sand" (178) Aunt Rosas "cancer spread[s] like an ugly rumor" (182) and Magda articulates her "cosmic and impersonal" pessimism, a "tidewater Tragic View" (183) that holds that the Choptank itself was a passing fea-
ture of the landscape; the very peninsula . . . ephemeral" (185).

From this point of view, then, the "family totem" (245), that "celebrated Easter egg," appears to be "mere family junk or joking relic" (246). Only for "Damaged Angela" (244) does the "vanished country of the Easter egg" (156) retain its power. For Ambrose and Peter its magical autonomous world is abandoned when, "certain the family must fail at last, Ambrose caused the entire tower [of the house] to be converted into a camera obscura" in order to attract "travelers en route to Ocean City" (155).

In the place of the "green and rivered landscape of the egg" (164) is one composed of "red brick hospital, weathered oysterdredger . . . dowdy maples and cypress clapboards of East Dorset" (156), a "view better mediated . . . than viewed directly" (440), for the "dark chamber and luminous plate make the commonplace enchanting. What would scarcely merit notice if beheld firsthand . . . [is] magically composed and represented . . . and [is] intensely interesting" (155-56). However, no matter how fascinating such projections of the "familiar details of . . . life" (85) may be, they cannot halt the fall of the "ill-founded house" (188) or the decay of the "cancerous" (588) family. The "list of the tower" binds the "mechanism" of the camera obscura until it is finally "out of commission" (246), "fixed for keeps upon the county hospital, the broken seawall, the river of incongruous pleasure boats" (559), a reminder of the family "firm" and "infirmitry" (152) as Magda, Ambrose, and Lady Amherst "hold hands in reciprocal succour" (559), stare at these frozen images, and await the diagnosis of Peter Mensch's disease while the "damaged daughter" (242) consoles herself by gazing at the "vanished country" through the "blank window" (156) of Aunt Rosa's egg.

At issue here, of course, is an artistic as well as a family disaster, a question of the "Death-of-the-Novel" and the "End-of-Letters" (438) as well as a poignant portrayal of death in the novel and the end of a family. The Easter egg and the camera obscura are emblems of the two forms of representation that have sustained the novel: the first an expression of the desire to
modify reality, or as Barth puts it in an early interview, “re-invent the world,”19 and the other a commitment to “make the commonplace enchanting” (155) by “holding a great mirror up to life,” thereby allowing us to “recognize our world and ourselves” (472). And, of course, the “sinking tower” (152) in which Ambrose and his daughter live is an emblem of the traditional home of the artist, symbol of solitariness and loneliness, but also a refuge and beacon, and the sign especially of the alienated modernist who is closed off from normal relations with family and society but who is gifted with powers of perception that make possible the highest form of artistic expression.

Ambrose, however, who lives as a hermit in his “sinking tower, . . . measures the stars with a homemade astrolabe, inventing new constellations, . . . examines bemused beneath a microscope his swarming semen, giving names to (and odds on) individual spermatozoa in their blind and general race” (61), has lost touch with his muse and is “too distracted to compose” (40). As an aborted attempt on the part of “Arthur Morton King to come to terms with conventional narrative and himself” (149) Ambrose’s incomplete story emblematizes the dilemma of the contemporary novelist. He reviews his “work-then-in-progress” and his “30 year old life” (149), corks the work in an empty jeroboam, throws it into the Choptank river, takes 30 librium capsules, and goes home to die. But his suicide fails, the jeroboam returns with the tide two days later, to be kept for nine years, uncorked only to provide the Author in 1961 with the “Bee-Swarming, Water-Message, and Funhouse anecdotes” (150). However, the librium capsules do liberate him from the “library of [his] literary predecessors,” from “Realism” and all the “traditional contaminants of fiction” (151–52), and it takes nine years for him to become reenamored with the novel, a development that is marked by the beginning of his affair with Lady Amherst. Her “symbolic potential” (61) as well as her person attracts him, for he associates her with the “muse of Austen, Dickens, Fielding, Richardson and the rest” (41), sees her as “Literature Incarnate” (40) “La Belle Lettre sans Merci, whose “old
egg” he hopes to impregnate with one of his “sluggish swimmers” (238).

It is significant, then, that as he prepares to visit his lover “to mark the advent of [his] 40th year,” he decides “to try again to launch [his] old chronicle on the tide” (152) by sending it to her to read; and, inspired by her to a “rage for paternity” (347), he conceives a “longish fiction, novella-size at least” (347), based on the classical myth of Perseus, Andromeda, and Medusa, a myth that he reads as a drama of the perils of self-consciousness.

Ambrose’s Perseus, middle-aged and ill married, his mythic exploits and heroic innocence behind him, once again ‘calls his enemy to his aid’ (Ovid’s happy phrase, for Perseus’s use of the Gorgon’s head to petrify his adversaries), attempts to reenact his youthful triumphs, comes a cropper, but with the help of a restored and resurrected Medusa—whose true gaze, seen clearly, may confer immortality instead of death—transcends his vain objective and becomes, with her, a constellation in the sky, endlessly reenacting their romance. (348)

As this description of the Perseus project by Lady Amherst suggests, she is delighted by Ambrose’s decision to “speak once again to the passions instead of playing his avant-garde games” (348). She is especially taken with the conceit that “by some magic physics of the heart” Perseus and Medusa “will become not stones, but stars, rehearsing endlessly the narrative of their affair,” for she sees in it “an emblem of [her] trials thus far, and a future hope” (436).

But for Ambrose, finally, Lady Amherst’s person is more important than her “symbolic potential”; hence he sends to the Author the “ground plans” (652) for his Perseus story, leaving to him the task of writing the story while Ambrose devotes his full attention to his lover and family as he attempts to become a “Member” of the “Human Race” (758) and in the process a character in that “most happily contaminated literary genre: the Novel” (151). The form and meaning of this contamination are
suggested by the ways the Perseus/Medusa myth informs the Mensch/Lady Amherst story. "Perseus's conception in Argos upon the virgin Danaë in the brass contraceptive tower, by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold" (648) is comically echoed and domesticated when Ambrose and Germaine, aroused by the reading of Clarissa’s table of contents, copulate "on a pair of clean 50-lb sacks of Medusa" (440) cement at the top of Schott’s Tower of Truth, and Ambrose’s reworking of the classical material is suggested when, during their honeymoon evening aboard the Constellation, they each have a “vision” (683) as they climax together.

Ambrose’s marriage, significantly, is marked by his farewell to Arthur Morton King, his nom de plume, who “sprang” “genie-like” (758) from a bottle on May 12, 1940. As he celebrates the beginning of the second cycle of his life, he appears “in propria persona” (759) having in effect rejected “Dear (dead) Art” (758) for life with Lady Amherst, his final letter to “Art” being also a proposal of marriage to her. Now no longer the “filler in of blanks” (758) addressed to a “Cruel Yours Truly” who “confirms his dearest hope—that there are Signs—and his deepest fear—that they are not for him” (168), the “Once & Future Ambrose Mensch” becomes the one “Whom It Ceases to Concern” (646), finally free to author a letter to “Whom it may concern (in particular the Author)” (765) and to sign himself “Yours truly, Ambrose Mensch” (765).

This is a letter that at once echoes and extends the Author’s account of his “three concentric dreams of waking,” for it brings together origins and ends by providing the design for Letters in “a postscript to the Author” (765). It is fitting, of course, that Mensch, the “former formalist” (769) and now the Author’s “altered ego” (655) should introduce the theme and problem of closure, for he is the only character in Letters whose “historicity” (191) the Author accepts unequivocally, freely acknowledging that he (the Author) helped to build the Menschhaus and that Mensch supplied the outlines for the Ambrose sketches in Lost in the Funhouse. Here, apparently, is the one “connection”
in the novel that may not be “strictly verbal” and “epistolary” (52), although it is certainly literary, as the Author makes clear, when, in writing to Lady Amherst, he describes Mensch as “our mutual friend” (52). And just as John Rokesmith in Dickens’s novel represents an attempt on the part of John Harmon to deal with the pressures of reality by transforming his real identity into a role, by becoming an imaginative version of himself, so Arthur Morton King suggests a similar response on the part of Ambrose Mensch when he is confronted by the challenge of the bottled message. And “John Barth,” Author of Letters, acknowledges a parallel situation by confirming his “long since distanced connection” (653) to Ambrose and his modernist preoccupations. Because “overmuch presence appears to be the story teller’s problem” (LIF, 101) the Author transforms his “real” situation into a fictive one and in the process frees himself to change his “notes toward a new novel” (L, 51) into a book that “neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents,”20 Robbe-Grillet or Dickens. And once having effaced himself by transforming his real identity into a role, the Author, “like Echo in the myth” disappears and gives back to Mensch his “own words in another voice” (194).

This, then, is the logic behind the conceit that Mensch supplies the Author with the sketches for the Ambrose sections in Lost in the Funhouse, with the plans and directions for the writing of Chimera and the design for Letters, as well as the explanation for the fact that the arrival of “Water message #2” (765) brings Letters to its conclusion. This second message, although different from the first, is no less ambiguous, for this one consists “wholly of body, without return address, date, salutation, close or signature” (765): “Bottled message: Tower of Truth 0700 9/26/69, plus some dark, grainy odd-odored solid, like freeze-dried coffee spoilt by moisture” (766). That this letter, like the one of May 12, 1940, takes the form of a note found in a bottle suggests that both Ambrose’s story and Letters is governed by a law of “reenactment” (39); but since this bottled
The mysterious message is enclosed in a “magnum of Mumm's Cordon Rouge” (765), a wine that Todd Andrews enjoys with Jane Mack and Baron Castine aboard the Baratarian on Saturday, August 23 while they joke about the location of Harrison Mack's freeze-dried feces (714) and discuss the dangers of being “hijacked” in the bay “or on the Intracoastal Waterway, by narcotics smugglers” (716). Subsequently, on September 26 Todd reports that the Baratarian is found on 9/19 “derelict & half scuttled, with specimens of Harrison’s freeze-dried droppings aboard, and charts of the Mexican Caribbean” (734); and Lady Amherst writes on 9/20 of the discovery the previous day of a “literal slick of diesel oil in the Atlantic off Ship Shoal Inlet... in the midst of which the Coast Guard finds at last the
derelict *Baratarian*. . . . Nothing material aboard except . . . a letter from the late Andrew Burlingame Cook VI to his son, dated 17 September 1969 . . . the contents whereof the U.S.C.G. is withholding pending the location of Mr. Cook’s next of kin” (691). However, a copy of this letter is sent to the Author by H. B. VII on September 15 with a postscript that asserts his absolute authority.

The man who died at Fort McHenry was not my father. I know who my mother is; have long, if not always, known. And she knows who my true father is, as I know (what A. B. Cook little suspected) who and where my twin children, and their mother, are.

About “Comrade Bray” and “Comrade Mack,” not to mention Mr. Todd Andrews, I am unconcerned. I know who they are, what they “stand for,” what they intend, and what will come to pass: at Barataria Lodge tomorrow; on the campus at Marshyhope State University a week from Friday.

The “Second Revolution” shall be accomplished on schedule. . . . The tyrannosaurus blunders on, his slow mind not yet having registered that he is dead. We shall be standing clear of his death throes, patient and watchful, our work done. (754)

Such claims of authorial distance, detachment, and omniscience are put into question by other letters that serve to question stable family structures, clear, unambiguous meanings, and a predictable future. For example the “slick of oil” that marks the site of the derelict is also a sign for Jerome Bray who leaves the “lap” of Merope Bernstein’s leotard “soiled as if by axle grease” (534) and who, in his letter of 9/23/69 to his Granama, refers to the “ex-yacht *Baratarian* a/k/a/ *Surprise*, ha, ha, whose crew and cargo (Honey-Dust Ingredient #7) not the U.S.N. and U.S.C.G. together will ever find” (755–56). Ambrose, however, will attribute authorizing authority and control to “Brice and/or Bruce,”

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the twinlike, effeminate “curly blond thugs” (549), formerly regents to Reg prince but now apparently acting on their own.

Brice and/or Bruce it was who fetched me that blow that day; the same who—surely—planted Water Message #2 for my discovery yesterday; and they have intimated that Bray may make his “final appearance” at the Tower of Truth dedication ceremonies this Friday: the Ascension sequence, in which, I begin to think, I too must play a role. (766)

“Water Message #2,” then raises once again the problem of reading, for it demonstrates the way in which words by surviving their authors and reappearing in and reshaping the meanings of the words of others initiate a ghostly, echoing effect that prevents the reader from experiencing the sense of harmony that normally accompanies closure. Instead we are presented with a series of “hints” that carry us in search of answers back to other letters. “Look it up,” Ambrose says, “that’s what print’s for” (387); but when we follow his advice we find not the answer we had expected but another text whose meaning is, in the words of Geoffrey Hartman, “teasingly evasive.”

Ambrose will go on to suggest that all the novel’s puzzles may be “diversions,” that the “real treasure (and our story’s resolution) may be the key itself: illumination, not solution, of the Scheme of Things” (768). And this key, of course, is a letter, more specifically, a Bottled Message, that by its very nature prevents the writing of THE END. As John Irwin observes of Poe’s “Ms Found in a Bottle,” the fact that the manuscript is cast into the sea at the last moment makes it impossible that the narrative contain a record of that final moment. “The very mechanics of written narration—the necessity to interrupt the text before the moment of ultimate discovery in order to dispatch it before the destruction of the narrator—excludes the written narrative from any access to the absolute.” And the organization of LETTERS works to exaggerate the mechanics to which Irwin refers.
Ambrose's "Bottled Message #2" discovered on 9/29/69, refers ambiguously to a place, time, and events that the reader already has experienced since Barth does not arrange the individual letters chronologically. The eightieth letter, in the form of a "Draft codicil to the last will and testament of Todd Andrews" (733), dated "Friday, September 26, 1969," is written in the "Observation Belfrey" (734) of the Tower of Truth and records a series of ominous events that seem to threaten the "demolition of the structure wherein [he] draft[s] it and of [himself]" (734). But the account ends just moments before Todd presumably makes a "thick paper airplane" of the documents and "sail[s] it" (737) out of the window of the tower.23

Now Barth has indicated that he "gave considerable thought and attention to the ending of Letters [sic]—even, I should say especially, in the very early stages of planning." "Rightly or wrongly, I felt it critical that the reader remain in doubt, for example, about whether that tower Todd Andrews is last seen holed up in blows up or not. I wasn't going to blow it up; I wasn't going to be the one to push the detonator at that point."24 Instead of "lowering some god down on wires,"25 Barth offers the reader Ambrose's response to a second "Bottled Message" in the form of a letter of "Envoi" (768), some concluding remarks in alphabetical order, the "first such letter from yours truly, to whom these presents may concern, restopped in your faithful craft along with whatever that brown stuff is: past cape and cove, black can, red nun, out of river, out of bay, into the ocean of story" (768), with a carbon copy to the "Author" (767). Like Andrew's draft codicil to his will and Bray's letter to the future, this document suggests that the denouement of Letters will not be the representation of an event that unites the narrative knots or initiates an explosive release but an emblem of the novel itself, "that most happily contaminated literary genre" (151), a "Bottled Message," containing letters about Letters and some freeze-dried feces.

And Ambrose's emblematic Envoi, with the design for the novel included as a postscript, is echoed by another by the
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Author as he brings letters but not letters to an end. This second of two communications to the reader, like the first, calls attention to the problem of time as it relates to the acts of reading and writing.

But every letter has two times, that of its writing and that of its reading, which may be so separated . . . that very little of what obtained when the writer wrote will still when the reader reads. And to the units of epistolary fictions yet a third time is added: the actual date of composition, which will not likely correspond to the letterhead date, a function more of plot or form than of history.

The plan of Letters calls for a second letter to the Reader at the end of the manuscript, by when what I've "now" recorded will seem almost as remote as "March 2, 1969." By the time Letters is in print, ditto for what shall be recorded in that final letter. And—to come to the last of a letter's times—by the time your eyes, Reader, review those epistolary fictive a's to z's, the "United States of America" may be setting about its Tri or Quadricentennial . . . or be a mere memory. . . . (44-45)

This emphasis on the temporal dimension of fiction is, of course, appropriate in a novel whose "ground theme" is "reenactment" (656), an attempt on the Author's part to "learn where to go by reviewing where I've been" (C, 10). He begins by calling attention to the different times that form the experience of the reader of a novel. There is first, of course, the time of reading, those moments that pass as the reader moves from word to word, from sentence to sentence, from the beginning to the end of the novel, caught up in the fictive events but, like Isabel Archer during her midnight vigil or Quentin and Shreve in their cold Harvard dormitory room, still vaguely aware of passing time and events in the "real" world. Next, as the Author suggests, there is too an awareness of the time when the writer wrote the words "now" being read, and of the fact that the words
bear some relation to the writer's own life and time and to the way that he transforms his experience into a fiction. Finally, there are the times of the characters, each of whom has his or her special relation to temporality, and, in the case of *Letters*, this relationship is complicated by the fact that most of the characters are “resurrection[s]” of those from the Author's “previous fictions, or their proxies,” who extend the fictions into the “historical present” (341) as well as contribute the “elements of [the] themes and form” (431) to the new one.

The entire process described above is emblematized in the novel by Lady Amherst, who reads “through [“Barth’s”] published *oeuvre* . . . a book a month” (556) beginning in March with *The Floating Opera*. Each of the books echoes in a disturbing way her memories of her past as well as the circumstances of her present situation, including her relationship with the Author. She is “introduced . . . by Ambrose Mensch to the alleged original of . . . Todd Andrews” and experiences a “familiar uneasiness about the fictive life of real people and the factual life of ‘fictional characters’” (38); she knows “several of [the] characters” from *The End of the Road*, and the Author's representation of Jacob Horner “puts [her] disquietingly in mind of certain traits of [her] friend A.M.” (61); The *Sot-Weed Factor* overwhelms her with “‘coincidences’ of history and [the author's] fiction with the facts of [her] life” (198); the “Giles Boy novel” (348) echoes her own preoccupation with the authenticity of “Andrew Cook IV's four letter family history” (348) that she is preparing for the press; and, finally, her lover Ambrose is “in” the “Lost in the Funhouse stories” (347), an especially disturbing fact, for it is at this point that she herself feels “lost” (435) as a result of Ambrose's infidelity. Nevertheless she reports that she “enjoyed the stories—in particular, of course, the ‘Ambrose’ ones. Your Ambrose, needless to say, is not my Ambrose—but then, mine isn't either” (438). Moreover the fact that she is reading the stories leads her lover to undertake a review of the “origins of printed fiction, especially the early conventions of the novel” (438) and that resolve leads directly to the mating season sequence in the phallic
Tower of Truth. This “project of engenderment” (442), we are reminded, takes place on July 14, the “180th anniversary of Bastille Day (and 152nd of Mme de Stael’s death)” (438) and provides Ambrose with a “particular spur to his myth in progress (442), and he returns to it during a week marked by the launching of Apollo II and the preparation for Dorchester County’s “nine-day tercentenary celebration” (442).

At work here is a process that Paul de Man calls the “discontinuous and polyrhythmic nature of temporality,” one that is revealed by the act of reading with its structure of recollection and anticipation which expresses the way the present moves toward a future that will in some form include a reassimilation of the past. But this movement seems threatened in Letters by the fact that by July Lady Amherst “has now gone quite through [Barth’s] published oeuvre.” “What am I to read in August? In September?” (556), she asks, a question that is reemphasized by her lover when he reminds the Author that “my good Dame History—has caught up with your production and needs a quickie to tide her over while you do that long one” (652). Toward that end Ambrose sends to him the “ground plan for that Perseus-Medusa story I told you of, together with more notes on golden ratio, Fibonacci series, logarithmic spirals than any sane writer will be interested in,” as well as “alphabetized instructions” for the writing of Chimera and the “theme” for Letters, leaving to the Author to “work out a metaphoric physics to turn stones into stars . . . dead notes into living fiction” (652).

The story that results, of course, is the one that Lady Amherst regards as “Ambrose’s and mine (435), and she sees in it “the emblem of my trials thus far, and a future hope” (436). That is to say she finds in art a way of understanding her own past life and a way of moving away from it to the future that it will help generate. And the Author following the instructions of his alter ego, acting as “both protagonist and author, so to speak . . . overtake[s] with understanding [his] present paragraph as it were by examining [his] paged past, and thus pointed, proceed[s] serene to the future’s sentence” (C, 80–81). Or
to put the point another way, the act of recycling characters from the Author's previous fictions into Letters is emblematic both of the process of writing, of the act of giving life to the dead letter and demonstrating that the "stories of our lives are negentropic" (768), and the process of reading, an activity characterized by a movement from our sense that the people represented by the written words are real human beings beset with real life problems to an awareness of the complexities of the verbal surface, of the play of the written characters.

Hence the novel concludes with two letters: the first is an "alphabetized wedding toast" from the Author to his central characters—Germaine Pitt, his "heroine" and "creation" (53), and Ambrose Mensch, "old fellow toiler up the slopes of Parnassus" (655) and "alter ego" (653)—a "greeting" (677) that is duly acknowledged by Lady Amherst before she lapses forever into silence; the final one is an Envoi to the reader that at once extends far beyond the time of the action of Letters to the times of its writing and reading and at the same time, as the second of two such documents, looks back to the novel's beginnings. This "second letter to the Reader" (45), dated "Sunday, September 14, 1969," but actually written on "Tuesday, July 4, 1978," both echoes and differs from the first that was "March 2, 1969," but started in October 1973 (44) and completed in January 1974 (45). The first announces that "Letters is 'now' begun" (42) while the second tells us that "Letters is 'now' ended" (771), but both documents insist on the presence of the reader and by doing so suggest the Author's mortality and his separation from the text. "Perhaps," the Author writes at the end of the first letter, "you're yet to have been conceived, and by the 'now' your eyes read now, every person now alive upon the earth will be no longer, most certainly not excepting Yours truly" (45). However, this Author is the one who "participates as a character" in Letters and as such "isn't the real author at all," for the real one "lives and works in a dimension quite other than that of his creatures (but reminiscent of theirs—he has made them in his image)." 27 Hence in the final letter there is "An end to I" (169) as the
writing self—call him John Barth—shifts to the “third-person viewpoint” (166) to record the final details of the work of writing.

In the interim between outline and longhand draft, as again between longhand draft and first typescript, first typescript and final draft, final draft and galley proofs, he goes forward with Horace’s “labor of the file”: rewriting, editing, dismantling the scaffolding, clearing out the rubbish, planting azaleas about the foundations, testing the wiring and plumbing, hanging doors and windows and pictures, waxing floors, polishing mirrors and windowpanes—and glancing from time to time, even gazing, from an upper storey, down the road, where he makes out in the hazy distance what appear to be familiar loblolly pines, a certain point of dry ground between two creeklets, a steaming tidewater noon, someone waking 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 passage, written “a decade since [the Author] first conceived an old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls etc.” (771) and nine years after the time of the action that LETTERS represents, is marked both by the question of its relation to the letters that precede it as well as by its implied reference to the present and future. The allusion to Horace recalls his advice to authors in the Ars Poetica to “put your parchment in the closet and keep it back til the ninth year” and hence suggests not only the nine-year period that separates the time of action from the time of writing in LETTERS but also echoes Ambrose Mensch’s relation to The Amateur, which he keeps corked in a “jeroboam of Piper-Heidsieck” (149) for nine years before trying “to launch it on the tide” (152). However the allusion also reminds us of an important difference between The Amateur and LETTERS for Horace commends Homer for beginning his story in medias res rather than ab ovo, and, as the echoes here of the Author’s “three concentric dreams of waking” suggest, he follows Homer’s example rather than that of his alter ego. More-
over, by emphasizing the craft and work required to produce the universe of the novel, the passage moves the writer and reader outside the fictive cosmos leaving them free both to admire its harmony and to feel its relation to that other universe in which they dwell. The novel ends with a description of “real life” events that at once echo those within letters and anticipate those that will form the basis for Barth's next novel, *Sabbatical: A Romance*.

Sloop *Brillig* found abandoned in Chesapeake Bay off mouth of Patuxent River, all sails set, C.I.A. documents in attaché case aboard. Body of owner, former C.I.A. agent, recovered from Bay one week later... bullet hole in head... Nature of documents not disclosed. Time now to lay the cornerstone, run Old Glory up the pole, let off the fireworks, open doors to the public. (772)

Rising above the flood of events that mark the “now” for both writer and reader is the open house of story, a place that promises both wonder and illumination; for the world seen from its “upper storey” is a marvelous one, the product of a magic that combines the spell of the camera obscura with that of Aunt Rosa's Easter egg. Because it is made of letters, “epistolary fictive a’s-to-z’s” (45), it inscribes quotation marks around its perspective and events, thereby creating a world where it is possible to “say the unseeable, declare the impossible” (393), a place where “words... make the wordless happen” (332).