

## PASS ME THE «BOINA»: A CONVERSION WITH JOHN BARTH

*Enrique García Díez*

*Enrique García.*— Like the rest of us, or perhaps a little more so, a writer reveals his intimate concerns in a variety of obsessions which continually emerge in his work. To what degree are you conscious of your own «obsessions»?

*John Barth.*— Very often we learn these obsessions from our critics and reviewers, who point out to us that we are obsessed with A, B or C. A more gentle term would be «preoccupations». Retrospectively, I can see preoccupations in my own work, as I do in other people's work. It's obviously true, for example, that the first two novels, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, are preoccupied with the voltages of the classical sexual triangle.

*E. García.*— A triangle which seems to disintegrate after these first novels or to get entangled in much more complex structures...

*J. Barth.*— As I approached thirty, I realized that my true subject was innocence. The true preoccupation, if not the obsession, of the next two novels, the long ones *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, is innocence, perhaps of a particularly American variety. The theme of the adulterous triangle either disappears or fades into the background in the next two novels.

*E. García.*— Considering these thematic preoccupations, one can discern a change of attitude toward your material: while in the first two novels there is a kind of personal commitment to an existentialist view of life, the rest of your production seems to be the result of a much more detached, freer, I would say, mental elaboration.

*J. Barth.*— I think so, too, though the principles of conventional dramaturgy are so simple in most novels and dramas that once you have decided that your story will revolve around a radically innocent protagonist, then clearly the plot must consist of incremental assaults upon this innocence, elaborated at whatever length seems proper. Among the other preoccupations of that second group of novels

is a preoccupation with elaboration almost for its own sake. For God knows what reasons, I shifted from, if not minimalism, at least a reasonable moderation in the elaboration of my stories to a desire to exhaust their narrative possibilities.

*E. García.*— Is your imagination still challenged by the formal possibilities of storytelling as much as it was with such complex novels as *Letters* or the earlier ones like *Giles Goat-Boy*, for example?

*J. Barth.*— I hope not, since length itself is exhausting. The aesthetic of complication involves a considerable imposition upon civilized attention; and after *Giles Goat-Boy* I vowed to go into the other direction and see whether I could work in short forms. I did for the next two years: the *Funhouse* stories and the *Chimera* novellas. The length of the *Letters* project dismayed no one more than the author. I hadn't wanted it to be that large. But works really do announce their own dimensions, within certain constraints that the author can compose. I think more in terms of time than in terms of bulk. I hadn't thought that the *Letters* project would be a tidy four-year project.

*E. García.*— How far in advance do you plan your plots?

*J. Barth.*— As far as possible. And it is my temperament to want the plan clear, in a fair degree of detail, pretty far down the line. But I've learned, either from experience or from fatigue, not to do that much careful planning nowadays, to trust my imagination to get itself out of trouble. With a project as long as a novel, the investment of time and imaginative energy is such that one doesn't want to embroider the tapestry very far without knowing how you are going to get those threads together at the end.

I am in the final stages of the initial draft of another fairly long novel not so long as *Letters*, *Giles* or *The Sot-Weed Factor*, but one of some complexity, in which, as in the case of the *Sabbatical* novel, I have deliberately left certain crucial things open until I get to them. In *Sabbatical*, the not-planning was part of the plan. There are certain narrative bridges that you not only cannot cross until you get to them, but cannot even envision the design of until you arrive at the toll booth. That was the case with the climactic chapter of *Sabbatical*. The retrieval of the hero's «boina» was in the ground-plan, but the appearance of the sea-monster was not. I knew something truly extraordinary had to happen, and I prepared the plot for something extraordinary, but I had no exact idea what the extraordinary thing would be until the time came.

The situation is similar in the novel in progress, *The Tidewater Tales*, whose narrative device is a risky one. The story involves a couple in the last stages of their first pregnancy; eight and a half months pregnant with twins, at least, the couple are adrift in a small sailboat without an engine in Chesapeake Bay. They are being carried, by their own design, more or less wherever the wind takes them and telling each other stories. Well this has to build, obviously, as pregnancy itself does. It has to build up to some climactic delivery. And that's the scene I began when it was time for me to come to Spain, so there is a sort of (laughing) suspended obstetrics.



*E. García.*— Surely then there will be some Spanish echoes in it, in the baby...

*J. Barth.*— Echoes, precisely. There is one figure: an elderly man, though not Spanish, sailing single-handed around the world, who wanders into Chesapeake Bay in an old boat called Rocinante. He has himself fallen so under the spell of Cervantes that he half seriously pretends to be D. Quijote. What I wanted my main characters to do in the course of the plot is to encounter surrogates for my four deities: D. Quijote (without Sancho this time; D. Quijote «solo»), Odysseus (who, as in some late versions of the myth, has sailed out of time with Nausikaa from Lisbon, which is the city of Odysseus, over the 37th parallel of latitude to Chesapeake Bay), and Scheherezade and Huckleberry Finn. These are my four deities: The North, East, South and West of my imagination.

*E. García.*— Energetic deities, indeed. Like them, your protagonists criss-cross the paths of the world trying to establish their own coordinates (personal, historical, literary, etc.). But of all forms of journeying, sailing must have a special significance for you.

*J. Barth.*— One of the pleasures —perhaps, one of the perils as well of literal sailing as a pastime, is that it literalizes so many common metaphors of daily life. One is always taking bearings, making leeway or headway, steering close to the wind... The metaphor that most applies here is that in practical navigation you often find out where you are by retracing where you have been. Then, once you realize where you are, you can decide where you want to go and what course to steer to get there. A writer going down the road of his own career may determine what it is he is going to do next, what his imagination has in mind for the next chapter of his bibliography, by sailing in one direction for a while and then, if it doesn't go very well, trimming the sails and going a different way. In the *Tidewater Tales* novel, that literal state of affairs in the plot is a metaphor for the author's situation. Experience teaches us when to trust such metaphors and when not to, when to change metaphors, when to let the boat sail itself and when to take the helm. That is why, for example, it has never bothered me very much not to know at all what the next project will be after the one in hand. Some writer-friends of mine are always thinking two books down the road. I never have the slightest idea, until the one in the shop is out of the shop, what the next project will be. And I never look forward to it with apprehension, always with curiosity.

*E. García.*— Everyone of your books is so ambitious in scope and technique that one has the feeling that you must have emptied yourself out into it. But so far you have done very well finding new material and new ways out. Has the thought of «possible exhaustion» bothered you seriously?

*J. Barth.*— The thing I must guard against (though I have learned how to use it) is a little bit the opposite. When the project is finished, the motor is still running, and some images are likely to work their way into the next project. Sometimes I let it happen. For example, the theme of the lost and found «boina», which is part of the armature of the *Sabbatical* novel, crops up again in *The Tidewater*

*Tales* novel—a similar kind of story told by a similar kind of character who is a minor character in the new novel. The retrieved «boina» in the *Tidewater Tales* becomes a ceremonial emblem of narration; he who wears the «boina» tells the story. When it's my turn, I say «pass me the boina» and I put it on my head and narrate for a while. We have the expression in English «to pass the hat». It means to take up collection, but in this context «passing the boina» means: «it's your turn to tell the story». We'll do that this morning, O.K?

*E. García.*— Sorry, I have no boina to pass; but allow me instead to ask you a few more questions. The question of artifice, for example. Understood as the conscious manipulation and display of the entrails of the story before the reader's eyes, artifice has become an essential feature of much postmodern writing and certainly of your own. Still many people and some critics, are reluctant to accept it as a genuine device. Their argument is that the novel has turned into a brilliant display of narrative virtuosity at the cost of passion. Let me hurry to say that—although it's true in certain cases— I don't share that view. Would you like to comment on it?

*J. Barth.*— Art is artifice; no question about it. My house rule is that the element of artifice for its own sake—foregrounded, anti-illusionist artifice— has to be infused with more than mere algebraical energy; with genuine emotionality, if not passion. That has been my intention. But to borrow another metaphor from sailing, one's navigation stars are not always the same as one's destination. In the last couple of projects and certainly, I hope, in the one in hand there is not much formalism for its own sake. I honour and respect formal design; what I think, though, is that the best stories do not wear their formal designs on their sleeves. While there is a kind of art which conceals its essential simplicity under a display of complexity—a lot of magic tricks, a lot of acrobatics— there is the other kind, too. I prefer, but don't always write, the kind of narrative which conceals its complexity beneath a facade of simplicity, rather than the other way round. Though I think either is an honourable way to work; the merit comes from how it's done and not from the principle on which the work is based.

*E. García.*— In that respect, one could say that regardless of times and literary fashions, the writer's responsibility toward the artifact has not basically changed, and, what is more amazing, that the reader's persistent demand is still for «good stories».

*J. Barth.*— I believe that. I was astonished to hear Jorge Luis Borges say, in reply to a question from me about what he regarded as the storyteller's primary responsibility: «the creation of character». That reply surprised me, particularly coming from Borges, because I believe that the aspect of his fiction that we admire least is his creation of characters. (Laughing) Perhaps that's why he believes it to be the writer's primary responsibility. I myself would agree with Henry James that the writer's first responsibility is to be interesting, always to be interesting. Of course, different things interest different people.

*E. García.*— Today's novel, your own work, shows better than ever the inadequacy of Stendhal's used-up image of the «mirror along the road». Rather than reflecting any aspect of outer reality, the novel today is a very delicate sensor which has picked up and expressed the apocalyptic air in which we live, very subtle but no less real.

*J. Barth.*— Indeed it has, Enrique. For example, one of the problems of the young Storyteller in my novel in progress is that he does not want to write about the apocalypse. He doesn't want to write about what, in my novel, is called the «doomsday factor», echoing *The Sot-Weed Factor*. The Doomsday Factor is what I want my *Tidewater Tales* to be about, and therefore they continually circle that subject. Borges again: He says somewhere that in a riddle to which the answer is «time», the word you never mention when you are posing the riddle is «time». The same is true of the Doomsday Factor.

*E. García.*— Metafiction then seems a valid, although devious, way to talk about the world. It reinforces a certain feeling of artificiality, of irreality, of being what we have always been: stories within stories, stories told (produced and manipulated) by some unknown (often dangerous) author.

*J. Barth.*— Precisely so. The true realism. That's why the term metafiction makes me uneasy: because it's finally an aesthetics of mimesis. Like most other popular aesthetics, it is neither to be praised nor condemned in principle. Everything depends on how it is done. We all know that a good artist in any medium is likely to rise above what he takes to be his principles.

*E. García.*— To end this informal conversation I want to thank you for your «passionate» homage to Spanish language in your lecture yesterday: D. Quijote, Pedro Salinas, Borges, García Marquez, etc...

*J. Barth.*— *De nada* and «Praise be to the Spanish Language and Imagination», as I have written somewhere. For this particular writer, the novel begins with D. Quijote (specially with the opening of part two). I was delighted when García Márquez came to live for a while in Spain: it seemed to me that that was the narrative *boina* home again.