

## ANALYSIS

*Giles Goat-Boy* (1966)

John Barth

(1930- )

“In the metaphoric world called the University, control is held by a computer, WESAC [WESCAC], which is able to run itself and to tyrannize people, for it has the ability to subject them to a radiating and disintegrating force, that is, to EAT them, an acronym for its power of ‘Electroencephalic Amplification and Transaction.’ WESAC is so out of hand that one of its developers, Max Spielman, believes it can only be controlled through reprogramming by a Grand Tutor, a prophet, who will bring a ‘New Syllabus,’ that is, a new philosophy. For this role and this purpose he selects George Giles, whom he had raised among goats as a goat, though he was actually a human found as an infant in the tapelift of WESAC.

In his undertaking George has to contend with a troublemaker, Maurice Stoker, who alone fully understands the operation of WESAC, and with a minor poet, Harold Bray, who contends that he is a Grand Tutor. George enters the computer to destroy it, and learns to confound WESAC by answering its questions through paradoxes that paralyze the machine. When George emerges, authorities eager to put WESAC back into operation seize him and send him back to the animal site of his boyhood, for he is now the University’s scapegoat.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 282

“It is not, I hasten to say, a merely blasphemous work of empty nihilism, though some reviewers have reacted as if it were. It is a work of genuine epic vision, a fantastic mosaic constructed from the fragments of our life and traditions, calculated to startle us into new perceptions of the epic hero and savior. It is epic in its scope: in its combination of myth and history, of the ideal and the actual. And it is a sacred book because it is concerned with the life of a religious hero and with the way to salvation. True, it treats these matters comically, even farcically at times...insisting on its fabulous dimension, its unreality....

The vision of fabulation is essentially comic because it is an instrument of reason; and it is frankly allegorical because it has not the naïve faith in the possibility of capturing the actual world on the printed page which realism requires of its practitioners. Barth has observed that ‘If you are a novelist of a certain type of temperament, then what you really want to do is re-invent the world. God wasn’t too bad a novelist, except that he was a Realist.’ Realism, in this view, is a game that only God can play.... The old realistic novel has always assumed that a readily ascertainable thing called reality exists, and that we all live in it; therefore, it is the only thing to write about. But Barth says that he doesn’t ‘know much about Reality’.... Just as the ubiquitous mirrors of the *Alexandria Quartet* emphasized that work’s cubist perspectivism, so does a bizarre collection of scopes and lenses underscore the motifs of quest and perception in *Giles Goat-Boy*.... Like Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, Barth is playing with archetypes...and playing with words....

Oedipus sees truly only after he is blind. This myth, and Dante’s mythic trip through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise, have contributed heavily to Barth’s vision in *Giles Goat-Boy*. Just as Dante must learn to abandon reason for revelation when reason has taken him as far as it can, leaving his old guide, Virgil, for his new one, Beatrice; so George, separated from his mentor, Max, gains his greatest insight when he sees through his ladyship [Anastasia]: in the dark of WESCAC’s belly, his head covered by his mother’s purse and his body united with Anastasia’s in conjugal embrace, he sees: ‘In the darkness, blinding light! The end of the University! Commencement Day!’... John Barth has chosen two basic metaphors for his fabulative epic, which combine to make a dominant image from which many metaphorical consequences flow. He has chosen to see the universe as a university, and he has chosen to make his hero a man whose formative years were spent as a goat among goats....

For Barth, the university must have had the great virtue of including everything, already organized in terms of inquiry and quest.... By making his 'hero' a 'goat'...he has chosen to upset the traditional Christian view of salvation. In tradition Christ, the lamb of God, drove pagan gods out of Europe and stilled forever the voice of the goatish Pan. Barth's *Revised New Syllabus* comically but seriously reinstates the goatish side of man. George is...a saviour who will restore sexuality to an honored place in human existence. In this respect Barth joins Yeats, Lawrence, Swinburne, and other artists who have rebelled against the puritanical and ascetic side of the religion founded by the 'Pale Galilean'....

The metaphors of goat/man and university/universe merge when George the Goat-Boy leaves the *pasture* to enter the *campus*, metaphorically exchanging one *field* for another. His curious upbringing as a Goat-Boy and his potential as a possible saviour or 'Grand Tutor' make this journey especially poignant. Having been brought up as a kid, an animal, George seeks to reach the highest possible level of human development. The enormity of his quest reflects the enormity of human existence, for we all begin as kids, faced with the problem of becoming as fully human as possible. The university becomes the proper sphere for George's quest because it is the place where life is studied and questioned.... Lucky Rexford...alludes strongly to John F. Kennedy in the specific frame of reference, but just as strongly represents a type: the type of the good administrator, by which Rexford is connected to fictional figures like Melville's Captain Vere or historical personages like Pontius Pilate. Rexford and George are set to re-enact the archetypal confrontation between Pilate and prophet when *Giles Goat-Boy* comes to an end...

Just as the realistic novel was rooted in the conflict between the individual and society, fabulation springs from the collision between the philosophical and mythic perspectives on the meaning and value of existence, with their opposed dogmas of struggle and acquiescence. If existence is mythic, then man may accept his role with equanimity. If not, then he must struggle through part after part trying to create one uniquely his own."

Robert Scholes  
*Fabulation and Metafiction*  
(U Illinois 1979) 75-102

"In *Giles Goat-Boy* Barth attempted a Messiah who might be the perfect American savior: a hybrid of a machine and a goat. Fathered by a computer, born of a virgin who immediately abandons him in a library dumb-waiter, made lame in the chute, raised as a goat among goats by a scientist soured on humankind, the Goat-Boy, Barth insists, follows the archetypal pattern of heroes, and will certainly grow into the Grand Tutor who will decipher what is 'passed' and what is 'flunked' in a universe run like a university.

Overlong, belaboring the analogy between studentdom and humankind, *Giles Goat-Boy* is probably Barth's least successful novel. But it powerfully conveys his new way of dealing with that recurring figure in his work: the damaged, abandoned child, the inhuman man who cannot feel a thing. Even this weak novel shows Barth's genius for archetype as analogy, as the means of expressing, ennobling and enlivening the anguish of the man paralyzed by depression.... As goat he has lustiness without anxiety, no introspective bent, no awareness of depression. As Goat-Boy he fuses his experience above the human line and becomes a Comic Hero. For the answer to depression is entertainment, the fictions that for Barth do more than lighten the heart. Through analogy after analogy, Barth builds an emotional system where parody is the bridge over the feelings you have to the ones you do not, where it is possible to estheticize yourself into one of those beautiful people who are history's adornments....

John Barth's unsentimental awareness of the problems of intimacy offers comic visions of how to avoid it. In *Giles Goat-Boy*, for example, a masochistic girl and a boy who has been raised among goats enter the belly of a computer to discover the mystery of everything. They make love in the machine. The girl finds release from her masochism, the boy from his animal insensitivity. The control on her self-destructiveness and his destructiveness is the monitor robot. Outside the computer they never achieve that happiness again....

John Barth is the brightest mark of a cultural faith in the self as a fabricated thing, a movable objet d'art. Barth's dazzling humor lights up an audience of role-players by taking the self-game one step further. Barth parodies how much people become actors, liars to avoid knowing who and what they really are....

No Freudian, Barth is all for keeping life's surfaces lovely by keeping torment buried, by claiming that psychology is esthetics. Barth outdoes the audience in seeing happiness as the well-wrought barricade."

Josephine Hendin

*Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945*  
(Oxford 1979) 74, 82-83, 219

"Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* or *The Revised New Syllabus*, a 'souped-up Bible,' abounds in clear-cut theological allusions that have comic-apocalyptic or absurd effects. The novel is divided into two volumes, like the Bible; as in the Bible, the numbers three and seven are prevalent. Barth divides each volume of the *RNS* into three reels and seven subdivisions. Giles attempts three interpretations of his seven assignments, descends into the belly of WESCAC three times, and completes the revision of the New Syllabus at the age of thirty-three and a third. The reader, because of the suggestive allusions, expects revelation. However, at the close he is not sure whether the gimping protagonist is at the *schlemiel* end of the continuum of the heroic, whether he is an anti-hero or a Christ figure. Norms are rejected and a sense of chaos is affirmed... Such 'deliverance' concludes the quest in Barth's novel."

Elaine B. Safer

"The Allusive Mode and Black Humor in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*"  
*Renascence* 32 (Winter 1980) 89-104

"We start with systems, anti-systems, pastoral, the whole American tradition caught up in an immense, self-indulgent, overbearing novel: Barth's summa theologica, *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966). In several ways, this novel is the most all-inclusive work of its decade, transforming the cold war of the fifties into the campus wars of the sixties, and subsuming under campus everything we associate with the American experience. Yet, at the same time, Barth has entered his own 'new phase' or 'new curriculum,' in which a fiction can exist only as a phenomenological experience, as a self-conscious artifact, itself the subject of itself. Further, Barth perceived all human experience as fitting allegorically into technical terms: for the human body, we have the body of the computer; for human passions, the responses of the programmed material, etc. A brief quotation, from Volume II, First Reel, Chapter 7, is our paradigm:

'I was the GILES, I repeated, by WESCAC out of Virginia R. [George is speaking to Virginia's father, Reginald Hector, who put George out to die as an infant]; rescued from the tapelift by G. Herrold the booksweep, reared by Max Speilman as Billy Bockfuss the ag-Hill Goat-Boy, and come to Great Mall to change WESCAC'S AIM and Pass ALL or Fail ALL.'

The elucidation of this passage is the subject of the novel, 750 pages, over 400,000 words. The book, like Barth's later *Letters*, is for survivors. *Giles Goat-Boy* is subtitled 'The Revised New Syllabus.' The title page, after various cover letters, is far more elaborate: 'R.N.S. / The Revised New Syllabus / of George Giles / Our Grand Tutor,' with further information that this is the 'Autobiographical and Horatory Tapes / Read Out at New Tammany College to His Son / Giles (.) Stoker / By the West Campus Automatic Computer / And by Him Prepared for the Furtherment of the / Gilesian Curriculum.' But before we arrive at this elaboration of the book—and it is helpful to digest this material from the start—we must travel along a good deal of self-conscious material: a 'Publisher's Disclaimer,' followed by letters from four editors, including the publisher's son, who served as readers, and that followed by further disclaimers from the publisher. Each editor-reader offers reasons why the book should or should not be published, none of them on its aesthetic values (although the publisher's son hints at these), three of them on its pornographic qualities, its lack of coherence, its defiance of propriety in manners and morals, its association with anarchistic and nihilistic values.

In this section—still far from the beginning of the novel proper, unless this is the beginning—the manuscript, so the publisher tells us, has been altered, with passages deleted, all because the author refuses to respond to queries. From there, we arrive at another prefatory section: 'Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher' from J.B.—the author, we assume. He announces that the manuscript enclosed is not the one they had expected, *The Seeker*, but another one, put into his hands by Stoker Giles, a student at an unnamed campus (Penn State?); and the manuscript therein is his story as provided by his father, George Giles,

printed out by the West Campus Automatic Computer (WESCAC) and itself a lengthy description of the Revised New Syllabus.

After forty-odd pages of text, we arrive at the subtext, which is the novel proper, the growth and development of Barth's latest picaresque protagonist, the goat-boy Billy Bockfuss, who became George Giles. As Billy, he was goat; as George, he was man. We enter Swiftian thickets, Horses and Houyhnhnms, or classical centaurs. Barth's elaboration serves a strong 1960s function in its presentation of life as existent only in the eyes of the observer, the solipsism Barth finds so distasteful in some of his contemporaries. All he lacks are reviewers' and readers' opinions, but he has prepared for them by way of the editors' views, which suggest four ways to judge the book. And if Barth had been able to foresee the paperback edition of his book, he would have found his narrative surrounded by blurbs that provide reviewers' judgments, although these are proffered in the general terms of high praise that may mean limited (if any) reading. *Time* compares *Giles* to 'perhaps Batman' and the *National Observer* suggests Barth as "The Rudolph Nureyev of Prose," while the *Times Book Review* compares him to Joyce, Proust, Mann, and Faulkner. These remarks, even if unincorporated into the Preface, complete the cycle of self.

For his 'outer world' Barth has found another self, in computer technology. The computer is the ultimate in the narcissistic experience because it creates and completes cycles, from programming thorough completion, without interruption or interference. In his disdain for old fictional forms, Barth saw mechanical elements and technological means as ways to enter the new. The WESCAC computer, under whose aegis the entire New Tammany College once fell, has taken on not only human functions but functions involving brainwaves. It is theoretically capable 'of being intensified almost limitlessly, at the same amplitudes and frequencies as human "brainwaves," like a searchlight over tremendous spaces.'

Barth then plays with military and other applications, which complement the computer's ability to EAT. The computer consumed people when Maximillian Spielman (minstrel, play-man), goat-boy's tutor and mentor, pressed the EAT button. Thousands of Americans suffered 'mental burn-out' as a consequence, the severity depending on how close they were to the center, like victims of atomic fallout on Hiroshima. The losses were most severe at the center, instant death; then radiated out to catalepsy, disintegration of personality, loss of identity; still further out, inability to choose or act except on impulse, then suicide, madness, despair, hysteria, 'vertiginous self-consciousness.' In the very outer rings of affected areas we find 'impotency, nervous collapse, and more or less severe neuroses.' Damage was functional and, therefore, permanent.

New Tammany College has experienced apocalypse, and the society into which George is to be transformed from goat to boy is one contaminated by computer fallout. The context is, in a sense, not only the past apocalypse, as related to George, but present sixties chaos, campus riots, subsequent 'fallout.' In that present, the campus, as a reflection of the world, involves a deadly struggle between Student-Unionism and Informationalism. The codification of information has meant departments have absorbed human impulses: men's freely willed acts have been classified by psychology or anthropology and determined to be historical events, or by philosophy as matters of dissection. A moral vacuum has developed, which various movements have desperately attempted to fill.

New religions have proliferated, Barth's campus versions of the consciousness and political movements of the 1960s: the pre-Schoolers, the Curricularists, the Evolutionaries, the Ismists (idealoguees), the neo-Enochians (Christers), the Bonifascists (Nazis), the Secular-Studentists (Communists), also called Mid-Percentile or Bourgeois-Liberal Baccalaureates, the Ethical-Quadranglists, the Sexual Programmmists, the Tragicists and New Quixotics, the Angry Young Freshmen, the Beist Generation (consciousness-raising), East and West Campus (Soviet Union and America). They range from 'good feeling' groups, to academicians who have forsaken teaching for worship of administration and their Kanzler (Chancellor), to pedagogues who offer various theories of learning (not learning itself), to those who return to old systems once they are labeled new.

With its East-West struggle, its computer wars, its tribalization of the student body, its ideological divisions, the campus is a disintegrative force—an educational institution which has collapsed as much as the society. It *is*, indeed, the society. Within this, the group that rules is the 'Sovereignty of the Bottom

Percentile.’ In the multiple confusions, proliferations, internal conflicts, tensions, struggles for power and control, the West Campus computer, WESCAC, is refined. Into it are incorporated other systems, those acronyms which Barth finds to be so dehumanizing: NOCTIS (for Non-Conceptual Thinking and Institutional Synthesis) and MALI (Manipulation Analysis and Logical Inference).

None of this hodgepodge is idle information, for George’s birth, as he will learn later, is connected to the computer and its functions. At this point, about one hundred pages after the start, George enters into his novelistic phase: that age-old attempt to discover who and what he is, his origins, parentage, tribe. Barth crosses with his own work in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, duplicating those early fictional efforts which stressed the protagonist’s discovery of his origins: Tom Jones, Humphrey Clinker, etc. These discoveries—social, personal, psychological—are connected to George’s decision to forsake his Billy Bockfuss identity and assume his human one: ‘I don’t want to be a *Billy* now or a *Bockfuss*, either one! I’m going to be a human student.’ His decision to become George cannot be dissociated from his desire to discover his parentage, and this, in turn, will draw him ever further into the innards of the computer, three Dantesque descents in all. The pattern is strikingly like that which Pynchon will employ later in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where technological patterns replace pastoral as forms of sustenance; where one is determined, not by association with life-giving elements, but by scientific complications lying beyond individual comprehension. The ultimate truth will be that Billy, now becoming George, was computer-born, fathered by a computer, and fated for his present course. George Giles is the GILES, the aggregate of all data fed into WESCAC. As he reaches toward the innards of WESCAC, he is named and then prepared to go forth to meet his maker. God’s creation is now the computer’s. The struggle is displaced Oedipal: animal son with father (WESCAC) a mechanical object; not pastoral but technology epitomized.

George’s plan is to discover AIM—Automatic Implementation Mechanism—which determines, in the very innards of WESCAC, what the computer will EAT and when it will EAT. To be a hero, he must also be a Grand Tutor, a kind of Christian knight who will do good. Max, the specialist in psycho-protology (he should have been called not Spielman, but Scheisskopf), is dubious; for he wants George to have a normal life. Yet he recognizes the latter’s situation as that of the classic hero, having apparently read Raglan, Campbell, Weston, Frye, among others. George enjoys the mystery of parenthood, the irregularity of his birth, the threat on his life and subsequent injury to his legs, the circumstances of his rescue by George Herrold, his namesake, the fact that he was raised by a foster parent (Max), disguised as an animal, and bore a name not his own. Life takes after legend, fiction, and myth.

Struggling to emerge through this morass of exotic detail, acronyms, strange events, animal-human combinations, is a rather traditional picaresque-hero type of novel. Essential to Barth is the ‘adventure of life’: that meeting between an innocent young man and what lies beyond, in which determinism and free will can struggle. One begins, like Laocoon, with a few coils encircling oneself; the next step is to break out, or succumb. Potential self-destruction overlaps with expression of function, with characters and elements extending from one book to the other. Such a format has served Barth well, since he has perceived postwar America through the eyes of a minstrel or troubadour, a Spielman; all has been imitation, and the real, whatever it signifies, is buried beneath layers of deception. He is, like Gaddis, one of our writers of the imitational world. In *Giles Goat-Boy*, the computer world, as essence and terminology, serves what the counterfeit does for Gaddis.

Since George is a goat-boy, every new situation, event, even food, is, for him, a source of wonder. Each new figure he meets—whether Maurice Stoker, Max Croaker, or Eblis Eierkopf—has a dual purpose to keep the narrative going by supplying the reader with new information and to provide context for George’s wonder and innocence. For George is a rustic, Huck type coming to the big city; the West Campus and New Tammany College in particular are urban experiences for the farmboy-animal. George responds with innocence, but his innocence—like Cooke’s in *The Sot-Weed Factor* or Horner’s in *The End of the Road*—must turn slowly toward forms of knowledge, even at the expense of life. And just as Cooke must write his epic poem, George must justify himself by committing a heroic act: in his case, penetrating to the belly of the WESCAC computer and redirecting its aim.

His goal is, seemingly, an act of broad cultural dimensions, but it is also connected to his own manifest destiny. Barth has, in several ways, thrown himself back into a much older frame of reference—into

Emerson country, behind him Carlyle, Wordsworth, and Rousseau—and attempted to find amidst seeming 1960s chaos elements that join. And in personal heroism, of the parodied sort, he finds AIM. This heroism cannot be clear and free, that is, romantic, but must be immersed in particular American conflicts: pastoral versus urban, Garden versus technology, systems versus anti-systems, history versus now. Further, Barth introduces large historical processes, allegorical elements at work behind campus activities: cold war, struggle against the Nazis, Jewish Holocaust, Nazi types remaining within the Western world, continuing ideological struggles between survivors of the free and less free worlds. Civil rights and black movements are still inchoate.

Holding the disparate elements of *Giles* together is Barth's sense of apocalypse: not the end of the world, but the termination of a way of life. It is, essentially, the end of the pastoral existence which George, in a more innocent world, could have represented. Within the imminence of apocalypse, the man who controls the computer controls life. Ostensibly, the chancellor of New Tammany is Rexford; but he is, like Eisenhower, whom he resembles, a figurehead. The real power, the emperor of the land, is the computer, WESCAC (with its suffix close to shit), and there Bray is king. As a false Grand Tutor—Secretary of State?—he has entered the belly of WESCAC, and from there his edicts control the college, the campus, the frontier, the clocks, all the details of Matriculation, Commencement, and Examinations. Since Bray is himself a confidence man—a man who traffics in masks and anti-masks, in roles and counter-roles—elements behind the apocalypse are themselves distorted and disguised. There is no clear pattern, no straight road toward what we commonly assume is an apocalyptic end of things.

George gets a whiff of apocalypse when the Dean of Flunks, Maurice Stoker, takes him on a tour of the power area, one wing of the computer complex. They descend into the guts, passing guard dogs reminiscent of concentration camps. In this power complex, the allegories become mixed: camps, furnaces, guards, dogs. In the Furnace Room (Germanically capitalized), an emergency threatens to blow everything up, and a key valve must be turned. Amidst troops running everywhere, fire, hideous flames, heat, huge muscled women as well as men, Stoker is in his element: 'Volcano with a cap on it!' he exults. With his huge tool, he turns the valve where others failed, in the act knocking down men with his wrench, then spraying one of the women with a caustic fluid.

The scene, recalling Bosch, is all sadism. Stoker gains his satisfaction from humiliating and demeaning others; or from open acts of brutality. This is, in effect, George's introduction to the power center, to whose controls he aspires as Grand Tutor. If the computer is, ultimately, a form of the bomb (the struggle over which characterized 1950s science as much as the moon shot did in the 1960s), then to control it is to have at one's fingertips the means of apocalypse. This, then, will be the area in which George can test his aspirations for heroism: as the ultimate hero, the mythical savior not only of his people but of the world.

Bray explains the Examination. In the procedures of Matriculation, Placement, Graduation, and Examinations, Barth has located his apocalyptic vision; what will be for Pynchon rockets, what was for Gaddis imitations, for Ellison invisibility, for Heller the catch, will be for Barth the examination. It is both an existential and a metaphysical moment.... Apocalypse interlocks with other elements; for example, the three descents George must make into the belly of WESCAC. Each descent involves a different perception for goat-boy of the nature of his role and of campus reality. A sense of ending is imminent in each descent. To 'go underground' is to explore the nature of death, or, if one is fortunate, to find signs that indicate prolongation of life. But such signs— in the subterranean journeys of Vergil, Odysseus, Dante, can exist only alongside final things. So, too, with George; each descent has within it a potential shredding.

His first descent is based on his view that Passage (Passing) and Failure (Failing) are fundamentally distinct, each ideologically pure. While this applies directly to campus affairs, its apocalyptic potential applies more intensely to East-West political stances; such a firmly held distinction can lead only to nuclear war. George's opinion, however, is naïve, not strongly held, simply something he hits upon and then tries to work out. This descent is marked by his wearing the mask of Bray, so that, in effect, his philosophy of distinction is a lot of braying, a lot of wind.

For his second descent, George has leaped to the opposite conclusion. These choices, incidentally, involve brushes with personal death, as well as the opportunity to 'kill' the computer. George has a

perception of still another position while he chews on the old New Syllabus, that of Enos Enoch, the old New Testament of Jesus Christ. This revelation shows George now that 'failure is passage'; but while it seems to have relevance for the sixties, it is, also, pure braying. It is a witty way of saying the part is the all, elements being equal regardless of differences. The parody of 1960s compromise suggests a deeply conservative vein in Barth despite the radical structure of the novel and the original means of displaying the self. George's second passage underground is a failure, since the philosophy on which it is based is spurious. Further, in making the descent, George must deny his own sexual proclivities, deny distinctions between male and female; denying sex, he negates life. The passage, if successful, would be an ironical end of all things; for life to continue, George must move on to another descent.

For the final one, George must achieve wisdom: i.e., Dante in the *Paradiso*. The third descent arrives with George's sense of failure: his 'paradoxes became paroxysms.' He finds his reason constricted, himself fearful that his previous assaults upon truth have revealed only confusion. He feels his mind will crack. As he tells Rexford: 'I'd come to understand that East and West campuses, goat and Grand Tutor, even Passage and Failure, were inseparable and ultimately indistinguishable.' George's perception of interconnection will save him, but it is, really, old, based on Emersonian unity of self carried into political ideology. The 'revised' New Syllabus' sounds strikingly like the 'original New Syllabus' of Enos Enoch, George's revelation not too distinct from that of Jesus: self-reliance for the individual, interdependence for the social body.... His Bible is the revised New Syllabus of George Giles, reached after descents and revivals, approximate to the emergence of the 'original New Syllabus'....

The larger mythical frame for the descents is the struggle between father and son, the Oedipal conflict which is the subject of a play by Taliped, the famous Dean of Cadmus College. The inset play, coming just before the novel's midway point, is a parody of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, adapted to deans, pot, and blind academics. It is the campus equivalent, on still another level of perception, of apocalypse: here generational conflict, which Barth sees as one of the keys to the sixties. Taliped has not just murdered his father at the crossroads, he has committed a pre-Manson butchering of the innocents. 'First I cut the old man's throat and dumped him out to teach him manners. Then I humped his girlfriend as he bled to death, for sport. My policy, in cases of this sort, is first to stab 'em in the belly-button and then cut other things.' He spends so much time 'butchering and banging her' that the others almost get away, but he finds them hiding and dismembers them. Taliped insists he felt remorse afterward, saying that if he had not lost his temper he would have dispensed with the carving.

Like the original, Taliped's version is based on revelations which trap the seeker after truth, even crazy Taliped. When he is blind, Taliped 'sees the light,' as it were, perceiving he is thrice flunked—on his ID card, in bed, and at the crossroads. The 'smartest dean that ever deaned' will never see the light again, although he has achieved awareness. The chorus then chants, 'Here today and gone tomorrow,' before breaking into an orgy of rhetorical terms which explain the movement of the drama. The final message, an 'interruption of this catharsis,' brings a news bulletin.

Parody of the Oedipal myth is essential to Barth's overall structural concept, which I locate in father (WESCAC, technology, mechanical, informational, progress) and son (George, pastoral, Pan, goatish, humanistic, compromising). The successive tests George must pass before he can descend into the belly of the computer—the goal being to replace *its* truth with *his*—are all stages in growth and development against the background of a generational conflict. The tasks all display some threat to his very survival and are, therefore, the way in which life itself is carried forth, by way of murderous conflicts. Since this appears to be the chief structural element of the novel, it brings us back to traditional forms, the epical quest, those attributes of the hero's life as laid out in Lord Raglan's *The Hero*.

If WESCAC is the emperor, not of ice cream, but of the land, then George—if he is indeed the GILES, the real Grand Tutor—must save the campus, the university, the land and world. The sick king has infected all forms of knowledge: whether it is Max Spielman's Hebraic humanism; Eirkopf's religious devotion to technology and positivism, reflected in his lenses and mirrors, all secondary means of 'seeing'; Maurice Stoker's ability to change sides, as needed; Harold Bray's edicts from the belly of WESCAC, all misleading, because he is not the true Grand Tutor, but a poseur; Peter Greene's boosterism, his platitudes, his simplistic Americanism (behind which is much decency); Anastasia's inability to define herself through

choice, her willingness to be used, to be a receptacle; Julius Rexford's lack of definition as Chancellor, his surface perfection which hides considerable confusion; Croaker's animality, which in another context might be a way of knowing, but which here is purely carnal chaos; Dr. Sear's polymorphism, which proves untenable. Even the Living Sakhyan, the campus god, remains sphinxlike, mute, giving out no vibrations, offering no solace, remaining stolid and neutral.

An acute paradox arises. For while all generational activity must derive from George, he is, to a large extent, hobbled by a doom assigned him. If he is chosen, if he is the GILES, that incorporation of the total university (or universe), then his task is to postpone the apocalypse, at least during his lifetime. That is, in a sense, his mission. And while it is a huge mission, of messianic proportions—he is to be the new Founder—he is, then, kept from individual development by the nature of his task. To establish the Revised New Syllabus, he must break free, as limned by his three descents; and freedom is not his, either. Task or destiny struggles against liberation.

Barth has attempted to manifest those 1960s tensions in formlessness struggling to escape from form, in the need for personal expression bottled up by destiny or function. The novel's structure follows George's own gait. Caught between four-leggedness and two-leggedness, George must carry a stick, especially when he moves from goat to boy. Like Oedipus with his pierced ankles, George has legs that do not straighten out completely, and his slightly bent form, supported by the stick, is a physical manifestation of who and what he is. No longer goat, not quite man, he is a mutant of sorts—and as mutant, he has no clear identity. He is, in fact, merely a response to situations, utilizing a stick as a third leg when he forsakes his four legs. The gait created by this locates George in a physical limbo, and even his sexual tastes will be affected.

The mutant quality of George's condition, while permitting him to live in the animal-pastoral world, inhibits him in the man-made world. It disallows a clear identity, making him a figure of destiny, despite his descents to perceive the truth. Barth has caught that sense of the sixties which seemed all change and yet hobbled change. Through his first three novels, Barth had stressed quality of freedom—that ability of the individual to impose his own pattern on a contingent universe, connecting absurd fragments by way of will, or failing and needing support. Basically a rationalist's view of universe and individual, it has become, by *Giles*, ambiguous. Barth has been caught up by history; the great freeing powers of the postwar years, transformed into human liberation, have become restricted. The materials of *Giles* are concerned with frontiers, dualisms, competing campuses, ideological antagonisms and conflicts, confrontations between historical elements, generational struggles. George's innocence has lost its bloom. The picaresque hero, who is Barth's trademark, must become a statesman, ideologue, humanist, politician, social scientist, pedagogue, academician. The demands of the sixties turn us into polymaths, as George learns; and yet at the same time, we must not lose our original perceptions. For George, that is the stable, the company of goats, his Panish earlier existence.

Barth threads through a narrow course. Conflicts and decisions call for a mutant, and yet all intellectual mutants—Bray, Stoker, Rexford—betray themselves and the campus. George must resist that. The way he can do it is, chiefly, by means of sex. Sex should remain barnyard sex, which for Barth means honesty of feeling, direct expression of self, simple physical release. As soon as sex becomes part of other schemes—like Dr. Sear's polymorphism, Stoker's display of sexual bravura, Croaker's beastliness—it loses its primary function. Pure and simple pleasure is the sole form of salvation.

Barth's reliance on pastoral is curious, seriously out of phase with complications at other levels. The crucial segment arrives when George is ejected from WESCAC for the third time. Sparks and flames reveal that the computer is shutting down and the time is out of joint, personally as well as ideologically. That ejection sets off the 1960s, so to speak. What, then, can George do? The verdict indicates that he belongs back in the barn. In that third descent, he has lost touch with himself; he has a blank ID and an uncertain sense of self. 'I was not born George; I was not born anything; I had invented myself as I'd elected my name.' That separation of name, self, presentation of self can only mean George's contact with the working universe is disjointed. Touching the barn—Antaeus with the earth—can restore him, and it.

Restoration in the barn simplifies one structural element of the book, the sexual motif. That simplification, which is essential for George's youthful work to be done (the establishment of the new



revised syllabus to replace the Founder's Scroll), manifests how shaky Barth's interpretation of his own materials is. For while writing a vast critique of the 1960s, the most compendious work on a decade since Gaddis's *The Recognitions* on the 1950s, Barth has fallen back on sexual platitudes. He has honored the simplicities of barnyard sex, glorifying the pleasure principle of uncomplicated intercourse (goats or people), and epitomized in the sensations of sexual release the essential human factor. Whereas everything else is unduly complicated and caught up in irresolvable trappings, the sexual component of all this can be reduced to manageable levels. Renewed by the barnyard experience, George can complete his mission: 'for though my youthful work was done, that of my manhood remained to do.' In the so-called Posttape (a kind of Becket Krapp), which Barth suggests may be spurious, George speaks of going forth to teach the unteachable, expecting to fail. The students will quickly forget who 'routed the false Grand Tutor, showed the Way to Commencement Gate, and set down this single hope of studentdom, *The Revised New Syllabus*.' He, too, will end up 'naked, blind, dishonored.'

This is a good deal for sexual renewal to help bring about. The solution is far out of line with the ingredients. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Cooke's compulsive virginity—the other side of George's compulsive barnyard sexuality—was a source of humor, since he was barraged by those offering sexual favors and he burned with desire. His restraining himself for the sake of his poetic art carries a witty undertow. Here, in *Giles*, Barth has no such effective ploy; for issues, despite their parodic and even burlesqued presentation, are serious; and George's reversal of Cooke is supposed to offer a viable alternative to counterfeit feeling. He is the real thing, life itself, the embodiment of vital principles; whereas the others are either moribund, dependent on lenses and mirrors, sexually frantic because incapable of sex, neurotically polymorphous, or remnants of a humanism that no longer functions. In this chaos of university and universe, George and his liberated sexuality are deemed valid. His sense of his sexual powers offers true liberation.

Thus, Barth is trapped, himself, by the very decade whose conflicts he has limned and intuited. For to believe in the sexual life as valid alternative to falsity is itself the kind of simplification Barth would otherwise bring against the people he parodies. One of the allures of the sixties was their offer of a sexual 'coming out': be oneself, whether hetero, bi, or homo, or some exotic combination. The other side is sexual disability, and there is a sufficiency of that in the novel, in Barth as a whole. His fictions are filled with sexual cripples, from those impotent to those pansexual, there is barely a normally functioning individual... From the sexual point of view, Barth's novels are a circus sideshow, he the barker offering untold and fascinating effects from male and female, or from both sides. The sexual cripples, the overachievers, the impotent, and others (mounters of mother or sister) seem more than social reflections, more than demonstrations of the body politic; just as George's rampant sexuality seems to move beyond simply 'health.' Barth's distaste for sexual definition, if these reflections of over and under are significant, seems part of his exhausted vision. He is not Swiftian enough to see sex as filth, as rooted in elimination; but rather as part of the exhaustion of the entire Western tradition, whose depletion he has located as central to our culture.

'Reality' in *Giles Goat-Boy*, until efforts at resolution, had been on a mighty scale. Without making excessive claims for Barth's philosophic powers, we can observe him as trying to negotiate his way through highly difficult terrain. The terrain is divided between that which belongs to the practical world and that which belongs to the world of pure knowledge, roughly the Kantian division between reason and understanding. *Giles* is, in certain respects, Barth's equivalent of *The Magic Mountain*, that disquisition on reason and understanding within a world of sexual and other cripples. As a 'magic mountain,' New Tammany College has its sphinx (also its sphincter, since Max's masterwork is *The Riddle of the Sphincters*), its philosophical opposites, its disease in WESCAC, its appeal to the universal mind, its atmosphere of enclosure and hermeticism. Even the time sequencing—George spends seven years at instruction—has parallels, in that inner and outer time conflict: New Tammany and the magic mountain are both in and not in the world.

In that struggle of opposing elements, the pure world versus the practical, Barth comes up against what he cannot resolve; and when he attempts to do so in the person of George, and in George's sexuality, he denies a good deal of the complication promised the reader. To bring together the pure world of

understanding, perception, and self-consciousness, and the practical world of ethics and morality, is to see ironically, even parodistically. To attempt a resolution, in a goat-boy or otherwise, is to reduce.

The disclaimer in the 'Postscript to the Posttape' may then be validated. The entire enterprise is questioned, and the author is not even sure if the manuscript is by Stoker Giles or Giles Stoker—backward serves as easily as forward Barth (signed 'J.B.')

questions the tragic view of himself with which George closes the narrative: 'the hopeless, even nihilistical tone of those closing pages militates against our believing them to be the Grand Tutor's own.' George's rejection of even his friends, of his son, his embrace of the mulatto boy Tombo, his sense of his own apocalyptic end, all, 'J.B.' says, throw into doubt the validity of the text. Then the editor, a voice beyond 'J.B.,' questions whether even the Postscript is valid, for it is in different type from that of the 'Cover-Letter to the Editors and Publisher.' The end note casts the entire enterprise into confusion, and Barth has negated—not through parody, but through denial—the book. He has thrown it back into a funhouse and demonstrated in over 400,000 words the exhaustion of the very elements he has tried to perceive. He is, in his own admission, no more than a voyeur."

Frederick R. Karl  
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Michael Hollister (2015)