

## 40 QUOTATIONS



John Barth

(1930- )

John Barth is the most elitist of Postmodernist novelists and fiction theorists, an academic Expressionist of such densely solipsistic artifice that few can read him. As a Professor at Buffalo and at Johns Hopkins universities he mentored some writers more readable than himself, including A. B. Paulson. Barth esteems only a handful of contemporary fiction writers, feels superior to the common reader and seems interested only in the latest technique. He imagines that he is as great as Joyce or Kafka or Borges but as an American model of elite Postmodernist fiction he got eclipsed by Thomas Pynchon, who at least is readable and funny. In his story “Lost in the Funhouse” Barth is like a pedantic magician who has no magic because he explains all his tricks as he goes along—he is a “metafictionist.” For him, fiction writing is merely a mechanical process, like manipulating dummies (readers) in a funhouse. His fiction is totally cerebral, as if written by an inner space alien with a thin body, big head, and huge inky eyes.

ORDER OF TOPICS: elitism, opinions, the novel is dead except for me, solipsism, drugs, writing, beyond Realism, beyond Modernism, intellectual fantasy, Postmodernism, Postmodern technique, black humor, conventions, death:

### ELITISM

Distressing as the fact is to us liberal Democrats, the commonality, alas, will *always* lose their way and their souls.

### OPINIONS

The horror of our history has purged me of opinions.

It is often pleasant to stone a martyr, no matter how much we may admire him.

## THE NOVEL IS DEAD EXCEPT FOR ME

The novel, if not narrative literature generally, if not the printed word altogether, has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt, as Leslie Fiedler and others maintain.... I'm inclined to agree, with reservations and hedges...it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up.

When I see a young man taking up the practice of fiction as a vocation in this age of the camera, it seems to me that he is doing a very quixotic thing to dedicate his mortal time to that possibly dead art form.

One writes fiction now in a sort of apocalyptic ambience, it doesn't finally matter at all to the art of literature whether historically this particular genre fades away.

## SOLIPSISM

It certainly is a solipsistic and hermit-like thing to do—to close oneself in a room for hours at a stretch, day after day, not in human company, listening only to the sound of your own words.

I myself like a kind of fiction that, if it's going to be self-conscious, is at least comic about its own self-consciousness. Otherwise, self-consciousness can be a bloody bore. What is more loathsome than the self-loathing of a self one loathes?

## DRUGS

I went through a period in the late 1950s and early '60s of experimenting with psychic energizers.

My doctor, who is a very leary man, gave me a very mild prescription for Dexamyl, which is a gentle amphetamine plus a kind of tranquilizer. I really am antichemical, and I found that I was so suggestible to these chemicals that I only needed to use half of one a day.

Did you ever use Dexedrine? They all have a similar—speeding—effect. You feel as though you have this endless energy when, in fact, you're just draining your energy.

## WRITING

Those rituals of getting ready to write produce a kind of trance state.

To turn experience into speech—that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammatize, to syntactify it—is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all.

## BEYOND REALISM

God wasn't too bad a novelist, except he was a Realist.

My first two novels were very short and relatively realistic.

Unlike those critics who regard realism as what literature has been aiming at all along, I tend to regard it as a kind of aberration in the history of literature.

## BEYOND MODERNISM

Works like *Finnegans Wake* strike some of us [me] as being, after all, the monumental last cry of a certain variety of modernism and not terribly *consequential*, though impressive in themselves.

I always felt that it was a bad idea on the face of it, though there are beautiful counter-examples, to write a more or less realistic piece of fiction, one dimension of which keeps pointing to the classical myths—like John Updike's *Centaur*, or Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Malamud's *The Natural*. Much as one may admire those novels in other respects, their authors have hold of the wrong end of the mythopoeic stick. The myths themselves are produced by the collective narrative imagination (or whatever), partly to point down at our daily reality; and so to write about our daily experiences in order to point up the myths seems to me mythopoeically retrograde. I think it's a more interesting thing to do, if you find yourself preoccupied with mythic archetypes or what have you, to address them directly.

Some of the serious affect that we experience in the face of genuine myth can be experienced in the face of contemporary "comic" fiction using mythic materials.

The landmark writers more often than not are not formally or technically innovative. Fitzgerald, Hemingway the novelist, Joe Heller, Ralph Ellison, Phil Roth, Saul Bellow, John Updike—however much we [I] may admire them on some sort of grounds, we [I] don't particularly admire them for dramatic innovations in form and technique. I have to add immediately that these are not my very favorite writers; and those who are—Borges, Beckett, and Nabokov, among the living grand masters (and writers like Italo Calvino, Robbe-Grillet, John Hawkes, William Gass, Donald Barthelme)—have experimented with form and technique.

What the writers that I just mentioned share (except Robbe-Grillet) is a more or less fantastical, or as Borges would say, "irrealist," view of reality, and this irrealism—not antirealism or unrealism, but irrealism—is all that I would confidently predict is likely to characterize the prose fiction of the 1970s. I welcome this.

#### INTELLECTUAL FANTASY

The possibility of constructing a fantastically baroque plot appealed to me most: the idea of turning vigorously against the modernist notion that plot is an anachronistic element in contemporary fiction.... [I wanted] to tell complicated stories simply for the aesthetic pleasure of complexity, of complication and unravelment, suspense, and the rest. I don't think you could do it with a long face: you would almost have to be parodying the genre in some respect to bring it off. But I don't believe that that is necessarily a sterile or unproductive thing to do.

What I did in the case of the *Goat-Boy* novel was to try to abstract the patterns and then write a novel which would consciously, even self-consciously, follow the patterns, parody the patterns, satirize the patterns, but with good luck transcend the satire a little bit in order to say some of the serious things I had in mind to say. Otherwise it would be a farce, a great trifle—which, of course, some readers found it to be.

Not every boy thrown to the wolves becomes a hero.

He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.

#### POSTMODERNISM

It's dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac, when the real technical question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka but those who've *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their careers.

It's an aristocratic notion on the face of it, which the democratic West seems eager to have done with; not only the "omniscient" author of older fiction but the very idea of the controlling artist has been condemned as politically reactionary, even fascist.

In mass society, for example, when individualism as a philosophy is historically discredited, the novel of character is a kind of anachronism. I find that to be a most persuasive argument, but I note to myself that, for example, the simple device of telling a story in the first person obviates almost all those objections.

### POSTMODERN TECHNIQUE

It is easier and sociabler to talk technique than it is to make art.

A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary: Joyce and Kafka, for instance, in their time, and in ours, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges.

Two of the finest living specimens that I know of are Beckett and Borges, just about the only contemporaries of my reading acquaintance mentionable with the “old masters” of twentieth-century fiction.

Borges defines the Baroque as “that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders upon its own caricature.” While his own work is not Baroque, except intellectually (the Baroque was never so terse, laconic, economical), it suggests the view that intellectual and literary history has been Baroque, and has pretty well exhausted the possibilities of novelty.

I sympathize with a remark attributed to Saul Bellow, that to be technically up to date is the least important attribute of a writer, though I would have to add that this least important attribute may be nevertheless essential. In any case, to be technically *out* of date is likely to be a genuine defect.

My feeling about technique is art is that it has about the same value as technique in lovemaking. Heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill; but what you want is passionate virtuosity.

### BLACK HUMOR

I beseech the Muse to keep me from ever becoming a Black Humorist. Mind, I don’t object to Black Humorists, in their place, but to be numbered with them inspires me to a kind of spiritual White Backlash. For one thing they are in their way *responsible*, like more conventional social satirists: they dramatize—and good for them!—the Madness of Contemporary Society, of Modern Warfare, of Life with the Bomb, of What Have We Nowadays. But I say Muse spare me (at the desk, I mean) from Social-Historical Responsibility, and in the last analysis from every other kind as well, except Artistic.

### CONVENTIONS

It might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature—such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation...even characterization! Even *plot!*—if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one’s predecessors have been up to.

[We should] find a way to assimilate what’s gone before us in the twentieth century—Joyce, Beckett, Borges, and the rest—and yet tell stories.

I like plot in fiction in the same way that I like melodic music.

Perhaps we should accept the fact that writing and reading are essentially linear activities and devote our attention as writers to those aspects of experience that can best be rendered linearly—with words that go left to right across the page; subjects, verbs, and objects; punctuation!--instead of trying to force the medium into things that are not congenial to it.

## DEATH

“My dear fellow,” Burlingame said, “we sit here on a blind rock careening through space; we are all of us rushing headlong to the grave. Think you the worms will care?”

Some of these quotations are excerpted from  
“John Barth” (1971), interviewed by Joe David Bellamy  
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Joe David Bellamy (U Illinois, 1974)

