

**OSCILLATING BETWEEN NIGHTMARISH REALITY
AND IRRELEVANT STORY: JOHN BARTH'S BOOK OF TEN NIGHTS
AND A NIGHT**

**Raluca Șerban¹
Mihai Șerban²**

Abstract

John Barth's Book of Ten Nights and a Night seems to mark if not a turning point in Barth's writing, at least an isle of concern for everyday reality, with its complex social and political matters, in the midst of an ocean of playfulness and "irrelevant" storytelling, as the author himself labels his fiction. The eleven stories themselves are light, playful, funny, ironic, in his words, "irrelevant" to the world out there – in one word, entertaining. They self-reflexively turn towards themselves, as the author's fascination, indeed obsession, with writing and story-telling is as noticeable as ever: virtually all stories, one way or another, revolve around writers and teachers of literature, and they include extensive commentary on writing, yet something is radically different: the real world finally managed to creep into Barth's writing in a way it had never done before. Even a writer of so "light" novels could not turn his face from the nightmarish Ground Zero, the scene of the 2001 terrorist attacks that literally put an end to the world as Americans knew it. The full horror of September 11 is depicted in the frame of the stories. The moral seems to be that if mankind, if America is to survive such horror, it is going to be through storytelling.

Keywords: nine eleven, nightmarish reality vs. "irrelevant" story, storytelling, self-reflexivity, self-fictionalization

To be or not to be socially responsible: John Barth's writing in relation to 9.11 events

To be interested in, and write about, everyday reality, with its complex social and political matters, is quite an unexpected turn for an author who had warned his muse to "spare him" of social-historical responsibility (in his 1965 "Muse, Spare Me"), to "keep" him from ever becoming "responsible" and dramatizing "the Madness of Contemporary Society, of Modern Warfare, of Life With the Bomb", and who declared himself "not impressed by the apocalyptic character of the present age" (Barth, 1997: 55). Perhaps the "apocalyptic character" of *our* age eventually called for his attention.

¹ Raluca Șerban, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, raluca_stoica_serban@yahoo.com

² Mihai Șerban, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, mihai_serban_2005@yahoo.com

Although some of Barth's audience responded to it favorably, the novel attracted quite a lot of negative critical reactions. Some maintained that it contains "a few bright spots in an otherwise dismal bunch", that "such minimalist flourishes are not what one would expect from the former creator of gargantuan metafiction", while the fact that the stories "proliferate" with Barth "stand-ins – retired professors who are writers or retired writers who are professors" (*Publishers Weekly*, 2004: 53-4) is not appreciated either. The reviewer concludes that, because most of the stories "are filled with the gaseous, colorless chitchat characteristic of Barth's late style", the author "tells and tells, but has nothing to show, leaving the reader with no reason to read him" (id.). Others consider the *Book* "unfulfilling and lacking dramatic impact", mainly due to "his metafictional toying with variant versions of 'a non-story that becomes a Story by acknowledging that it isn't one'." Again with the exception of two tales ("The Rest of Your Life" and "And Then There's the One"), the volume is considered to be characterized by modest self-reflexiveness: "Barth's conviction that characters and plots, beginnings and endings aren't stories' central concerns becomes, once again, initially stimulating, increasingly puzzling, ultimately dissatisfying" (*Kirkus Reviews*, 2004: 191). Quite on the contrary, others³ argued – and I would agree – it was precisely Barth's style, among other things, that which constituted an "insurance policy against pedantry", as he has "nearly always managed to fuse a resonant sense of the richness of culture with mock gravity and slangy colloquialism" (Spayde, 2001), and it continues to be appreciated by his constant readers.

The awkward juxtaposition of self-reflexive writing and socially reflexive framework

The eleven stories themselves are what Barth has accustomed his readers to, that is, light, playful, funny, ironic, and, in his words, "irrelevant" to the world out there – to put it briefly, entertaining. They self-reflexively turn towards themselves, as the author's fascination, indeed obsession, with writing and story-telling is as noticeable as ever: virtually all stories, one way or another, revolve around writers and teachers of literature, and they include extensive commentary on writing. The author – outside and, due to his constant employment of *la mise-en-abyme*, inside his texts – still plays with the reader in ways the latter is familiar with, continuing his self-fictionalizing venture, and yet something is radically different: the real world finally managed to creep into his writing in a way it had never done before. Even a writer of so "light", bright, funny, ironic, or playful novels could not turn his face from the nightmarish "Ground Zero", the scene of the 2001 terrorist attacks that literally put an end to the world as Americans knew it. The full horror of September 11 is depicted in the frame of the stories, though it is intertwined with a counter-setting, or the other side of the coin, an imaginary marsh-nymph-land. In

³ In spite of responding negatively to *Coming Soon!!!*, Jon Spayde appreciates Barth's earlier work; his reference is to *On with the Story*.

this chapter I shall explore the interplay between nightmarish reality and light, “irrelevant” Story, and what issues out of it.

The novel opens bluntly, and self-reflexively:

*There was meant to have been a book called *Then Nights and a Night*, which, had it gotten itself written before TEOTWAW(A)KI 9/11/2001 – The End Of The World As We (Americans) Knew It – might have opened with a sportive extended invocation to the Storyteller’s Muse, more or less like this:*

Tell, O Muse of Story, the hundred-percent-made-up tale of a modern-day Odysseus’s interlude with the brackish tidewater marsh-nymph here called WYSIWYG – (Barth, 2004: 1)

for it does speak of itself after all: despite being written and published after “TEOTWAW(A)KI”, it does open with precisely this sort of “sportive extended invocation to the Storyteller’s Muse”.

Due to the strange juxtaposition of 9.11 events and his writing of his stories, insignificant to the horror-stricken real world and its suffering, up till the end, the author *needs* to and *does* justify the writing, publishing, and ultimately enjoying of his “irrelevant” literature, a term explained by the marsh-nymph towards the end of the second night: “By *irrelevant*, of course [...] we mean irrelevant to Black Tuesday’s terrorism”, *not* “irrelevant to human experience of life, language, and storytelling” (46).

Indeed, this is the key-word of most fragments in which the writer attempts to rationalize and defend the publication of the novel:

*Their quandary (Graybard’s and Wysiwyg’s) is that for him to re-render now, in these so radically altered circumstances, Author’s eleven mostly Autumnal and impossibly innocent stories, strikes him as bizarre, to put it mildly indeed – as if *Nine Eleven O One* hadn’t changed the neighborhood (including connotations of the number eleven), if not forever; at least for what remains the Teller’s lifetime. And yet not to go on with the stories, so to speak, would be in effect to give the mass-murderous fanatics what they’re after: a world in which what they’ve done already and might do next dominates our every thought and deed. [...] After *Black Tuesday*, however, it’s [Teller’s task] how to tell those or any such tales in a world so transformed overnight by terror that they seem, at best, irrelevant. (5)*

- defensive fragments alternating with the author’s recurrent apprehension that “‘T would be impertinent. Bizarre. Obscene, almost: idle quasi-erotic fantasizing in the very smoke of Ground Zero!’” (19)

The counterpoint of the nightmarish scene of the attacks is the relaxed atmosphere in Wysiwyg’s translucent dwelling, where “Present Teller”, namely Graybard, the author’s *alter ego* in the fictional world, “tells Original Author’s Stories” and “Brackish Marsh-Nymph listens” – stories “to be strictly *irrelevant*, in the sense of having nothing directly to do whatever with today’s disaster” (21).

As if in an attempt to reject responsibility for having produced the eleven “irrelevant” stories, the distinction real Author – Teller Graybard, Author’s fictional projection in the text, is clarified from the beginning: while “capital-A Author” is “the mere narrative hardware, so to speak (which is why we can forget about him)”, “Yours-Truly-quote-Graybard” embodies “narrative Imagination – the Art-of-Fiction software” responsible merely for “rendering Author’s story-ideas” (4). The metaphor is very telling, as hardware cannot exist without software and vice versa. The real author needs to hide behind a fictional character, let us remember, in order to create a self-fictionalizing text, so he is somehow dependant on the latter, just as the fictional character is dependant on, that is shaped by him. Remarkably, it is the fictional character/narrator Graybard that who rejects responsibility, basically holding the real Author accountable and in need for justification: the Teller/narrator has one major condition to proceed with the *Hendecameron*, namely, “not for one nanosecond shall Reader conflate Present Reteller of these tales with their Original Author” (20), repeatedly referred to as “Never-Mind-Who(m)” (9).

In order to minimize the “bizarre” impression that the stories might create due to their complete ignorance of the Black Tuesday, “a maybe-sportive narrative frame” is needed, one to be created, “dreamed up” by Graybard. Such justification is inspired by previous literary examples, that act as models for the novel, among which the most mentioned throughout the *Book* are “the Sanskrit *Ocean of Story*, as told by the god Shiva to his playmate Parvati: the longest story ever told, spun out by the Lord of Creation and Destruction” (8), Scheherazade’s bedtime stories – wherefrom the sexual element is imported, “minus the nightly menace from her bedmate” (8); and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, at first mentioned ironically and judgmentally:

Great Plague of 1348 devastates city of Florence! People dropping like flies from the Black Death that’ll kill one out of every three Europeans over the next dozen years! Corpses piling up in the streets [...] and in the face of this horror, what do Boccaccio’s three young lords and seven young ladies do? Why, they retreat with their lucky servants to their country estates [...] and they organize their own little play-world [...] and in the hottest part of the afternoon, after siesta-time, they amuse themselves with witty and/or racy stories (6-7)

but then quite seriously considered as a model:

Is that to tell irrelevant stories in grim circumstances is not only permissible, but sometimes therapeutic. That their very irrelevance to the frame-situation may be what matters, whether the frame’s grim and the tales are frisky or vice versa. As somebody’s grandma-from-Minsk used to say about shtetl humor back in the time of the pogroms, If we didn’t laugh, we’d hang ourselves. (7-8)

Later on, at the beginning of the fifth night, the issue of the stories' irrelevance is brought up once more by their author:

And once again shook his authorial head at the luxurious irrelevance of such yarning: Caribbean getaways and winter retreats! Lost and found wedding rings (he kissed his treasured own) and images neither exhausted nor exorcised by their narrative employment! Ground Situations, Dramatic Vehicles, and stymied minor-league storytellers [...] All these while one's outraged nation imperiously mounts a massive military campaign against an elusive, ubiquitous enemy's encavements in a destitute country [...] when on any day or night of this projected Hendecameron the Al Qaeda terrorists might strike again, worse than before... (111),

an issue quickly followed by the justification provided by literary antecedents: "Yes, yes, he knows: Boccaccio, Scheherazade, and company; the relevance of Irrelevance" (111) – a rationalization repeatedly and ironically scrutinized only to be reinforced shortly after: "our playing Scheherazade and Boccaccio while a War of Civilizations might be brewing" / "all the more reason to get to it" (113).

Examples of this sort abound in the framing scenes of the novel: towards the end, the author's fictional counterpart concludes that what their model-predecessors were doing, telling irrelevant stories at the very heart of a terrible disaster, was actually "making the best of a horror show that they can do absolutely nothing about", while his nymph's correction equals a strengthened justification for *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*: "they could at least *acknowledge* it from time to time, for pity's sake, the way we've acknowledged what's been going on Out There" (269).

The juxtaposition of the scene of the terrorist attacks and the scene of storytelling, resulted from the Teller's need to "acknowledge" appalling reality, is indeed uncanny. The interplay reality-fiction will be present throughout the framing sequences that connect the stories. Grim descriptions of the Nine Eleven attacks and Ground Zero:

Thousands dead at Ground Zero alone, some maybe even still painfully dying at this narrative moment; the nation in shock, the economy reeling, air travel disintegrating [...] , all hands clueless about what dreadful thing'll happen next and whether life in the US of A will ever return to normal in our lifetime (45-6)

alternate with plunges into the fictional fairyland wherefrom Graybard and Wysiwyg weave stories: "and you and I are supposed to enjoy guilt-free Metaphorical Congress between telling irrelevant Autumnal stories?" (46); and another example:

they are once again tête-à-tête in Wysiwyg's peculiar glass domain – mid-morning in the still-stunned time zone of Islamic terrorism's latest grisly spectacular and headquarters of the wounded nation's scramble for military response, but after dark already in marsh-nymphland (63),

where we see that time is one more clue of the Teller's gliding from real to fictional space. Interestingly though, time seems to have stopped with the terrorist attacks, as Wysiwyg's "see-through digital bedside clock [...] flashed, unnervingly, 9:11 9:11 9:11" (35).

All the framing scenes in the days that follow 9.11, up till Friday, September 21, report the news from Ground Zero and the attacks' social and political consequences. Here are a few more examples:

Friday, September 14, 2001 in Hendecameronland:

morning showers on the Chesapeake and cooler than the days just prior, but with promise of clearing skies by midday. Ground Zero still ablaze; National Moment of Silence declared for noon to mourn Black Tuesday's victims – maybe 'only' four or five thousand after all, instead of six or seven? Narrator uncertain – as Author filled his pen, plugged his ears for a few hours against Reality, and dispatched Graybard Imagination off to his daily dalliance with the Muse of Story – whether the entire nation was to observe that solemn moment as one (at 12 noon Eastern Daylight Time, 11 Central, 10 Mountain, 9 Pacific, 7 Hawaiian, or whatever it's called out there) or successively at each time zone's noon (85),

or two days later:

Here one has the fine mild morning of Sunday, September 16, 2001; things still frantic up in Manhattan, where fires burn yet at Ground Zero's mass grave and Wall Streeters worry, as do many of the rest of us, what'll happen when the stock market reopens tomorrow after its longest closure since the crash of 1929... (139)

and so on and so forth till Friday, September 21, when the Hendecameron ends.

The interplay of reality (autobiographic details) and fiction.

The blocked writer

On a different level, reality and fiction intermingle with the interplay of autobiographic details and "Hundred-Proof Fiction". Despite the stories being labeled "fictional" with two exceptions, autobiographical details sneak into all tales, quite more so in those clearly identified as imagined. One explanation, provided by the author himself with the assistance of his imaginary narrator Graybard and blocked-writer character Charles P. Mason in story four, would be that:

Just as nature requires for flake-making, along with sufficient moisture and proper temperatures, a speck of atmospheric dust for ice crystals to coalesce upon and grow their intricate hexagonal lattices, so your storymaker needs some given – a newspaper item, a mote of gossip or conversation, witnessed behavior or personal experience, even a dream – from which to grow the narrative artifact. And like the dust-grain in the fallen flake, the real-life datum may be all but imperceptible after narrative imagination has wrought it into finished fiction (96).

These “specks of dust” are nevertheless retrievable from the imaginary world of the eleven tales. Their most notable common trait is the fact that they are all scattered with characters who are teachers or writers or both, or at least retired people or close to retirement – very similar with the author himself in different detail-aspects. For instance, in the first story, “Landscape: The eastern Shore”, the reader can easily recognize the author’s familiar surroundings, the Chesapeake marshes, while the main character, Captain Claude Morgan, is a senior in his eighth decade, slowly decaying in his decomposing house. The marshes are also present in “9999”, where another 85-year-old character is awaiting his end, this time a suicidal one.

The second and third tales are declared not quite fictional, “not exactly made-up stories” (46): in “The Ring” we can identify the author’s Grand Cayman trip, also the background scene of the loss of his “travelog”, described in detail in *Once Upon a Time*, while in “Dead Cat, Floating Boy”, he presents us the issue of haunting image-memories, that survive and deny exhaustion by their narrative employment, and which, much more importantly, bring other memories back, in this case, the memory of his first marriage one-year trip to Europe and its unpleasant consequences for the family’s pets. We also get glimpses of the couple’s floating “ever more rockily through the terminal stages of their once-happy union – which ended as the offspring one by one sprang off to college” (79) – another trauma to be dealt with in writing.

Most notably, tale number four, “A Detective and a Turtle”, is the non-story of a blocked writer’s impossibility to *get* a story from the strange association of the two nouns in the title. Charles P. Mason is not only a storyteller, but also a teacher, of “English for Teachers” and occasionally of literature, “Intro to Literature”, as supporting his family is not ensured by “his gainless calling”, storytelling, “as quaint a calling nowadays as shoeing horses or fletching arrows” (92). The “English prof and modestly successful practitioner of regrettably now-marginal art form” (99) has a pre-writing morning ritual that recalls Barth’s own, as repeatedly described in his more autobiographical writing:

he walks to the kitchen [...] refills his thermal coffee-mug; returns to his workroom; considers briefly whether to set this silly business aside and leaf through his notebook for some more promising bit toward which to direct his muse’s energies. But there is none, he’s fairly certain; inspiration doesn’t come to him as readily or frequently as in decades past (104).

Even “the original brown looseleaf pocket notebook in which since apprenticeship he has accumulated trial offerings to his muse” (107) is there – all quite fictional we might agree, if it weren’t for the above-quoted snowflake analogy, that recalls the very mechanism of self-fictionalization, and which allows us, which prompts us to look for autobiographical dust-specks.

The figure of the blocked writer, the author in need of inspiration, is recurrent in the *Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, evoked from the beginning, by the four-page “stereophonic narrative for authorial voice”, the introductory “Help!”, followed by frequent allusions to authorial impotence, which culminate in the fourth night’s story, as we have seen above. For instance, before the first tale is told, *in order* for it to get told, the narrator must be helped by the marsh-nymph:

our current, several-decades-older caller for Help! will forthwith accept and administer unto himself a certain software-upgrade potion from his Brackish Tidewater Marsh-Nymph Here Called WYSIWYG... (19)

while in “The Ring”, the reader is asked to picture one such stuck storyteller as the Ground-Situation for a story:

Imagine, even (although one winces at such self-reflexiveness), an aging storyteller who [GS] for the first time in his long career goes to his muse’s cupboard and discovers it altogether bare! He to whom inspiration has ever come as reliably as urination or tumescence finds to his quiet but growing dismay no lead in his narrative pencil, shall we say, and, half fearful of that association, follows his muse’s example by going on vacation (55).

Such a situation is by no means unnatural in this trade, the author himself lets us know in a *mise-en-abyme* fragment, especially in-between long-term projects:

On a certain late-summer weekday morning early in the twenty-first century, the Narrative Hardware of these tales was sitting per usual at his worktable in his workroom in his-and-his-spouse’s tidewater domicile, scratching out notes toward his Next Thing while his helpmeet busied herself in her own workroom or with family matters elsewhere. ‘Found himself lost’ is how that aborted Invocation paradoxically put it; Reader should understand, however, that there was nothing novel or troubling in this state of affairs, par for his and many another scribbler’s course between extended projects (34).

Writer/teacher characters

The next stories introduce even more writer/teacher-characters: the fifth features a journalist and his wife, an “educator”, as they are called in the story, while the narrator of “The Big Shrink” is a teacher of “remedial English and freshman composition” (147) and the main character of the eighth, “And Then There’s The One”, is a retired academic, “who, lacking both doctorate and scholarly publication, will not aggrandize himself with the title ‘Professor’ (although that was in fact his rank...)” (178).

Moreover, in “The Rest of Your Life”, the couple’s collection of garbage washed by water on their property is reminiscent of a similar activity of the author and his wife described in *Once Upon a Time*, together with the occasional retrieval of objects that carry some sort of “water messages”, objects that demand to be

deciphered, interpreted – a (fictional) chest in *Once Upon a Time* and now “a plain white plastic wall clock, battery-powered”, which had stopped “at almost exactly 3:45, so that when George held it twelve o’clock high, the outstretched hands marked its internal waterline like a miniature horizon” (126):

During their coveside residency a number of souvenirs had washed up on their reedy shoreline along with the usual litter of plastic bags and discarded drink containers from the creek beyond – wildfowl decoys, life vests, fishermen’s hats, crab-trap floats – but none so curious or portentous. In a novel or a movie, George supposed to Julia, the couple would begin to wonder whether some plot was thickening (126).

The tale of the seventh night, “Extension”, which brings to the foreground an elderly couple who plans a home-extension never to be built – a story told, ironically, from an “assisted-living facility” (165), features once more the main themes of the novel “Distress and Autumnality” (33). Their week-end retreat/vacation house, “a rural hideaway overlooking the bay and, by extension, the Atlantic and thence all other oceans”, “meant to supplement our equally modest, okay-for-its-purposes house in the city across the bay” (165), brings to mind Barth’s own summer retreat on the Chesapeake, similarly described elsewhere. The dissolution of a first marriage and the immigration of grandparents are even more “specks” of autobiographical dust.

The “real” author trapped in the text - an illusion Barth never gives up

The “real Author” is featured in the novel in other ways as well, as we have already seen: as Barth’s readers have been accustomed by previous novels, at some point the Author *had* to make a more theatrical appearance in the text, and so he does, towards the end, in a frantic “authorial outburst” (which features another imaginary projection of Barth in his fiction, yet on a different level from Graybard, as this self-duplication process, once started, propagates ad infinitum), which self-reflexively points to the *Book* itself:

All I wanted, all we needed, was a bit of a frame-tale to connect those eleven miscellaneous items and make them into a book instead of a mere collection, right? So we come up with this wacko Wysiwyg/Muse/Imaginarium idea and decide to give it a spin, see whether it’ll fly, never mind the mixed metaphor – but then wham!, along comes Nine Eleven, and suddenly it’s a whole nasty new world out there, and how’re we supposed to float a butcher’s dozen irrelevant stories about Autumnality and Innocent Marital Guilt and Stuck Storytellers et cet., now that [...] Apocalypse has moved in just around the corner? (264).

and on for one more page: “So Miss Wys comes to our rescue by defending the relevance of Irrelevance, but then with her other hand she ups the ante by disqualifying *Help!* as a story, which left us with ten tales for eleven nights...”

(264-5), till the “End of uncharacteristic Authorial Outburst”, when the author still has not a clue “how to wind this gig up and get offstage without egg on our faces” (265), mirroring a “real” fear that must be haunting the “real” Barth. By anticipating the readers’ potential negative response to the novel/collection, the author basically tries to annul it, by integrating it in the *Book*, as well as by writing his fear into the text, he probably hopes to cope with it, as well.

Barth would once more like to create the illusion that himself, the real author, is trapped *in* the text, as we have seen in previous novels. Since the distinction Author-Teller/Narrator, in his words, “narrative hardware” versus “software”, is clarified from the beginning, when Narrator Graybard reports the above authorial intrusion, it is for the reader to take it for granted. As forceful as it is, though, we should keep in mind that this is an illusion, for the self-fictionalization process once started, it never ends. More proof to this is added a few pages later, when, in a strange ontological reversal, more “real” Wysiwyg and Graybard categorize the Author as fictional: “The bloke who sent me? [...] We half suspect he’s just something you and I dreamed up anyhow” (291).

On with the illusion, we could say, Barth reinforces the reader’s impression that the fictional text, namely, the interactive hypertext of the story “Click”, incorporates windows onto reality, windows that allow one a glimpse of the real author’s workroom, desk, as well as of his very making of the novel:

Restless Fred moves to click on action but defers to Irma [...] who clicks on scene and sees what the Author/Narrator sees as he pens this: a (white adult male right) hand moving a (black MontBlanc Meisterstück 146 fountain) pen (left to right) across the (blue) lines of (three-ring looseleaf) paper in a (battered old) binder on a (large wooden former grade-school) worktable all but covered with the implements and detritus of the writer’s trade [...] For example, to mention only some of the most conspicuous items: miscellaneous printed and manuscript pages, (thermal) coffee mug [...], (annotated) desk calendar (displaying MAY), notebooks and notepads, the aforeconsulted (American Herritage) desk dictionary open to the ‘the’ page (1333) on its (intricately hand-carved Indian) table-stand, (Panasonic auto-stop electric) pencil sharpener (in need of emptying) [...] a wall mirror... (237-8)

Remarkably, the author’s knowledge of prominent examples of *la mise-en-abyme* in painting is once more exposed: “the mirror (left of center) gives back a view not of the viewer – fortunately, or we’d never get out of the loop and on with the story – but of the workroom door...” (id.).

More instances of *la mise-en-abyme* are scattered throughout the novel; one particularly captivating example (which identifies the author of the book as somebody different from John Barth) is to be found very close to the end of the novel, when we learn that at least part of the book was based on a manuscript of the

main character of the last story, Trudy / Gertrud Ullman, alias Wysiwyg, the “prolixity” of which “deserved, if not a memoir, then a full-fledged novel, or at least some sort of story-series”. Moreover, since she abandoned the enterprise, the manuscript was sent to

a bona fide publishing fictioneer whose project-in-the-works, deponent happened to know – a framed story-collection called The Book of Ten Nights and a Night – had been sidetracked by the Nine Eleven terrorist attacks on New York and Washington at least until the author's imagination could come to some sort of terms with that enormous event.
(287)

Additionally, we find out that “her condition was simply that her poet-pal tell his novelist-pal that he'd *invented the whole story himself*” (288).

Despite the unusual attention paid to the real world, i.e. the Nine Eleven attacks, the novel is also highly self-reflexive, not only due to such authorial intrusions as the above-mentioned ones, but also due to the countless comments on writing and storytelling in general, as well as on its own production – some of which we have already looked into. The framing scenes are the perfect opportunity for the narrator and his muse to comment on each of the eleven stories, as in the paragraph below, on story nine, “9999”:

Last night's story filled the bill in most respects – plenty of numbers but no ball-busting math; lots of nines for Ninth Night Nine Nineteen, and even a Nine Nineteen in the story: that Pam character's birthdate in Nineteen Nineteen, which means she'd've been, let's see, eighty-two yesterday if she weren't a fictional character and hadn't died in Ninety-two. [...] My only complaint is that it was all so bloody depressing, Geeb (228).

In the same manner, the reader was introduced to the themes of the novel, back in the second night, when Wysiwyg declared that while she had

no particular complaint about the story, he should understand, which, taken together with Help!, sufficiently announces the themes of Distress and Autumnality, with a brackish tidemarsh setting thrown in for good measure – perhaps an early foreshadow of her saltyfresh self? But their M.O. [modus operandi] was in clear need of readjustment (33).

These themes are going to be reiterated at various points, together with comments on the next stories, especially those that feature older, post-retirement heroes.

In the fourth story “about a non-story that *becomes* a Story after all by acknowledging that it isn't one” (63), we read about Charles P. Mason that

while some others blesses with his gifts of language and narrative imagination manage to illuminate in just a few pages some aspect of human experience and to render that illumination memorably into life-enhancing art, our Chuck spins yarns about... yarnspinning (95)

- which could be interpreted as another self-reflexive paragraph, as the story itself and a big share of the author's writing perfectly match the description. "The Detective and the Turtle" is maybe the most self-reflexive part of the book, as it is the story turn upon itself, in the absence of well-defined characters and plot; after a bit of tech talk about narrative composition:

The 'And then one day' that typically introduces the Dramatic Vehicle to generate a story from the Ground Situation cannot likely be 'And then one day he died' (although one can point to some odd, beyond-the-grave narrative exceptions). (101)

the narrator goes on to wonder about the possibility even of constructing a story out of nothing:

Is this how Chekhov went about his art? Has any storyteller from Homer to Hemingway, Poe to Pasternak, attempted to fabricate a narrative something out of so nearly nothing? Not likely (though not impossibly, either), and no matter (101)

and on with the technical, though at times ironic, commentary:

He's Charles the Mason, surveying the materials at hand with a professional eye and a skilled artisan's imagination, to see whether there might be in them not an Iliad or a Dr.Zhivago but a C. P. Mason short story. If there be no weather in it, say (as there's been next to none so far in this), or pungent sense of place, eloquent details, memorable characters, grand passions, and high drama, then tant pis: It'll at least be architecturally complete, with a proper story's incremental raising of stakes, climactic even if quiet 'turn,' and consequential denouement. (102)

Even the frame itself gets to be commented on, in the same literary critical manner: the Hendecameron's point of view being mainly Graybard's,

we've had detailed accounts of his companion's nightly dress and undress; oughtn't we to hear what duds he doffs when dud-doffing time arrives, for the pair's now-ritual creek-dip between wine and waterbed? Yes, well, okay – although in the nature of their situation, their character-functions, and even their names, her appearance is more relevant to this framing-tale than his (201).

More technicalities are evenly distributed throughout the novel: in the last story, "Click", after denying to present the reader with the main characters' real names, the narrator adds "Never mind, just now, their 'real' names: They would involve us in too much background, personal history, all the stuff that real names import; we would never get on with the story" (235). Indeed, a lot of this background load has been discarded on the way by the author of the eleven stories, as himself explains, after calling them "a butcher's": "Baker adds one for good measure; butcher lops off excess lard" (264).

Similarly, the problem of how to properly end the novel, after the fusion between the last tale and the frame, is brought up:

Tale Eleven – Wysiwyg? – remains incomplete. So Ms. Let's-Call-Her-Trudy, serially misled by appearances, comes to devote herself quixotically to narrowing, in her fashion, the onerous gap between What One Sees (in others and so, by extension, in herself) and What One Gets – in the course whereof she is interloped upon by Present Company, assists in a musely way his Dispatcher's narrative project, and here they are. So now what? Where's the denouement? How does Wys's story end, and theirs? (289),

followed by the realization that “we're in the story's ending, right here right now, sentence by sentence; its denouement is whatever you and I do from this page forward” (290). Narrative tense is another clue to that: “I've noticed we've switched to narrative present tenses”, Wysiwyg notifies the narrator, who once more technically explains: “that's because past-time narration implies a present from which Narrator can retrospect, and *that* implies that he's aware of what happened next back then and how the story ended. It's all history already except the telling. Whereas in *our* case... but hey, I just work here: What do I know?” (266), once more passing responsibility to narrative “Hardware”, to the author.

Conclusions, or, how to end a neverending novel

Mixing up ontological levels seems to solve the problem, namely, deeming Trudy/Gertrud Ullman fictional, the character of the last story, and Wysiwyg “real”: “My Wysiwyg is no Trudy Ullman; she's you; *You're* you.” (290) Or maybe she's not so “real” after all, the reader is confided eventually: “Since the ontological order of things precluded your going back with me to my guy's Scriptorium and its circumambient Real Life”, i.e., to the author's workroom and world, “I'm staying here with you, Wys, in this Imaginarium of ours, till this book's last period and beyond” (291).

Moreover, since improper endings seem to be appreciated by all parties involved in the telling of these stories, by the narrator – cf. the end of story number three:

even as there are touchstone images that the narrative use of far from exhausts [...] so there are stories, Reader – this themamong – that hopefully substitute the sonority of closure for the thing itself; that may sound done but are not; that, like an open parenthesis, without properly ending at least for the cross-fingered present stop (82)

by his muse, as well as by the author himself, the novel could not end otherwise, but improperly, with a question mark: will there be stories in the aftermath of disaster? “We'll see” (295). The answer is going to be provided, as usually with Barth, by his next novel, one that will try to answer precisely this question: is there any room for storytelling in a world that seems to have “exhausted” even “replenished” literature? To use Graybard's words, we'll see.

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The author

Raluca Șerban is currently lecturer with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and teaches Business English and Professional Communication to undergraduate and graduate students. Specialized in American Studies, she has recently finished her PhD thesis (*Representations of Authorship in the Postmodern American Novel. Self-fictionalization in John Barth's Writing*). She has published several articles in academic journals and has co-authored three textbooks: *Talking Business*, for 1st year Public Administration students, *First Steps into Marketing*, for 1st year Marketing students and *English for Marketing Students*, for 2nd year students. Her main research interests include American cultural studies, postmodern literature and action / practitioner research.

Mihai Șerban is currently assistant lecturer with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and teaches Business French and Professional Communication and Romanian as a foreign language to undergraduate students. He also collaborates with the Faculty of Letters, the University of Bucharest, where he teaches comparative literature. He specialized in comparative literature and has a PhD thesis in the field: *Iconological and Ekphrastic Readings of André Gide and Mateiu Caragiale*. He has published several articles in academic journals and his main research interests lie in comparative literature as well as psychoanalytical criticism.