

Gender and Fictional Transcendence of Rennie Morgan in John Barth's *The End of the Road*

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Abstract: John Barth's postwar novel *The End of the Road* is more likely to be read as a phallogentric novel. However, this paper argues that Barth should be called a feminist and a celebrator of gender queerness. The love triangle between the Morgan couple and the protagonist, Jacob Horner, uncovers not only a hidden homosexual implication between Jacob Horner and Joseph Morgan, but also the process of gender transcendence represented by Rennie Morgan, activated through the horse riding lessons with Jacob. However, being excluded from the phallogentric heterosexual cosmos, each character is found struggling and competes within the cosmos of the excluded "other". Despite Rennie having become a victim of Joseph's destructive phallogentric authority, her death eventually leads him towards the path of self-annihilation. Furthermore, the death of Rennie becomes the source of Jacob's artistic creation. The creation of *the End of the Road* thus symbolizes the rebirth of Rennie Morgan.

Keywords: postwar, transcendence, phallogentric heterosexuality, homosexual implication, self-annihilation

1. Introduction

One of the effects of World War Two was the spread of an atmosphere wherein no absolute value was to be trusted. During the postwar era the whole of American society was split into two diverse groups: one pursued the “American Dream” while the other was suspicious of that egocentric society. Writers who belonged to the latter group used art and literature as their weapons to show society another side of reality. For instance, J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) describes a character that tries to escape from a society as a manipulator where men are invisible or not considered as individuals at all; John Barth’s *The End of the Road* (1958) describes his main character as being in complete paralysis before the many options society offers him, thereby becoming incapable of making a choice.

Besides the issue of nihilism and the relationship between literature and the postwar society, the discourse of gender and sexuality also serves as an important theme to be explored. Despite the fact that many historians considered the 1950s as “an age of conformity,” where prescribed distinct gender roles—breadwinning husbands and homemaking housewives—was enforced and moving outside them was seen as “un-American,” it was also during this period that gender and sexual diversity flourished (Bechtel 5). However, scholars who questioned the standard norm of masculinity and femininity, who argued for a more variegated understanding of postwar society and culture, tended to express their arguments in an indirect way. With regard to John Barth’s works, as Stan Fogeland Gordon Slethaug commend in *Understanding John Barth*, to be able to understand Barth one must understand a paradox in which Barth “loves the myths, stories, and techniques that saturate accessible, realistic works of fiction, yet he cannot merely retell or represent them” (9). In other words, the readers are required to *read against the grain* instead of reading innocently in order to understand Barth’s inner thought.

As Cynthia Davis suggests in “Heroes, Earth Mothers and Muses: Gender Identity in Barth’s Fiction,” Barth’s traditional gender role is inherent in a “male-centered mythology” (110). Indeed, Barth’s provocation of the “hatred of other gender” can be found in his short story “Night-Sea Journey,” whereby the sperm calls “She” as “Other-than-a-he” (10; Davis 114). Davis then concludes her analysis regarding John Barth’s work as: “The result is female characters who are always seen from [the]outside, who are reduced to symbols, symbols moreover of the non-human aspects of life, and who are denied power even in that area by the insistence on the creative male perceiver” (119). Similarly, in *The End of the Road*, the protagonist Jacob Horner describes the wife of Joseph Morgan, Rennie Morgan, as an “unharnessed animal,” in other words, as a non-human (*TER* 307). However, I argue that John Barth should not be criticized as a phallogocentric author but the opposite of it: a feminist thinker.

Through the lens of queer criticism, this paper suggests that Barth can be seen as a celebrator of gender queerness. The first chapter suggests that not only Rennie Morgan, but also Joseph Morgan and Jacob Horner are excluded from the phallogocentric heterosexual cosmos. In the second chapter, the competitive power between the excluded members will be focused upon and the analysis between Rennie Morgan and Joseph Morgan will be revisited. The third part draws on the act of fictional writing, I argue that the act of writing down the story by Jacob holds a

transcendent function in the novel, in which the dead character is given a 'life' and *reborn* as a real being in the world of fiction.

2. Outside the Phallogentric Heterosexual Cosmos

John Barth's *The End of the Road* unfolds the complex love triangle between the Morgan couple and Jacob Horner in Wicomico County, Maryland. Regarding this relationship structure, Hebert. P. Smith sees it as a "logical paradigm," with Jacob Horner and Joe Morgan as "representatives of conflicting ethical positions" and Rennie Morgan as an "ethical vacuum, waiting to be filled by the winner" (72). Based on this, Davis comes to criticize Rennie as valueless in two aspects: "unpossessed, she is 'empty,' waiting for the chooser to confer value on her; once possessed, she loses her appeal and becomes a burden" (112). In the novel, this status of Rennie is emphasized by Jacob's description that "I think Rennie's attraction for me lay in the fact that [...] she had peered deeply into her self and had found *nothing*" (*TER* 316). Based on this, Smith stresses that Rennie's symbolic quality is shown by the fact that "Once the adultery has been consummated, Rennie is no longer the central concern" of the men (75). Davis further closes the case by noting, "Barth's men are human types, choosers and definers" while Barth's women are "the reality-figure to men"; "by separating women from men, he posits a self-Other distinction in which women are always Other" (114).

However, this paper suggests an alternative viewpoint through the lens of queer feminism. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's concept, Anna Schober emphasizes that in the cosmos of the One, in other words, the phallogentric discourse, "the female, as excluded, sustains the functioning of the discourse" (4). Furthermore, by linking Judith Butler's conception that outside of the phallogentric order there are also the lesbian and the homosexual, a conception, in which a competition between the "feminine" and the "homosexual" emerges in the sphere of the excluded Other, can be made (Butler 1993: 51; Schober 4). As Davis Morrell notes in his book *John Barth: An Introduction*, "you need a woman between to be the catalyst for the reaction between the two males so that you can work out your dialectic." Thus one comes to understand that Rennie's role is to sustain the relationship between Jacob and Joseph; she is the main part of the love triangle (20). Here, however, it is necessary not to forget that both Jacob and Joseph are also excluded from the phallogentric heterosexual cosmos due to their homosexual proclivities toward each other.

In *Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature*, Robert Rogers claims that Joseph has deviant tendencies: his "'reasoned' facade about taking marriage seriously... masks sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic, and homosexual proclivities, as his fanatical probing of the intimate 'fact' of Jacob's sexual relationship with Rennie reveals plainly enough" (170-171; qtd. in Harris 34). Indeed, Joseph's deviant tendencies are obvious as he abuses Rennie psychically and mentally tortures her by forcing her to commit adultery with Jacob multiple times. Regarding this, Jacob claims: "Perversity? I don't know, Joe. If I see anything perverse it's you sending Rennie up to my place now" (*TER* 393). Also, Joseph's behavior toward sex seems to be very pragmatic. When he first met Rennie, he had been able to bathe Rennie, he slept beside her

without touching her, and he only made love to her when she decided to completely “erase” herself in order to follow his principles (*TER* 311). His tender behavior to Rennie seems to be for the purpose of developing the feeling of guilt in her in order to make her confess her weakness and dependence on him, instead of love. Apparently, this kind of artificial love and sexual relationship cannot satisfy Joseph’s need, as he would not have to masturbate alone if he were sexually fulfilled.

Joseph’s sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic and homosexual proclivities also can be found in Jacob as well. Jacob’s voyeurism is exhibited when he induces Rennie to spy on Joseph: “you mean you never spy on people when they’re alone? It’s wonderful! Come on, be a sneak! It’s the most unfair thing you can do to a person” (*ER* 319). The scene wherein Jake masturbates secretly in the college further emphasizes this proclivity: “I lounged in my office with a magnificent erection, wallowing in my position, and watched with propriety eye the parade of young things passing my doors” (*TER* 343). Also, Jacob’s sadistic tendency is significant when he is in “Rennie-torturing mood”—“her suffering exerted a powerful physical attraction on me” (*TER* 372, 374). Besides that, it is the imposed relationship by Joseph on Jacob and Rennie that serves as a root of Jake’s motivation for committing adultery with Rennie, as he claims that the sex with Rennie to him is meaningless: “The whole business was without significance to me. I have no idea what was on Rennie’s mind—and no wish to penetrate until afterward her characteristic taciturnity—but I know that my own was empty” (*TER* 348). In fact, Jacob only becomes excited when the repetition of their sexual affairs is marked by irony and sarcasm. Thus, “the more [Rennie] professed to take the [adultery] lightly, the graver it seemed to [Jacob]”; “the happier [Rennie] grew, the more glum [Jacob] became” (*TER* 378). After the adultery is committed, what concerns Jacob the most is Joseph’s dismissal of him: “my fear of his disappointment in me, his disapproval of me, and his disgust with me,” which emphasizes that it is not Rennie but Joseph who owns a primary position inside Jacob (*TER* 352). When Joe announces that the Colt forty-five is fully loaded and ready to be used, instead of being shocked or afraid, Jake is “thrilled” and even exclaims, “It was Joe Morgan, after all, that I loved,” revealing his masochistic, homosexual implications toward Joseph (*TER* 394). The homosexual implication between Jacob and Joseph further explains why Joseph neither shoots Jacob nor denounces his cuckolding behavior to the others after Rennie dies. At the end of the story, the only act Joseph commits towards Jacob is to ask him on the phone: “What do you think about things?” (*TER* 442). Supposedly, what lies under the word “things” is the homosexual implication between them.

In short, the main three characters in the novel, which include Rennie Morgan, Jacob Horner and Joseph Morgan, are considered as being excluded from the heterosexual phallogocentric cosmos. In fact, they are set into a position to compete with one another in order to gain the authority outside the cosmos of One.

3. Chaos among the Excluded Others

3.1 Gender Transcendence of Rennie Morgan

Before the intervention of Jacob—“the devil’s advocate”—into the Morgans’ life, the Morgan couple lives under an order created by Joseph Morgan, whom Rennie refers to as “God” (*TER*313, 312). Indeed, Joseph Morgan symbolizes the Christian God: “strong, correct, superior, with the power of punishment in his hands, an uncommon and bright intelligence to which everything must have a reason or an explanation” (Ditterich 58). Like the biblical God, Joseph offers Rennie a reason for living. Rennie is given free will but she must be tested. Here comes the Devil, Jacob Horner, who is clever, persuasive and dares to argue against the God-like Joseph. Ironically, it is the Devil “Horner” who respects Rennie Morgan’s discipline and logic and encourages her to risk her sense of absolutes. These “horns” that Jake puts into Rennie assist her in overcoming the inferiority she feels about herself due to Joseph’s existence: “I don’t think I’ll ever really get to be what Joe wants—I’ll always be uncertain, and he’ll always be able to explain his positions better than I can” (*TER* 311). Moreover, these “horns” evoke Rennie’s individuality and originality, which is presented during the horse-riding lesson with Jacob.

“On horseback [...] it was a pleasure to see her strong, rather heavy body sitting perfectly controlled in the saddle [...] her cheeks ruddy in the wind, her brown eyes flashing, her short-cropped blond hair bright in the sun. At such times she assumed a strong kind of beauty.” (*TER*304)

This “strong kind of beauty” that Rennie presents strongly attracts Jacob as it emphasizes not only the process when Rennie transforms herself from a horse/object to a rider/subject, but also the moment when she transcends the traditional gender boundary. On page 43 of “The origins of ‘queer studies’ in postwar Japan,” Hitoshi Ishida, Mark McLelland and Takanori Murakami emphasize,

[the image of] “horse-riding women” are associated with lesbianism due to the ‘active’ nature of the pursuit as well as its unconventionality (*Kitankurabu* 1961). It was also connected to FtM cross-dressing on account of the masculine nature of riding clothes (*Kitankurabu* 1953a), and it was frequently discussed in terms of sadism due to its association with the ‘lashing of the whip’ (*Kitankurabu* 1954).

Indeed, descriptions like “strong, rather heavy body” and “short-cropped blond hair” imply a strong sense of masculinity and together with her ‘active’ role in guiding Jacob how to ride a horse, it is possible to interpret Rennie as a female-to-male cross-dresser while she is on top of a horse. Interestingly, Rennie once again performs this ‘active’ behavior—riding on top of him—during sexual intercourse with Jacob, which, was never practiced by her with her legal husband, Joseph Morgan. Hence, the subjectification of Rennie Morgan is deeply associated with the horse-riding lessons and the sexual intercourse with Jacob Horner.

Supposedly, the act of parodying Rennie's femininity through the act of horse riding serves an important role in interrupting the traditional gender binary. By parodying gender performance, the structure of gender binary can be weakened and thus a multiplication of the sexes may be achieved. From this aspect, it is possible to claim that John Barth's queering of Rennie is for the purpose of destabilizing the naturalness of gender.

3.2 Attempted Annihilation of Joseph Morgan

It is suggested that after experiencing the process of gender transcendence through the horse-riding lessons with Jacob, Rennie Morgan can no longer fit into "the Morgan cosmos" or Joseph's "version" of Rennie due to the development of her subjectivity (*TER* 362). This transformation leads to the annihilation of Rennie by her husband. Another reason that increases Joseph's impulse to annihilate Rennie is that Rennie's pregnancy is caused by nothing but his abusive behavior towards his wife: forcing his wife to have sex with another man. Moreover, the abusive behavior towards Rennie by Joseph could be analyzed as Joseph's attempt to hide the homosexual implication between himself and Jacob. Acknowledging that all of these will result in the ruin of his social position in 1950s America, where the society is mainly dominated by the discourse of heterosexuality, an idea that both the child and the mother of the child must to be annihilated appears in Joseph's mind and leads him to take action.

If one follows Jacob's description that "At a few minutes before nine o'clock I went to get Rennie, and found her and Joe just finishing a late dinner by candlelight," one finds out that the late candlelight dinner that Joseph prepares for Rennie is awfully suspicious, as normally the Morgan family will have their dinner before six thirty and at six-thirty the kids will go to bed (*TER* 431). However, this night Joseph has changed the dinner time, which leads one to deduce that after the kids have gone to bed at six-thirty, there will be no witnesses to his attempted murder. Also, it is suspected that the creation of a romantic atmosphere serves as a mask to hide Joseph's attempted murder, as we know that Joseph who sees reason as an absolute, who puts only a minimal amount of furniture in the house, is far from being romantic. Thus, his romantic act represents something *abnormal*. However, one does not know of Joseph's attempt until the Doctor (abortionist) claims that "She must have eaten a big meal before she came out here"; "She should've known better. Vomited it up from the ether and then aspirated it into her lungs" (*TER* 436). Thus, one comes to realize that it is the "hot dogs and sauerkraut" that are served by Joseph that kill Rennie (*TER* 431). As we know, a hot dog resembles the basic shape of a phallus and therefore evokes a connection to male sexuality and power, which leads us to conclude that, metaphorically, Rennie's death is the result of Joseph's destructive phallic power. More specifically, Rennie's death is caused by multiple penetrations: Jake's and Joe's phallus in routine; the "curette" that is used by the Doctor during the abortion; and prior to that, the Colt forty-five that Joe owns, which functions as a phallic tool to (de)stabilize the structure of their relationship: "a perfect equilateral triangle, with the gun in the center" (*TER* 395).

Although Joseph has the guts to plan a murder, he has no guts to face its consequences. His refusal to go with Rennie shows his fear of losing his rational side or his fear of encountering

his emotional side. By excluding himself from Rennie's abortion, Joseph is able to create a false conception that everything is Jacob's fault as he had cuckolded him by making Rennie pregnant. Joseph seems to ignore the fact that "there's about one chance in four" that he could be the father of the child too, as it is he who forces his wife to have sex with both Jacob and himself at the same time (they even wear the same brand of condom), which eventually makes Rennie pregnant (TER396). If one must inquire into the parties who should feel guilty for Rennie's pregnancy, which eventually leads to her death, it is both Jacob and Joseph. This argument is supported by Rennie's description that "I can even imagine him bringing me right back up here and coming up himself to make sure—" (TER 374); "Please, *please*, either throw me out or rape me, Jake!" (TER375). Thus, an assumption can be made here: if Jacob is the one who physically rapes Rennie, then it is Joseph who mentally rapes Rennie.

While Joseph Morgan excludes himself completely from seeing the suffering of Rennie, Jacob encounters Rennie's fear, suffering, and death, which is considered to be enough to traumatize him:

During the early stages [...] Jake's tear-filled eyes prevent him from seeing Rennie. When she begins bleeding he is barely able to swallow the vomit that rushes to his mouth; he begins to "catch Rennie's fear" (434). Upon her death, he is "stunned past weeping" (436), as shock immediately sets in. "Fighting nausea and faintness" (436), he is unable to speak. Finally, entirely in the grip of emotions unmediated by reason, he falls into a dead faint. (Harris 37)

Considered paralyzed by the whole process of watching Rennie's death, Jacob is incapable of doing anything but listen to the Doctor's instruction, by which he leaves Rennie's body to Joseph and prepares himself to join the Remobilization Farm as a permanent resident. The story ends with Jacob saying "Terminal" to the taxi driver, which leads the reader to think that this is *the end* of the chaos (TER 442). As to Joseph, it is claimed that he was fired due to the intolerance of the rumors of his wife's abortion in 1950s American society. After all, it is Joseph's attempted murder that leads him to the path of self-annihilation: he no longer belongs to the mainstream cosmos at that time.

4. Fictional Transcendence of Rennie Morgan

With regard to Jacob's life afterward, according to John Barth's *Letters*, Jacob had moved to the Farm in Ontario Canada and before that, Lily Dale, New York (18). It is claimed that Jacob has had a "bilateral vasectomy" in order to reduce his threat to others (Dyer 59). Jacob usually spends his time preparing daily almanac cards and rocking on the porch (Dyer 59). As to Joe Morgan, Tombo X, the Doctor's assistant, reports that Joseph had arrived in the Remobilization Farm in 1969 and presented his "ultimatum" to Jacob Horner: "You're going to *Rewrite History*,

Horner. You're going to *Change the Past*. You're going to *Bring Rennie Back to Life*" (*Letters* 20). Ever since then, Joseph has become a member of the Farm (Dyer 59).

Drawing on Joe's ultimatum, even though in Barth's *Letters* it is written that "Rennie Morgan, [...] and her unborn child, perhaps legitimate, remained dead," one should be able to argue that the creation of *The End of the Road* serves as the rebirth of the fictional Rennie Morgan, the Earth Mother myth(19). According to Dorothy Astoria, the word "Rennie" in Latin language means "reborn" and in a symbolic world, death carries the connotation of rebirth (245). As to the connection between Rennie and the Earth Mother, a brief look at the description below will help one to understand:

Barth contributes no energetic will to women, no identity that she can choose as a man does, no completed sense of self; but he gives her the power of inertia, of being preceding definition. She is the blank reality that must be given a human face—a man's. [...] finally she represents [...] a larger reality of failure and morality that he must face and name without completely controlling...This depiction of female characters is progressively clarified by Barth's development of an "Earth Mother" type. (*Gender Studies* 113)

Descriptions such as "the power of inertia," "the blank reality," and "a larger reality" are crucial in promoting Rennie's Earth Mother power: "a power that represents the cycle of life and death and the process of cosmic renewal" (Andrews 61). Regarding this, Morell further explains, "you need a woman between to be the *catalyst* for the reaction between the two males so that you can work out your dialectic" (italics mine; 20). That is to say, without Rennie as the catalyst, the Earth Mother, no story or human relationship can be told. In this sense, Rennie represents "the aspect of life that underlies and balances human conceptualization" (Davis 113).

While the Earth Mother embodies the creator of life, she also embodies the death goddess: she "demand[s] life in order to give life and require[s] blood sacrifice in order to thrive" (Andrews 61). Thus, it is possible to suggest that the sacrifice of Rennie herself and her unborn child serve as a metaphor for the rebirth of fiction. In other words, the novel is the product of Rennie's blood scarification; the act of writing the tale represents the process of a cosmic renewal of the death. In short, through the process of narrating/writing, the fictional Rennie Morgan is given the so-called *life*. Thus, what the reader can see at the end of the road is a transcendent *all* life.

5. Conclusion

John Barth's works are often depicted as phallogocentric. In *The End of the Road*, scholars have suggested that the love triangle in the novel dehumanizes the female character, Rennie Morgan, as she serves as a tool to satisfy the desires of both male characters, Joseph Morgan and Jacob Horner. However, through the queer perspective, it becomes possible to interpret the text

differently and suggest a fresh perspective: John Bath as a feminist writer. In the light of queer theories, one discovers that what lies underneath this love triangle is the competitive relationships between the excluded Others. Through the analysis of the homosexual implications between Joseph and Jacob, one comes to understand that both male characters are positioned by Bath at the outside of the phallogentric heterosexual matrix (the cosmos of the One). They actually exist in the same cosmos as Rennie, the female Other. While being inside the same cosmos the members become competitive, which results in a total chaos. The origin of the chaos can be referred to Joseph's desire to gain his phallogentric authority. In Joseph's eyes, Rennie, who has experienced the process of re-identification (gender transcendence) through the horse-riding practices and has become pregnant, can no longer fit into the Morgan's cosmos. More specifically, Rennie's gender transcendence is seen as a betrayal to Joseph's domination while the possibility of her having Jacob's child is also unacceptable, as Joseph might then become a cuckold husband and lose his social status. Thus, Rennie becomes the target of annihilation. The preparation of a late candlelight dinner right before the abortion by Joseph serves as his motivation to "murder" his wife. In fact, Rennie's death is mainly caused by the hot dogs and sauerkraut that she has eaten an hour ago. In this sense, Rennie is a victim of Joseph's phallic annihilation. Traumatized by Rennie's death, Jacob leaves Wicomoco and lives in a hospital. It is during that time that Jacob starts to write *The End of The Road*. From this aspect, the creation of the novel *The End of the Road* represents the blood scarification of Rennie. However, metaphorically, it is suggested that through the act of writing/narrating, Rennie is brought back to *life*; the process of writing holds a transcendental function in which Rennie Morgan becomes a real being through the creation of *The End of The Road*.

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