

Douglas Robinson, *John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy: A Study*. Jyvaskyla: University of Jyvaskyla, 1980. 390 pp. (Jyvaskyla Studies in the Arts, 15)

*Giles Goat-Boy* is, to use Robert Scholes' words, "a tract for our times, an epic to end all epics, and a sacred book to end all sacred books." It is an attempt at all-inclusiveness, both as far as the materials and the ways in which they are treated are concerned. The novel is "total," multidimensional, almost at every point: every situation, episode, character includes everything: tragedy, comedy, parody, allegory, myth, history, philosophy, irony, artistic self-commentary, verbal exuberance and playfulness. Its structure – and *Giles Goat-Boy* is very structured – is exhaustive in a similar way. The critic's task is clearly a difficult one; to deal separately with the analysis of multiple layers and yet to capture their interdependence, their interaction and consequent tensions between them, to render this totality which is the very essence of the book. Thus, it is hardly

surprising that most of the critics have limited their analysis to just one aspect of the novel. This limited criticism, particularly the approach which "tends to stress the role played by irony in his work" and "the low profile given meta-physical concerns," seems to have prompted Douglas Robinson to write his study which he describes as an attempt to render a "holistic perception" of the novel's vision.

Epistemological skepticism, Robinson argues, which in modernist writers led to the refinement of realism, in postmodernist fiction results in the affirmation of, and the insistence on, artifice: in the refinement of unrealism. Consequently, the postmodernist writer uses parody "to fuse and juxtapose the pleasurable comic and the intellectually serious." To achieve this fusion, he uses extensively metaphorical structures while at the same time undermining them with irony. The balance between the two (or between epistemological skepticism and aesthetic possibility) is a kind of dialectic which together with the dialectic between metafiction, "introspective, self-reflexive joy in language, in the forms of fiction and the patterns of imagination," and metaphysics "begin to account for the complexity of modern fiction."

Robinson sees Barth's novels as operating along the metaphorical dialectic, between metafiction and metaphysics – the dialectic balanced, in turn, by irony all along – and he examines *Giles Goat-Boy* as it moves along this dialectic, from parody to allegory, as "thenovel's allegorical structure moves hierarchically from history, involving the parody of the *roman à clef*, through mythology, containing George's failed heroic quest, to philosophy, where through allegorical ideas and characters, Barth evokes his tragic metaphysical vision." Included here is also language, "Barth's fun with the linguistic medium through George's narrative point of view and multiple frame-tales." Accordingly, the study analyzes four narrative levels in the novel.

The section on parodic language as style focuses on the "radical unrealism" of Barth's style (language, syntax, different kinds of description). The outermost frames, Robinson observes, "contribute to the ironic undermining of the realistic illusion," and together with the framed narratives (parodic tales within tales) "constitute the story's most extreme form of metafiction turning to irony." He then examines the characters in terms of the stylistic characterization through parodic voice and traces the development of George's narrative voice through the analysis of its antithetical components: the heroic and the bathetic, the academic and the goatish, the naive and the ironic. It moves from narrative unreliability to reliability as the ironic gap between George as narrator and George as character narrows and finally disappears. He remains, however, "ultimately unreliable in terms of the overall vision of the novel." The section on contemporary American history as setting begins with the presentation of the allegorical equivalences between University and universe, partly in terms of the *roman à clef* aspect of the novel. The author then shows how in the figure of Peter Greene Barth recreates American past and the myth of a self-made man. Attention is drawn then to the apocalyptic anxiety as setting. According to Robinson, contrary to the opinion of many critics, the novel does not belong to apocalyptic literature, instead "Barth creates a threat of cataclysm which does not materialize . . . leading to the conclusion that life goes on tragically, without the release of an end." The Boundary Dispute, Robinson contends, "reflects dynamically George's philosophical misadventures."

In his use of the hero myth, Robinson observes in the next section, Barth transcends parody for serious vision in two directions: the one toward metafiction and irony providing "serious vision of the nature of art: its patterns and its falsifications of the world," the other toward metaphysics: "here parody serves the opposite function, dissolving artifice in order to create a tentative but serious vision of life." The hero cycle and Barth's adaptation of it are outlined and then detailed in its particular stages: Departure, Initiation and Return are discussed as George progresses from childhood to maturity, and in the moment of illumination through a symbolic marriage "gains knowledge of himself and life, and learns that life itself is tragic." Thus reborn, he returns now as the Grand Tutor, only to find out that the Answer, the Truth, although learnable, is unteachable.

In the section on philosophical concerns in theme Robinson traces philosophical allegory through the discussion of plot, character and idea. George's cognitive development follows the dialectical path: from a thesis through antithesis to synthesis: a tragic vision of human life and its affirmation by an acceptance of his place in the ontogenical cycle of growth and decline. The novel's allegorical creation of character is further examined; the characters are discussed in contrasting or complementary pairs in order to "point up some of the important paradoxes that George learns in his Tutoring." The ideas are tackled through the analysis of George's progress from literal to metaphysical understanding of the seven tasks of his Assignment.

In the concluding section of his study Douglas Robinson attempts to show, though very briefly, "how the conflicting and contradictory strands of the story come together to form a coherent whole."

Paradoxically, considering its prime concerns, the study captures particular dimensions well but fails to account, at least fully, for the organic relations between them. The failure might be partly due to the application of the critical method itself. As the detailed analysis moves along the metaphorical dialectic, away from metafictional toward metaphysical vision, the approach becomes more and more seriously philosophical. The fun, the "joyous delight," the self-reflexiveness (or metafiction and irony, to use the author's terms) fade away, become less and less visible in the process - although we are reminded of them now and again, just as we are reminded of the significance of the interaction between the layers. Thus, as the two dimensions become divorced from each other, we lose the view of the whole. The point is that it is never made quite clear in what way metafiction and metaphysics, as defined by Robinson, are in dialectical relationship, their interaction and, consequently, their synthesis are not analytically accounted for.

Yet, it is precisely the inseparability of metafictional skepticism and metaphysical understanding that accounts for Barth's paradoxical vision: the comic insistence on life being told, on life-story (the aspect largely neglected by Robinson), on telling everything by every possible means, combined with a sense of impossibility of telling anything, of conveying one's sense of life; the joy of telling, the self-conscious linguistic exuberance (emphasized by multiple narrators) and the inherent ineffability, the silence, expressive of basic loneliness, a posttape to every life-story, every book. Yet life goes on and one goes on telling his story Ironically, aware of its impossibility, of the metafiction of his metaphysics.

That Douglas Robinson achieve: this blend in part cannot be denied, however,

as when discussing George's narrative voice or in the section on myth, the most valuable part of the book. Here he manages to capture, at least to a certain extent, the dynamic aspect of interacting parody and allegory as he speaks of how parody is transcended for serious vision of art and life. Yet even here the transcendence is in two opposite directions. Since, as Robinson argues, Barth's treatment of the hero myth results in "the transition from parodied mythology to allegorical metaphysics," - mythology thus becoming philosophy - it seems to me that philosophy should be included in this section. George's cognitive progress along the hero path is a philosophical one in vision, just as the meta-physical assignments constitute his heroic trials. The separation of myth and philosophy results also in unnecessary repetitiousness. Similarly, the divided discussion of characterization by voice and by philosophy is responsible for both the unnecessary repetitiousness and for the impression of a highly formalized representation. Such an approach might illuminate particular aspects, such as the use of parodic voice or the philosophical ideas in the novel (or the use of the hero myth), but it also contributes to the fragmentary perception of the characters and a sense of their isolation from the context.

This impression of fragmentary representation, of unrelatedness to the whole, is further strengthened by the proliferation of figures, tables and "glossing" chapters, such as the one on the equivalences between University and universe, between the events in the novel and the historical ones, or the chapter on the allegorical significance of the characters. In terms of the overall vision it is hard to see the point of such glossing. Not only does it do violence to the clarity of the argument but, as Robert Scholes has pointed out, "to take the mythography of *Giles Goat-Boy* in too heavy a way would do the story violence. Barth's vision, like Joyce's, holds myth and comedy in a precarious balance." Robinson's "glosses" are usually only marginally enlightening, especially as most of the things that he so painstakingly and seriously explains are made ostentatiously obvious in the novel, indeed, a parodic point is made of their playful correspondences. The impression of fragmentariness is further reinforced by the glossary appendix which I find arbitrarily arranged (as is the index) and unnecessary.

The study is admirable in its protean effort of getting at the "true form" of the novel, and while it does not fully succeed, one is still provoked to think, perhaps not for the first time, but certainly more largely, about *Giles Goat-Boy* from the angles from which Douglas Robinson approaches it. His book is generally clear and readable and it might be especially useful to anyone who is considering deeper critical analysis of Barth's novel for the first time.