JOHN BARTH ’51

29 October 1999

Mame Warren, interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is the 29th of October 1999. I’m in Baltimore, Maryland, with John Barth.

You were just starting to tell me that you were practically conceived at Johns Hopkins.

Barth: Yes. You know, I used to sail in the Virgin Islands, and they have a T-shirt down there that the locals like to wear, saying, “I born here.” And sometimes I feel like that when I walk around Gilman Hall, I should have that T-shirt on saying, “I reborn here.” Because my upbringing was across the Bay on the Eastern Shore in a little town called Cambridge, where they had only an eleven-year school system at a time when almost nobody went to college.

My ambition was to be a jazz musician. I was playing jazz and orchestrating music for dance bands. So after our eleven-year high school, I went up to Juilliard summer school to find out whether what I had was a pre-professional talent or an amateur’s flair. Up at Juilliard I found that the young man on my right and the young woman on my left were going to be the real musicians of their generation, and that mine was more of a flair and a hobby than a real talent.
I came back home prepared to become a soda jerk in my father’s soda fountain in Cambridge, but found back in those innocent days that--my memory tells me I had actually forgotten that in my senior year, eleventh grade, I had taken routinely, along with some of my buddies, a scholarship examination. I came home wondering what I was going to do next, and found that I had won a scholarship to Johns Hopkins. So, okay, why not. I don’t have anything else to do better than that.

You had to pick a major, and I wasn’t going to be a scientist, I wasn’t going to be a mathematician or be a historian. What do you pick? There was a major called journalism, so I put down journalism because I’d written a little feature column for our high school paper. Came over and found out that there was this newly established department called Writing, Speech, and Drama. It was, I know now, the second such department in our nation. I think the first creative writing program was the one at Iowa. There were courses at Harvard and other places, but degree-granting programs were a post World War II phenomenon, except that Iowa got there just ten years earlier, I think, a little bit before the Second World War started.

When I came up to Hopkins, the place was full of returning veterans and their wives and children and so forth. I gravitated into this journalism major, into this newly established program, found out two things very quickly, within the first semester of my freshman year. One, that the journalism program, so called, consisted of a wonderful editor from the [Baltimore] Sun paper, A.D. Emmart, who was an editorial writer, senior editorial writer for the Sun, who would come down once a week and talk to us about the philosophy of newspaper work and/or you went out
for the college paper to learn journalism, but that was it for the journalism program. I had no taste for reporting. I didn’t have the kind of initiative that goes out and gets the story in that sense.

So I figured, no, it’s not going to be journalism. But part of the requirements of that major were that one take a course in the introduction to fiction writing or the introduction to poetry. I thought, “I’ll try introduction to fiction writing.” And in the course of my regular curricular activities, I met Elliott Coleman, the old poet. He seemed old. He wasn’t all that old at the time. The gray hair, the silver hair, *eminence grise*, who was the head of the Hopkins program, a gentle, scholarly fellow, very kind to us rubes who were coming over from the Eastern Shore.

Some marvelous teachers outside the department who became my accidental mentors, because they never knew they were my mentors. George Boas in the philosophy department, the splendid, dapper, super sophisticated, utterly gentle, very knowledgeable historian of ideas, from whom I got all my education, I suppose.

Pedro Salinas, a distinguished old Spanish poet, a refugee from Franco’s Spain, who had been first in Puerto Rico, then up at Wellesley, then had landed at Hopkins, and with whom we undergraduates, we gringo undergraduates, read *Don Quixote* in Spanish. But the main thing for me was, because I was getting interested in writing at that time, it was whispered by my classmates [whispering] that this old fellow is the second most distinguished living Spanish poet after Federico Garcia Lorca, whoever that was. I didn’t know. So this was the first, other than Elliott Coleman himself, this was the first living, breathing embodiment of a writer whom I’d ever been in a room with, another enormously gentle and kind fellow, from whom I learned no end about *Don Quixote*, if not about writing directly.
And then my writing coaches, who I now realize were graduate assistants, grown men, veterans of the war, so they didn’t look like kids, not like TAs nowadays fresh out of their undergraduate college, who were doing their dissertations in the English department or what have you, but were working as coaches for us undergraduate writers. I remember them very well, Louis Rubin and Robert Jacobs, two people who were my first actual fiction coaches.

Now, I had no prior training in the medium. My freight of literature, as W.H. Auden says, all apprentice writers really learn in the library. You really have to download the freight of what Umberto Ecco calls “the already said.” You’ve got to get some notion. You don’t start inventing the wheel all over again. I had read very little in my public school, Eastern Shore semi-rural, semi-redneck primary education, and so the two things that helped me find my vocation, Mame, at Johns Hopkins were, God bless them, these wonderful teachers who were inspiring, one after another, in every subject. I just was in a kind of awe, taking in what they were saying. And as themselves, exemplars of, say, people like Pedro Salinas or George Boas, of the intellectual academic life on the one hand or the writer’s life on the other as a kind of passionate, dignified, noble profession. They were wonderful role models.

The other thing that saved my arse and made a writer out of me was that in addition to playing in jazz bands around Baltimore to pay my tuition, I got a job filing books in the old Gilman Hall Library, and my stacks were the stacks of the classics department, what was called then the Oriental Seminary, which is where I met Shaherazade and The Ocean of Stories, all these Sanskrit tale cycles and so forth in translation, along with Boccaccio and Rabelais and the wonder tale-tellers from other countries in other periods.
This is what I call my “à la carte” education, because we weren’t exactly told this, but it was understood that they were hiring a lot of these people to help them, a lot of us to help us defray our tuition. You would take your cart of books, you would go get lost in the stacks, and sooner or later you were expected to show up and get another cart of books, but there was no great pressure to do that. So I was reading off the cart, you know. Hence, my “à la carte” education, but getting a notion of what was there in the first place, a sense of the vastness and multifariousness of literature.

Most of the stuff that I was filing was à la carte also in the sense that it was off the regular menu of our very wonderful curricular education. We had wonderful undergraduate courses in the history of classics of Western literature, and classics of Western thought. You would have found Homer and Dante and Virgil and Sophocles and Aeschylus and company up there. You wouldn’t have found Petronius’ Satyricon with all its naughty illustrations. You wouldn’t have found A Thousand and One Nights in Burton’s translation. You wouldn’t have found the Kathasar [phonetic] saga of The Ocean of Stories, seventeen folio volumes, the longest framed story in the corpus of literature, as far as I know. And I read these damn things virtually from cover to cover. I may be exaggerating a little bit, but what I had to put back on the shelf I would sometimes go back and get again and take home and absorb.

So my literary education came both from the good examples and the good teaching and curricula of the Hopkins undergraduate college at that time, and from this wonderful off-the-cart, off-the-shelf stuff that I was taking home.
Hopkins was a tiny place, was and remains a tiny place compared to big state universities where I’ve taught since and so forth, and an intense place. The combination—and it’s not a residential campus, by and large, much less so than in the years just after the war than it is so when it went coed and they built some more dormitories and so forth. So we all lived off campus.

My impression of the place—I mean, my buddies, particularly the veterans, had been through some stuff and they were more mature than us green kids right out of high school. They knew how to drink and get raucous but not get arrested, for example, or pile up their cars. Some of them were married and had children already, which induced a lot of the rest of us following their example to marry at a sort of almost obscenely early age, because the whole push of the ’50s in places like that was to become an adult as soon as possible, which we definitely tried to do.

It was an enormously serious place. Obviously in curricula like the engineering curriculum, where many of my friends were until they dropped out because it was too hard, and the pre-medical curriculum and science curriculum, the work was gruelingly hard. Hopkins was like a sort of intellectual marine boot camp in that regard, I think. But even among us writing majors and English majors and majors in liberal arts, the tone of the place, as I saw it, Mame, seemed to be that we worked like hell, late into the night, five days a week, and then we binged. So we would party on weekends. Of course, I was playing jazz in dance bands downtown on weekends.

So the weeks, my memory was the weeks seem like one long day of working very hard at our studies, then the weekends, we simply partied hard and did all the things that OD’ing undergraduates do, binge-drinking undergraduates do, but with these older buddies who were sort
of anchors to windward, you know, who saw to it, because they’d been through this before, that we didn’t disgrace ourselves or get ourselves expelled absolutely. Those are pleasant memories.

I did get married early, as I mentioned a while ago, following, I think, the example of so many of my older buddies who were veterans, who had wives and children already. So by the end of my junior year already, I married my then girlfriend, started a family early, and stayed on at Hopkins as a graduate student partly because I knew the turf by that time and had my first child by that time, needed something to do, and there was Hopkins, which I knew. I could have gone somewhere else to do my graduate work, but—

**Warren:** You’re jumping ahead for me too much. I have a couple of questions. You’ve mentioned several names that interest me a great deal. I’d like to go into the classroom with you with George Boas. He’s somebody I’ve read a good bit about and of his works, too, and I’m very intrigued by him. Take me into the classroom with him.

**Barth:** With pleasure, because it’s a delight for me to remember it. George was, I think, the extraction there is Spanish, Jewish, a dapper fellow of enormous sophistication and polish, who, however, was not snobbish at all. The undergraduate curriculum then for liberal arts majors consisted of two-year-long courses—I love to think of that—a two-year course. The two main core courses were a two-year course in classics of Western literature, and for those you brought in every *eminence grise* when his specialty time. When Homer time came, you brought in the Homer guy, who would lecture for a couple of weeks on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. When Dante time came, you brought in the Dante. So us undergraduates, in a rather large lecture hall, simply got to listen to these marvelous lecturers talk about these great works of Western literature, with this
kind of knowledgeable passion with which great teachers can speak about things. Those were marvelous.

The phenomenon about Boas was that he taught this two-year course in classics of Western thought solo. He went from the pre-Socratic right up till the last semester in philosophy, that is almost up to the—what would have been regnant then? I guess the French Existentialists just during and after World War II. He took us through. The regnant discipline in the philosophy department in those days was the History of Ideas, and although that’s a somewhat discredited discipline now for philosophy, it’s a wonderful way to go at it for undergraduates who are just learning things first time. We learned that ideas have history. And even the idea that history is unimportant has a long history, and it would be typical of Boas that he would take us through that notion. “Let’s see where in the history of Western culture the idea has surfaced that history is unimportant.” And he would show us that that idea has a long history.

Among the great things about Boas, he was a splendid lecturer, not at all histrionic, just easy, very proper, very matter of fact, very witty lecturer, who had a gift, two important gifts for a lecturer, I think, a gift for illustration. He knew how to give good illuminating examples of what he was talking about when it came to things philosophical conundra, but also a gift for, as he liked to say himself, for making the strongest possible case for ideas that he himself doesn’t agree with, and he was eloquent about that. He would say, “If a lot of people have believed an idea, there must be something to it, so let us not, even though it may seem like anathema to us, let’s don’t dismiss it lightly. Let’s see why that idea was so influential for so long and make the best possible case for it as we can.”
I have—it won’t come to me now, perhaps, but I remember part of my education from Boas was collecting a lot of these apothems and just bits of incidental wisdom that George would drop on us from time to time. Maybe they’ll come to me as we’re speaking.

I had a chance late in his life, when I came back to Hopkins—George had had a stroke by that time and was not as portable as one could wish he was, but I made a pilgrimage out to his place to let him know that whether he knew it or not, he had been the one figure from whom I felt I had learned the most during my undergraduate and graduate years at Hopkins. By no means the only one I had learned a lot from.

It was George, by the way—many of us took master’s degrees then, those of us who stayed on, despite the university’s policy of not accepting its undergraduates into its graduate program, no good university likes to do that, but any good university will rise above its principles here and there, make some exceptions. So we had this one-year master’s degree program. Then, again, because I had children and because I was established in Baltimore as a working jazz musician and so forth, I stayed on yet further in a program that George Boas set up, along with Pedro Salinas, the poet, and Elliott Coleman, a serious Hopkins-style doctoral program for those of his MAs in the Writing Seminars, but wanted an honest intellectual Ph.D.

It was called Aesthetics of Literature, and the guiding spirits were Leo Spitzer, another great teacher I forgot to mention before, this Viennese-Austrian-Jewish refugee from Hitler’s terror, who settled in Hopkins and was sort of the god of Romance philology, I suppose would be the name of his field, one of these people with the Einstein hair and the pure European manner, who I remember being in awe of at the time.
They set up such an excellent program in aesthetics of literature that as a matter of historical fact, those of us writing, aspirant writers who ended up being mainly writers, were ones who dropped out of that program, like myself, after a year, because we were just out of our depth. The program was of such high intellectual quality that all the ones who finished it—have you talked to Richard Macksey?

Warren: Yes.

Barth: Macksey was my fellow graduate student in that program at the time. Dick and the other ones who finished that degree, almost without any exception, became primarily scholars and critics, because the place made intellectual activity so exciting, you know. It was so splendid. They became mainly intellectual scholars and critics who may write the odd poem here and there, you know, someone maybe will publish one novel, but they weren’t really congenital novelists, they were doing this sort of with their left hand. But primarily scholars. A couple of us who became mainly novelists or poets, and only, as it were, with our other hand, became academics who were drowning in that wonderful program because we were out of our depth, and dropped out and found something else to do, starting teaching instead for a living.

So while I wouldn’t recommend to any of my own graduate students that they stay on at the place where they did their undergraduate work, I think it’s good for a writer, by and large, with some exceptions, to have a chance of venue, to go to Europe for a while, or Japan or Africa for a while, or at least, if not Europe, Japan, or Africa, Chicago or Stanford for a while, have other coaches in another city, another ambiance, just as part of their maturation. I remember from my own experience that one should make exceptions to that rule in some cases. I don’t think it
hurt me to stay on at Hopkins since I gave come from such callow and unformed, though very pleasant, background over on the Eastern Shore. I had everything to learn and was just sort of getting my mind around the fact that there is this huge corpus of Western literature and thought, and needed time to sit there and assimilate it with familiar faces and familiar navigation stars for a while before I moved on.

**Warren:** You’re the first person I’ve talked with who’s used the word “coaches” as opposed to “mentors.” Are you making a distinction there?

**Barth:** Certainly among the—maybe not in the intellectual sphere, but in the sphere of writing, and probably any practicum course— you will have heard, by the way, Mame, if I can digress for just a moment, that the writing program at Hopkins was always regarded with some suspicion, if not downright hostility, by the other academic departments, on the not unreasonable grounds that Hopkins was founded as America’s first research university. Its business is intense intellectual academic research, and that practicum courses in the arts belong down at Peabody if you’re a musician, Maryland Institute if you’re a graphic artist or a sculptor.

Writing is sort of in a fishy category there. Since it deals with language, it seemed a little closer to what was going on in the general intellectual enterprise of the university than sculpture and musical composition did, so it got in somehow through a side door. But the English department and the other departments always looked at it askance and held it at a kind of arm’s length. And even now that feeling resurfaces from time to time. If there’s a change of administrators, the department may be in for some inclement administrative weather, the feeling,
“This is really not quite right, that we be doing this kind of thing, raising poets and writers at Johns Hopkins, etc.” though they’ve done a distinguished job.

What was your question?

**Warren:** The distinction. You used the word “coach” rather than “mentor.”

**Barth:** Right. I dare say that the advisors of doctoral candidates in any field in university may at that point feel they’re doing more coaching than teaching, you know. I’m sure even a master surgeon over at the medical institution says, “Now just take your hand and go this way with the scalpel,” rather than saying, “Now, you understand the brain is divided,” etc., etc., etc.

With writing it’s very clear. I taught books, of course, as well as teaching writing at Hopkins, but with new apprentices, undergraduate level, let’s say, although the muses are not interested in that distinction, undergraduate-level apprentices, it is a matter of teaching sometimes. They sometimes need to learn, as I needed to learn, how big literature is, how much has been going on. It’s like joining a party that’s been going on for a long time before you got there, and a lot of the jokes have been told already, you know.

So in order to keep them from just reinventing the wheel over and over again, you need to help steer them into where we are and how we got there. They need to hear about things like modernism and pre-modernism and post modernism, just to get their bearing. There’s a lot of teaching there.

I used to teach a course in the rudiments of fiction, which we talk about how come it is that stories seem to go this way, building up to a climax and down, rather than going the other way, with the climax up front. Why do we tell jokes with the punchline at the end rather than at
the beginning? What have writers in most cultures, in most centuries, what are some of the devices that they seem to have learned or most effective for getting a story told? Let’s look at some of them. Why do you need dialogue? Why etc. Beginning, middle, and end. Why have them in that order? I like to talk about those things. That’s teaching.

By the time we pick our graduate student poets and fiction writers, we pick them for their talent in the first place, which means that most of them, if they’re not publishing already, are about five millimeters away from professionality, and that’s the hardest little gap to close sometimes. So it becomes more a matter of coaching there. You’re doing a great many things almost professionally well already, if not professionally well. Maybe just hearing—I have that feeling almost metaphorically of taking their hand, you see, saying, “How about this image instead of that image? Why not put this character back here instead of over here?” Or, as Joe Heller used to say, “You got too many guys on the payroll.” Let’s see if we can’t cut down the budget, combine these two characters for efficiency sake. We don’t think the union will object. Let’s see if we can’t get the job done sooner. Is it a good idea to have her do this before she does that, rather than do that before she does this?

That’s coaching at that point. You’re not instructing them in any general principles. You’re just helping them be a better version, a more likely professional version of what they almost are already. It’s very labor-intensive. It’s why Robert Stone, for example, whom we very much liked as a teacher, left as early as he did from the program. He had been teaching only undergraduate writers at Amherst, and he had never taught graduate student writers, who are often staggeringly ambitious, staggeringly productive, and whose work is already at a high enough
level of finish that it’s enormously time-intensive and involves really reading a manuscript several
times and line editing them almost word for word, you see, applauding here and clucking your
tongue over there and making a suggestion here. He found it was taking up all his time as a
writer, and so he went up to Yale, where I’m interested to hear—we liked him, he liked us, I think,
but it was too much work—up to Yale, where he’s teaching only undergraduates again. “We’re
going to read Conrad today and I’ll look at your manuscript,” but he’s going to say, “a little too
long,” etc. “See if you can shorten this by three pages and show it to me again.”

Warren: It takes a little less time.

Another name you mentioned who interests me a great deal, and I don’t even know how
long he was here, is Louis Rubin.

Barth: Yes. Louis Rubin. I forgot to mention Karl Shapiro, too, the Pulitzer Prize—winning poet,
whom I didn’t have as a teacher, but he was one of those pleasant presences in the early, the
germininal Department of Writing, Speech, and Drama. Elliott Coleman. Karl Shapiro went from
here out to Chicago. An old fellow who was a Poe specialist, who used to teach the so-called
drama end of the department, which meant it was him in the way that A.D. Emmart was the
journalism, a guy named N. Bryllion Fagin.

Warren: What’s his name?

Barth: Fagin, just like the guy in Dickens’ novel. Bryllion is his first name. N, the initial N, and
middle name something like the element, but it was B-R-Y-L-L-I-O-N, I think, Bryllion Fagin.
Talked about Poe.
And an important guy for me, a Catholic-trained scholar named Francis Thompson, who took us all through the history of criticism, but also was the Joyce specialist. In those days, since the English department didn’t teach writers that modern, if you wanted to learn about Proust and Joyce and Thomas Mann and so forth, you learned it from the guys who were teaching in the Writing Seminars or in the appropriate language departments.

Thompson had a seminar in Joyce’s *Finnigan’s Wake* that went on every Tuesday night forever, and I took it for about three years. We would go over and read from the book. He would get mathematicians, scientists to pick up Joyce’s allusions to these things. The book itself, as you know, it ends in the middle of a sentence and circles back to its beginning, and that’s the way we read it. We would have a kind of s_____. When we got to the end of the book, we’d all break open some Irish beer or something and have a little celebration and start right over again with sentence number one. Wonderful education in Joyce.

Louis Rubin, like my first writing teacher, Robert Jacobs, was then a war veteran graduate student doing his Ph.D. either in the English department or the interdepartmental program in aesthetics of literature, who was instructed to coach our young fiction writers, ended up coaching the graduate seminar fiction writing as well. His specialty was, and remains, Southern literature and Southern history. But he, too, was a very understanding and insightful coach, and important in helping me write out all the crap that young writers have in their system, trying to find out who they are. He’s still very much alive, retired from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Warren: I know people he’s been very influential to.

Barth: Yes, indeed.
Warren: And I really hadn't—was he here very long?

Barth: He was here for the time it took him to complete his own degree, which I'm going to guess was probably the last there years of my undergraduate education, probably, and I know he was here during the year I was taking my master's degree, because he presided over the graduate seminar that year. Then I think he left to go down and take a job—he founded the writing program at Hollins College, a very good one, and then moved on to Chapel Hill, where he became a professor of Southern history and Southern literature at Chapel Hill until his retirement. And a good guy. All these were good guys, not as remote as those eminence grises like Leo Spitzer and George Boas and so forth. They were closer to our age and they started out as our TAs and so forth. So we felt more bonded to them than we did to the other gentlemen.

Warren: So you were really a witness to the evolution of Writing, Speech, and Drama into the Writing Seminars.

Barth: "Evolution" is a wrong term. I was a witness to the devolution of it. It was the evolution of the program. It had just started the year before I got there. Russell Baker and some others were charter members, students of the program. I came the year after it was established. It had that little period of prosperity during the four years of my undergraduate tenure and my undergraduate residency and the one-year M.A. residency, and then hit some adverse administrative weather, the hostility from other departments, and had the rug pulled out from under it, had its budget blasted away so that it devolved. They stripped off, not without some justification, they stripped off the drama and speech thing, which was only a marginal operation, and the journalism thing, which was only a marginal operation anyway. They stripped it of departmental status, although it was
still budgetarily and administratively autonomous. They wouldn’t call it a department anymore. This was not the department’s decision; it was some deanly or provostly decision.

And it became the writing seminar, which just meant that you had a seminar in fiction, a seminar in poetry, and that was about it then. Some undergraduate introductory courses. Because the budget was cut, all those lovely professors left, and it became for the next ten or fifteen, almost twenty years, it became just Elliott Coleman, a couple of stringers, nameless stringers teaching the fiction and the poetry, Elliott still lecturing on Marcel Proust and giving master classes in poetry, and a little bit of help from some alumni of the program, like Dick Macksey, who had established their own academic base over in the Humanities Center, etc., and lent some support to Elliott.

It lingered in this kind of twilight, I’m going to say fifteen years, twenty years. When I left in 1965 to go teach at Penn State and then at Buffalo, then at Boston U., and so forth, it was in pretty feeble case, and it remained that way. As Elliott got older and was approaching retirement, and I was deciding whether to stay at Boston U., go back to Buffalo, or come down to Hopkins, it really was in limp condition. I spoke to the then provost, George Owen and to Steve Muller, the then president. We all agreed on what the state of affairs was, and I told them that it seemed to me one of two things had to be done. Elliott was about to retire. They could either phase out the program gently at his retirement and let the adjuncts go. It would have been no Saturday night massacre, because those are not tenured members of the faculty anyway. And just let the program go and let Hopkins go back to what it had been before the thing was established.
Or they could hire me, quintuple the department’s budget, let me find a chairman, because I can’t administer anything, let me find a chairman, let the chairman make two or three good appointments immediately, give us plenty of office space, and let’s get back to something like where we were in the beginning. I deliberately accepted a joint appointment with the English department, at their invitation, thinking that that might mend, that might build some bridges in what had been historically not always a very friendly relationship. And that all worked very well. I felt welcomed there by the English department, as well as the faculty and by the administration.

I found a chairman, Charles Newman, who was editor of the—he was out at Northwestern University and editing a good literary magazine, *TriQuarterly*. He came in. My notion was that, it being Hopkins, what we needed for a chairman was not just a poet or a fiction writer; we needed somebody who was a first-rate intellectual who could hold his own with all these people up and down Gilman Hall, who also was a critic, a good critic or a fiction writer or a poet, who had a strong academic intellectual string to his or her bow, or else they’d be killed in that environment.

Charlie Newman was just that kind of thing. He came in, he smashed a lot of necessary crockery that needed smashing, but built a lot of bridges as well. Got us the office space, got us the appointment, got tired of the job, and then we hired John Irwin, who had been there as a doctoral candidate in English, had gone down to the University of Georgia to found the *Georgia Review*, who is, himself, a first-rate critic and then under a *nom de plume* I think one of our really first-rate poets. He writes under a pseudonym as a poet. He came in and then really put the department on its feet. So for the next twenty years, under John’s leadership, the department, in my opinion, flourished.
John has now stepped down as chairman. I’ve retired. Some of our other people have left. So the department is in temporarily vulnerable condition now in a way that reminds me of the situation fifty years ago, etc. But we’ve acquired enough powerful alumni, and there are enough good people still on the faculty, that I don’t think the department is in any danger of being kneecapped or otherwise sabotaged.

We’ve got so many—most of our graduates, as you can imagine, do not grow up to be professional writers any more than most Peabody graduates grow up to be concert pianists. They often go into other fields sometimes related to writing. They may become editors or advertising writers or PR people. A surprising fraction of them become lawyers. Some become very wealthy. Some of them endow the university. One of them has even endowed the chair that the current dean is sitting in.

So when trouble comes, as it has done in this past year, the department has a lot of alumni muscle that it can flex if it needs to without things getting really unpleasant, just to remind anybody that needs reminding that it has been a very popular major, even those who don’t turn out to be working professional writers. But some of them, too, like Russ Baker and William Styron’s wife, Rose, who was a classmate of mine, etc., and a poet in her own right, etc. So if we need to flex a little muscle, we can do it, although we try to do this kind of thing delicately so that we can remain on collegially terms with the other departments.

In fact, it makes me sort of proud of Hopkins that even after this many decades, they can look askance at something like writing in the university, and every time one of my good M.A. candidates or M.A. people decides that she or he wants to do a Ph.D. somewhere at Hopkins in
some other department, I warn them, “That’s fine, and if you’ve got this academic string in your bow, too, that’s terrific, but if you’re going to do it at Hopkins, you’re going to have to be prepared to set your muse aside for the next two or three years,” and that’s hard for a young writer to do. Some of our people have done that. I warned them that given my experience that I mentioned before, they may find that they’ll end up being mainly scholars and critics, because Hopkins is going to make intellectual activity seem like such a pleasant thing to do. They may have trouble hearing their other muse calling in their other ear.

Warren: So we seem to have worked our way around to teaching, which is just fine with me.

Barth: How are we doing on the clock?

Warren: We’re just fine for me. Take me into the classroom with John Barth. One thing I want to know, you’ve talked about Gilman Hall, did you ever teach in that classroom up at the top of the tower?

Barth: I loved it. That was a late acquisition.

Warren: I love that room.

Barth: So do I. Right up under the clock. Nothing above us except time itself. [Laughter] And looking out over the campus. John Irwin scored us that room sometime ago, and it’s terrific.

But the classical room in which so much happened in my undergraduate days and then when I came back to teach undergraduates was Gilman 38, a nondescript basement room in Gilman which has a wonderful literary history. The wastebasket in there, for example, at least the one that used to be in there, was thrown up in by Dylan Thomas, for example. [Laughter] When
he came through to give one of his–this guy would get staggeringly drunk, and so we’d think he
cannot be possibly perpendicular when he goes on stage. At one time Elliott Coleman was
walking him around in the rain. He threw up in the wastebasket in Gilman Hall, of Gilman 38, and
then walked on stage in the lecture hall, which I think was a chemistry lecture hall, Remson 101,
with a periodic table behind his head, and as Thomas could do, from the minute he stepped
through the door of the room, you wouldn’t know he had a thing to drink, you know, and he
would give one of these absolutely transfixing, exhilarating readings of his own and other people’s
poetry.

Gilman 38 was the seminar room for the old Writing Seminars, and it’s where most of us
went through the crucible of having our apprentice works. These are in the days before
photocopying and so forth, so the author had to read. We had mimeograph machines, but by and
large the author had to read. Okay for poets, but for fiction writers, you had to sit there and you
had to listen, and you’re already out of the medium because you’re in the aural tradition by that
time, really, rather than the written tradition. And your classmates are trying to remember what
they just heard, enough to make criticism. That’s where it all happened, in Gilman 38, so that’s
the one I remember as my crucible.

I was pleased that when I came back to Hopkins twenty-some years later, that room was
still in operation for the Writing Seminars, so I was able to tell my young students and coachees
some of the things that had gone on in that room in years past. Bill Styron sat here at this end of
the table and told me such and such about an awful piece that I was chosen to read to him when

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he came through when I was a student. And Dylan Thomas had thrown up if not in that very wastebasket, in one just like it over there, and that you may do the same some day.

But then that upper room, that's wonderful, the idea of leaving the campus, the other operations of the campus, physically below you, and ascending the last flight of stairs that even the elevator doesn't go up to, you know, as if to say the muses and other things—your other things can take you only so far, but then it's just you and the muse going up this last flight of steps to this elevated venue.

Warren: So how many people would be sitting around the table?

Barth: Well, in the so-called advanced undergraduate class, advanced in the sense that there, too, they apply for admission and we pick them on the basis that they've mastered some of the rudiments already and they're ready for some fine-tuning, as in the graduate seminar, twelve is a high number, but it's a typical number. Anything less than twelve is a nice small house. Anything more than twelve, in fiction particularly, is an awful lot of work. You add one more student and you've got a lot more pages of manuscript to line edit and have conferences with them about and so forth.

We tried hard—the three fiction writers on the staff most of the time I was there, Steve Dixon and Gene Magary [phonetic] and myself, have very different tastes in literature, we're very different kinds of writers, and it pleases me that we seldom disagreed about the merits of a candidate for the graduate program. We take it as an article of faith that we don't have any particular literary ideology. We're not looking for post modernists, whatever that is, or for traditional realists or anything. We just want people who are doing things promisingly well, that
we think we can help do it a little better. So, with a few exceptions, no matter what kind of stuff the candidate’s writing, whether it’s straight out of Ray Carver, Hemingway realistic minimalistic vein, or whether it’s explosively formal tricksiness of some kind of post post modern variety, we’re usually able to say, “This is not very interesting,” or, “This is really sharp. This person’s really good at what he or she is doing,” and we think we can be of some assistance there.

So typically, particularly in the graduate program, the mix of ideologies of where these people are coming from muse-wise is helpfully various, and there has been a prevailing tone in the room that pleases me. I don’t know whether it comes out of the walls of Gilman Hill and the history of all the people who have taught and learned there. A wonderful combination of noncompetitiveness. I’ve heard, for example, very contrasting stories from people who have come from the Iowa program to us, for example, or gone from us out to the Iowa program. Of course it’s competitive in a way, but it’s not sabotaging, kneecap, and competitive. A wonderful combination of critical candor and reciprocal respect.

I don’t know whether it comes down from the head into the paper or comes up to the head into the table from the people in the room, but one of the things that I certainly tried to do as their coach was to remind them how various literature is and how many of the things that might be regarded as post modern tricks you can find in Sanskrit literature from the tenth century, you know, or in Shakespeare’s plays at such and such a point, or here or there.

As I told you a moment ago, the size of the already said is enormous, and you’re not likely to do anything for the first time in an art that’s been going on as long as storytelling and by this time story writing has done. So they do learn, most of them, to be a little more pluralistic perhaps
in their tastes than perhaps they were when they came into the program, to learn that there are more ways to the woods than one, and that the important thing is not what you’re writing about, where it’s coming from, or what aesthetic principle you may believe you subscribe to for the present, but just how well you’re doing it. Does it knock my socks off? Is it a metaphor we want to applaud? Was that a wonderful *coup de théâtre*, one that Shakespeare or Cervantes or Rabelais might have applauded? Etc. When it works, it’s a good feeling.

So while there will be sometimes rivalries and even enmities among the students, especially if sex or romance gets involved among some of the young writers in the room, by and large, the tone of things is civilized but candid, sharp but diplomatic, and the students, by their own report, find it enormously supportive. They learn, of course, much more from one another than they do from whoever’s at the head of the table. The conversation in the room is one thing and our office conference is another. But if they’re like I was and my buddies back in those days—I’m sure they are—the conversation just goes on and on and on and on and on, you know, with the all-night parties. If they’re going down to Fells Point, it’s still the seminar, you know, going on.

**Warren:** We’re going to run out of tape if we go on and on here. Let me turn it over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

**Warren:** What do you want your students to learn most? What is it that you most want them to take away from the experience?

**Barth:** One of the things they seem to take away, though it’s not necessarily high on my agenda, one writer, in an interview for somewhere later on when he was reminiscing about the seminar
and about my seminar, said that, among other things, it’s a good training seminar in academic
critical deportment. Now, that may be the kind of thing I was just saying, you know, where you
learn to make your point but not try to bludgeon your fellow writer over the head, a little bit of
diplomacy combined with candor.

What I want them to learn I think I’ve made clear, Mame, already, what they’ll carry away
from it.

That’s my wife. We’re supposed to go bike riding in a few minutes.

If they don’t have it already, I want them to get some improved sense of the width, of the
depth of literature, you know, the enormous variety of things that there are to admire, and not
lock themselves into one kind of writing or one kind of writer and use that writer or writing to
bang on the head. Other ways of doing things, to learn that there are many ways to be splendid.
That would be one thing.

For another, even in the case of the graduate students in fiction, this would not be so true
in poetry, as it wouldn’t be in theoretical physics or chess or mathematics, in fiction, maturation
can take a very long time, and so the other thing I try to remind them and press upon them is that
seldom does it happen that a young writer right out of graduate school is going to find a New
York agent and be right on the stands in a hurry. If you’re a violinist, it probably either happens
early or it’s not going to happen at all. But the novel, particularly, is a medium that’s very kind to
slow growers. And those who do not find their voice by the time they’re twenty-five or thirty by
no means need give up, unless they’ve got to find something else to do to pay the rent, perhaps. A
number of them become lawyers, they become these other things I was talking about.
But it's always a delight to me, and not so surprising, that sometimes when they reach their forties or even fifties, the first novel will come along and it will get published. The novel, I remind my young coachees, as a genre was invented by middle-aged people. It's been a genre in which somebody, unlike any other art form I know of, can do it right the first time at age fifty or fifty-five sometimes. I don't know of any other medium of art in which that's true. We have a lots of Grandma Moses in fiction, you know, but not so many in the plastic arts. That, I think, is useful to learn.

So even if they decide, discouraged, that it isn't working yet and "Maybe I'd better go to law school the way Dad wanted me to in the first place," and they do, and they get their law degree and they practice, there are two or three cases among my own former students where then the novels start to appear, you know, and they become the Michael Creighton or who have you of their generation.

So, patience with their muse. A sense of the length, width, and depth of the literature corpus, that there are many more ways to the woods than one.

**Warren:** One last question. If you were to describe Johns Hopkins as a personality, how would you do it?

**Barth:** [Laughter] I've never thought of Johns Hopkins as a personality, and no doubt it has changed. I think it's probably a little more humane place than it used to think of itself as being back in my student days.

Let me tell you the anecdote very quickly of a fellow graduate student of mine back in those days, a graduate student in the English department who used to have nightmares about his
upcoming Ph.D. oral exams. The boat has sunk, we’re all in the water, we’re trying to get our hands on the gunnels of the life boats, and our professors are up there with hatchets, chopping off our fingers. That was the Hopkins, at least on the graduate level, that he thought of in those days. That fellow grew up to become chairman of the English department for a while, and when I met him later on, he’d been other places. I said, “Now, Jack, it’s you up there with the fire axe, right, chopping off the fingers.” He said, “I try to just pry the fingers off gently without chopping them.” I suspect the place is a little gentler in that regard than it used to be.

But I did used to like to think of it, maybe because I had all these marine and army, navy veteran buddies as an undergraduate, I think it used to like to think of itself, and we certainly thought of it, as I mentioned before, as a kind of Parris Island or other boot camp of the academic world, where they were deadly serious. Social life at Hopkins was never a big deal. Your social life was over in those row houses, fraternity houses off the campus. If anything, it was the opposite of a party school. Bloody serious, but high intellectual adventure, rigorous standards, which I still admire enormously and I hope are still being maintained in other departments, as they are in our writing seminars. Then blowing it off on the weekends with the free time. I like that idea of working very hard, working very hard, working very hard, and then playing hard on the time between when you’re working hard.

I suspect that when the university went coed, I hope and suspect that that may have gentled the aspect a little bit. I hope it’s still competitive. I hope the standards are still rigorous. It wouldn’t hurt if things were a little less boot campy over on the Homewood campus than they
were, and my sense as a teacher there in the 1970s and ’80s and into the ’90s was that that was
the case, that life was a little bit gentler.

**Warren:** Do you think coeducation made the difference?

**Barth:** I don’t know if it made the difference, but I think there’s a correlation. Whether there
was causation among the correlation or not, it would be presumptuous of me to say. I know that
it was a strange thing for me, after being a graduate student at Hopkins and a TA at Hopkins, to
go off to Penn State and for the first time to have women in the classroom. I thought this was so
delightful. I loved it immediately. It didn’t seem somehow immediately as serious as it was back in
my undergraduate days, but it was so much more pleasant and more human. Then, of course, I
had some wonderful students, including my wife, who’s waiting for me now so we can go biking.

Then when I came back to Hopkins, it was by then a coeducational institution. And the
graduate school, mind you, was always coeducational, so there were always women on the
campus, high performing ones. By that time, of course, it seemed the most natural thing in the
world that some of my best undergraduate students were the women students. It seemed queer at
that time, it seemed odd to think that once this was an all-male bastion, you know, with no female
voices in the room. It seemed so strange, as if you would have, what, all dwarves or all one-
handed people or something like that. Very strange.

Well, Mame, I think we can—if you’re finished—

**Warren:** I could go on for a long time, but I am perfectly satisfied. I want to thank you so very
much.

**Barth:** Well, I thank you for being patient with me.
[End of interview]