

The Literature of Exhaustion by John Barth

The Literature of Exhaustion is a 1967 essay by the American novelist [John Barth](#) sometimes considered to be the [manifesto](#) of [postmodernism](#).

The essay was highly influential¹ and for some controversial.^[2] It depicted [literary realism](#) as an "used up" tradition; Barth's description of his own work, which many thought nailed a core trait of postmodernism, is "novels which imitate the form of a novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author".

Barth argued that a particular stage in history was passing, and pointed to possible directions from there. In 1980, he wrote a follow-up essay, "The Literature of Replenishment."

In 1967, John Barth published a controversial essay in *The Atlantic* which amounts to a manifesto of [postmodernism](#). The essay was called "The Literature of Exhaustion" and in it Barth proposed that the conventional modes of literary representation had been "used up," their possibilities consumed through over use. In the sixties, as today, the great preponderance of literature belongs, technically speaking, to the nineteenth century; the formal advances of [modernism](#) are all too often ignored.

Barth's essay has been vilified as an over hasty death notice for literature, one that seemed hypocritical from a man who is, after all, a novelist, but this is to miss its point. "The Literature of Exhaustion" is principally concerned with the ways art has been kept alive in the age of "final solutions" and "felt ultimacies," from the death of God to [the death of the author](#). Barth holds up the figure of Jorge Luis Borges as an exemplar of an artist who "doesn't merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it" (31).

Barth, like many postmodernists, is particularly enamoured of a Borges' story entitled, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in which a turn-of-the-century French Symbolist produces, not copies or imitates, but actually composes several chapters of Cervante's novel. Borges thus broaches issues as diverse as the death of the author, intellectual property rights, and the historical specificity of aesthetic and cognitive modes. What impresses Barth is that Borges thus (re)uses Cervantes' novel in order to produce a "remarkable and original work of literature, the theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (31).

There seems to me to be no better formulation for the task facing the authors of hypertext fiction: the necessity of making language and its increasingly outdated technical modes live again. This will be achieved not simply through new technology, but through the re-imagining of the "ultimacies" in which we live. No amount of [RAM](#) will, in itself, make a work succeed, but, as [Marshall McLuhan](#) reminds us, the medium is the message. Changing the medium may help us find new messages, or at least new ways of re-using the old ones. Certainly it offers new ways to re-conceive the legacy of cultural traditions.

[Gore Vidal](#) criticized "The Literature of Exhaustion" and Barth's novels for making an analysis of only the plots of novels and myths, while refusing to engage with the style of either, resulting in reductionist and disinterested understandings of novels' contents.^[3] Vidal instead advocated increased stylistic innovation and appreciation as better venues for further progression of the novel as a form, pointing particularly to the work of [Italo Calvino](#) as a model.

In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth discusses those writers whose suspicion that certain forms of literature have become obsolete is incorporated both thematically and technically in the fictions they produce. He highlights the successes of Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, and Samuel Beckett in the face of apparent artistic impasse; they acknowledge and push beyond the boundaries staked out by their literary predecessors and employ a potentially stifling sense of "ultimacy" in the creation of new work, so that their forms become metaphors for their aesthetic concerns. "The Literature of Replenishment" seeks to correct any misreading of the former essay as a complaint that contemporary writers have little left to accomplish save the parody of conventions that they arrived upon too late to benefit from themselves.

Barth's method is to define and legitimize postmodernism by placing its most interesting practitioners—he singles out Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez for praise—in a direct line of succession that may be traced through the great modernists of the first half of the twentieth century back to eighteenth century novelist Laurence Sterne and sixteenth century writer Miguel de Cervantes. "The Literature of Replenishment" makes clear that Barth is not averse to admitting realistic elements into his fictional worlds, provided they do not constrain the imagination. Both of these essays are collected in *The Friday Book: Essays, and Other Nonfiction* (1984). *The Friday Book* and its companion volume, *Further Fridays* (1995), also contain many essays dealing with Barth's affection for and interest in his native state of Maryland.