

# The Literature of Exhaustion

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 influential,<sup>[1]</sup> and for some controversial.<sup>[2]</sup> It depicted [literary realism](#) as a "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."

[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.<sup>[3]</sup> 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.

Barth first delivered "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967 as a lecture in a Peters Rushton Seminar held at the [University of Virginia](#);<sup>[4]</sup> it was first printed in *The Atlantic* in the same year. Since then has been reprinted several times, and was included in Barth's nonfiction collection *The Friday Book* (1984)

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.