

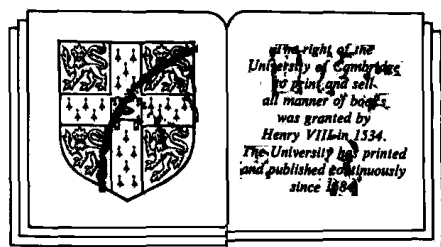
Critical Assumptions

K.K. RUTHVEN

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Preface

This book is based on seminars conducted with postgraduate students whose first degree was in English. All were competent at the art of writing essays on literary topics, but few had had the opportunity to examine very carefully the critical principles they had picked up from a variety of teachers. I imagine that students elsewhere have the same experience.

To try to understand why we say what we say about books is a worthwhile ambition, if only on account of the taste it creates for inquiring into our reasons for saying what we say about many other things. *Critical assumptions* is written for students who would like to identify more clearly their own attitudes to books. In order to illustrate the range and diversity of critical responses to literature, I have brought together numerous observations (some famous, some not, but all pertinent) on four recurrent problems in the history of criticism: the genesis, form, meaning and value of what are called literary works. While going about the business I have often thought of Walter Benjamin's dream of remaining hidden behind a phalanx of quotations which, like highwaymen, would rob passing readers of their convictions. Such a book proved impossible to write. Even so modest a task as the marshalling of quotations is a critical act, and the temptation to take part in highway robberies proves irresistible; so I have not tried to conceal my own preferences among the options surveyed.

No book can be free of assumptions, least of all a book which takes them as its subject. My major assumption is this: that although the volume of commentary on literature is immense, the number of different observations which can be made about books is relatively small. Many of the likes and dislikes expressed by literary critics can be subsumed in sets of opposites, such as originality versus imitation, inspiration versus making, clarity versus obscurity, and so on. It is also notable that such pairs function differently in literary history from the way they function

in literary theory. In literary history, the binary components are mutually contradictory and always demand a commitment to one or the other. If conscious craftsmanship happens to be in vogue, for instance, people tend to keep quiet about those involuntary experiences and fortuitous discoveries which go by the name of inspiration; but if a writer is expected to be the trumpet of a prophecy, or to display graces beyond the reach of art, we are unlikely to hear much about multiple drafts and compositional agonies. In literary theory, on the other hand, binary components are not contradictory but complementary to one another and equal in value: every theoretical position on any issue whatsoever is likely to be taken by somebody at some time and defended in ways which other people will find persuasive.

Traditionally, literary criticism has aligned itself with literary history, and the range of 'acceptable' literature has narrowed accordingly, irrespectively of whether it was the old generation or the new one which shaped the standards of excellence. This difficulty would be obviated if literary criticism were to be grounded in literary theory, such as I have described it. For if all theories are possible (and capable of various permutations with one another) then the whole of literature becomes available to us as a galaxy of possibilities: there can be no dead issues, obsolete forms, unfashionable authors, or unreadable books. I find this a richer prospect than the alternative, which is to encourage inexperienced readers to despise all writing which is not in accordance with certain types of theories which happen to be fashionable at the time. The following pages accordingly document some of the possibilities which constitute our range of choice.

Christchurch, New Zealand

K. K. RUTHVEN

I have taken the opportunity afforded by the publication of this paperback edition to correct a few typographical errors in the original text.

Adelaide

K.K.R.

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I

Books as heterocosms

The term heterocosm

Imaginative works make public a private view of reality, and do it so compellingly that we want to share it. A book, we say, constitutes a world of its own. Such a world may appear disturbingly unfamiliar at first; but gradually, as it comes to dominate our imagination, we begin to understand its peoples and customs, and may end up feeling relatively at home there. Later, on returning to the world we left behind, we may find ourselves noticing things we never noticed before, and will value the book for sharpening our awareness. Conversely, the imaginative world we have just explored may strike us as being altogether too bizarre to be of interest to anybody except connoisseurs of alternative realities. Whatever our reaction, we shall have made the common assumption that a book is some sort of container for a special kind of reality, which may or may not resemble that 'real' reality we experience outside books.

Current attitudes are anticipated already by Richard Hurd, who warns us in the tenth of his *Letters on chivalry and romance* (1762) that 'the poet has a world of his own, where experience has less to do than consistent imagination'. This is the conclusion generally reached by all those who look upon writers as creators who somehow make poems in the way that God made the universe. The Muse who inspired Cowley's *Pindaric odes* (1668) is praised for having, like God, a 'thousand worlds' at her disposal:

Thou speak'st, great Queen, in the same style as He,
And a new world leaps forth when thou say'st, 'Let it be'.¹

If God is the Maker, then the poet becomes (said Shaftesbury) 'a second maker, a just Prometheus, under Jove' who 'like that sovereign artist or universal plastic Nature forms a whole, coherent and proportioned in itself'.² And what the second maker

makes is a second world, a heterocosm distinct from the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of man. We have inherited the Greek term 'heterocosm' ('other world') from the eighteenth-century German philosopher Baumgarten, who introduced it in his *Reflections on poetry* (1735).³ Whenever we read, we encounter literary examples of what another German philosopher, Leibniz, called 'possible worlds',⁴ each coherent and proportioned in itself. What should we call them?

If 'heterocosm' is accurate but awkward in English, none of the alternatives is entirely satisfactory. The term most commonly encountered is 'world', enclosed in inverted commas (or pronounced with an odd inflection) to indicate that we are not confusing the 'world' of Charles Dickens (nineteenth-century England) with the "'world'" of Dickens' novels. Despite its ambiguity the 'world' metaphor is attractive because so easily extendable, enabling us to talk about the moral climate of Frank Sargeson's stories or the topography of Ionescoland.⁵ 'Secondary worlds' is another possibility. This is the term used by Tolkien,⁶ who dissociates a primary world in which we eat and sleep and work from those secondary worlds produced by 'sub-creators' who have mastered the 'elvish craft' of fantasy; and Tolkien's term is adopted by W. H. Auden in a series of lectures published as *Secondary worlds* (London, 1969). 'Secondary worlds' seems to recollect the ancient definition of art as 'second nature': Cicero, for instance, explains how we may use our hands to 'bring into being within the realm of Nature a second nature for ourselves' (*De natura deorum*, II 60). Venerable as this usage may be, 'secondary' unfortunately implies second-best, a pejorative connotation avoided altogether by Middleton Murry's beautiful if somewhat cumbersome 'countries of the mind'.⁷ Other possibilities include 'mundo' (Wallace Stevens), 'private countries' (Lawrence Durrell) and 'anti-worlds' (Andrei Voznesensky).⁸ We use them when we want to describe places like the Forest of Arden or Prospero's island, Yeats's Byzantium or Lawrence's Etruria, places which often bear plausibly geographical names but have no geographical location.

The usefulness of talking about books in this way is challenged by P. N. Furbank who disapproves of what he calls 'thinking-in-"worlds"'.⁹ He points out that the unity we find in a book is the result of authorial decisions, and is therefore different in kind from that unity we claim for the world about us, which constitutes a whole merely by happening to be all there. Differences between

the selectiveness of heterocosms and the totality of the world make any comparison invidious: 'I feel distrustful of so many worlds being discovered or created', he complains, 'and suspect that entities are being multiplied needlessly' (p. 122). Yet anybody who follows Milton's advice and reads promiscuously will readily confess that a primary attraction of reading is the plurality and variety of literary worlds. Even if we were able to envisage (as E. M. Forster once invited us to do) all the great novelists sitting together in the British Museum writing their novels concurrently,¹⁰ we could hardly imagine them contributing to one another's novels. As Dorothy Walsh once observed, Dostoevsky's Underground Man could never turn up for tea at a Trollope parsonage:¹¹ for heterocosms are very much divided and distinguished worlds, to their credit and our delight. Nevertheless, Furbank's strictures are valuable in that they discourage glib talk about literary 'worlds'. Insisting, as he does, that the form of a book is radically different from the form of the world, and that the excellence of a book is dependent on the amount of reality it can ingest, Furbank clearly locates the points at which opinions divide. I propose, therefore, in probing more deeply into the nature of heterocosms, to pose his conclusions as questions, and to ask, in the first place, how we are able to say that a literary work has unity and form.

The sense of form

'Form' is fundamental to most definitions of art. A spatial concept, it can be applied literally to spatial media like painting or sculpture, where form is manifestly a visual or tactile experience. In a temporal medium like literature, on the other hand, 'form' can never be more than a metaphor, and this has led people to suppose that 'form' is a concept best approached through the psychology of perception: there is no objective 'form' in a literary work, but merely a subjective 'sense of form' or *Formgefühl*, as Wölfflin called it.¹² In that case, plays and novels have form because of our readiness to confer form upon them. We appear to be inveterately form-finding creatures like Tennyson, who (Carlyle told Emerson) was always 'carrying a bit of Chaos about with him' and 'manufacturing [it] into Cosmos'.¹³ If this seems a perfectly natural thing to do, it is worth bearing in mind that the construction of highly organised heterocosms may be peculiar to certain cultures and even to certain social classes within those

cultures. We are told, for example, that such practices are inimical to Islamic thought, which sees the world as being already complete and therefore incapable of being 'supplemented' by art.¹⁴ We are also warned that 'form' is ideologically suspect, and that one of the aims of Marxists is 'to liberate criticism from the magic spell of that liberal dogma which sees art as organising the "chaos" of reality, as imposing form on the formless, order on the amorphous'.¹⁵ For all that, it would be difficult to imagine a 'heterochaos': where, outside *Finnegans wake*, would one search for a 'chaosmos'?¹⁶ Moreover, we continue to create order even when evidence of disorder appears to be overwhelming. Henry Adams made this point strikingly when he remarked that the kinetic theory of gas proved that 'Chaos was the law of nature' whereas 'Order was the dream of man'.¹⁷ And as a dream, the dream of order cannot be destroyed by chaotic reality.

Comparable investigations of the problem in aesthetics result in George Boas's claim that 'the formless is usually that form for which we have no name'. 'Even a blot of ink', adds Boas, 'has the form of a blot'.¹⁸ So strong is our impulse to order that we may even delude ourselves into believing that we are uncovering some kind of hidden form or 'cryptomorph' in the books we study. The outcome is often an aesthetic version of what theologians call the Argument from Design, in so far as Boas's faith in the ultimate form of formlessness sounds not unlike that theory of the universe set out so memorably in Pope's *Essay on man* (1283ff):

All nature is but art, unknown to thee
All chance – direction, which thou canst not see
All discord – harmony, not understood. . .

and so forth. Wherever we see chaos, we are guaranteed to find cosmos, provided we take the trouble to look properly; in Dryden's words:

No atoms casually together hurled
Could e'er produce so beautiful a world.¹⁹

Art is often suspected of harbouring hidden order.²⁰ Even the most intractable of books may yield conclusions which parallel those recorded in William Paley's *Natural theology* (1802), whose title-page promises 'evidences of the existence and attributes of the deity collected from the appearances of nature'. Where design does not exist we feel obliged to invent it, and set about the task

as diligently as those early Christians who imposed a symbolic order on that heterogeneous collection of writings known to us as The Holy Bible. In the process, we may hope to emulate not William Paley but Luke Howard, who devised in 1803 a system for classifying cloud-formations still in use today, a system which gives us the illusion that the nebulous may yet contain discoverable forms, and not be forever at the mercy of form-finders and their impositions.

Not only critics but writers too are said to be characterised by a 'blessed rage for order', to quote a much-quoted phrase from Wallace Stevens' poem 'The idea of order at Key West'. For scientific validation of this rage for order we turn to Gestalt psychology, which developed in the early years of this century under the influence of Max Wertheimer. Gestalt psychologists claim that we have an innate preference for perceiving wholes as distinct from separate parts, and that our ability to apprehend individual parts is determined by whatever whole we see such parts as belonging to. Hence the law governing the so-called *phi phenomenon*, which is this: 'There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole.'²¹ Much of the evidence comes, of course, from experiments in visual perception; but theorists of literary form are likely to be particularly interested in the Gestalt principle of closure, as illustrated in the way we invariably 'see' a circle when confronted by a line which curves well beyond semi-circularity without actually achieving circularity. The fact that we all develop Gestalt vision as children indicates that we need some sort of mechanism for imposing order on disorder to avoid being overwhelmed by the chaos of experience. The blessed rage for order looks like an aesthetic version of our indomitable urge to make sense of things by interposing *Gestalten* between ourselves and the outside world. But it may not be as simple as that. When Hermann Rorschach invented his famous ink-blot, he had some difficulty in finding a sequence of blots sufficiently suggestive for his purposes: some ink-blot, unco-operative patients testified, look remarkably like ink-blot.²² Now this problem ought never to have arisen, for Rorschach's patients should have been able to interpret any blot whatsoever in terms of a suggested Gestalt, in the way that Botticelli did when he told Leonardo da Vinci that if you throw a sponge-full of paint at a wall the resultant blot will take the form of a landscape.²³ Yet one's sympathies go out to

those unimaginative people who failed their Rorschach test by insisting that blots are blots. What a relief it would be if critics of arcane masterpieces like Pound's *The cantos* were to display similar candour, instead of feeling obliged to write well-intentioned apologies which point to the existence of hitherto unsuspected clusters of images or thematic threads, in the expectation that revelations of such hidden order will improve *The cantos'* stature as poetry.

So universal is the assumption that art is linked indissolubly to order that theories of artistic disorder are relatively hard to come by. Controversy centres usually on whether 'form' is a quality inherent in literary works, or whether it is something projected on them by critics: are we talking about structures we perceive, or constructs we apperceive? Neither formulation questions the importance of order in what goes on when we read a poem or novel. Indeed there is little in the history of European literature to make us doubt the inevitability of art's alliance with order. Even the neoclassical cult of negligence, with its enthusiasm for the unbuttoned and the windblown, is only an elegant pretence at disorder (with order in vigilant attendance, like the clergy at a one-day Feast of Fools). One thinks of the 'sweet neglect' praised in Jonson's exquisite lyric, or of Herrick's 'Delight in disorder':

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles, in clothes, a wantonness.²⁴

It is easy to establish the consummate artistry of such artlessness. Pindaric odes are organised in such a way as to look disorganised, and we are not expected to regard eulogies of *beau désordre* as anything more serious than a calculated flirtation with chaos.

All this is far removed from the 'disorder' theories which currently command attention. One of these is documented at length by Morse Peckham in his book *Man's rage for chaos* (Philadelphia, 1965). Peckham believes it is not the function of the arts to bring us into perfect focus by offering intimations of a sublimely articulated orderliness, but rather to *disorientate* us. We arrive with preconceptions which works of art destroy. What looks to be ordered and beautiful is really a configuration of subversive elements which will detonate the moment we make contact with it. Art upsets us for our own good by destroying the complacency which accompanies ideas of order and control; its true value is therefore propaedeutic, for it prepares us for life. 'The very drive to order which qualifies man to deal successfully with

his environment', writes Peckham, 'disqualifies him when it is to his interest to correct his orientation' (p. xi). Upset by some new book, we have ample leisure in which to learn to cope with the new demands it makes on us; and the lesson will have been well learned when new demands are made on us in the course of our lives, for by then we shall have rehearsed the ritual of coping-by-adjustment. Peckham seems to assume, however, that all good art is radically disturbing. But this is a difficult thesis to defend in the case of writers outside the Romantic tradition – Joseph Addison, for instance, or Samuel Johnson – who wrote with a view to consolidating public opinion and preserving the status quo. Besides, as Peckham admits, there is no psychological verification for the theory of disorder he proposes. Jonathan Culler is therefore on much safer ground when, in claiming that the novels of Flaubert seek to disorder our expectations of coherence, he confines his attention to structures of meaning in the texts themselves.²⁵

The other disturbing theory which challenges traditional assumptions about the ordered nature of aesthetic experiences has come from what is known in electrical engineering as Information Theory. In Information Theory, a series of signals constitutes a message, and the information-content of such a message is measured by the degree of unpredictability of successive items. Should the signals occur in a purely random order, each will be unpredictable from what has gone before; in which case, each signal is said to give maximum information and to have maximum entropy. A telephone number has a higher Information-content than a *Hamlet* soliloquy, where predictability makes for a high degree of redundancy. And so it has come about that in the last twenty-five years or so aestheticians have had to confront what Rudolf Arnheim calls an appalling paradox: 'that complete disorder or chaos provides a maximum of information, whereas a completely organised pattern yields no information at all'.²⁶ By the same token, however, it may be an extremely fertile paradox in the imagination of anybody equipped to explore it, for the most striking feature of Information is its uninformativeness by ordinary standards. One way of reading Thomas Pynchon's novel *The crying of lot 49* (Philadelphia, 1966) is to treat it as a comedy of Information. Its heroine, Oedipa Maas, spends much of her time in trying to unriddle a mystery which may not even exist, and the book stops abruptly just as some sort of clarification is about to be offered. Oedipa tries to make sense of a welter of random

objects and incidents, but the more she encounters, the more she discovers to be encountered, and the less she finds out. In the ordinary sense of the word, she is deprived of information, and the novel is a compendium of redundancies; but as Information, none of these things is redundant, because Oedipa is caught up in the dimension of maximum entropy. What looks like disorder in the novel is rather what Arnheim would call a 'clash of unco-ordinated orders'.²⁷ *The crying of lot 49*, like that other masterpiece of disorder, *Tristram Shandy*,²⁸ opens up a new universe of discourse.

More often, however, it is the sillier side of randomness which is brought to our attention. George Macbeth's *Collected poems* (London, 1971) contains poems whose parts are designed like playing-cards, to be shuffled and dealt and then read in whatever order chance decrees. Works made up of loose-leaved pages refuse to commit themselves to the stability of a 'correct' order. The value of such random or 'aleatory' creations resides in their resistance to hierarchical ordering. As examples of Information they are very effective, for they maximise their entropy by evading predictability. Most of us, however, prefer information to Information, and derive satisfaction from the redundancies of more orthodox books.

Relationships to reality

Because we always compare what we read with what we know, we can hardly avoid comparing heterocosms with the world we live in. Our confused expectations of books and their authors are outlined neatly at the beginning of one of Wallace Stevens' poems, where an imaginative man confronts his public:

They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.'

The man replied, 'Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'²⁹

And so they are; and the people in Stevens' poem concede as much when they go on to ask, rather unreasonably, for 'A tune beyond us, yet ourselves' – for a literature which manages somehow to be 'like' life and at the same time to transcend it, a 'mundo' not entirely detached from our ordinary universe.

We soon recognise the existence of varying degrees of proximity

between heterocosms and the world. At one end of the scale we find purely imaginary places like Angria and Gondal, which the Brontë children dreamed up for their own amusement. At an opposite extreme we encounter Defoe's London or Joyce's Dublin, places described so vividly that one can trace events in the novel on a street-map, or make an Odyssey around Dublin on Bloomsday. So scrupulously specific was Joyce in evoking the Dublin of 1904 that he was careful to lodge Bloom and Molly at a house shown to be vacant in *Thom's Dublin directory* for that year.³⁰ The allurements of specificity are strong enough to encourage certain writers to take extraordinary care in delineating the topography of imaginary places, so much so as to render them mappable: places like Hardy's Wessex, for instance, or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Trollope's decision to make a map of his imaginary Barsetshire while writing *Framley Parsonage* (1861) would have met with the approval of Robert Louis Stevenson, who believed that factual errors in *The antiquary* (1816) and *Rob Roy* (1818) could have been avoided if Scott had taken the trouble to make maps and almanacs while writing them.³¹ So powerful is our desire to make the imagined look real that fiction often attracts cartographers, as J. B. Post reveals in his intriguing *Atlas of fantasy* (Baltimore, 1973). For always there is the possibility that the imagined, however fantastic, will turn out to be rooted in reality after all, like Homer's *Odyssey*, which is now read as an account of a sea-voyage anybody can repeat, despite the fact that as long ago as the third century BC Eratosthenes declared it a waste of time to go looking for the things Odysseus saw.³²

A heterocosm is the way it is as a result of an authorial decision to imitate life or transform it. The more familiar and popular aim is *mimesis*, or the representation of reality, which derives from Aristotle's *Poetics* and is disparaged in that ignoble analogy, *ars simia naturae*, art as the ape of nature.³³ Mirrors provide the basic conceptual model for mimetic approaches, enabling Hamlet to remind the players that the purpose of play-acting is 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature', or Stendhal to conceive of the novel as a mirror in the roadway.³⁴ The mirror-model, which permits us to say that art 'reflects' life, is rejected by people sensitive to the fact that reality cannot be represented in art without some distortion. When the conceptual model shifts from mirror to glass, art no longer reflects life but refracts it, offering us a 'deflection, not a reflection, of experience' (Erlich).³⁵ For all their differences, however, reflectivists share with refractivists the

same basic assumptions: firstly, that a real world already exists, containing real roads along which Stendhal can set up his mirror, and real toads which Marianne Moore can place in her imaginary gardens;³⁶ and secondly, that this real world is already formed before we begin to perceive it, and so well formed as to constitute an exemplary model for mimetic art.

This is why those who reject realistic *mimesis* direct attention away from the correspondence of art to reality, and focus instead on the imagination of the artist. 'A man's work must be the reflex of a living image in his own mind', writes Holman Hunt, 'and not the icy double of the facts themselves'; Baudelaire confesses in his *Éloge du maquillage* that he has no desire to assign to art 'the sterile function of imitating nature'.³⁷ Whistler should not be praised for his mimetic fidelity to Thames fogs, thought Wilde, but for having the imagination to 'invent' Thames fogs by creating an artistic awareness of them, thus proving the axiom that life imitates art far more than art imitates life ('The decay of lying').

Whenever writers are convinced that their true business is not so much to transcribe reality as to transcend it, *mimesis* is abandoned in favour of some form of meliorism. The idealised landscapes and figures depicted in Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590) or Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1598) are melioristic in this sense, and testify to a belief that art should not reflect but perfect life. Although obliged to begin with nature, the poet (Sidney explains in his *Defence of poesy*, 1595) will refuse to be 'enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts', preferring instead to range 'within the zodiac of his own wit'.³⁸ Confronted with a brazen world of reality, Sidneian writers manufacture a golden world of the imagination by salvaging the scattered and fragmented excellences of nature and recombining them into ideal wholes, thus creating a literature in which the Golden Age is restored, Paradise regained. 'The great design of the arts', wrote John Dennis in 1704, 'is to restore the decays that happened to human nature by the Fall.'³⁹ Support for such a poetics of perfectibility can always be solicited from Aristotle, who once declared that art must be superior to nature because it perfects it (*Politics*, 1255b); as Oscar Wilde would say, 'Nature has good intentions, of course, but... she cannot carry them out' ('The decay of lying'). Hence the importance recognised by Baudelaire of a decreative principle in the imagination which 'decomposes all creation, and with the materials... creates a new world'.⁴⁰

Baudelaire's own poetry illustrates very well that what is reconstituted after dismantlement need not be idealistic in Sidney's sense. Melioristic writers often feel that the ordinary world is not particularly interesting the way it is, and refuse to accept the view that the world is all that is the case. It is true that Wordsworth claimed to have had his imagination strengthened by 'natural objects', but William Blake found that 'natural objects always . . . weaken, deaden and obliterate imagination'. 'Imagination is my world', he proclaimed in his *Descriptive catalogue* (1809): 'this world of dross is beneath my notice.'⁴¹

Literary autarchies

Any writer who rejects both the realism of *is* and the idealism of *ought* is in a strong position to sever contact with reality and produce one of those seemingly self-contained heterocosms in which, as Hurd noted, experience has less to do than consistent imagination. They are said to be autonomous because subject only to laws of their own making, and autotelic in so far as they appear to exist for no other purpose than to be what they are. 'There neither exists nor *can* exist', writes Edgar Allan Poe, 'any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble than this very poem, this poem *per se*, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.'⁴² Such works are called autarchies, and are best explained by a master of autarchic fictions, Vladimir Nabokov: "'reality" is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average "reality" perceived by the communal eye'.⁴³ When literature achieves this degree of refinement, one can appreciate the momentous implications of heterocosmic theory. Some of these will have to be investigated more closely in subsequent chapters, but for the moment let us simply note the major points.⁴⁴

1. If a heterocosm need not necessarily correspond to the world we live in, it cannot be expected to observe whatever truth-standards happen to apply there. Whatever truth resides in a heterocosm is more likely to be truth-of-coherence than truth-of-correspondence.

2. Writers who believe their most important task is to establish internal coherence in their works are likely to believe in addition that their aesthetic responsibility towards such works must take priority over any moral considerations for the people who read