Metafiction

The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction

PATRICIA WAUGH

METHUEN
London and New York

NEW ACCENTS

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The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction

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General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change; to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

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I

What is metafiction and why are they saying such awful things about it?

What is metafiction?

> The thing is this.
> That of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best – I'm sure it is the most religious – for I begin with writing the first sentence – and trusting to Almighty God for the second.
>
> (Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, p. 438)

> Fuck all this lying look what I'm really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff . . .
>
> (B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, p. 163)

> Since I've started thinking about this story, I've gotten boils, piles, eye strain, stomach spasms, anxiety attacks. Finally I am consumed by the thought that at a certain point we all become nothing more than dying animals.
>
> (Ronald Sukenick, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, p. 49)

> I remember once we were out on the ranch shooting peccadillos (result of a meeting, on the plains of the West, of the collared peccary and the nine-banded armadillo).
>
> (Donald Barthelme, *City Life*, p. 4)

> Fiction is woven into all . . . I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid.
>
> (John Fowles, '*The French Lieutenant's Woman,* pp. 86–7)

If asked to point out the similarities amongst this disconcerting selection of quotations, most readers would immediately list two or three of the following: a celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing.

In compiling such a list, the reader would, in effect, be offering a brief description of the basic concerns and characteristics of the fiction which will be explored in this book. *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.

Most of the quotations are fairly contemporary. This is deliberate. Over the last twenty years, novelists have tended to become much more aware of the theoretical issues involved in constructing fictions. In consequence, their novels have tended to embody dimensions of self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty. What connects not only these quotations but also all of the very different writers whom one could refer to as broadly 'metafictional', is that they all explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction.

The term 'metafiction' itself seems to have originated in an essay by the American critic and self-conscious novelist William H. Gass (in Gass 1970). However, terms like 'metapolitics', 'metarhetoric' and 'metatheatre' are a reminder of what has been, since the 1960s, a more general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world. Metafiction pursues such questions through its formal self-exploration, drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book, but often recasting it in the terms of contemporary philosophical, linguistic or literary theory. If, as individuals, we now occupy 'roles' rather than 'selves', then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of 'reality' itself.

The present increased awareness of 'meta' levels of discourse and experience is partly a consequence of an increased social and cultural self-consciousness. Beyond this, however, it also reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality'. The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own 'meanings'. Its relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention. 'Meta' terms, therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers. In fiction they are required in order to explore the relationship between the world *of* the fiction and the world *outside* the fiction.

In a sense, metafiction rests on a version of the Heisenbergian uncertainty principle: an awareness that 'for the smallest building blocks of matter, every process of observation causes a major disturbance' (Heisenberg 1972, p. 126), and that it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed. However, the concerns of metafiction are even more complex than this. For while Heisenberg believed one could at least describe, if not a *picture* of nature, then a picture of one's *relation* to nature, metafiction shows the uncertainty even of this process. How is it possible to 'describe' anything? The metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be 'represented'. In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to 'represent' the *discourses* of that world. Yet, if one attempts to

analyse a set of linguistic relationships using those same relationships as the instruments of analysis, language soon becomes a 'prisonhouse' from which the possibility of escape is remote. Metafiction sets out to explore this dilemma.

The linguist L. Hjelmslev developed the term 'metalanguage' (Hjelmslev 1961). He defined it as a language which, instead of referring to non-linguistic events, situations or objects in the world, refers to *another* language: it is a language which takes another language as its object. Saussure's distinction between the signifier and the signified is relevant here. The signifier is the sound-image of the word or its shape on the page; the signified is the concept evoked by the word. A metalanguage is a language that functions as a signifier to *another language*, and this other language thus becomes its signified.[1]

In novelistic practice, this results in writing which consistently displays its conventionality, which explicity and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice, and which thereby explores the problematic relationship between life and fiction – both the fact that 'all the world is not of course a stage' and 'the crucial ways in which it isn't' (Goffman 1974, p. 53). The 'other' language may be either the registers of everyday discourse or, more usually, the 'language' of the literary system itself, including the conventions of the novel as a whole or particular forms of that genre.

Metafiction may concern itself, then, with particular conventions of the novel, to display the process of their construction (for example, John Fowles's use of the 'omniscient author' convention in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). It may, often in the form of parody, comment on a specific work or fictional mode (for example, John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971), which retells, and thus comments on, the *Beowulf* story from the point of view of the monster; or John Hawkes's *The Lime Twig* (1961), which constitutes both an example and a critique of the popular thriller. Less centrally metafictional, but still displaying 'meta' features, are fictions like Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967). Such novels attempt to create alternative linguistic structures or fictions which merely *imply* the old forms by encouraging the reader to draw on his or her knowledge of traditional literary conventions when struggling to construct a meaning for the new text.

Metafiction and the novel tradition

I would argue that metafictional practice has become particularly prominent in the fiction of the last twenty years. However, to draw exclusively on contemporary fiction would be misleading, for, although the *term* 'metafiction' might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself. What I hope to establish during the course of this book is that metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels. This form of fiction is worth studying not only because of its contemporary emergence but also because of the insights it offers into both the representational nature of all fiction and the literary history of the novel as genre. By studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity.

Certainly more scholarly ink has been spilt over attempts to define the novel than perhaps for any other literary genre. The novel notoriously defies definition. Its instability in this respect is part of its 'definition': the language of fiction appears to spill over into, and merge with, the instabilities of the real world, in a way that a five-act tragedy or a fourteen-line sonnet clearly does not. Metafiction flaunts and exaggerates and thus exposes the foundations of this instability: the fact that novels are constructed through a continuous assimilation of everyday historical forms of communication. There is no one privileged 'language of fiction'. There are the languages of memoirs, journals, diaries, histories, conversational registers, legal records, journalism, documentary. These languages compete for privilege. They question and relativize each other to such an extent that the 'language of fiction' is always, if often covertly, self-conscious.

Mikhail Bakhtin has referred to this process of relativization as the 'dialogic' potential of the novel. Metafiction simply makes this potential explicit and in so doing foregrounds the essential mode of all fictional language. Bakhtin defines as overtly 'dialogic' those novels that introduce a 'semantic direction into the word which is diametrically opposed to its original direction. . . . the word becomes the arena of conflict between two voices' (Bakhtin 1973, p. 106). In fact, given its close relation to everyday forms of discourse, the language of fiction is

always to some extent dialogic. The novel assimilates a variety of discourses (representations of speech, forms of narrative) – discourses that *always* to some extent question and relativize each other's authority. Realism, often regarded as the classic fictional mode, paradoxically functions by suppressing this dialogue. The conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved in realistic fiction through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author. Novels which Bakhtin refers to as 'dialogic' resist such resolution. Metafiction *displays* and *rejoices in* the impossibility of such a resolution and thus clearly reveals the basic identity of the novel as genre.

Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'.

Although this oppositional process is to some extent present in all fiction, and particularly likely to emerge during 'crisis' periods in the literary history of the genre (see Chapter 3), its prominence in the contemporary novel is unique. The historical period we are living through has been singularly uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic. Contemporary fiction clearly reflects this dissatisfaction with, and breakdown of, traditional values. Previously, as in the case of nineteenth-century realism, the forms of fiction derived from a firm belief in a commonly experienced, objectively existing world of history. Modernist fiction, written in the earlier part of this century, responded to the initial loss of belief in such a world. Novels like Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) signalled the first widespread, overt emergence in the novel of a sense of fictitiousness: 'a sense that any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspectives, fictions, that is, in an epistemological, not merely in the conventional literary, sense' (Pfeifer 1978, p. 61).

Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more and more novelists have come to question and reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality (the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient author, the rational connection between what characters 'do' and what they 'are', the causal connection between 'surface' details and the 'deep', 'scientific laws' of existence).

Why are they saying such awful things about it?

This rejection has inevitably entailed, however, a good deal of writerly and critical confusion. There has been paranoia, on the part of both novelists *and* critics for whom the exhaustion and rejection of realism is synonymous with the exhaustion and rejection of the novel itself. Thus B. S. Johnson bursts into (or out of?) *Albert Angelo* (1964) with the words which preface this chapter, 'Fuck all this lying'. His comment serves in the novel as much to voice a paranoid fear that his audience will misinterpret his fiction by reading it according to expectations based on the tradition of the realistic novel, as to demonstrate the artificiality of fictional form through a controlled metafictional discourse. At the end of the book he asserts:

> a page is an area on which I place my signs I consider to communicate most clearly what I have to convey . . . therefore I employ within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks or to refuse to take them seriously is crassly to miss the point.
>
> (*Albert Angelo*, p. 176)

It reads rather like an anticipation of a hostile review. A similar defensiveness about the role of the novelist appears in Donald Barthelme's obsession with *dreck*, the detritus of modern civilization.[2] It is expressed through John Barth's characters who – as much in the style of Sartre as in that of Sterne – 'die, telling themselves stories in the dark', desperately attempting to construct identities which can only dissolve into metalingual mutterings (*Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), p. 95). Extreme defensive strategies are common. Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) is written to express the sense of absurdity produced by its author's paradoxical realization that 'I have no culture', and that 'I can't live without a culture anymore'; p. 15). Attempts at precise linguistic description continually break down. Crude diagrams replace language in order to express the poverty of the 'culture' which is available through representations of 'assholes', 'underpants' and 'beefburgers'.

The strategy of this novel is to invert the science-fiction convention whereby humans are depicted attempting to comprehend the processes of an alien world. Here, contemporary American society *is* the 'alien world'. Vonnegut defamiliarizes the world that his readers take for granted, through the technique of employing an ex-Earthling narrator who is now living on a different planet and has set out to 'explain' Earth to his fellow inhabitants. The defamiliarization has more than a satiric function, however. It reveals Vonnegut's own despairing recognition of the sheer impossibility of providing a critique of commonly accepted cultural forms of representation, from *within* those very modes of representation.

What is the novelist to do? Here the 'naïve' narrative voice, apparently oblivious of all our liberal value-systems and moral codes, reveals through its defamiliarizing effect their often *illiberal* and *amoral* assumptions and consequences. Beneath the fooling with representations of cows as beefburgers, however, lurks a desperate sense of the possible redundancy and irrelevance of the artist, so apparent in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Indeed, Philip Roth, the American novelist, has written:

> The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents.
>
> (Quoted in Bradbury 1977, p. 34)

In turning away from 'reality', however, and back to a re-examination of fictional form, novelists have discovered a surprising way out of their dilemmas and paranoia. Metafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems. The paranoia that permeates the metafictional writing of the sixties and seventies is therefore slowly giving way to celebration, to the discovery of new forms of the fantastic, fabulatory extravaganzas, magic realism (Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Clive Sinclair, Graham Swift, D. M. Thomas, John Irving). Novelists and critics alike have come to realize that a moment of crisis can also be seen as a moment of recognition: recognition that, although the assumptions about the novel based on an extension of a nineteenth-century realist view of the world may no longer be viable, the novel itself is positively flourishing.

Despite this renewed optimism, however, it is still the case that the uncertain, self-reflexive nature of experimental metafiction will leave it open to critical attacks. Yet metafiction is simply flaunting what is true of *all* novels: their 'outstanding freedom to choose' (Fowles 1971, p. 46). It is this instability, openness and flexibility which has allowed the novel remarkably to survive and adapt to social change for the last 300 years. In the face of the political, cultural and technological upheavals in society since the Second World War, however, its lack of a fixed identity has now left the novel vulnerable.

Hence critics have discussed the 'crisis of the novel' and the 'death of the novel'. Instead of recognizing the *positive* aspects of fictional self-consciousness, they have tended to see such literary behaviour as a form of the self-indulgence and decadence characteristic of the exhaustion of any artistic form or genre.

Could it not be argued instead that metafictional writers, highly conscious of the problems of artistic legitimacy, simply sensed a need for the novel to theorize about itself? Only in this way might the genre establish an identity and validity within a culture apparently hostile to its printed, linear narrative and conventional assumptions about 'plot', 'character', 'authority' and 'representation'. The traditional fictional quest has thus been transformed into a quest for fictionality.

Metafiction and the contemporary avant-garde

This search has been further motivated by novelists' responses to another feature of contemporary cultural life: the absence of a clearly defined avant-garde 'movement'. The existence of an unprecedented cultural pluralism has meant that post-modernist writers are not confronted with the same clear-cut oppositions as modernist writers were. An innovation in a literary form cannot establish itself as a new direction unless a sense of shared aims and objectives develops among experimental writers. This has been slow to take shape in recent years. An argument originally advanced by Lionel Trilling in *Beyond Culture* (Trilling 1966) and reiterated by Gerald Graff has suggested one reason for this: that the unmasking of the 'hypocritical bourgeois belief in the material and moral progress of civilization' (Graff 1975, p. 308) has been so thoroughly accomplished by modernism that the creative tension produced by opposing this 'bourgeois belief' is no longer clearly available the novelist.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, the individual is always finally integrated into the social structure (usually through family relationships, marriage, birth or the ultimate dissolution of death). In modernist fiction the struggle for personal autonomy can be continued only through *opposition* to existing social institutions and conventions. This struggle necessarily involves individual alienation and often ends with mental dissolution. The power structures of *contemporary* society are, however, more diverse and more effectively concealed or mystified, creating greater problems for the post-modernist

novelist in identifying and then representing the object of 'opposition'.

Metafictional writers have found a solution to this by turning inwards to their own medium of expression, in order to examine the relationship between fictional form and social reality. They have come to focus on the notion that 'everyday' language endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently 'innocent' representations. The literary-fictional equivalent of this 'everyday' language of 'common sense' is the language of the traditional novel: the conventions of realism. Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly 'objective' facts in the 'real' world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality.

The metafictional novel thus situates its resistance *within* the form of the novel itself. Saussure distinguished between *langue* and *parole*: between the language system (a set of rules) and any act of individual utterance that takes place within this system. Each metafictional novel self-consciously sets its individual *parole* against the *langue* (the codes and conventions) of the novel tradition. Ostentatiously 'literary' language and conventions are paraded, are set against the fragments of various cultural codes, not because there is nothing left to talk about, but because the formal structures of these literary conventions provide a statement about the dissociation between, on the one hand, the genuinely felt sense of crisis, alienation and oppression in contemporary society and, on the other, the continuance of traditional literary forms like realism which are no longer adequate vehicles for the mediation of this experience. Metafiction thus converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism. It suggests, in fact, that there may be as much to be learnt from setting the mirror of art up to its own linguistic or representational structures as from directly setting it up to a hypothetical 'human nature' that somehow exists as an essence outside historical systems of articulation.

The problem facing writers who attempt authentically to represent conditions of rapid social change is that they may

themselves produce works of art which are ephemeral and even trivial. In the present situation 'even a single work will be sufficient grounds for declaring a style finished, exhausted' (Rochberg 1971, p. 73). The practitioners of so-called 'aleatory art' (which attempts to be totally random in order to suggest the chaotic, frenetic and colliding surfaces of contemporary technological society) are open to these charges. Literary texts tend to function by preserving a balance between the unfamiliar (the innovatory) and the familiar (the conventional or traditional). Both are necessary because some degree of redundancy is essential for any message to be committed to memory. Redundancy is provided for in literary texts through the presence of familiar conventions. Experimental fiction of the aleatory variety eschews such redundancy by simply ignoring the conventions of literary tradition. Such texts set out to resist the normal processes of reading, memory and understanding, but without redundancy, texts are read and forgotten. They cannot unite to form a literary 'movement' because they exist only at the moment of reading.

The metafictional response to the problem of how to represent impermanence and a sense of chaos, in the permanent and ordered terms of literature, has had a much more significant influence on the development of the novel as genre. Aleatory writing might imitate the experience of living in the contemporary world, but it fails to offer any of the comfort traditionally supplied by literary fiction through a 'sense of an ending' (Kermode 1966). Metafiction, however, offers both innovation *and* familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions.

Aleatory writing simply responds with a reply in kind to the pluralistic, hyperactive multiplicity of styles that constitute the surfaces of present-day culture. What is mainly asserted in such novels is an anarchic individualism, a randomness designed to represent an avoidance of social control by stressing the impossibility of easily categorizing it or assimilating the reader to familiar structures of communication. An argument sometimes proposed to justify the strategies of such fictions is that they are 'radical' because they rupture the conventional linguistic contracts that certify and/or disguise orthodox social practices (as

realism, for example, certifies concepts like 'eternal human nature' or the assumption that authority as manifested through the omniscient author is somehow free of both gender distinctions and of historically constructed and provisional moral values). Such novels supposedly expose the way in which these social practices are constructed through the language of oppressive ideologies, by refusing to allow the reader the role of passive consumer or any means of arriving at a 'total' interpretation of the text.

Although it is true that much of this should undoubtedly be the task of experimental fiction, it does seem questionable whether, for many readers, so-called 'aleatory writing' is going to accomplish all of this. Novels like John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), though apparently less 'radical', are in the long run likely to be more successful. Both are metafictional novels in that they employ parody self-consciously. Both take as their 'object' languages the structures of nineteenth-century realism and of historical romance or of fairy-tales. The parody of these 'languages' functions to defamiliarize such structures by setting up various counter-techniques to undermine the authority of the omniscient author, of the closure of the 'final' ending, of the definitive interpretation. Although the reader is thereby distanced from the language, the literary conventions and, ultimately, from conventional ideologies, the defamiliarization proceeds from an extremely familiar base. Such novels can thus initially be comprehended through the old structures, and can therefore be enjoyed and remain in the consciousness of a wide readership which is given a far more active role in the construction of the 'meaning' of the text than is provided either in contemporary realist novels or in novels which convert their readers into frenetic human word-processors, and which 'last' only as long as it takes to read them.

The mirror up to art: metafiction and its varieties

It remains, within this introductory chapter, briefly to examine some alternative definitions of self-conscious writing. These similar modes have been variously termed 'the introverted

novel', 'the anti-novel', 'irrealism', 'surfiction', 'the self-begetting novel', 'fabulation'.[3] All, like 'metafiction', imply a fiction that self-consciously reflects upon its own structure as language; all offer different perspectives on the same process. But the terms shift the emphasis in different ways. The 'self-begetting novel', for example, is described as an 'account usually first person, of the development of a character to a point at which he is able to take up and compose the novel we have just finished reading' (Kellman 1976, p. 1245). The emphasis is on the development of the narrator, on the modernist concern of *consciousness* rather than the post-modernist one of *fictionality* (as in, for example, André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (1925)).

The entry of the narrator into the text is also a defining feature of what has been called 'surfiction'. Raymond Federman's book of that name discusses the mode in terms of overt narratorial intrusion so that, as in the 'self-begetting novel', the focus appears to be on the ironist him/herself rather than on the overt and covert levels of the ironic text. Telling as individual invention, spontaneous fabrication at the expense of external reality or literary tradition, is emphasized rather than what has been stressed above: metafiction's continuous involvement in – and mediation of – reality through linguistic structures and pre-existent texts.

As defined here, of course, metafictional writing may include all or some of the strategies that critics have discussed in the terms that have been mentioned. Different categories, in fact, often compete for the same fictional texts: John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) is clearly 'self-begetting', 'surfictional' *and* 'metafictional'. As I have argued, metafiction is not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency *within* the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion. Metafiction thus expresses overtly what William H. Gass has argued is the dilemma of all art:

> In every art two contradictory impulses are in a state of Manichean war: the impulse to communicate and so to treat the medium of communication as a means and the impulse to make an artefact out of the materials and so to treat the medium as an end. (Gass 1970)

The expression of this tension is present in much contemporary writing but it is the *dominant* function in the texts defined here as metafictional.

The metafictions of Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov illustrate this point. In some of their work – Borges' *Labyrinths* (1964) and Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), for example – fiction *explicitly* masquerades as formalized critical interpretation. In all their work, however, as in all other metafiction, there is a more complex *implicit* interdependence of levels than this. The reader is always presented with embedded strata which contradict the presuppositions of the strata immediately above or below. The fictional *content* of the story is continually reflected by its *formal* existence as text, and the existence of that text within a world viewed in terms of 'textuality'. Brian McHale has suggested that such contradictions are essentially *ontological* (posing questions about the nature and existence of reality) and are therefore characteristically post-modernist. He sees as modernist those *epistemological* contradictions which question how we can know a reality whose existence is finally not in doubt (McHale, forthcoming).

Borges' imaginary kingdom Tlön, discovered by the 'fortunate conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopaedia', is a post-modernist world. It is twice a fiction because it is suggested that, before its invention by Borges, it has already been invented by a secret society of idealists including Bishop Berkeley, and both, of course, are finally dependent upon the conventions of the short story (*Labyrinths*, p. 27). The fact that this 'imaginary' world can take over the 'real' one emphasizes more than the *epistemological* uncertainty of both of them (which would be the aim of the 'self-begetting novel'). 'Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius', the story, is about a story that invents an imaginary world, and it primarily and self-consciously *is* a story which, like all stories, invents an imaginary world. It implies that human beings can only ever achieve a metaphor for reality, another layer of 'interpretation'. (Borges' story 'Funes the Memorias' (1964) shows that this need not be cause for despair, for if indeed we

could not create these metaphorical images then we would all surely become insane.)

Metafictional novels (unlike 'surfiction' or 'the self-begetting novel') thus reject the traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination fabricating, through an ultimately monologic discourse, structures of order which will replace the forgotten material text of the world. They show not only that the 'author' is a concept produced through previous and existing literary and social texts but that what is generally taken to be 'reality' is also constructed and mediated in a similar fashion. 'Reality' is to this extent 'fictional' and can be understood through an appropriate 'reading' process.

Also rejected is the displacement of 'historical man' by 'structural man' advocated by Robert Scholes as the basis of what he calls 'fabulation' (Scholes 1975). David Lodge has pointed out that 'history may be in a philosophical sense, a fiction, but it does not feel like that when we miss a train or somebody starts a war'.[4] As novel readers, we look to fiction to offer us cognitive functions, to locate us within everyday as well as within philosophical paradigms, to explain the historical world as well as offer some formal comfort and certainty. Scholes argues that the empirical has lost all validity and that a collusion between the philosophic and the mythic in the form of 'ethically controlled fantasy' is the only authentic mode for fiction (Scholes 1967, p. 11). However, metafiction offers the recognition, not that the everyday has ceased to matter, but that its formulation through social and cultural codes brings it closer to the philosophical and mythic than was once assumed.

A brief comparison of two self-conscious novels, one obviously 'metafictional', the other more obviously 'fabulatory', shows how metafiction explores the concept of fictionality through an opposition between the construction and the breaking of illusion, while fabulation reveals instead what Christine Brooke-Rose (1980) has referred to as a reduced tension between technique and counter-technique: a 'stylization' which enables other voices to be *assimilated*, rather than presenting a conflict of voices.

Muriel Spark's *metafictional* novels lay bare the process of imposing form upon contingent matter through the discursive

organization of 'plot'. She can, however, as David Lodge has said of Joyce, afford her metaphoric flights because of the stability of her metonymic base (Lodge 1977a, p. 111). She uses her 'flights', in fact, to comment on the very paradigms that they are in the process of constructing (this embedding of strata, of course, being fundamental to metafiction). In *Not to Disturb* (1971), for example, this highly obtrusive simile describes a storm:

> Meanwhile the lightning which strikes the clump of elms so that the two friends huddled there are killed instantly without pain, zigzags across the lawns, illuminating the lily-pond and the sunken rose garden like a self-stricken flash photographer, and like a zip-fastener ripped from its garment by a sexual maniac.
>
> (p. 86)

This appears to be a piece of highly stylized descriptive prose marked particularly by the appearance of extremely bizarre metaphors. To this extent it is very similar to Richard Brautigan's *fabulatory* novel, *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), which is full of similar metaphorical constructions where the extreme polarity of vehicle and tenor implicitly reminds the reader of the way in which metaphor constructs an image of reality by connecting apparently quite disparate objects. In this novel, for example, trout are described waiting in streams 'like airplane tickets' (p. 78), and the reader's imagination is stretched throughout by the incongruity of the comparisons. The novel is a celebration of the creative imagination: it is a 'fabulation'.

In the Spark example, however, there is a further, more subtle function that is part of a sustained metafictional display; for the vehicle of the metaphor is explicitly related to what is happening at the contiguously unfolding level of the story. A group of entrepreneurial and enterprising servants have arranged the filming of the last moments of an eternal triangle of superannuated aristocrats. The servants know their masters are going to die and also know how to capitalize on their deaths. Aristocratic scandals provide excellent material for media sensationalism. The photographer and the zip fastener (which the mentally deficient aristocratic son is continually attempting to

rip off in the excitement of his intermittent sexual energy) are important elements in the plot being constructed by the novelist (who also, as in the example, arranges appropriate climatic conditions) and, of course, by the characters. The reader is alerted to the way in which the explicitly artificial construction of these connections fits in with the larger designs of the novelist playing God. The elements at the metaphorical level of the construction break down not into 'natural' or randomly chosen components, but to another level of artifice: the level of the 'plot'. The reader is thus reminded that pure contingency in novels is always an illusion, although the lowest level of the artifice (what the Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky has referred to as realistic motivation; see Lemon and Reis 1965, pp. 61–99) is assumed to be reality. Thus not only do the characters in this novel play roles, 'fictionalize' in terms of the *content* of the plot; they too are 'fictionalized', created, through the *formal construction* of the plot.

Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them. Very often realistic conventions supply the 'control' in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves. More obviously, of course, this allows for a stable level of readerly familiarity, without which the ensuing dislocations might be either totally meaningless or so outside the normal modes of literary or non-literary communication that they cannot be committed to memory (the problem, already discussed, of much contemporary 'aleatory' writing). Metafiction, then, does not abandon 'the real world' for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'.

'Metafiction' is thus an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions. There are those novels at one end of the spectrum which take fictionality as a theme to be explored (and in this sense would include the 'self-begetting novel'), as in the

work of Iris Murdoch or Jerzy Kosinski, whose formal self-consciousness is limited. At the centre of this spectrum are those texts that manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or 'naturalized' and given a total interpretation (which constitute, therefore, a 'new realism'), as in the work of John Fowles or E. L. Doctorow. Finally, at the furthest extreme (which would include 'fabulation') can be placed those fictions that, in rejecting realism more thoroughly, posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions, as in the work of Gilbert Sorrentino, Raymond Federman or Christine Brooke-Rose.

Much British fiction fits into the first half of the spectrum, though problematically, and much American fiction into the other half, though with the same proviso. The novelist at either end, however – in confronting the problem that, 'whether or not he makes peace with realism, he must somehow cope with reality' (Dickinson 1975, p. 372) – has acknowledged the fact that this 'reality' is no longer the one mediated by nineteenth-century novelists and experienced by nineteenth-century readers. Indeed, it could be argued that, far from 'dying', the novel has reached a mature recognition of its existence as *writing*, which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized.

2

Literary self-consciousness: developments

Modernism and post-modernism: the redefinition of self-consciousness

Metafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism. The metafictional writer John Barth has expressed a common feeling about the term 'post-modernism' as 'awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anticlimactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow' (Barth 1980, p. 66). Post-modernism can be seen to exhibit the same sense of crisis and loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order as that which prompted modernism. Both affirm the constructive powers of the mind in the face of apparent phenomenal chaos. Modernist self-consciousness, however, though it may draw attention to the aesthetic construction of the text, does *not* 'systematically flaunt its own condition of artifice' (Alter 1975a, p. x) in the manner of contemporary metafiction.

Modernism only occasionally displays features typical of post-modernism: the over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator (as in Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969)); ostentatious typographic experiment (B. S. Johnson's *Travelling People* (1963), Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971)); explicit dramatization of the