

METAFICTION

Edited and Introduced by

MARK CURRIE



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Metafiction

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General Editors' Preface

The outlines of contemporary critical theory are now often taught as a standard feature of a degree in literary studies. The development of particular theories has seen a thorough transformation of literary criticism. For example, Marxist and Foucauldian theories have revolutionised Shakespeare studies, and 'deconstruction' has led to a complete reassessment of Romantic poetry. Feminist criticism has left scarcely any period of literature unaffected by its searching critiques. Teachers of literary studies can no longer fall back on a standardised, received, methodology.

Lecturers and teachers are now urgently looking for guidance in a rapidly changing critical environment. They need help in understanding the latest revisions in literary theory, and especially in grasping the practical effects of the new theories in the form of theoretically sensitised new readings. A number of volumes in the series anthologise important essays on particular theories. However, in order to grasp the full implications and possible uses of particular theories it is essential to see them put to work. This series provides substantial volumes of new readings, presented in an accessible form and with a significant amount of editorial guidance.

Each volume includes a substantial introduction which explores the theoretical issues and conflicts embodied in the essays selected and locates areas of disagreement between positions. The pluralism of theories has to be put on the agenda of literary studies. We can no longer pretend that we all tacitly accept the same practices in literary studies. Neither is a *laissez-faire* attitude any longer tenable. Literature departments need to go beyond the mere toleration of theoretical differences: it is not enough merely to agree to differ; they need actually to 'stage' the differences openly. The volumes in this series all attempt to dramatise the differences, not necessarily with a view to resolving them but in order to foreground the choices presented by different theories or to argue for a particular route through the impasses the differences present.

The theory 'revolution' has had real effects. It has loosened the grip of traditional empiricist and romantic assumptions about language and literature. It is not always clear what is being proposed as the new agenda for literary studies, and indeed the very notion of 'literature' is questioned

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by the post-structuralist strain in theory. However, the uncertainties and obscurities of contemporary theories appear much less worrying when we see what the best critics have been able to do with them in practice. This series aims to disseminate the best of recent criticism and to show that it is possible to re-read the canonical texts of literature in new and challenging ways.

RAMAN SELDEN AND STAN SMITH

The Publishers and fellow Series Editor regret to record that Raman Selden died after a short illness in May 1991 at the age of fifty-three. Ray Selden was a fine scholar and a lovely man. All those he has worked with will remember him with much affection and respect.

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Introduction

Definitions and Marginal Cases

The first use of the term 'Metafiction' is attributed to William Gass in the late 1960s, who wanted to describe recent fictions that were somehow about fiction itself. As it was defined in the 1970s, metafiction was fiction with self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-knowledge, ironic self-distance. But this conception of metafiction has raised problems which compel a definition with a different emphasis. First, the idea of self-consciousness is strangely inconsistent with most postmodern literary theories which would attribute neither selfhood nor consciousness to an author, let alone a work of fiction. Second, there is a vertiginous illogicality about 'self-consciousness': that something which is defined by its self-consciousness must surely be conscious of its own definitive characteristic. It is not enough that metafiction knows that it is fiction; it must also know that it is metafiction if its self-knowledge is adequate, and so on in an infinite logical regress. Can it then be meaningful to say that metafiction is conscious of itself?

A third problem rises in the gap between a relatively new term and the well-established literary characteristics it describes. 'Metafiction' might have consolidated its place in the critical lexis as a descriptor of postmodern fictional preoccupations, but few commentators have proposed the absolute novelty of literary self-consciousness. The problem here is not merely that metafictional characteristics can be found throughout the prehistory of postmodernism. There is also something about postmodern fiction, the deep involvement with its own past, the constant dialogue with its own conventions, which projects any self-analysis backwards in time. Novels which reflect upon themselves in the postmodern age act in a sense as commentaries on their antecedents. 'Self-consciousness' is neither new nor meaningfully 'self' consciousness, since the metafiction refers to fictions other than itself, in its own history. The relationship between a critical term and its literary object becomes profoundly confused because the literary object itself performs a critical function. The definition of 'metafiction' as fictional self-consciousness does not acknowledge this complexity, and my continued use of the notion of self-consciousness here carries such problems within it.

This volume begins from the definition of metafiction as a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject. Far from being some marginal no-man's-land, this definition gives metafiction a central importance in the projects of literary modernity, postmodernity and theory which have taken this borderline as a primary source of energy. The borderline between fiction and criticism has been a point of convergence where fiction and criticism have assimilated each other's insights, producing a self-conscious energy on both sides. For criticism this has meant an affirmation of literariness in its own language, an increased awareness of the extent to which critical insights are formulated within fiction, and a tendency towards immanence of critical approach which questions the ability of critical language to refer objectively and authoritatively to the literary text. For fiction it has meant the assimilation of critical perspective within fictional narrative, a self-consciousness of the artificiality of its constructions and a fixation with the relationship between language and the world. The reciprocity of this relationship indicates that metafiction is only half, the fictional half, of a process of challenging the boundary between fiction and criticism, and therefore that its explanation requires that it be articulated across the boundary, connecting it to the self-consciousness of criticism. The rationale of this volume is therefore one of contextualising metafiction in its relation to metacriticism, or to open out the idea of self-consciousness to accommodate criticism as well as fiction.

The critical self-consciousness of metafiction once seemed to announce the death of the novel, appeared to be a decadent response to its exhausted possibilities, but now seems like an unlimited vitality: what was once thought introspective and self-referential is in fact outward-looking. John Updike recently described self-consciousness, in another context, as a 'mode of interestedness which ultimately turns outwards'. This was certainly the fate of self-consciousness in literary narrative the implications of which extended far beyond the boundaries of fiction. If narrative self-consciousness found its first extended expression in the so-called high culture of literary modernism, it soon flowed outwards into the more demotic realms of film, television, comic strips and advertising. If this self-consciousness ever seemed pertinent only to the logic of artifice, similar insights eventually took hold beyond the domain of art, on modes of historical and scientific explanation, and indeed on representation and language in general. Only in a few cases could this be considered an outward flow from metafiction, since self-consciousness must in a sense arise from within each specific discourse; but such ubiquity makes it impossible to see metafictional self-consciousness as an isolated and introspective obsession within literature.

To focus the issue of self-consciousness on the boundary between fiction

and criticism is to acknowledge the strong reciprocal influence between discourses which seem increasingly inseparable. A simple explanation of this inseparability would be that the roles of writer and critic are often fulfilled by the same person. On the one hand, novelists often depend financially or intellectually on employment as critics, so that the writers of fiction are also, for example, the reviewers who assess fiction for newspaper readers. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly for metafiction, academic literary critics have been increasingly successful as novelists, leading to a high level of critical awareness within their fictional productions. In many cases this awareness has been much more tangible than implicit expertise, especially in novels which take academic literary criticism as their subject matter. In this latest version of the novel of ideas, the practices and perspectives of modern literary theory have been disseminated, more widely than they would otherwise, in the novel form as a kind of in-built self-referentiality. In both cases the writer/critic is an inhabitant of Literatureland, the place where texts and acts of interpretation constitute the world of experience which the novelist, knowingly or unknowingly, represents. We have so many novels about Literatureland because novelists are so often not the integrated participants in the world that they would like to be and Literatureland – writing and reading – is both the realm of their expertise and the texture of their experience. The writer/critic is thus a dialectical figure, embodying both the production and reception of fiction in the roles of author and reader in a way that is paradigmatic for metafiction.

Writer/critics personify the boundary between fiction and criticism, and accordingly have a key role in this volume. But the personification of the boundary is of biographical explanatory value without in itself being metafictional. A metafiction is not definitively a novel whose author is both a writer and a critic, but a novel which dramatises the boundary between fiction and criticism, and to unify metafiction under this definition requires a rather loose interpretation of 'criticism'. A typology of metafiction has to acknowledge a difference between a novel like Lodge's *Small World*, which takes the world of professional literary criticism as its fictional object without explicitly highlighting the artificiality of the fictional process, and one like Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* which highlights the artificiality of its construction without reference to literary criticism. In the former, the academic 'criticism' within the novel evokes implicitly the critical judgements that will be made of the novel. In the latter, an intrusive authorial voice appropriates in self-commentary a less academic critical perspective attributed to a reader who exists within the novel only as an addressee. In one sense Lodge's novel dramatises the critic more explicitly than Fowles's, and in another it allows the critic no explicit self-conscious or illusion-breaking dramatic function. If Lodge's device seems pertinent to the boundary between fiction and criticism,

Fowles's does so only by articulating a critical perspective on the boundary between art and life.

This difference illustrates an important preliminary distinction in the way that metafiction dramatises the boundary between fiction and criticism, either as illusion-breaking authorial intervention or as integrated dramatisation of the external communication between author and reader. In both cases it is often through an internal boundary between art and life that the novel develops the self-commentary that gives it critical self-consciousness. This is where the definition of metafiction as the dramatisation of the fiction/criticism boundary allows for marginal cases. One such marginal case would be a novel like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where Marlowe is a dramatised narrator, a kind of surrogate author grappling with his ability as a storyteller and with the ability of words to communicate his experience. At the same time, Marlowe is a surrogate reader trying, as protagonist of the narrated journey to make sense of events and to interpret its significance in a manner analogous to that of the external reader. The external readership is given further surrogate representation in the form of Marlowe's audience, his fellow sailors who listen to the narration from within the boundaries of the fiction yet alongside the external readership. This internal dramatisation of the external relationship between Conrad and his readership allows complex articulations of self-consciousness and metafictional appropriations of readers' responses. But surrogate authors and readers are endemic in fiction. To see the dramatised narrator or novelist as metanarrative devices is to interpret a substantial proportion of fiction as metafiction. As Umberto Eco has pointed out the surrogate reader is as common in fiction as the figure of the detective or any similar dramatised interpreter whose role in the narrative is to make sense of unintelligible events or to grapple with a mystery.

Another marginal case would be the metafiction which depends upon intertextuality for its self-consciousness: narratives which signify their artificiality by obtrusive reference to traditional forms or borrow their thematic and structural principles from other narratives. In its reference to quest narratives, to Dante's 'Inferno' or to Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', *Heart of Darkness* gives its literal journey symbolic and literary overtones. Joyce's *Ulysses* joins its portrait of Dublin inseparably to its reinterpretation of Homer. Coover's 'The Magic Poker' and Fowles's *The Magus* invoke the metaphors of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In each case an internal boundary between extratextual reference to real life and intertextual reference to other literature signifies the artificiality of the fictional world while simultaneously offering its realistic referential possibilities. The boundary of art and life within the fiction, by reproducing the boundary of art and life which surrounds the fiction,

subverts its own referential illusion and in so doing places it on the boundary between fiction and criticism.

These cases are marginally metafictional in the sense that they are implicit about their relation to criticism or their own artificiality. This points to two contradictory problems which are returned to throughout the writings in this volume. First it implies that metafiction might be better understood not as a generic category but, in the words of Patricia Waugh, as 'a function inherent in all novels'. Second, it implies that metafiction in some cases is not inherent, in the sense that it is an objective property of the literary text, but that it depends upon a certain construal of fictional devices as self-referential, or metanarrative in function. Taken together, these problems indicate a double relevance to metafiction of the boundary between fiction and criticism. Not only is this boundary dramatised or signified within fiction as self-commentary, but also problematised by the idea that metafiction is less a property of the primary text than a function of reading. In this way the epistemological ambiguity of a metafiction which highlights the artificial invention of its object is duplicated in a critical ambiguity between the objective discovery and the subjective invention of the literary object. In short, the critical text is the literary text and vice versa, and in this tautology we find a succinct expression of the postmodern condition in fiction and criticism.

From modernism to new historicism

If metafiction characteristically internalises the relationship between authors and readers, fiction and criticism or art and life, we find its antecedents throughout literary history. Chaucer's elaborate framings of *The Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's plays within plays, the extensive use of epistolary forms in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry and fiction, or the intrusive narrators of Fielding and Richardson, are all in a sense precursors of the metafictional paradox. Novelistic parodies like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* are seen as early metafiction precisely because the basis of their comedy is in making the paradox visible. Many commentators have looked to such precursors for the origins of postmodern sensibility, and to parody in particular as an intertextual mode of writing with a clear critical function. But when postmodern retrospect discovers proto-postmodernism in this way it produces a spurious self-historicising teleology which confirms that critical texts construe their literary objects according to their own interests and purposes: postmodern discourses are seen as the endpoint of history and all prior discourses are construed as leading inexorably towards the postmodern. To acknowledge this co-implication of literature and

criticism, the history that I want to sketch here for metafiction is not a unilinear literary history, but a conjunctural analysis which traces parallel events in fiction and criticism of the twentieth century.

Linguistic self-consciousness probably has two principal sources in the twentieth century – literary modernism and Saussurean linguistics. Both are places where the self-referentiality of language was emphasised alongside its ability to refer to an external world. In Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* the emphasis comes from the thesis that referential meaning is a mere function of differences between signs, so that the explanation of meaning must refer to that system of differences rather than to a sub-linguistic reality. This does not mean, as many have claimed in recent decades, that reference is impossible or illusory, but rather that the referential function of language is implicitly also self-referential because it depends upon the hidden system of differences, systemic and contextual, which give each sign its value. According to this argument, language hides the conditions which permit meaning production, and the task of the structuralist analysis is therefore to make those conditions – differential relations, contextual factors and conventions – explicit. For reasons that remain unexplored, and perhaps unexplorable, an analogous attitude to language was taking hold, at the time Saussure formulated these ideas, in literary modernism, which sought to foreground the hidden conditions – structural principles, the process of production, the conventions and the artifice – which permitted the production of literary meaning.

The self-referential dimension of literary modernism consisted partly in rejecting conventions of realism, traditional narrative forms, principles of unity and transparent representational language in preference for techniques of alienation, obtrusive intertextual reference, multiple viewpoints, principles of unity borrowed from myth and music, and a more demanding, opaque, poeticised language. In modernist fiction these tendencies are of two kinds: those which foreground fictional conventions, and those which foreground language itself. In both cases, transparent and invisible verbal structures are transformed into defamiliarised and visible techniques, so that referential meaning is articulated alongside a self-reference to the conditions of its own possibility. A dramatised version of this conjunction would be the representation of an artist in fiction, as in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* in which the narrator becomes more alienated from the referential aspect of words, seeing them instead as a kind of material self-activity, at the same time as the novel experiments poetically with the representation of his thoughts. *Ulysses*, likewise, portrays Dublin in all its newly achieved extremes of naturalism, within a verbal and literary universe which paradoxically reminds us always of the artificiality of the portrait. The opacity of language in *Finnegans Wake* apparently abandons the attempt at representation for a radical self-referentiality

which stages only language itself. In its tendency away from representation, the modernist fiction was placing new demands on the reader to make sense of the text which was no longer intelligible in conventional referential ways.

These tendencies in modernist fiction, which require no lengthy demonstration here, led critics in the first half of the century towards a formalist or language-based analysis. Under the influence of prolific writer-critics of the early modernist period like Eliot and Pound, the new critical attitude in the Anglo-American tradition was one in which the representational content of a literary work was categorically inseparable from or identical with its formal and verbal structure.

Saussurean linguistics and literary modernism may have had some untraceable historical connection in their approaches to reference, but they did not converge in literary formalism until much later. It was not until the 1960s that critics in Europe brought Saussurean structuralist perspectives to bear on the question of literary reference. In the work of Roman Jakobson, for example, the convergence of the two sources is found on the one hand as a concern with the question of realism in art and on the other as an attempt to internalise literary studies within the field of general linguistics. For Jakobson, Saussure's differential theory of the sign acts as a model for a differential theory of discourse which can account for the modernist insight that fictional realism is a mode of discourse which hides the formal and linguistic conditions of its own significance. Roland Barthes argued similarly from a Saussurean point of view that the signifier which did not declare its own systemic conditions was an 'unhealthy signifier' – language that pretends not to be language, to be uncomplicatedly transparent – a 'naturalisation' of language as a referential medium. Like Jakobson, Barthes used structuralist poetics as a way of responding to the new kind of literature, particularly the Nouveau Roman, which had developed the self-reflexivity that fictional realism lacked. On the basis of this contrast, Barthes distinguished between the 'readerly' and the 'writerly' text where the latter was a text for which the reading process was not a passive reception but a creative act of structuring. In the terms of this distinction, modernist fiction not only articulates its own reading by foregrounding the conditions of its meaning-production; the processes of reading and writing are further conflated by the idea that reading is itself a process of creating the text, of creating structure, and imbuing it with meaning.

In this respect, Barthes was a key figure for the history of self-consciousness in criticism. He was a figure in whom the influences of Saussure and literary modernism converged, he was a theoretician preoccupied with linguistic self-consciousness, and he was an important transition figure between structuralism and poststructuralism. If structuralist poetics operated initially with the belief that literary structure

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was a property of the object-text, Barthes' conflation of reading and writing processes pointed towards the idea that literary structure was a function of reading, or that critical metalanguage projected its own structure onto the object text in exactly the same way that language in general projected its structure onto the world. Thus, metalingual reference to language was no different in kind from reference in general, and criticism had to guard against naturalisation of its object by articulating a modernist self-consciousness. This insight that fiction and criticism shared a condition, that the role of the critical text was to articulate the self-consciousness that either the realist text lacked or that was immanent in the modernist text, and that at the same time the critical text must acknowledge reflexively its own structuration or literariness, was the gateway into poststructuralism through which criticism passed at the end of the 1960s.

The importance of Derrida's work in the late 1960s and in the 1970s is paramount for any analysis of the borderline of fiction and criticism. Like Jakobson and Barthes, Derrida's work developed attitudes to language that derived both from literary modernism and from Saussurean linguistics. In Derrida's work literature's boundary with philosophy, linguistics and criticism is transgressed in a way that imputes to literary language a new epistemological import. There is also a kind of closing of a circle in Derrida between literary modernism and postmodern criticism. Derrida always acknowledged, for example, the influence of Joyce's language on his various critiques of metalanguage, so that his writings on Joyce, which are closer to literary parodies than critical analyses, enact the reciprocal influence of fiction and criticism between modernism and postmodernism. Derrida's readings of Joyce question the ability of a critical text to refer transcendently to a literary text and revert to the same intertextual modes of criticism that are developed by Joyce's own novels. Thus affirming the literariness of criticism, Derrida also affirms the metafictional critical functions of intertextuality, parody and anti-reference.

Derrida refuses to write criticism as if it were simply outside its literary object, and equally he refuses metalingual status to those discourses like Saussure's which, in order to be about language, seem to separate themselves from their object. A brief tour of Derrida's reading of Saussure is worthwhile here for the reciprocal relevance of poststructuralism and metafiction. It is the neutrality of Saussure's account, its apparent separateness from its object that Derrida focuses on. In the first place this focus takes the form of the now famous argument that when Saussure identifies his object as spoken, not written language, his neutrality is compromised. The exclusion of written language is, according to Derrida, a mere prejudice inherited by Saussure which assumes that spoken language is somehow closer to the signifying mind than writing. But

Saussure's own use of writing as an analogy to explain the nature of speech exposes this prejudice as an arbitrary imposition of boundaries which makes his study less than neutral from its inception.

As a counter-move to Saussure's exclusion Derrida uses the term 'writing' to refer to 'the entire field of linguistic signs', seeing the graphic signifier as no more exterior than the phonic, where both are representations of the signified. But the distinction of signifier and signified is like that of speech and writing in that each is an imposed structure based on the presupposition of internal and external elements of language. For Derrida, this presupposition specifically invokes both a signifying mind and a referent, since the binary idea of the sign retains a vestige of the theory of representation in which the 'thing itself' is understood as separate from the way in which it is represented. Saussure is therefore structuring language according to presuppositions rather than referring neutrally to it as an object. There are therefore already two levels at which the relationship between language and its referential object is a problem. First, there is the level I referred to earlier where Saussure's account suggests that language can only refer to the outside world because of its internal system of differences which both enable reference and impose structure on the referent. Second, there is the level at which Saussure's exclusions and methodological choices impose value-laden structure on language as an object despite masquerading as neutral or objective manoeuvres.

By pointing this out Derrida is reapplying the Saussurean insight to Saussure, reminding us that just as language structures its object so does metalanguage. But what of the third level of reference as structuration? What of Derrida's own text and its attempt to represent Saussure? Derrida's writing has two strategies which address this problem. The first is the idea of immanence: the idea that Derrida is trying not to refer to Saussure from the outside but to operate within his text, within his own terms. Derrida presents his argument as something which happens inside Saussure's, as a 'tension between gesture and statement', which is both a reading added on by Derrida afterwards, and a possibility which presided internally over the inception of his argument. Likewise Derrida's own terms – like 'writing' or 'différance' – are not really intelligible as autonomous concepts, but rather name problems and contradictions within Saussure's system of terms and oppositions. The second strategy is a kind of self-consciousness in Derrida's text which prevents his own terms from acquiring metalingual or objective status by foregrounding their paradoxical and difficult relation to the language they describe. Derrida's language is never that of academic, transparent objectivity, at times enacting the principles that it advances – as when he endorses the priority given to writing over speech in the graphic joke of 'différance' – and at times playing with the rhetorical and metaphorical dimension of his

own writing to the point of irritation. Derrida's reading of Saussure is an intervention which articulates the reflexivity which Saussure lacks at the same time as it articulates a reflexivity of its own.

For this reason it has never been possible to define any autonomous theory of language that belongs to Derrida. In general, poststructuralist thought has abandoned the idea that theory is capable of abstracting the principles of language. Hence Barthes', definition of the theoretical:

Theoretical does not of course mean abstract. From my point of view, it means 'reflexive', something which turns back on itself: a discourse which turns back on itself is by virtue of this very fact theoretical.

This is a characteristic poststructuralist attitude to theory which implies that a critical text is no more capable of theorising language than a fictional one, and that the metalingual text which, like Saussure's, aspires towards transparency in its own language is as untheoretical as a realist novel. Theory then is a writing practice with pangeneric and interdisciplinary potential which turns language back on itself to foreground the hidden determinants and assumptions in the structure of the objects of discourse.

But when exactly does a discourse turn back on itself and how does one draw the line between language which is and is not theoretical in this way? Here again we encounter the paradox that a literary text and its reading are inseparable and that reflexivity is as much a function of reading as an inherent property of a text. This characteristic deconstructionist conflation is compounded in the work of Paul de Man. Like Derrida, who saw the tension between gesture and statement in Saussure as something the text does to itself as well as something formulated by his own intervention, de Man understood texts, literary and non-literary, as caught in an undecidable tension between literal and tropological dimensions of language, and recommended a 'rhetorical reading' which sought to sustain and represent the contradiction between them. De Man designated the inseparability of a text and its analysis with the phrase 'allegory of reading', the ambiguous genitive of which confused the location of the metalingual allegory between the text and its reading, and attributed to texts the ability to formulate elaborate theories of the self-referentiality of language unknowingly. De Man's writing, like that of many of the American deconstructionists, passed between critical commentary and metalingual propositions in a way that not only gave literature a new metalingual and philosophical status, but which endorsed the idea that literature and criticism could be seen as part of a common endeavour to enact the opacity of language.

If 'reflexivity' is linguistic self-awareness which links the projects of metafiction with metacritical writings such as Derrida's, it has also played

an important part in a range of other discourses from linguistics, philosophy, theology, archaeology, architecture, film and the visual arts – places where a certain opacity of signifying media has been affirmed in recent years. It would of course be impossible to sketch these larger contexts adequately, but one can refer for example to the influence of deconstruction in architecture or Biblical hermeneutics, or to the increasingly complex versions of reflexivity in film, to suggest that this is not a phenomenon isolated either in literary studies or universities. Some would claim that Derrida's work is merely a limited expression of insights developed by Nietzsche or Einstein, Wittgenstein, Montaigne or even Plato. But for the purposes of contextualising metafiction, the two most relevant domains of theoretical writing are those concerned with language and those concerned with the writing of history.

It is no surprise that in literary studies the influence of deconstruction receded in the late 1980s under widespread pressure to re-engage with history. Derrida and his American disciples were perceived as formalists who showed scant regard for the material historical processes which shaped language and literature. Twentieth-century literary studies in America had been dominated by a rather factitious and binary debate between historicism and formalism since the New Critics defined their project in opposition to literary historicism in the 1920s. Opposition to the New Criticism from without and within had always been articulated in the name of historicism, and it was in the context of this debate that Derrida's work made its impact in the early 1970s in America. In that period it was common to see Derrida represented as the long-awaited return to some kind of historical perspective after the dominance of New Criticism and the apparent continuity of its formalist preoccupations in the work of Northrop Frye and those few Saussurean structuralists whose work had reached the United States before Derrida's. Before long, however, perspective had altered. In the late 1970s, the mediation of Derrida's work in the United States stressed the formalist orientation of his analyses, and opposition to deconstruction had itself become an historicist encampment.

The confusion here emerged from the fact that, on the one hand, and particularly in those works first translated in the United States, Derrida seemed to reject the synchronic account of structure which structuralism had inherited from Saussure, while on the other hand, assembling a critique of historical explanation on metaphysical grounds. In *Positions* Derrida summarises this critique as an objection to both 'the general concept of history' and 'the concept of history in general', that is the idea on the one hand, of a single history which transcends all other discourses and to which those discourses are internal, and on the other hand, the idea that all historical narratives have some common denominator which unifies them and compels some definition of the essence of history. For

American literary studies, Derrida did not offer a procedure which would allow a re-engagement with history. Rather his work inclined towards an examination of the metaphysical presuppositions and structurality of historical explanation in the same way as it did for structural-linguistic explanation, for example taking a dialectical approach to the poles of language and history in *Of Grammatology*, which asserted and enacted the proposition that language was no more within history than history was within language. For the American debate between historicism and formalism this was insufficiently polemical.

In Europe the debate between historicism and formalism had a different and perhaps more political configuration. As many American commentators have now argued, the European context of Derrida's writing was dominated by a polemic between a range of Marxist positions all committed to the importance of historical analysis, and those perspectives which belonged either to the formalist-structuralist tradition or to the existentialist and phenomenological schools in philosophy, both of which effectively demoted history from its status as transcendent explanatory system. The basic opposition of formalism and historicism underlay many of the ongoing polemics of recent decades, particularly where Marxism and poststructuralism encountered each other, as for example in the differences between Frankfurt School critical theory and French deconstruction. Often the alignments in Europe were less clear cut than in American criticism, either through attempts to fuse the two perspectives, for example in the reception theory developed in Konstanz University by Hans Robert Jauss and others, or through internal squabbles which revealed positions within poststructuralism which allowed for historicist and Marxist commitment such as Foucault's in his debate with Derrida.

Historiographical interstices between Derrida and Foucault are quite minor in that both saw history as a value-laden, artificial and textual structure, but Foucault's work, more than Derrida's, offered a way of returning to historical writing as a strategic opposition to the values of traditional history. For Foucault in his 'archaeological' phase, the writing of history involved the reduction of the irreducibly complex discursive formation of a period or epoch to a simple, unified essence which could take its place in a continuous narrative. This process was a 'structure of exclusion', an imposition of boundaries around the object of analysis akin to Saussure's, which bespoke the values of the historian and gave the impression that one thing lead to another in a causal chain. In place of this, Foucault articulated the histories of the forgotten areas of human thought, of the people excluded by traditional histories, and emphasised discontinuity in the progress of the historical narrative. The 'structure of exclusion' of an historical explanation represented the structure of power and authority which sought to rearrange and efface the disparity of events

to produce a stable, centred narrative. Foucault's revised historicism was a refusal to efface the 'multiplicity of force relations' that constitute an epoch, and a turn towards the notion of history's complex plurality that would subvert the traditional authoritarian commitment to trace a line, a causal sequence or a tradition through a disparate past. In conjunction with Foucault's later writing, which turned more explicitly to questions of power in discourse, these revised historiographical goals inspired American critics such as Jerome McGann and Steven Greenblatt in the 1980s to formulate a New Historicism which incorporated an awareness of the textuality of historical writing and the values that textual structures imposed upon the representation of their historical objects. It was with such directives that American literary criticism moved away from the language-based analyses of deconstruction in the 1980s towards a self-conscious, textualist historicism. The return to history in criticism in the 1980s was not governed in all cases by a poststructuralist paradigm oriented towards a critique of historical explanation. There was also a resurrection of materialist and Marxist approaches which reinstated historical perspective as an authority within which discourses could be understood symptomatically. But even if there was a tendency towards a transcendental historicism in some of the new historicisms, old conceptions of the relation between base and superstructure had given way to more sophisticated accounts of ideology as a kind of confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality which placed issues of language and representation at the forefront of cultural analysis. These trends in Europe and the United States may have owed more to Foucault, Althusser and Adorno than to Derrida and de Man in their anti-formalist and increasingly political orientations, but the legacy of deconstruction was evident in a new emphasis on the role of language in the apprehension of political reality. Post-formalist historiography undoubtedly acknowledges the common ground between interpreting the world and interpreting a text, and the impossibility of separating or subordinating the relationship between language and history.

The development of a self-conscious historiography in criticism went hand in hand with the poststructuralist critique of narrative explanation in general. The unilinear causality of narrative and its teleological orientation towards revelation and closure were seen as operating principles which projected structure onto otherwise structureless experience. The ubiquity of the narrative explanation in general history, the history of ideas, the history of science, the history of literature, in politics, law, biography, in the construction of national consciousness or personal identity, gave to the project of uncovering its hidden philosophical and politics assumptions a universal import. Taken in combination with the developments that had dismantled the boundary between theoretical and fictional production and highlighted the formal and textual principles of historical narratives, the

perception of an all-encompassing scope for narrative offered an extended remit to the self-conscious novel. Traditionally, the novel was the most artful and sophisticated expression of narrative control. In the very act of telling a story the novel was a kind of history: a retrospective account of events ordered sequentially and causally, often with an omniscient potential to examine the relations between individuals and social conditions. The self-conscious novel therefore had the power to explore not only the conditions of its own production, but the implications of narrative explanation and historical reconstruction in general. In this context, the self-conscious re-engagement with historical subjects in what have been called the historiographic metafiction of the 1980s seems to acknowledge the new theoretical relevance of the novel to questions of representation and the principles of organisation through which history becomes knowable.

The passage from modernism to new historicism in the novel has been tailing criticism from the front. Outside of literary studies, the transition from modernism to postmodernism is often understood as a radical disjunction from and rejection of the past in favour of futuristic experimentation followed by an ironic recovery and recontextualisation of historical forms. This is perhaps less marked in literary history, where modernism was always already engaged in the recontextualisation of past forms, as for example in the use of myth. There was also a face of literary modernism which concerned itself specifically with the problems of giving narrative form to individual memory, as in Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But if the seeds of historiographical metafiction were planted in modernism, they flowered so spectacularly only because events in the related but non-fictional fields of philosophy, linguistics, and literary and cultural criticism created the right conditions to give historiographical metafiction new theoretical scope. Hence, the works of Robert Coover, Umberto Eco, A.S. Byatt, John Fowles, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Julian Barnes and others who have ruminated self-consciously on the fictional representation of history, are contributors to a new philosophy of historical representation in which the ideological function of story-telling is central.

Twentieth-century intellectual life has been dominated by the polemic between history and language, but as we approach the end of the century the poles have converged. It is no longer possible to discuss history without heeding its linguistic representational condition, just as it is no longer possible to discuss language without contextualising the discussion in social and historical frameworks. If modernism strove for a kind of disjunction from history (social and literary), that project has now itself become part of history, supplanted by a postmodernism which strives to return to history having assimilated the self-conscious textualism that modernism formulated. In this light the emergence of historiographical

metafiction from metafiction, of postmodernism from modernism, or the transmutation of literary into cultural studies, represent expanded scope for tendencies in twentieth-century thought which once seemed to point unpromisingly towards self-analysis and self-absorption.

Metafiction and postmodernism

Metafiction is not the only kind of postmodern fiction, and nor is it an exclusively postmodern kind of fiction. It is neither a paradigm nor a subset of postmodernism. Though Hutcheon has claimed the former for historiographic metafiction and Zavarzadeh has claimed the latter for metafiction in general, both claims are obliged to prescribe definitions of metafiction and postmodernism to achieve coherence. Such definitions might provide some satisfaction for the typologically minded critic, but they also impose boundaries which have no essential justification. Metafiction cannot be defined essentially without proposing a categorical separation of literary types and critical constructions; and postmodernism is equally undefinable without some authority that could arbitrate between its meanings as a kind of art, an historical period, or some total ideological and political condition. Terms like 'metafiction' and 'postmodernism' are not sustained by any common essence among their referents.

How then is it different to define metafiction as a borderline discourse between fiction and criticism? There is a sense in which any definition of metafiction is a contradiction. Since metafiction concerns itself above all with a reflexive awareness of the conditions of meaning-construction, any typological definition of metafiction rooted in objective characteristics or essences will contradict the linguistic philosophy that it attempts to describe. Above all, metafiction is committed to the idea of constructed meanings rather than representable essences. What is needed is a non-essentialist definition, one which does not name a singular common essence between metafiction but which designates a kind of problem in the philosophy of language, an irreducible difference and a non-identity: not a precise typological configuration of the relation of metafiction to postmodernism, but a postmodern definition of metafiction. This is what can be achieved by a definition located on the border between a discourse and its representation, one which divides responsibility for the metafictional function between fiction and criticism.

Because metafiction is not strictly a kind of fiction, because previous definitions have not often confronted its complexity, the term 'metafiction' has never really established an assured place in the lexicon of critical terms. The most distant antonyms of 'metafiction' such as 'realism' are

underwritten by ontological difference in no more demonstrable a way than its closest relations such as 'fabulation', 'surfiction' or 'magic realism'. But such vagaries need not deprive 'metafiction' of concepthood. They merely imply that metafiction is one function of literary language among others, potentially co-existing with others, and that this function is a dialectic composite of inherent characteristics and critical interpretations.

The dialectic of inherent characteristics and critical interpretations leads into categorical difficulties of two kinds. The first kind of categorical difficulty is a metafictional novel which cannot appropriate its own critical response by any amount of reflexivity. An example would be John Fowles's *The Magus* where metafictionality is generated in the relationship between Conchis, the surrogate author, and Nicholas, the surrogate reader. In a classic metafictional dynamic, this relationship stages a quest by Nicholas for an interpretation of the inexplicable and mysterious circumstances in which he finds himself, and of which Conchis is a kind of author-God. In the process of the quest, Nicholas formulates possible interpretations of the fiction constructed around him by Conchis, and in so doing, interpellates the external reader, who is in possession of no extra information, into analogous interpretative acts. Nicholas and the reader are yoked together by a fictional point of view in quest of an interpretation, so that critical perspectives are assimilated into the novel and represented as part of the fiction. The literary interpretative nature of Nicholas's quest is established throughout the novel by a level of intertextual reference which consolidates Conchis's surrogate-authorial role and blurs the boundary between reality and art within the fiction. Although this dynamic is one with built-in metafictional reflexivity, it is still necessary to distinguish between appropriated critical perspective represented in Nicholas's quest and the actual critical responses of external readers. That is to say, the real reader can always further distance him or herself from the critical responses built into the text and from the interpellative processes of narrative technique, remaining free to construct the text from some other critical perspective not appropriated by the text itself. In this sense there is no real difference between reading a metafictional novel and reading a realistic one, since metafictional reflexivity can never fully appropriate the response of the real reader. It is of course possible to read *The Magus* as straightforward realism in which the characters have perfectly plausible, but not illusion-breaking literary interests.

A second categorical difficulty militates against the idea that metafiction is a type of fiction. Take, for example, the case of Tom Wolfe, an outspoken critic of metafictional writing in recent years. Wolfe's case is that the novel's most significant energy is social realism, the ability of fiction to portray the real world. For Wolfe, metafictional self-reference to the godlike power of the author, appropriation of critical perspective and

endless intertextual cross-referencing are merely decadent forms of self-absorption which deprive the novel of that significant energy. This case, first articulated in *The New Journalism*, is repeated in the preface of his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which attempts to portray New York without deviation into self-analysis. But realistic intent of this kind does not immunise Wolfe's text against metafictional interpretation. Like Fowles's *The Magus*, *Bonfire of the Vanities* also establishes an internal boundary between reality and its representation, this time in the difference between actual occurrences and their distortion by journalistic representation. *Bonfire* tells a story of 'real' events alongside an unfolding journalistic story. It contains authorial and readerly surrogacy in the figures of Peter Fallow, the scoop journalist, and Sherman McCoy, who reads Fallow's story as the unfolding of his own downfall. The blurring of the distinction between reality and representation in *Bonfire* enacts a central proposition that so-called real events are inseparable from their interpretations, creating an internal analogy for the text itself. Journalism within *Bonfire* corresponds to Wolfe's own attempt to write a journalistic novel in exactly the same way that Fowles's *Magus* corresponds to Fowles's own creative function. Add to this a list of implicit intertexts which shape Wolfe's narrative, to the genre of 'Yuppie Nightmare' films, or to Greek tragedy, and a case for the metafictionality of Wolfe's novel emerges. This point was made adequately by Brian de Palma's film of Wolfe's novel, which ironically transposes Fallow into an obtrusive narrator, and opens with a paradigmatic metafictional scenario in which Fallow receives an award for the novel of the story which is about to be narrated, and of which he is the surrogate author.

These examples show that metafiction can be located at the conscious and the unconscious level of the text. Whereas postmodern fiction can generally be regarded as conscious metafiction, postmodern readings can also identify metafiction as an aspect of the unconscious level of the text, against the grain of realist intention, and therefore beyond any temporal boundaries which might apply to the term 'postmodernism'. In other words, postmodernist fiction and criticism both aim to articulate the unconscious, and in particular the unconscious self-referentiality of non-metafictional fiction. If unconscious self-consciousness is the common critical object of metafiction and criticism, it does not stabilise the identity of either, since both metafiction and criticism are likewise produced by the discourses which represent them. (Rather than seek to impose some kind of stability in this predicament, we should treat the idea of 'unconscious self-consciousness' as a reminder of compound illogicalities in the definition of metafiction as self-consciousness.) Metafiction is not then simply a form of postmodernism. The postmodern context is not one divided neatly between fictional texts and their critical readings, but a

Metafiction

monistic world of representations in which the boundaries between art and life, language and metalanguage, and fiction and criticism are under philosophical attack.

Part One

Defining Metafiction

1 Metafiction*

ROBERT SCHOLES

Robert Scholes is one of several writers who sought to give definition to William Gass's term 'metafiction' in the early 1970s. This article attempts to link that term to ideas which derive from John Barth's essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' (see Part Three) to describe the attempts of experimental fictions of the 1960s to 'climb beyond Beckett and Borges' (the principal subjects of Barth's essay) towards 'things that no critic can discern'. These undiscernible things are best thought of as moments of critical vertigo in which the relations between real life and representation are no longer clear, either within or beyond the fiction.

In a volume dedicated to the idea that metafiction is a border-line territory between fiction and criticism, this essay has a special place. Its argument begins with the idea that there are four aspects of fiction (fiction of forms, ideas, existence and essence) which correspond to four critical perspectives on fiction (formal, structural, behavioural, and philosophical) in the sense that each critical perspective is the most appropriate response to the four aspects of fiction. The argument then moves on to claim that, because metafiction 'assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself', this scheme offers a model for the typology of metafiction, so that four distinct directions in metafiction can be understood to pertain to these four aspects of both fiction and criticism. Like most typologies, Scholes's relies on relational rather than absolute categories, and difficulties of determining the dominant aspect of any given metafiction can present real problems to the critic. The interest of the essay lies mainly in the idea that when a novel assimilates critical perspective it acquires the power not only to act as commentary on other fictions, but also to incorporate insights normally formulated externally in critical discourse. Scholes seems to conclude that the critic, and even the 'metacritic', is redundant with regard to such insights, but only, I think, because he is writing in the immediate prehistory to the golden age of the American metacritic, an age in which criticism sought to incorporate the same kind of aporetic insight into subject and object relations.

*Reprinted from SCHOLES, ROBERT, 'Metafiction', *The Iowa Review*, 1, Fall (1970), 100-15.

This essay was originally published in *The Iowa Review* in conjunction with Robert Coover's short story 'The Reunion'.

Many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafiction.
(W.H. Gass)

And it is above all to the need for new modes of perception and fictional forms able to contain them that I, barber's basin on my head, address these stories.
(Robert Coover)

the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones.
(Donald Barthelme)

We tend to think of experiments as cold exercises in technique. My feeling about technique in art is that it has about the same value as technique in lovemaking. That is to say, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill; but what you want is passionate virtuosity.
(John Barth)

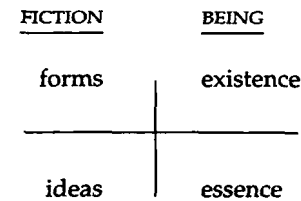
I

To approach the nature of contemporary experimental fiction, to understand why it is experimental and how it is experimental, we must first adopt an appropriate view of the whole order of fiction and its relation to the conditions of being in which we find ourselves. Thus I must begin this consideration of specific works by the four writers quoted above with what may seem an over-elaborate discussion of fictional theory, and I ask the reader interested mainly in specifics to bear with me. In this discussion I will be trying not so much to present a new and startling view of fiction as to organize a group of assumptions which seem to inform much modern fiction and much of the fiction of the past as well. Once organized, these assumptions should make it possible to 'place' certain fictional and critical activities so as to understand better both their capabilities and limitations.

One assumption I must make is that both the conditions of being and the order of fiction partake of a duality which distinguishes existence from essence. My notion of fiction is incomplete without a concept of essential values, and so is my notion of life. Like many modern novelists, in fact like

most poets and artists in Western culture, ancient and modern, I am a Platonist. One other assumption necessary to the view I am going to present is that the order of fiction is in some way a reflection of the conditions of being which make man what he is. And if this be Aristotelianism, I intend to make the most of it. These conditions of being, both existential and essential, are reflected in all human activity, especially in the human use of language for esthetic ends, as in the making of fictions. Imagine, then, the conditions of being, divided into existence and essence, along with the order of fiction, similarly divided. This simple scheme can be displayed in a simple diagram. [see Fig. 1.1].

fig. 1.1



The forms of fiction and the behavioral patterns of human existence both exist in time, above the horizontal line in the diagram. All human actions take place in time, in existence, yet these actions are tied to the essential nature of man, which is unchanging or changing so slowly as to make no difference to men caught up in time. Forms of behavior change, man does not, without becoming more or less than man, angel or ape, superman or beast. Forms of fiction change too, but the ideas of fiction are an aspect of the essence of man, and will not change until the conditions of being a man change. The ideas of fiction are those essential qualities which define and characterize it. They are aspects of the essence of being human. To the extent that fiction fills a human need in all cultures, at all times, it is governed by these ideas. But the ideas themselves, like the causes of events in nature, always retreat beyond the range of our analytical instruments.

Both the forms of existence and the forms of fiction are most satisfying when they are in harmony with their essential qualities. But because the forms exist in time they cannot persist unchanged without losing their harmonious relationship to the essence of being and the ideas of fiction. In the world of existence we see how social and political modes of behavior lose their vitality in time as they persist to a point where instead of connecting man to the roots of his being they cut him off from this deep reality. All revolutionary crises, including the present one, can be seen as caused by the profound malaise that attacks men when the forms of human behavior lose touch with the essence of human nature. It is similar with fiction. Forms atrophy and lose touch with the vital ideas of fiction. Originality in fiction, rightly understood, is the successful attempt to find