

## 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 reader (Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979)); Chinese-box structures (Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), John Barth's *Chimera* (1972)); incantatory and absurd lists (Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), Gabriel Josipovici's *The Inventory* (1968)); over-systematized or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices (Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* (1974)); total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative (B. S. Johnson's 'A Few Selected Sentences' (1973)); infinite regress (Beckett's *Watt* (1953)); dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names (Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)); self-reflexive images (Nabokov's mirrors, acrostics, mazes); critical discussions of the story within the story (Fowles's 'The Enigma' (1974), Barth's *Sabbatical* (1982)); continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions (Muriel Spark's quasi-omniscient author, Fowles's very un-Victorian ending in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)); use of popular genres (Richard Brautigan's *A Confederate General from Big Sur* (1964), Vonnegut's *Slaughter-house-Five* (1969)); and explicit parody of previous texts whether literary or non-literary (Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* (1979), Alan Burns's *Babel* (1969)).

In all of these what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text. Although metafiction is just one form of post-modernism, nearly all contemporary experimental writing displays *some* explicitly metafictional strategies. Any text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure problematizes more or less explicitly the ways in which narrative codes – whether 'literary' or 'social' – artificially construct apparently 'real' and imaginary worlds in the terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently 'natural' and 'eternal'.

In 1945 Joseph Frank explained the self-referential quality of modernist literature in these terms:

Since the primary reference of any word group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive . . . instead of the instinctive and immediate reference of words and word groups to the objects and events they symbolize, and the construction of meaning from the sequence of these references, modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity.

(Frank 1958, p. 73)

In short, self-reflexiveness in modernist texts generates 'spatial form'. With realist writing the reader has the illusion of constructing an interpretation by referring the words of the text to objects in the real world. However, with texts like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), in order to construct a satisfactory interpretation of the poem, the reader must follow the complex web of cross-references and repetitions of words and images which function independently of, or in addition to, the narrative codes of causality and sequence. The reader becomes aware that 'meaning' is constructed primarily through internal *verbal* relationships, and the poem thus appears to achieve a verbal autonomy: a 'spatial form'. Such organization persists in contemporary metafictional texts, but merely as *one* aspect of textual self-reflexivity. Indeed, 'spatial form' may *itself* function in these fictions as the object of self-conscious attention (for a discussion of this aspect of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, see Chapter 5).

Post-modernism clearly does not involve the modernist concern with the mind as itself the basis of an aesthetic, ordered at a profound level and revealed to consciousness at isolated 'epiphanic' moments. At the end of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for example, Lily Briscoe suddenly perceives a higher (or deeper) order in things as she watches the boat return. Her realization is translated, directly and overtly, into aesthetic terms. Returning to her canvas, with intensity she draws the final line: 'It was finished. Yes she thought laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision' (p. 320). A post-modern 'line' is more likely to imitate that drawn by Tristram Shandy to represent the plot of his 'life and times' (resembling a diagram of the formation of an

oxbow lake). In fact, if post-modernism shares some of the philosophies of modernism, its formal techniques seem often to have originated from novels like *Tristram Shandy* (1760), *Don Quixote* (1604) or *Tom Jones* (1749).

For Sterne, as for contemporary writers, the mind is not a perfect aestheticizing instrument. It is not free, and it is as much constructed out of, as constructed with, language. The substitution of a purely metaphysical system (as in the case of Proust) or mythical analogy (as with Joyce and Eliot) cannot be accepted by the metafictionist as final structures of authority and meaning. Contemporary reflexivity implies an awareness both of language *and* metalanguage, of consciousness *and* writing.

B. S. Johnson's 'A Few Selected Sentences', for example, is precisely what its title suggests: a series of fragments taken from a wide variety of discursive practices (ranging from a sixteenth-century description of the cacao fruit to absurd warnings) which, although resisting final totalization, can be arranged into a number of conventional narratives. The most obvious of these is a comment on what we are doing as we read: constructing a detective story. The style is reminiscent of Eliot's technique of fragmentation and montage in *The Waste Land*, but there the connections are present despite the fragmentary surface, to be recovered through the mythic consciousness as the reader partakes in the modern equivalent of the Grail search. The fragments which Johnson has shored against his ruins are not at all explicable by any such *a priori* transcendental system, only by his readers' knowledge of the conventions of stories. There is no longer a deep, structured collective unconscious to be relied upon, only the heavily italicized and multi-coded 'Life' with which the story ends (p. 80).

Whereas loss of order for the modernist led to the belief in its recovery at a deeper level of the mind, for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's 'reality'. Writing itself rather than consciousness becomes the main object of attention. Questioning not only the notion of the novelist as God, through the flaunting of the author's godlike role, but also the authority of consciousness, of the mind, metafiction establishes the categorization of the world through the arbitrary system of

language. The modernist writer whose style fits closest with this essentially post-modernist mode of writing is, of course, James Joyce. Even in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the epiphanic moments are usually connected with a self-reflexive response to language itself. The word 'foetus', for example, scratched on a desk, forces upon Stephen's consciousness a recognition of his whole 'monstrous way of life' (pp. 90-2).

*Ulysses* (1922) goes further in showing 'reality' to be a consequence of 'style'. However, despite parody, stylization and imitation of non-literary discourses, there is no overtly self-referential voice which systematically establishes, as the main focus of the novel, the problematic relationship of language and 'reality'. The only strictly metafictional line is Molly's 'Oh Jamesy let me up out of this Pooh' (p. 691), though there are many inherently self-conscious devices now widely used by metafictional writers, and the 'Oxen of the Sun' section is, of course, an extended piece of literary pastiche. Each of the parodies of literary styles in this section presents a direct and problematical relationship between style and content which draws attention to the fact that language is not simply a set of empty forms filled with meaning, but that it actually dictates and circumscribes what can be said and therefore what can be perceived. When a discussion of contraception, for example, creeps into the parody of the language of courtly love, the reader is made to see contraception in a new light. The realities of procreation in the twentieth century are thrown into a different perspective through their discussion within the linguistic parameters of the medieval world.

*Ulysses* has eighteen chapters and eighteen main styles. B. S. Johnson's *Travelling People* (1963), overtly both Shandyan and Joycean, has nine chapters and styles. Style is explicitly explored here in terms of negativity: how it represents certain aspects of experience only by excluding others. The novel begins by parodying the opening of *Tom Jones*, with Johnson setting out his 'bill of fare' and explaining that the style of each chapter should spring from its subject matter. Each shift of style is further accompanied by a Fieldingesque chapter heading, which, through its equally vacuous generality in Johnson's text, undermines the attempt of such verbal signposts to be comprehensive. The

introduction, headings and 'interludes' complement the Joycean stylistic shifts through which the characters, the rootless 'travelling people' of the contemporary world, attempt to construct identities for themselves.

Henry, the protagonist, for example, is shown continually stylizing his existence, distancing unpleasant realities such as how many dogs are required to manufacture a certain amount of glue by communicating the information to himself in the language of a strident advertising slogan: 'See that your pet has a happy home in Henry's glue' (p. 12). The reader is thus made aware of how reality is *subjectively* constructed. But beyond this essentially modernist perspective, the text reveals a post-modernist concern with how it is itself *linguistically* constructed. Through continuous narrative intrusion, the reader is reminded that not only do characters verbally construct their own realities; they are themselves verbal constructions, *words* not *beings*.

It might seem that in its (to quote Flann O'Brien) 'self-evident sham' (*At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), p.25) metafiction has merely reduced the complex stylistic manoeuvres of modernism to a set of crude statements about the relation of literary fictions to the real world. The opening page of John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1956), for example, might appear in this light:

It has always seemed to me in the novels that I've read now and then, that the authors are asking a great deal of their readers who start their stories furiously in the middle of things, rather than backing or sliding slowly into them. Such a plunge into someone else's life and world . . . has, it seems, little of pleasure in it. No, come along with me reader, and don't fear for your weak heart. Good heavens, how does one write a novel . . .

This seems a far cry from the plunge into the complex flow of consciousness characteristic of the opening of modernist novels such as *Ulysses* or *To the Lighthouse*. It is, in fact, much closer to Sterne's establishment of the novelist as conversationalist, as dependent on the reader for identity and sympathy. Thus Tristram begs his reader, 'bear with me – and let me go on and tell my story in my own way' (*Tristram Shandy*, p. 15). It also signals the

contemporary writer agonizing – like Sterne, like Tristram – over the problem of beginnings but, unlike them, with a new sophisticated narrative awareness that a story never has a ‘real’ beginning, can only ever begin arbitrarily, be recounted as plot. A ‘story’ cannot exist without a teller. The apparent *impersonality* of *histoire* is always finally *personal*, finally *discours*.<sup>5</sup>

The themes of Barth’s novel in many ways resemble those of much modernist fiction. Its central character Todd realizes that existence cannot finally be explained in the terms of logical causality. There is no original ‘source’ of one’s behaviour, whether one draws on psychological, environmental or physical evidence. The attempt to trace such a source is, in fact, doomed in precisely the way of Walter Shandy’s encyclopaedia. The incompleteness which permeates everything in Tristram’s account is here present, frustrating the modern concern to define reality in terms of a unified consciousness, a whole self. Thus Todd’s modernist solipsism is continually undermined by the ironic and sometimes comic use of various Shandyan devices. In its recognition that the limits of one’s language define the limits of one’s self, metafiction breaks into solipsism by showing that the consciousness of Todd is here caught in a net not of its *own* making but of that of the *novelist* and, ultimately, that of the very public medium of *language*.

As Sartre argued in *Being and Nothingness* (1956), acts of consciousness have to be conscious of themselves, so that even when consciousness is focused on something else – when writing, for example – it must remain aware of itself on the edges of consciousness or the subject cannot continue to write. Modernism aimed at the impossible task of exploring pure consciousness. Metafiction has accepted Wittgenstein’s notion that ‘one thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it’ (quoted in Josipovici 1977, p. 296).

Having differentiated briefly between the modes of literary self-consciousness characteristic of modernist and post-modernist writing, this chapter will now attempt to examine the concerns of contemporary metafiction in relation to some of the changes in the way in which reality is mediated and constructed by cultural theory

and practice outside the strict domain of the 'literary'. Literature should not be analysed as a form of expression which simply sets up its own traditions and conventions totally apart from those that structure non-literary culture. If metafiction is to be seen as a positive stage in the development of the novel, then its relevance and sensitivity to the increasing and diverse manifestations of self-consciousness in the culture as a whole have to be established.

Two leading ideas in the field of sociology have been the notion of history/reality as a construct, and the idea of 'framing' as the activity through which it is constructed. Psychologists, sociologists and even economists have surely proved the tremendous importance of the serious possibilities of 'play'. Nevertheless it seems to be these aspects of metafictional writing that critics seize on to accuse it of ephemerality and irrelevance. This chapter aims to look at the ways in which metafictional techniques can be seen as a response to such non-literary cultural developments.

### **The analysis of frames: metafiction and frame-breaking**

A frame may be defined as a 'construction, constitution, build; established order, plan, system . . . underlying support or essential substructure of anything' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Modernism and post-modernism begin with the view that both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through such structures or 'frames'. Both recognize further that the distinction between 'framed' and 'unframed' cannot in the end be made. Everything is framed, whether in life or in novels. Ortega y Gasset, writing on modernism, pointed out, however, that 'not many people are capable of adjusting their perceptive apparatus to the pane and the transparency that is the work of art. Instead they look right through it and revel in the human reality with which the work deals' (Ortega y Gasset 1948, p. 31 ). Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds 'framing' as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels. The first problem it poses, of course, is: what is a 'frame'? What is the 'frame' that separates reality from 'fiction'? Is it more than the front and back covers of a book, the rising and lowering of a curtain, the title and 'The End'?



Modernist texts begin by plunging in *in medias res* and end with the sense that nothing is finished, that life flows on. Metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings, of boundaries, as in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951): 'A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead' (p. 7). They often end with a choice of endings. Or they may end with a sign of the impossibility of endings. Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1967) presents the reader with two 'books': the book can be read according to the order in which it is printed, or it can be read according to an alternative order presented to the reader in the 'conclusion', the apparent 'end' of the first order. The first 'book' is read up to chapter 56; the second 'book' begins at chapter 73 and covers the whole novel except for chapter 55. The final 'end' is now apparently in chapter 58, but, when the reader gets there, it is to discover that he or she should go back to chapter 131, and so on and on and on. The final chapter printed is chapter 155 (which directs the reader back to 123), so the last printed words are: 'Wait! I finish my cigarette' (*Hopscotch*, p. 564). We are still waiting . . .

Alternatively, such novels may end with a gloss upon the archetypal fictional ending, the 'happily ever after'. John Barth's *Sabbatical* (1982) poses the question whether the ending of the events begins the writing, or the ending of the writing begins the events. Susan decides that they should 'begin it at the end and end at the beginning, so we can go on forever. Begin with our living happily ever after' (p. 365); but her author has decided: 'we commence as we would conclude, that they lived

Happily ever after, to the end of Fenwick and Susie . . .'  
(p. 366)

Contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins. Contemporary sociologists have argued along similar lines. Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis* has suggested that there is no simple dichotomy 'reality/fiction':

When we decide that something is unreal, the real it isn't need not itself be very real, indeed, can just as well be a dramatization of events as the events themselves – or a rehearsal of the dramatization, or a painting of the rehearsal or a reproduction of the painting. Any of these latter can serve as the original of which something is a mere mock-up, leading one to think that which is sovereign is relationship – not substance.

(Goffman 1974, PP. 560–1)

Frames in life operate like conventions in novels: they facilitate action and involvement in a situation. Goffman defines frames early in his book:

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify.

(ibid., p. 67)

Analysis of frames is the analysis, in the above terms, of the organization of experience. When applied to fiction it involves analysis of the formal conventional organization of novels. What both Goffman and metafictional novels highlight through the foregrounding and analysis of framing activities is the extent to which we have become aware that neither historical experiences nor literary fictions are unmediated or unprocessed or non-linguistic or, as the modernists would have it, 'fluid' or 'random'. Frames are essential in all fiction. They become more perceptible as one moves from realist to modernist modes and are explicitly laid bare in metafiction.

In metafictional novels, obvious framing devices range from stories within stories (John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1976)), characters reading about their own fictional lives (Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*) and self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations (Coover's 'The Babysitter', 'The Magic Poker' (1971)). The concept of 'frame' includes Chinese-box structures which contest the reality of each

individual 'box' through a nesting of narrators (Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), John Barth's *Chimera* (1972)). Similar are so-called 'fictions of infinity' such as Borges' 'Library of Babel', where 'In order to locate Book B, first consult Book C and so on *ad infinitum*' (*Labyrinths*, p. 84). Sometimes overt frames involve a confusion of ontological levels through the incorporation of visions, dreams, hallucinatory states and pictorial representations which are finally indistinct from the apparently 'real' (Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971)). Such infinities of texts within texts draw out the paradoxical relationship of 'framed' and 'unframed' and, in effect, of 'form' and 'content'. There is ultimately no distinction between 'framed' and 'unframed'. There are only levels of form. There is ultimately only 'content' perhaps, but it will never be discovered in a 'natural' unframed state.

One method of showing the function of literary conventions, of revealing their provisional nature, is to show what happens when they malfunction. Parody and inversion are two strategies which operate in this way as frame-breaks. The alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction.

It seems that, according to Goffman, our sense of reality is strong enough to cope with minor frame-breaks, and in fact they reaffirm it, ensuring

the continuity and viability of the established frame. Indeed the disattend track specifically permits the occurrence of many out-of-frame acts, provided only that they are 'properly' muted, that is, within the disattend capacity of the frame. . . . Thus collusive exchanges between friends at stylish gatherings can be at once a means of breaking frame and a means of staying within it.

(Goffman 1974, p. 382)

This comment is interesting because it offers support for an intuitive sense that although Fielding, Trollope and George Eliot, for example, often 'break the frame' of their novels they are by no means self-conscious novelists in the sense in which the term has been discussed here. Although the intrusive commentary of nineteenth-century fiction may at times be metalingual (referring to fictional codes themselves), it functions mainly to aid the readerly concretization of the world of the book by forming a bridge between the historical and the fictional worlds. It suggests that the one is merely a continuation of the other, and it is thus not metafictional.

In *Adam Bede* (1859), for example, George Eliot destroys the illusion of Hayslope's self-containedness by continually intruding moralistic commentary, interpretation and appeals to the reader. However, such intrusions do in fact *reinforce* the connection between the real and the fictional world, *reinforce* the reader's sense that one is a continuation of the other. In metafictional texts such intrusions *expose* the ontological distinctness of the real and the fictional world, *expose* the literary conventions that disguise this distinctness. In the chapter entitled 'The Rector', the narrative voice intrudes: 'Let me take you into their dining room . . . we will enter, very softly . . . the walls you see, are new. . . . He will perhaps turn round by and by and in the meantime we can look at that stately old lady' (p. 63). Eliot is here using the convention of the reader's presence and the author's limitations – a pretence that neither knows what will happen next – to suggest through the collusive interchange that both are situated in ontologically undifferentiated worlds. Although this is a frame-break, therefore, it is of the minor variety which, in Goffman's terms, *reinforces* the illusion.

In order to clarify the implications of the difference between a minor and a major frame-break, and their respective uses in realistic and metafictional novels, *Adam Bede* can be compared with a metafictional novel, set at roughly the same time and in many ways involving similar moral issues. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* uses the device of authorial intimacy ultimately to *destroy* the illusion of reality. Throughout the fiction, real documents are referred to – as, for example, in the description of Sarah unpacking at Exeter. The narrator meticulously describes each article that she takes out:

and then a Toby Jug, not one of those greenish-coloured monstrosities of Victorian manufacture, but a delicate little thing . . . (certain experts may recognize a Ralph Leigh) . . . the toby was cracked and was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged. But unlike her I fell for the Ralph Leigh part of it. She fell for the smile.

(p. 241)

Sarah and the toby jug appear to have the same ontological status as the narrator. This brings the reader up against the paradoxical realization that normally we can read novels only because of our suspension of disbelief. Of course we *know* that what we are reading is not 'real', but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment. We tend to read fiction as if it were history. By actually appearing to treat the fiction as a historical document, Fowles employs the convention against itself. The effect of this, instead of *reinforcing* our sense of a continuous reality, is to split it open, to *expose* the levels of illusion. We are forced to recall that our 'real' world can *never* be the 'real' world of the novel. So the frame-break, while appearing to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, in fact lays it bare.

Throughout *The French Lieutenant's Woman* there is an abundance of frame-breaks more overt than this, particularly where the twentieth-century narrator suddenly appears as a character in the *histoire* as well as in the *discours*. The effect is one which Goffman has again discussed: 'When a character comments on a whole episode of activity in frame terms, he acquires a peculiar reality through the same words by which he undermines the one that was just performed' (Goffman 1974, p. 400). When Fowles discusses the fact that 'these characters I create never existed outside my own mind' (pp. 84–5), the peculiar reality forced upon the reader is that the character who is the apparent teller of the tale is its inventor and not a recorder of events that happened (this becomes the entire theme of Raymond Federman's novel *Double or Nothing*). Fowles goes on to argue, of course, that 'Fiction is woven into all. . . . I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid' (pp. 86–7).

Despite this effect of exposure, however, it can be argued that metafictional novels simultaneously strengthen each reader's sense of an everyday real world while problematizing his or her sense of reality from a conceptual or philosophical point of view. As a consequence of their metafictional undermining of the conventional basis of existence, the reader may revise his or her ideas about the philosophical status of what is assumed to be reality, but he or she will presumably continue to believe and live in a world for the most part constructed out of 'common sense' and routine. What writers like Fowles are hoping is that each reader does this with a new awareness of how the meanings and values of that world have been constructed and how, therefore, they can be challenged or changed. To some extent each metafictional novel is a fictional *Mythologies* which, like Roland Barthes's work, aims to unsettle our convictions about the relative status of 'truth' and 'fiction'. As Goffman argues:

The study of how to uncover deceptions is also by and large the study of how to build up fabrications . . . one can learn how one's sense of ordinary reality is produced by examining something that is easier to become conscious of, namely, how reality is mimicked and/or how it is faked.

(Goffman 1974, P. 251)

### **Play, games and metafiction**

All art is 'play' in its creation of other symbolic worlds; 'fiction is primarily an elaborate way of pretending, and pretending is a fundamental element of play and games' (Detweiler 1976, p. 51). Without necessarily accepting the Freudian notion that art and literature act as compensatory forms of gratification replacing for an adult the lost childhood world of play and escapism, it can be argued not only that literary fiction is a form of play (if a very sophisticated form) but that play is an important and necessary aspect of human society. It is clear that metafictional writers view play in this light – Ronald Sukenick, for example, in a story entitled 'The Death of the Novel' (1969): 'What we need is not great works but playful ones. . . . A story is a game someone has played so you can play it too' (pp. 56–7) – and it is clear that psychologists like L.

S. Vygotsky (1971), Jean Piaget (1951) and Gregory Bateson (1972) share this perception. However, it is also clear that critics of metafiction either disagree with psychologists' and sociologists' view of play as educative and enlightening or disagree with the notion of art as play. For metafiction sets out to make this explicit: that play is a relatively autonomous activity but has a definite value in the real world. Play is facilitated by rules and roles, and metafiction operates by exploring fictional rules to discover the role of fictions in life. It aims to discover how we each 'play' our own realities.

The metacommentary provided by self-conscious fiction carries the more or less explicit message: 'this is make-believe' or 'this is play'. The most important feature shared by fiction and play is the construction of an alternative reality by manipulating the relation between a set of signs (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) as 'message' and the context or frame of that message. As Bateson argues in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, the same behaviour can be 'framed' by a shift in context which then requires very different interpretative procedures. The same set of actions performed in a 'play' context will not denote what they signify in a non-play context. Roland Barthes demonstrates this very entertainingly in his analysis of wrestling in *Mythologies*. The sport is praised for its 'semiotic' as opposed to 'mimetic' construction of meaning, its flaunting of its status as play. The spectators are never deluded into believing that a 'real' fight is taking place; they are kept constantly aware that it is a spectacle:

only an image is involved in the game, and the spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoys the perfection of an iconography. It is not true that wrestling is a sadistic spectacle: it is only an intelligible spectacle.

(Barthes 1972b, p. 20)

Literary fiction, as a form of play, shifts signification in the same way. In fact the shift of context is greater because fiction is constructed with language and language is characterized precisely by its detachability from specific context. Language does not have to refer to objects and situations immediately present at the act of

utterance; it does not have to be directly indexical. A phrase uttered in a real-life context and referring to objects actually present can be transferred to many different contexts: everyday, literary, journalistic, philosophical, scientific. The actual relationship of the signs within the phrase will remain the same, but, because their relationship to signs outside themselves has shifted, the meaning of the phrase will also shift. Thus the language of fiction may appear to imitate the languages of the everyday world, but its 'meaning' will necessarily be different. However, all play and fiction require 'meta' levels which explain the transition from one context to another and set up a hierarchy of contexts and meanings. In metafiction this level is foregrounded to a considerable extent because the main concern of metafiction is precisely the implications of the shift from the context of 'reality' to that of 'fiction' and the complicated interpenetration of the two.

Bateson saw play as a means of discovering new communicative possibilities, since the 'meta' level necessary for play allows human beings to discover how they can manipulate behaviour and contexts. The subsequent discovery of new methods of communication allows for adaptation, which he sees as ensuring human survival. Fictional play also re-evaluates the traditional procedures of communication and allows release from established patterns. Metafiction explicitly examines the relation of these procedures within the novel to procedures outside it, ensuring the survival through adaptability of the novel itself.

Metafiction draws attention to the process of recontextualization that occurs when language is used aesthetically – when language is, in the sense described above, used 'playfully'. Most psychologists of play emphasize this release from everyday contexts. They argue that 'a certain degree of choice, lack of constraint from conventional ways of handling objects, materials and ideas, is inherent in the concept of play. This is its main connexion with art' (Millar 1968, p. 21). When such a shift of context occurs, though, the more dislocatory it is (say, from the everyday to literary fantasy rather than to literary realism), the more the shift itself acts implicitly as a metacommenting frame. Without *explicit* metacommentary, however, the process of



recontextualization is unlikely to be fully understood, and this may result in an unintentional confusion of planes or orders of reality.

This was demonstrated very clearly in fact by Jakobson's work on speech disturbances or aphasia (Jakobson 1956). In what Jakobson referred to as 'similarity disorder', the aphasic person suffers from an incapacity to 'name' objects (an incapacity to manipulate language through the activity of substitution) and a tendency to rely on metonymy. In this disorder, the aphasic cannot use words unless the objects to which the words refer are immediately present. Language thus loses its central characteristic of detachability from context. The more dependent the message on the *immediate* context, therefore, the more likely is the aphasic to understand it. Jakobson suggests that this disorder is 'properly a loss of metalanguage' (ibid., p. 67). Although linguistic messages can operate outside their immediate referential contexts, metalanguage (reference to the codes of language themselves) is needed for this to be successful. The more 'playful' a literary work (the more, for example, it shifts from everyday to alternative-world contexts), the more such metalanguages are needed if the relationship between the 'real' and the 'fictive' world is to be maintained and understood. In metafictional novels it is the nature of this relationship which is the subject of enquiry. Metalingual commentary is thus fore-grounded as the *vehicle* of that enquiry.

In some novels, contexts shift so continuously and unsystematically that the metalingual commentary is not adequate to 'place' or to interpret such shifts. The reader is *deliberately* disoriented (as in the novels of William Burroughs, for example). Alternatively, some contemporary novels are constructed with extreme shifts of context or frame (from realism to fantasy, for instance), but without any explanatory metalingual commentary to facilitate the transition from one to the other. The reader is thus neither offered a rational explanation for the shift nor provided with any means of relating one context to another.

Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) achieves its bizarre effects through this type of shift. Ostensibly realistically portrayed characters suddenly begin to act in fantastic ways. Characters die and come back to life, a man

is turned into a snake 'for having disobeyed his parents' (p. 33). Similarly, in Leonard Michaels's 'Mildred' (1964) a tense conversation is interrupted by one of the characters literally starting to eat the womb of one of the others, and finally the narrator starts to eat his face. Michaels gives no indication that this surrealist dislocation may be based on a confusion of the *metaphorical* 'eating one's heart out' (based on context detachability) with its *literal* meaning when returned to context. In other words, he deliberately uses 'similarity disorder' in reverse. The effect in both of these examples is close to that of a schizophrenic construction of reality (as Bateson sees it), where information is not processed, where metalingual insufficiency results in a failure to distinguish between hierarchies of messages and contexts. Here the historical world and the alternative or fantasy world merge. In metafiction they are always held in a state of tension, and the relationship between them – between 'play' and 'reality' – is the main focus of the text.

It is therefore play as a rule-governed activity, one involving 'assimilation of' and 'accommodation to' (Piaget's terms) the structures of the everyday world, as much as play as a form of escapism, of release from 'having to mean', which interests metafictional writers. As Gina Politi has argued:

There is some truth in the historical fact that whenever man has to be defined as man equals child, the edenic period whereby he can live without structures is short-lived and another game is invented which brings in the law-maker who declares what games are and what they are not.

(Politi 1976, p. 60)

Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) achieved the success it did because of its accurate perception of this point.

Another fictional response to the sense of oppression by the endless systems and structures of present-day society – with its technologies, bureaucracies, ideologies, institutions and traditions – is the construction of a play world which consists of similar endless systems and structures. Thomas Pynchon and Joseph

McElroy both construct novels whose vast proliferation of counter-systems and counter-games suggests one way of eluding the apparent predetermination of the structures of the everyday world. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and McElroy's *Lookout Cartridge* (1974) function through informational overload and apparent overdetermination. However, the systems and structures presented to the reader never add up to a body of meaning or an interpretation. Documentation, obsessional systems, the languages of commerce, of the legal system, of popular culture, of advertising: hundreds of systems compete with each other, collectively resisting assimilation to any one received paradigm and thus the normal channels of data-processing.

In McElroy's *A Smuggler's Bible* (1966) the central motif of smuggling, of counterfeiting, of forging, of deceiving, set against the 'absolute truth', the concordance of origins and endings of the Bible, is explored as much through what the language *is* as what it *says*. The central character David Brooke, like Borges' mnemonist, suffers from total recall of information and breaks down. The novel also breaks down. Neither Brooke nor the novel can absorb and organize the numerous and contradictory codes and registers of language with which they are both confronted and constructed. Mythical, biblical, numerical, geographical, physical and metaphysical explanations break down into a total overdetermination of meaning, which therefore becomes meaningless.

The image of the smuggler's bible is in fact just one of the many examples in recent literature of versions of the 'black box', contemporary culture's answer to the Grail. The image appears explicitly in another story concerned with human attempts to resist technological and social determinism: Barthelme's 'The Explanation', in the collection entitled *City Life* (1970). The story is a parody of an interview between an anonymous Q and A about the identity and meaning of a black box which is typographically reproduced at the beginning of the story. At one level the story is

simply and directly metafictional: it is 'about' the non-interpretability of itself:

Q: It has beauties

A: The machine

Q: Yes. We construct these machines not because we confidently expect them to do what they are designed to do – change the government in this instance – but because we intuit a machine out there, glowing like a shopping centre.

(p. 72)

Halfway through, Q introduces a series of 'error messages', corrections by a computer of uninterpretable programs, which in this instance all refer to the story itself, in a 'computerized' literary-critical discourse:

undefined variable . . . improper sequence of operators . . .  
improper use of hierarchy . . . missing operator . . . mixed mode,  
that one's particularly grave . . . argument of a function is fixed-  
point . . . improper character in constant . . . invalid character  
transmitted in sub-program statement, that's a bitch . . . NO END  
statement

(P. 73)

Later, Q tells the reader: 'The issues are not real in the sense that they are touchable.' A (the reader substitute within the story), however, still manages to process the message, sees in the black box a face, an extraordinarily handsome girl stripping, a river, a chair, a human narrative, or at least the raw materials of one. Barthelme's story dramatizes the human propensity to construct its own systems and interpretations in order to resist technological determinism and dehumanization. If the machine operates in terms of its own cybernetic game theory, Barthelme shows that his fiction can operate through simply recontextualizing its messages within his own 'play' world.

Such fiction, however, moves towards a form of play which one theorist has termed the 'illinx': an entropic, self-annihilating

form which represents an attempt to 'momentarily destroy the stability of perceptions and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind . . . a kind of seizure or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness' (Caillois 1962, p. 25). Fictions of aleation or randomness can be placed in this category. Metafiction functions through the problematization rather than the destruction of the concept of 'reality'. It depends on the regular construction and subversion of rules and systems. Such novels usually set up an internally consistent 'play' world which ensures the reader's absorption, and then lays bare its rules in order to investigate the relation of 'fiction' to 'reality', the concept of 'pretence'.

Two theories of play will briefly be considered here: that of Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1949) and that of Roger Caillois in *Man, Play and Games* (1962). Huizinga defines play as a free activity which 'transpires in an explicitly circumscribed time and space, is carried out in an orderly fashion according to given rules and gives rise to group relations which often surround themselves with mystery or emphasize through disguises their difference from the ordinary world' (Huizinga 1949, pp. 34–5). This accords with the notion of 'play' implicit in most metafictional novels.

There is a central contradiction in both Huizinga's and Caillois's definition of play, however, which is precisely where metafictional interest is focused. They appear to argue that the main significance of play is its civilizing influence, but Huizinga explicitly states at one point that he sees civilization becoming less and less playful. Yet elsewhere he argues that he sees 'man' as becoming more and more civilized. The way out of this problem (and the perspective asserted by most metafictional writing) is implicit in the second part of Caillois's book where he argues that it is precisely an awareness of play *as* play which constitutes the civilizing, as opposed to the brutally instinctual, possibilities of play. The positive emphasis thus shifts to the laying bare of the rules of the game. 'Illinx' becomes associated with attempts at pure mimesis and is seen to result in alienation. The player loses him or herself in a fantasy world and actually becomes the role being played (a favourite metafictional theme – as, for example, in Muriel

Spark's *The Public Image* (1968)) or attempts to impose it on others as 'reality'. In literature, then, realism, more than aleatory art, becomes the mode most threatening to full civilization, and metafiction becomes the mode most conducive to it!

The current 'playfulness' within the novel is certainly not confined merely to literary form but is part of a broader development in culture which is registered acutely in all post-modernist art. As Michael Beaujour suggests:

The desire to play a game in reverse usually arises when the straight way of playing has become a bore . . . the rules of the game, which although arbitrary, had somehow become 'natural' to the players, now seem artificial, tyrannical and dead: the system does not allow for sufficient player freedom within it and must be discarded. Although only a system can replace a system, the interregnum may be experienced as total freedom. In fact, it is but the moment of a new deal.

(Beaujour 1968, p. 60)

Freedom is the moment when the game or the genre is being discarded, but the rules of the new one are not yet defined and are therefore experienced as the 'waning of former rules' (ibid.). Metafiction is in the position of examining the old rules in order to discover new possibilities of the game. In its awareness of the serious possibility of play, it in fact echoes some of the major concerns of twentieth-century thought: Piaget's work on the educational value of play; Wittgenstein's view of language as a set of games; the existential notion of reality as a game of being; the possibility of the endless play of language through the release of the signifier in post-structuralist theory such as that of Lacan or Derrida and, of course, the proliferation of popular psychology books such as Eric Berne's *Games People Play*. Even in the commercial world, game theory is an increasingly important aspect of systems analysis. A new emphasis on the importance of discovering fresh combinations in probability and risk is shown in the application of game theory, for example, to economic or political problems.

Some metafictional novelists make the reader explicitly aware of his or her role as player. The reader of *The French Lieutenant's*

*Woman*, having to choose an ending, becomes a player in the game, one very much modelled on the Heideggerian game of being. In the title story of B. S. Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* (1973), an adventure story in which nothing happens, the reader is told to 'provide your own surmises or even your own ending, as you are inclined' (p. 41). Barthelme and Federman present the reader with acrostics, puzzles to be solved, and black boxes or blank pages to interpret, according to the reader's own fictional predilections. Calvino's novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, addresses the reader in the second person and explicitly discusses the supremacy of his or her activity in realizing the text imaginatively. The 'Dear Reader' is no longer quite so passive and becomes in effect an acknowledged fully active player in a new conception of literature as a collective creation rather than a monologic and authoritative version of history.

All metafiction 'plays' with the form of the novel, but not all playfulness in fiction is of the metafictional variety. Metafiction very deliberately undermines a system, unlike, say, aleatory or Dadaist art which attempts to embrace randomness or 'illinx'. In a novel like Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, there is playfulness but none of the systematic flaunting characteristic of metafiction. (The effect is perhaps closer to that of Márquez's fictions, where fantastic events and situations are integrated into a basically realistic context with no narratorial hint of their impossibility or absurdity.) Only a common deployment of the title links the separate sections of the novel. It is metafictional only to the extent that it foregrounds the arbitrary relationship between words and things and lays bare the construction of meaning through metaphorical substitution. For the most part, it is fabulatory because the reader is never required systematically to connect the artifice of the narrative with the problematic 'real' world, or to explore the mode of fictional presentation.

Another sort of fiction is that built around the idea or rules of an actual game, as in Coover's 'Panel Game' (1971) or *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.* (1968) and Nabokov's *The Defence* (1964). The latter, for example, is close to metafiction in that the game of chess, traditionally a metaphor for life, is used here as a metaphor for the strategies of art. Luzhin is one of Nabokov's

familiar artist *manqué* figures, playing blind games of chess in order to achieve abstract perfection until the 'consecutive repetition of a familiar pattern' (p. 168) becomes an invincible opponent taking over his life. In a state of paranoia similar to Woolf's Septimus Smith, he throws himself out of the window and dies in what his chess-obsessed mind has taken to be a real-life game. The novel suggests that each person is to some extent the victim of his or her own games with reality, but that the mistake is to search for a perfect form of order.

The 'problem of the equality of appearance and numbers' (*Pricksongs and Descants*, p. 8) – that is, of play with combination and permutation – is a favourite device in metafiction. Writers employing such techniques, through a heightened sense of the randomness of the world, have come to see its configuration, in whatever mathematical or other combination they choose, as just as correspondent with reality as the paradigms of realism. Italo Calvino suggests that the combinative impulse has been basic to literature from the beginning; that in ancient times 'the storyteller would delve into the natural resources of his own stock of words. He did this by combinations and permutations of all the characters, activities and tangible objects which could be invoked in the repertoire of actions' (Calvino 1970, p. 93). He suggests that this forms a kind of generative grammar of narrative which makes renewal possible. Combinative play in metafiction is concerned with the self-consciously performed reintroduction into the literary system of previously outworn modes and the exposure of present exhausted forms often unrecognized as such. Further, the element of chance in combination may throw up a whole new possibility which rational exploration might not have discovered.

Samuel Beckett begins with the perception that habit and routine form the substructure of most individual existences. He therefore uses both as the starting point for his fiction and pushes them to a logical extreme which reveals not only their *absurdity* but also their *necessity* in a world that has no innate structure of its own. Malone tells himself stories that are made to correspond, through his own conceptualizations, with the apparent structure of his life, which itself turns out to be only the story he narrates. He provides variety in this life by means of the slightly shifting repetitions that



he consciously forces upon the narrative process. *Malone Dies* (1951) has to be understood in these terms, for the patterns Malone sets up seem to bear not even an analogous relationship to the meaning of the world outside him.

In *Watt* (1953) the protagonist totally replaces the world with his verbal constructs when he realizes the impossibility of transcribing it. In attempting to grasp the meaning of phenomena, he enumerates every possible combination and permutation he can think of for each set of circumstances, in an attempt to construct a system which will offer him a stable identity. However, as Mr Nixon tells Mr Hackett, 'I tell you nothing is known. Nothing' (p. 20). The human mind is a fallible instrument of measurement and the external world a chaos. Knowledge derived from human calculation or generalization can only demonstrate the epistemological distance between consciousness and objective reality, however exhaustive the account. The Lynch family, attempting to total one thousand years of age between them, have their calculations completely undermined by the textual superiority of the footnote informing the reader: 'The figures given here are incorrect. The consequent calculations are . . . doubly erroneous' (p. 101). Even if the figures were not in some epistemological doubt, the reader's attention has anyway been called to the ontological status of the fictional text. Watt's life is full of similarly fruitless calculations, like the half-page of combinations of 'man' and 'woman' in the attempt to settle the question of whether Mrs Gorman is a 'Man's woman' and whether she and Watt will therefore suit each other. The passage begins with an oscillation between polarities – of gender, of rhymes (the arbitrary sound-relations in language such as 'Watt' and 'not'), of terms like 'call' and 'countercall' – but this simple binary opposition is abandoned, to end with: 'that meant nothing' (p. 141) (not even the binary opposition of all *or* nothing but the identity of all *with* nothing).

The problem is that to cover the infinite number of possible situations that can arise from a finite number of experiences would involve the use of infinite numbers of words and repetitions. Beckett's attempt to show this makes the text become rather like an official form which asks one to delete the irrelevant information. The contradiction between, on the one hand, an abstract

methodology which constructs a 'system' and, on the other, the apparent concrete illogical 'reality' of experience in the world (which Realism chooses to treat as one and the same) is, in fact, irreconcilable. So Watt constructs his own system of 'Kriks' and 'Kraks'. Instead of trying to force correspondence between his system and the world, he simply ignores the world.

Many of Beckett's characters spend their fictional lives in various forms of serious play, attempting to come to terms with this problem. Combination is foregrounded even on a stylistic level, as in *Waiting for Godot* (1956): 'Let us not then speak ill of our generation. . . . Let us not speak well of it either. . . . Let us not speak of it at all. . . . It is true the population has increased' (p. 33). This spiralling sentence structure is very common in much of his work. So is the use of contradiction, as in the end of 'Dante and the Lobster' (*More Pricks than Kicks*, 1934): 'Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all. It is not' (p. 19), which functions in a way and with effects similar to the footnote in *Watt*.

In *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965) the second sentence, 'Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly omit', suggests that poetic descriptions are no longer valid, and substitutes the mathematical: 'Diameter three feet, three feet from ground. . . . Two diameters at right angles AB CD divide the white ground into two semicircles ACB BDA.' The human subject is suddenly inserted into the geometry problem – 'the head against the wall at B, the arse against the wall at A, the knees against the wall between B and C' – and the text breaks down into a series of oppositions: white/black, human/mathematical, light/dark, heat/ice, in a sequence again of colliding combinations which reduce this world to variations on the alignments of ABCD (pp. 7–14).

Calvino's fiction also uses these strategies of combination. In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) a footnote tells the reader that the 'author' (who is effectively made redundant by the information) generated the text in the manner reproduced in fact by the narrative situation: a group of characters who are mute tell their stories by selecting and combining the images from a pack of tarot cards. These combinations and selections, drawing from a total system of literature (a *langue*), produce individual utterances (*paroles*) or stories which have meaning only through their

differential relation with implied archetypal stories recurring throughout: *Oedipus*, the Grail legend, *Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*. The contemporary 'author', now the contemporary categorizer, is himself produced through the textual combinations. He believes that to write a 'great work' of literature simply involves the provision of a reference catalogue of existing 'great works', an ultimate intertextual key. The possibilities of 'literature as system' begin to obsess him, until he realizes: 'It was absurd to waste any more time on an operation whose implicit possibilities I had by now explored completely, an operation that made sense only as theoretical hypothesis' (p. 120).

Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* discovers a more effective way out of this endlessly permutating system: the use of overtly metafictional, and in particular parodistic, devices. The novel opens with a direct address to the reader in the situation of reading, and a metalingual discourse upon the construction of the plot and the relation of *histoire* to *discours*. This confuses the ontological levels of the text with descriptions like: 'The novel begins in a railway station . . . a cloud of smoke hides the first part of the paragraph' (p. 8). Here the situation of *narration* is confused with the situation of the *histoire*, reminding the reader that descriptions in novels are always creations of that which is to be described: that the language in this sense refers ultimately to itself. Throughout we are reminded of the status of the book as an *artefact* through references to missing pages, pages stuck together, disordered pages. We are reminded also of its *intertextual* existence through the fragments of novels, stories and narratives embedded within the outer frame. (Again this is a very common metafictional device, used extensively, for example, by Flann O'Brien, B. S. Johnson, John Irving and Donald Barthelme.) Both Beckett and Calvino metafictionally 'play' with possibilities of combination, but through techniques like irony provide themselves with escape routes from the endless permutations of systems which might continually change their surface forms but which retain their inherent structures. Other novelists may choose to impose extreme formal constraints on themselves, which, in their arbitrariness, metafictionally reflect back on the conventional contracts which legitimize 'meaning'. Two examples of this literary production in a

very closed field are Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* (1974) and Gilbert Sorrentino's *Splendide-Hotel* (1973).

*Alphabetical Africa* works on the principle that every sentence in the first chapter is composed only of words beginning with 'A'. Chapter 2 adds 'B' words, and so on. The linguistic structure dictates both formal effects and meaning. The narrator, for example, cannot be introduced as a person until 'I'. He literally awaits creation through language. Alliteration cannot function because, instead of being a technique of linguistic deviance and thus foregrounded, it is the stylistic norm until well into the novel. Even the story and the development of the plot are determined by what can be constructed out of the available linguistic elements. At 'M', therefore, a murder can occur which could change the whole course of the action. At 'O' the reader is told: 'One is always either moving forwards or backwards, one is always driven by insane but meticulously considered needs.' Thus even the historic 'one', the non-person existing outside the discourse, is ultimately constructed through it (explicitly, therefore, through an arbitrary order and set of distinctions).

A similar example of what Abish has referred to as language as a 'field of action' is Sorrentino's *Splendide-Hotel*. Here, however, the letters of the alphabet merely serve to trigger off verbal musings. The *Splendide-Hotel*, though never defined, is clearly the verbal imagination itself, seen as intrinsically playful rather than intrinsically aesthetic. The narrator intrudes with the information that 'I insist I do not speak of this game as art, yet it is close to art in that it is so narrowly itself: it does not stand for anything else' (p. 14). He thus offers a view of literature similar to that formulated by Roman Jakobson: the view that literature is a message for its own sake, or a message about itself (Jakobson 1960). However, both Abish and Sorrentino, in their self-contained linguistic play, tend to point the direction from metafiction to a 'literature of silence', or a pure formalism, a literature solely concerned with its own linguistic processes.

### The linguistic universe: reality as construct

Frame analysis and play theory are areas of contemporary social investigation which illumine the practice of metafiction and show the sensitivity of its response to cultural change. They are each, however, aspects of a broader shift in thought and practice whereby reality has increasingly come to be seen as a construct. Hegel, in fact, suggested that history be contemplated as a work of art, for in retrospect it 'reads' like a novel: its end is known. Metafiction suggests not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested, like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independently of human design.

This is the theme of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975). Like much British self-conscious fiction, however, the novel manages to suggest the fictionality of 'reality' without entirely abandoning realism. The only *blatantly* metafictional moment is when an academic novelist, clearly recognizable as a surrogate for Bradbury himself, scurries across the corridor of Watermouth University where the novel is set. (He is, interestingly, presented as a very minor and ineffectual character.) A close analysis of *The History Man*, though, reveals an intense preoccupation, formally as well as thematically, with the notion of history as fiction. Even the opening paragraph is less a piece of realistic prose than a *parody* of realism. The continual use of deliberately well-worn phrases about the Kirks (Howard's 'two well-known and disturbing books'; p. 3); the antithetical structures and parallelisms ('You buy the drinks, I'll buy the food'; p. 8); the juxtaposition of normally unrelated items such as 'a new kind of Viennese coffee cake to eat and a petition to sign' (p. 3): these function not only to parody the Kirks' lifestyle but to foreground the ways in which that lifestyle is also a consequence of Bradbury's obtrusive *linguistic* style.

The Kirks are explicitly 'types' who exist in the service of plot: the plot of history/fiction which envelops the plotter Howard through the superior shaping powers of the novelist himself. He, allowing Howard the delusion of freedom, reminds the reader of his ultimate control through the ironic repetition of events at the end.

The significance of these events Howard, of course, fails to grasp, trapped as he is both in his own 'lifestyle' and in Bradbury's 'fictional style'. Howard acts as though he were the embodiment of history and thus in control of both his own and others' destinies. Although 'the days may lie contingently ahead of them . . . the Kirks always have a plot of many events' (p. 52). Howard confuses his own plots, however, with those of history – here constructed through language by Bradbury himself. It is Miss Callendar (whose name suggests time as contingency, as escape from plot) who points out the multiple possibilities of interpretation, the numerous plots that can be drawn out of, or imposed on, any historical or fictional situation. It is she who exposes Howard's plot as 'a piece of late nineteenth-century realism' (p. 209).

The notion of the fictionality of the plots of history is textually reinforced through a variety of techniques. The dialogue, for example, is submerged in the main narrative to suggest the ways in which our individual interpretations are always parts of larger ones. This foregrounds the provisional status within the overall *discours* of any character's or narrator's speech act. The reader is taken into the dynamic present tense of Howard's plots, yet reminded of Freud's law of displacement – that it is impossible to see the world other than as we wish it to be – by the ostentatious entries of the greater plot-maker, the novelist, into the text. He functions to set fictional desire against fictional reality and to show how one is translated into the other.

To some extent the idea that life involves the construction of plots has always been a preoccupation of the novel. Richard Poirier, in fact, has suggested that Americans have always treated reality as their own construction; they have always realized that 'through language it is possible to create environments radically different from those supported by political and social systems' (Poirier 1967, p. 16). Thus the notion of history as either a rather badly made plot or a fiendish conspiracy is more deeply rooted in the American than in the British novel.

A comparison of the exploration of plots in John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) with that undertaken by Bradbury in *The History Man* illustrates very well such differences between these two fictional traditions. The characters in both novels self-

consciously participate in plots, whether of their own or others' making. In Barth's novel, however, *all* the characters are self-consciously plotters. Ebenezer argues that what the cosmos lacks human beings must supply themselves, and Burlingame gives philosophic respectability to the notion of plotting, while using it like Howard to gain personal advantages. However, in this world, because the plots are so much more anonymous, proliferating and uncontrollable, the characters' behaviour appears far more desperate and absurd than Howard's self-assured exploitation of Marx, Freud, Hegel and undergraduate innocence. Even Barth's demonstration of his authorial control through the overplot of the mythic quest is continually and ironically undercut to give the sense, as Burlingame expresses it, that 'the very universe is nought but change and motion' (p. 137).

The consequence of this, though, is that, in attempting to embrace all, his characters embrace nothing but the 'baroque exhaustion of the frightening guises of reality' (Barth 1967, p. 81). In the novel as a whole, moreover, the metafictional bones are often left obtruding from a very thin human covering. The reader is presented, in fact, with a fictional world in many ways akin to Borges' Tlön, where history lessons teach that 'already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty – not even that it is false' (*Labyrinths*, pp. 42–3). In *The History Man* the stable ironic voice of the author ensures that the reader can observe and evaluate Howard's version of the past and his imposition of various images and plots upon the present. But in *The Sot-Weed Factor* there is no such area of narrative stability. Plot is all.

The concept of reality as a fiction has been theoretically formulated within many disciplines and from many political and philosophical positions. One of the clearest *sociological* expositions is in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1971). They set out to show that 'reality' is not something that is simply given. 'Reality' is manufactured. It is produced by the interrelationship of apparently 'objective facticities' in the world with social convention and personal or interpersonal vision. These social forms operate within particular historical structures of power and frameworks of

knowledge. Continual shifts in the structures of knowledge and power produce continual resyntheses of the reality model. Contemporary reality, in particular, is continually being reappraised and resynthesized. It is no longer experienced as an ordered and fixed hierarchy, but as a web of interrelating, multiple realities.

Moving *through* this reality involves moving from one 'reality' to another. Most of the time, however, we are not conscious of these shifts. Habit, instrumented through social institutions and conventions, normally disguises movement between levels, and confers an apparent homogeneity upon social experience. It is only when a convention is exposed as such that the lacunae between levels are also exposed.

Berger and Luckmann suggest that convention and habit are necessary because human beings need to have their choices narrowed for significant action to take place. Habit ensures that patterns can be repeated in such a way that the meaning of an action is not retained at the level of consciousness. If this were not so, the action could not be effortlessly performed. (This is also, of course, the basis for realistic fiction. When the conventions regarding fictive time, for example, are undermined in *Tristram Shandy*, the novel never gets under way as an *histoire* but functions only as a self-regarding *discours* which never quite manages to get the story told.) Habitualization provides for direction and specialization, by freeing our energies for more productive ends. It opens up a 'foreground for deliberation and innovation' (Berger and Luckmann 1971, p. 71). Conventions can, however, become oppressive and rigidified, completely naturalized. At this point they need to be re-examined, both in life and in fiction.

Everyday reality is, however, for Berger and Luckmann, 'reality *par excellence*'. It imposes itself massively on consciousness so that, although we may doubt its reality, 'I am obliged to suspend this doubt as I routinely exist in everyday life' (ibid., pp. 35–7). Problems that interrupt this flow are seen to be translated into its terms and assimilated: 'Consciousness always returns to the paramount reality as from an excursion' (ibid., p. 58). According to this view, the 'meta' levels of fictional and social



discourse might shift our notion of reality slightly but can never totally undermine it.

Berger and Luckmann argue further, however, that language is the main instrument for maintaining this everyday reality: 'Everyday life is above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellow men [*sic!*] (ibid., pp. 39–40). Thus texts which move towards a breakdown of the language system, presenting reality as a set of equally non-privileged competing discourses, *can* be seen as resisting assimilation into the terms of the everyday. They attempt, in fact, radically to unsettle our notion of the 'real'. (Doris Lessing's protagonist Anna, for example, in *The Golden Notebook*, loses her precarious hold on this 'everyday life' when she feels 'at a pitch where words mean nothing' (p. 462), because in this novel 'reality *par excellence*' is represented by the misrepresentational, inauthentic language of 'Free Women' which freezes the everyday – 'British life at its roots' – into a mocking parody of itself.)

What has to be acknowledged is that there are two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language and either delights or despairs in this. The first sort employs *structural* undermining of convention, or parody, using a specific previous text or system for its base (novelists like Fowles, Spark, Vonnegut, Lessing) because language is so pre-eminently the instrument which maintains the everyday. The second is represented by those writers who conduct their fictional experiments even at the level of the *sign* (like Barthelme, Brautigan, Ishmael Reed, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) and therefore fundamentally disturb the 'everyday'.

Berger and Luckmann do not, in fact, give enough attention to the centrality of language in constructing everyday reality. It is this exposure of 'reality' in terms of 'textuality', for example, which has provided the main critique of realism. As Barthes argued:

These facts of language were not perceptible so long as literature pretended to be a transparent expression of either objective calendar time or of psychological subjectivity . . . as long as literature maintained a totalitarian ideology of the

referent, or more commonly speaking, as long as literature was 'realistic'.

(Barthes 1972c, p. 138)

By 'these facts', of course, he means the extent to which language *constructs* rather than merely *reflects* everyday life: the extent to which meaning resides in the relations between signs *within* a literary fictional text, rather than in their reference to objects *outside* that text.

Metafictional texts often take as a theme the frustration caused by attempting to relate their linguistic condition to the world outside. Coover's 'Panel Game' (1969) parodies the attempt to find an all-encompassing truth in language, by showing the narrator caught up in a maze of the myriad possibilities of meaning, of *paroles* with no discoverable *langues*, while all the possible functions of language – emotive, referential, poetic, conative, phatic and, finally, metalingual – whirl around him:

So think. Stickleback. Freshwaterfish. Freshwaterfish: green seaman. Seaman: semen. Yes, but green: raw? spoiled? vigorous? Stickle: stubble. Or maybe scruple. Back: Bach: Bacchus: bachate: berry. Rawberry? Strawberry.

(*Pricksongs and Descants*, p. 63)

Through the emphasis on the arbitrary associations of sound, rhyme and image, attention is drawn to the *formal* organization of words in literature and away from their *referential* potential. The passage could almost be a deliberate flaunting of Jakobson's notion of literary form (for a full discussion of this, see Lodge 1977a). Jakobson argues that the poetic function of language manifests itself by projecting the paradigmatic or metaphorical dimension of language (the vertical dimension which functions through substitution) on to the syntagmatic or metonymic plane (the horizontal dimension which works through combination). In this passage, the speaker is wholly at the mercy of these internal operations of language, condemned to the substitution of one arbitrary phoneme for another: 'Stickleback. Freshwaterfish

[metonymic] Freshwaterfish: green seaman [metonymic/metaphoric] seaman: semen [metaphoric] . . .'

The notion of reality as a construct, explored through textual self-reference, is now firmly embedded in the contemporary novel, even in those novels that appear to eschew radically experimental forms or techniques. Muriel Spark's work is a good example of this development, for she uses textual strategies of self-reference, yet still maintains a strong 'story' line. This alerts the reader to the condition of the text, to its state of 'absence', just as much as a novel by Sorrentino or Sarraute or any other more obviously post-modernist writer whose embodiment of the paradoxes of fictionality necessitates the total rejection of traditional concepts of plot and character.

In Spark's first novel *The Comforters* (1957) the character Mrs Hogg (the name itself undermines the tendency of realistic fiction to assign apparently 'arbitrary' non-descriptive names to characters) forces her overwhelming physical and mental presence upon the other characters and upon the reader. The novel, however, goes on to delight in demonstrating the impossibility of this presence. Her physical grossness appears to be metaphorically (and conventionally realistically) related to her inner moral condition. She appears, in this sense, to be a full presence. Yet, shortly after one of the characters utters the familiar metaphorical cliché that Mrs Hogg appears to be 'not all there', the narrator informs us that 'as soon as Mrs Hogg stepped into her room, she disappeared, she simply disappeared. She had no private life whatsoever, God knows where she went in her privacy' (p. 154). Mrs Hogg's absence becomes as troublesome and problematical as her huge and physically grotesque presence. When Caroline (the central character who becomes aware that her life is writing itself into a novel) opens the door to Mrs Hogg's knock, she at first receives the impression that 'nobody was there', and afterwards Mrs Hogg is described as 'pathetic and lumpy as a public response' (p. 182).

The incongruous tagging of an adjective normally tied to objects as physically palpable as Mrs Hogg to something as intangible as a 'public response' brings into focus the relationship between her spiritual and physical reality. She is simultaneously, massively, physically *present* and totally, spiritually *absent*.

Through an ostensibly whimsical trick, Spark raises a *moral* point about the ethics of those who 'stand for' goodness and righteousness and ultimately become slaves to the public image of their cause. Such people, like Hogg with her fanatical moral intrusiveness, thereby corrupt the inner worth of their causes. Beyond this, however, Spark also makes an *ontological* point concerning the status of fictional objects. Georgiana Hogg is a public figure in all senses of the word because she is contained by, and exists through, the public medium of language. Thus, having been designated a minor role in the plot, when not essential to its unfolding, she does not exist. The moral and existential points are both made through the metafictional exposure.

The device is used throughout Spark's work, but always with some realistic motivation. Characters are never presented merely as words on the page. Lise, in *The Driver's Seat* (1970), sustains the plot momentum by her desperate search for a man to murder her. She does not know the man but can confidently identify him: 'not really a presence, the lack of an absence' (p. 71) – a remark which could stand, of course, as a definition of any character in fiction. Humphrey Place in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) is given a similar point of view when he replies to the chameleon-like Dougal's suggestion that he take time off: 'No I don't agree to that . . . absenteeism is downright immoral' (p. 49); and he later affirms, 'once you start absenting yourself you lose your self-respect' (p. 87).

Characters are absent because they are linguistic signs, and because they are morally deficient. In the earlier novels the connection between the aesthetic and the moral interpretation of the word 'absenteeism' is based on the perceived connection between inventing a character in fiction and fictionalizing in life in order to escape moral responsibility and to glorify the self. In *The Comforters* this self is a moral reformer, Mrs Hogg. The self might be a great pedagogue and leader, Jean Brodie, or a great aesthete ('each new death gave him something fresh to feel'), Percy Mannering (*Memento Mori* (1959), p. 22). The self can even be a mask, an actress, 'something between Jane Eyre, a heroine of D. H. Lawrence and the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*' – Annabel in *The Public Image* (p. 20). In the later novels, *Not to Disturb* (1971)

or *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), aesthetic and moral issues become interchangeable, so the Abbess does not long for beatification but declares at the end of the novel: 'I am become an object of art' (p. 125).

Characters in fiction are, of course, literally signs on a page before they are anything else. The implications of this provide a fairly simple creative starting point for much metafictional play. Is a character more than a word or a set of words? B. S. Johnson, for example, is clearly drawn towards a traditional liberal-humanist treatment of his characters and yet displays the conviction that they exist merely as the words he chooses to put on the page. In *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (1973) Johnson continually intrudes into the text to remind the reader that Christie is whatever fortuitous collection of words happened to enter his head during composition. Yet, at his death-bed scene, the necessary human awfulness of the situation forces Johnson to abandon his focus on *verbal* interaction and to shift to apparent *interpersonal* relationship. The author visits Christie in hospital, 'and the nurses suggested I leave, not knowing who I was, that he could not die without me' (p. 180). The self-conscious literary irony is clearly secondary to the pathos and absurdity of the represented human situation.

Johnson uneasily accommodates a notion of 'absence', an awareness of the linguistic construction of the reality of the text, within a broadly based realistic framework. He never abandons realism in the manner of the *nouveau roman*, of American writers such as Barthelme or Brautigan, or even of such British fiction as that of Christine Brooke-Rose and Ann Quin or Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969). In many of these writers' novels the sign as sign to a large extent overtly replaces any imaginary referent such as realism might offer. To be aware of the sign is thus to be aware of the absence of that to which it apparently refers and the presence only of relationships with other signs within the text. The novel becomes primarily a world of words, self-consciously a replacement for, rather than an appurtenance of, the everyday world.

Again, although this awareness of the problems of representation is far from new, it has clearly come to dominate contemporary critical theory, and increasingly fiction itself. It is true to say, though, that in most British writing the problem tends to

be explored thematically, or through macro-structures like plot and narrative voice. The problem of 'absence' is here an extension of the notion that a fictional world is created by a real author through a series of choices about the deployment of linguistic units, but nevertheless in some sense constitutes a version of the everyday world. The sign as sign is still, to a large extent, self-effacing in such fiction.

Ernst Cassirer made the point that signs and symbols have to annul presence to arrive at representation. An existing object is made knowable only through a symbol – by being translated into something it is not. The given can thus be known only through the non-given (the symbol), without which we would have no access to empirical reality. As Cassirer puts it: 'Without the relations of unity and otherness, of similarity and dissimilarity, of identity and difference, the work of intuition can acquire no fixed form' (quoted in Iser 1975, P. 17). In other words, it is *because* symbols are not reality and do not embody any of the actual properties of the world that they allow us to perceive this world, and ultimately to construct it for ourselves and be constructed within it. Writing necessitates 'absence', and to this extent metafictional writers like Muriel Spark can be seen fictionally to embody this ultimately 'commonsense', rather than 'radical' position.

John Fowles explores the concept from a similar, finally realistically motivated position in his story 'The Enigma' (1969). The exploration is provided with a foundation in psychological realism through the disappearance of the establishment figure of John Marcus Fielding. The missing-person motif is, of course, one of the best-established conventions of that supremely rational genre, the detective story. Here, as in Spark's novels, however, it is used in contravention. Through the metafictional play with definitions of fictional character, the motif is used to suggest possibilities which totally confound rational solution.

Fielding, as his son's ex-girlfriend suggests, seems to have disappeared because he felt himself, in Pirandellian fashion, to have been in the wrong story: 'There was an author in his life. In a way not a man. A system, a view of things? Something that had written him. Had really made him just a character in a book' (*The Ebony Tower*, p. 237). Again, thematic concerns are picked up at a level of

formal self-reflexivity. Fielding, she suggests, feels himself to lack identity. He is no 'different' from the stereotype of the upper-class member of the British establishment, and the only way of escaping his 'typicality' is to disappear: from the story, and from the 'typicality', the print, of the story itself. Once he has become a mystery, he exists as an individual, for 'Nothing lasts like a mystery. On condition that it stays that way. If he's traced, found, then it all crumbles again. He's back in a story, being written. A nervous breakdown. A nutcase. Whatever' (p. 239). Thus Fielding, through a recognition or 'laying bare' of his absence, becomes a real presence for the first time to the other characters in the story. But Fowles as author can also remind the reader that Fielding exists only if he cannot be 'traced', only if he is more than a literary-fictional 'character'. He never allows Fielding to rewrite his *own* story, only to change its interpretation through his disappearance. In fact, the effect of reading the hypothetical version of this disappearance is another reminder that the character Fielding is at the disposition of the author Fowles. The theory of his disappearance, which might be satisfactory 'in reality', appears to the reader as part of a text which he or she knows, and is then forced to admit, is *not* real. Attention is thus shifted away from the solution of the mystery towards an examination of the conventions governing the presentation of enigma in fiction.

The fiction of Johnson, Spark and Fowles is concerned, however, with a fairly restricted notion of absence. Although characters are paraded as fictions, often this is in order to suggest that we are all, *metaphorically*, fictions. This can even be reassuring: an affirmation of a substantial everyday world, however much we operate in terms of its metaphorical extensions. The 'disturbance' in a novel like Nathalie Sarraute's *The Golden Fruits* (1963) is much more extreme. Here the readings of *The Golden Fruits* by the readers in *The Golden Fruits* is the novel we are reading. The subject of the book is its non-existence outside its own repetitions. As the characters read the book we are reading, the text continually turns its own third-person narrative into a first-person discourse. The 'I' continually turns the 'he' into a 'you' in his or her *sous-conversation*. As the novel opens, for example:

the earth opens up. Enormous crevasse. And he, on the other side walking away without turning round . . . he should come back . . . don't abandon us . . . towards you . . . with you . . . on your side . . . take hold of what I'm throwing you. . . . Tell me have you read? . . . what did you think of it? (p. 11)

Desiring communication which is impossible because the level of narration is separate from the level of story, the 'I' attempts to treat the text itself as an addressee. This coming together of speaker and text is described as if they were lovers: 'We are so close to each other now, you are so much a part of me that if you ceased to exist, it would be as if a part of me had become dead tissue' (p. 142). The irony is that the text, of course, is the speaker, and vice versa. Like 'star-crossed lovers', they are dependent upon each other for existence (a more radically metafictional treatment of the problem examined in Johnson's *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*).

However, some British and American writing does, like Sarraute's, operate metafictionally at the level of the sign. In John Barth's 'Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction' (to which a note is added: 'the title "Autobiography" means self-composition: the antecedent of the first person narrator is not I but the story speaking of itself. I am its father, its mother is the recording machine'; *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 1), the story explicitly discusses its own 'identity' crisis. This involves its defects – 'absence of presence to name one' (p. 38) – and its attempts to 'compose' itself (p. 36), given these defects.

Gabriel Josipovici's *Moebius the Stripper* (1974) directly confronts the problem of absence by reproducing the text typographically in the form of a representation of a Möbius strip and exploring the crisis of Möbius, who has to die for the story to become text, who of course depends on the story for existence, but who cannot exist *because* of the story.

What the various fictional examples of this chapter suggest, in fact, is the extent to which the dominant issues of contemporary critical and sociological thought are shared by writers of fiction. This reveals, as one critic has said, that:



the case of being trapped inside an outworn literary tradition may be taken as a special symptom of the feeling that we are all trapped in our systems for measuring and understanding the world: that in fact there is no 'reality' except our systems of measuring.

(Forrest-Thompson 1973, p. 4)

The next chapter will examine the nature of this 'outworn literary tradition' and the centrality of metafictional writing in its renewal.

