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Are novelists liars? The ontological status of literary-fictional discourse

'Truth' and 'Fiction': is telling stories telling lies?

What is the status, in philosophical terms, of 'universes' outside the domain of the everyday world? As Berger and Luckmann point out, for most people the everyday world is the only 'real' world: it is 'reality *par excellence*' (Berger and Luckmann 1971). 'It's common sense', 'I saw it with my own eyes', 'Seeing is believing', 'in touch', 'Out of sight, out of mind': all implicitly invoke the belief in such a common phenomenological world. Literary realism appears to be a continuation or extension of this 'commonsense' world. Authorial comments serve to reinforce its general 'truths' and continually refer the reader to the content of everyday reality. The language of realism is generally metonymic: descriptions are presented as a selection from a whole which is the real world.

Previous chapters have explored how, as one moves from realism through modernist forms to contemporary metafiction, the shift is towards an acknowledgement of the primary reality not of this 'commonsense' context of everyday reality but of the *linguistic* context of the literary text. This chapter will explore the philosophical implications of this ontological shift through an

examination of the notion of 'context' offered by the metafictional text.

The meaning of an utterance in an *everyday* context is shaped by this context:

> the historical 'context' of an utterance does not merely surround it but occasions it, brings it into existence. The context of an utterance, then, is best thought of not simply as its gross external or physical setting, but rather as the total set of conditions that has in fact determined its occurrence and form.
> (Smith 1979, p. 16)

The successful comprehension of a so-called 'natural utterance' therefore depends on the resolution of indeterminacies of context. It depends upon the operation of the conventions of what J. L. Austin has termed the 'appropriateness conditions' relevant to each speech-act context (Austin 1962). This will include a variety of factors present in the immediate context: the relation of speaker to hearer, tone of voice, paralinguistic gestures, indexical reference to the immediate surroundings.

All written language, however, has to be organized in such a way as to recreate a context or to construct a new context verbally. All literary fiction has to construct a 'context' at the same time that it constructs a 'text', through entirely *verbal* processes. *Descriptions* of objects in fiction are simultaneously *creations* of that object. (*Descriptions* of objects in the context of the material world are determined by the existence of the object outside the description.) Thus the ontological status of fictional objects is determined by the fact that they exist by virtue of, whilst also forming, the fictional context which is finally the words on the page. Such language has to be highly conventional in order to perform simultaneously the function of creating a context and that of creating a text. Metafiction, in laying bare this function of literary conventions, draws attention to what I shall call the *creation/description* paradox which defines the status of *all* fiction.

Metafictional writers differ among themselves, however, over the precise relation of the verbal world of fiction to the everyday world. Writers such as E. L. Doctorow, Vladimir Nabokov, Muriel

Spark, Iris Murdoch, Kurt Vonnegut suggest that 'reality' exists *beyond* 'text' certainly, but may only be reached *through* 'text', that

> History – Althusser's 'absent cause', Lacan's 'Real' – is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be appropriated by way of prior (re)textualisation.
>
> (Jameson 1981, p. 82)

Fiction is here a means of explaining a reality which is distinct from it, it is 'an instrument for finding our way about more easily in this world' (Vaihinger 1924, p. 15). Writers like Gilbert Sorrentino and Donald Barthelme, however, suggest that the only difference beween literary fiction and reality is that the former is constructed entirely with language and this allows certain freedoms. It means, for example, that

> These people aren't real. I'm making them up as they go along, any section that threatens to flesh them out, or make them 'walk off the page', will be excised. They should, rather, walk into the page, and break up, disappear.
>
> (Gilbert Sorrentino, *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* 1971, p. 27)

The everyday world is merely another order of discourse so that, as one of the characters in Donald Barthelme's novel *Snow White* (1967) says:

> The moment I inject discourse from my universe of discourse into your universe of discourse, the yourness of yours is diluted. The more I inject it, the more you dilute. . . .
>
> (p. 46)

Literary fiction simply demonstrates the existence of multiple realities.

So why the obsession with the possibility or the implications of the charge that 'telling stories is telling lies'? Certainly a Platonic

concept of literature demands that imaginative freedom be morally justified. To the extent that this is a concern of all metafiction, its practitioners are Platonists. Telling stories may not, in fact, be telling lies, but until one has established the nature of 'truth' it will be impossible to know. So all metafictional novels have, finally, to engage with this question of the 'truth' status of literary fiction, and of necessity therefore with the question of the 'truth' status of what is taken to be 'reality'.

In attempting to define this ontological status of literary fiction, philosophers have traditionally fallen into two categories. First, there are the 'falsity' theorists, for whom fiction is clearly lies. Second, there are the 'non-referentiality' theorists (sometimes adopting the terms 'non-predication' or 'quasi-judgement') who argue that it is simply inappropriate to talk about the 'truth' status of literary fiction. Some metafictional writers adopt these positions, but on the whole most have collectively constructed a third category, suggested by John Fowles's reference to fiction as 'worlds as real as, but other than the world that is. Or was' (*The French Lieutenant's Woman,* p. 86).

In the rest of this chapter, metafictional writing will be related not only to the first two positions but more particularly to the third position (referred to as the 'alternative worlds' theory). Metafictional texts explore the notion of 'alternative worlds' by accepting and flaunting the creation/description paradox, and thus expose how the construction of contexts is also the construction of different universes of discourse. The rest of this book will examine how and to what extent metafiction destabilizes 'commonsense' contextual constructions of the everyday world. It will examine how this is achieved by preventing the reader from settling into any given context and by making him or her aware of possible alternatives to this 'commonsense' reality.

Reference, naming and the existence of characters

Whatever their philosophical view of fiction, aestheticians and metafictional writers, in exploring the relations between 'fiction' and 'reality', all address themselves to two problems: first, the paradox concerning the identity of fictional characters; second, the

status of literary-fictional discourse (the problem of referentiality). To take the first problem: a fictional character both exists and does not exist; he or she is a non-entity who is a somebody.

The speaker in John Barth's 'Night Sea Journey' (1968) thus cries out at the end of the story, when the dream is paradoxically accomplished:

> mad as it may be my dream is that some unimaginable embodiment of myself. . . . will come to find itself expressing in however garbled or radical a translation, some reflection of these reflections. If against all odds this comes to pass, may you to whom, through whom I speak, do what I cannot: terminate this aimless brutal business.
>
> (p. 12)

Here is a character that is only a voice, having knowledge of its existence only, it appears, when it utters. Yet it has no power to stop the utterance. The embodiment longed for is of something outside language, beyond an author, but it is of course the author's 'voice' which is the utterance; language which is the totality of existence; text which is reality.

This paradox is a favourite one of Jorge Luis Borges. The narrator of 'The Other' (1975), an old man called Jorge Luis Borges, realizes that he is sitting on a bench next to his younger self and concludes that the younger self must have dreamt him. In another of Borges' *ficciones,* 'The Circular Ruins' (1964), a man dreams another man into existence. The dreamer is then terrified that this man might discover he is only an image, a character in a fiction, but then discovers that he himself has been dreamt into existence by the man. Throughout many metafictional novels, characters suddenly realize that they do not exist, cannot die, have never been born, cannot act.

Or they start to perform impossible acts. In Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* the 'author' of the novel within the novel is tried by his characters while asleep for the injustices he has done to them. The characters at the end of Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* and John Barth's *Sabbatical,* begin to write the novel we have just been reading. In Barth's novel *Letters* (1979), characters

from Barth's other novels – Jacob Horner, Todd Andrews, Ambrose Mensch – write letters to themselves, to each other and to 'the Author'. One of the characters, who has previously read Barth's *The Floating Opera* and has met Todd Andrews, its hero, expresses reservations to the author, Mr B.: 'I felt a familiar uneasiness about the fictive life of real people and the factual life of "fictional" characters – familiar because, as I'm sure I have intimated, "I've been there before"' (p. 58). Another character signs his name 'The Author', and the other characters then address him as 'Mr John Barth'.

Barth himself has commented in an interview:

> The tragic view of characterization is that we cannot, no matter how hard we try, make real people by language. We can only make verisimilitudinous people. That view itself is on the minds of the characters themselves in a novel like *Letters*. . . . I take the tragic view of the tragic view of character.
>
> (Quoted in Ziegler and Bigsby 1982, p. 38)

As linguistic signs, the condition of fictional characters is one of absence: being and not being. Fictional characters do not exist, yet we know who they are. We can refer to them and discuss them. Fictional characters who are narrators exist in the same condition:

> Through all the detours that on e wishes,
> the subject who writes will neve r seize
> himself in the novel: he will onl y seize
> the novel which, by definition, ex cludes
> him . . .
>
> (Raymond Federman, *Double or Nothing,* unnumbered page between 146 and 147)

Our statements about literary-fictional characters can be verified only by consulting the statements which *are* those characters, which have brought them into existence. Metafictional novels continually alert the reader to this consequence of the creation/description paradox. To make a statement in fiction is to make a character. All statements have 'meaning' in relation to the

context in which they are uttered, but in fiction the statement is the character is the context. Thus characters in metafiction may explicitly dissolve into statements. They may act in ways totally deviant in terms of the logic of the everyday 'commonsense' world, but perfectly normal within the logic of the fictional world of which they are a part. They may travel in time, die and carry on living, murder their authors or have love affairs with them. Some may read about the story of their lives or write the books in which they appear. Sometimes they know what is going to happen to them and attempt to prevent it.

The question of the ontological status of fictional characters is ultimately inseparable from that of the question of the referentiality of fictional language. Both are fascinating to metafictional writers. Names in fiction refer to impossibilities that yet can be affirmed. We can refer to fictional characters by their names in the way that we refer to friends or relatives. However, as John Searle argues in *Speech Acts,* 'A proper name can only be a proper name if there is a genuine difference between the name and the thing named. If they are the same, the notion of naming and referring can have no application' (Searle 1969, p. 75). Searle might well now modify this statement, but it is still a useful way of pointing to the crucial fact that in fiction the description of an object brings that object into existence. In the everyday world the object determines the description. However much 'fiction' is seen as interchangeable with 'reality', the crucial difference remains that in *literary* fiction the world is entirely a *verbal* construct.

The use of names in traditional fiction is usually part of an aim to disguise the fact that there is no difference between the name and the thing named: to disguise this purely verbal existence. Metafiction, on the other hand, aims to focus attention precisely on the problem of reference. Here, proper names are often flaunted in their seeming arbitrariness or absurdity, omitted altogether (as in Nathalie Sarraute's work), or placed in an overtly metaphorical or adjectival relationship with the thing they name. Gilbert Sorrentino breaks into his novel *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971) to comment on a character called Dick:

> The first thing you should know about Dick (Detective) is that he is given this impossible name in order that the reader may ascertain certain things about his character. Or in all events, one certain thing. Basically, he was a gatherer of information. (p. 217)

Names are used to display the arbitrary control of the writer, and the arbitrary relationships of language: Pynchon's Stencil, Benny Profane, Oedipa Maas; Beckett's Watt, Hamm, Krapp; Fowles's Ernestina Freeman, Sarah Woodruff; Lessing's Anna Freeman; Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim. The degree of transparency in each case is dependent on the degree of adherence to realistic illusion. The technique is reminiscent of eighteenth-century fiction – Tom Jones, Roderick Random, Squire Allworthy – but is deployed explicitly to split open the conventional ties between the real and fictive worlds rather than to reinforce them by mapping out a moral framework. In metafiction such names remind us that, in *all* fiction, names can describe as they refer, that what is referred to has been created anyway through a 'naming' process.

'Falsity' and 'non-predication' theories

Searle argues that the 'principle of identification' establishes that, in order to exist, the object must be distinguishable from the speaker's utterance of it. This is the basis for his view that in fiction the proposition containing the reference cannot be said to be 'true', because the proposition that the object exists cannot be said to be true. This is broadly a 'non-predication' position. Such a view would argue that fictional statements do not 'really' refer but only appear to do so. Although linguistic signs normally denote the non-linguistic entities for which they are signs, this is not the case with literary fiction. Such theories begin to move towards an emphasis on the special nature of the relationship between utterance and context in fiction, the relations between word and word, rather than word and world:

> the difference between a sentence used as an actual assertion and the same sentence used as a mock assertion . . . is not mirrored in the syntactic or other features of the sentence. This

> difference is a matter of the purpose the receiver assumes the utterance to have.
>
> (Olsen 1978, p. 47)

To some extent nearly all metafictional writers are aware of this quasi-referential status of fiction. Some, however, choose to develop it in terms of an 'alternative reality' rather than privileging the 'everyday world' as the 'real reality'. Texts that consistently undermine every assertion with a reminder to the reader of its quasi-referential status must obviously occupy a 'non-predication' position. Such underminings thoroughly remove the fictional text from the context of 'common sense' and emphasize its special linguistic status.

In John Barth's story 'Lost in the Funhouse' (1968) almost every sentence is undermined and exposed as fictional. The text exists as a dialogue between the reader and different narrators about the validity of the conventions available for telling stories. After the description of a character, the reader is immediately informed: 'Descriptions of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction' (*Lost in the Funhouse,* pp. 73–4). Even sentences that appear to be reliable sources of information are so stylized as to offer an implicit comment on realism:

> Peter and Ambrose's father, while steering the black 1936 la Salle Sedan with one hand, could with the other, remove the first cigarette from a white pack of Lucky Strikes, and, more remarkably, light it with a match forefingered from its book and thumbed against the flint paper without being detached.
>
> (p. 75)

A mundane action is thus represented in a highly parenthesized, adjectivized sentence, using long pronominal phrases and extremely long qualifiers. The effect of this is to lull the reader, not into acceptance of the scene as *real,* but into acceptance of its reality as *a sentence in a book.* As with Tristram Shandy's attempt to recount his life-story, progression is always digression. The attempt exhaustively to describe anything constructs not an illusion of that object but a reminder of the presence of language.

Similarly, Raymond Federman in *Double or Nothing* continually rehearses possible narrative strategies. The novel as a whole is a commentary on the practice of writing fiction, with a novelist inside it writing a novel which is a commentary on the practice of writing fiction. It is a demonstration of Roland Barthes's view of how a metalanguage can become in its turn the language-object of a new metalanguage (Barthes 1967). At each stage in the novel, the outer narrator, the 'noodleman', agonizes about the many possible ways of telling the story (which becomes the story of its telling):

> FIRST PERSON
> or
> THIRD PERSON
>
> FIRST PERSON is more restrictive more subjective more personal harder
>
> THIRD PERSON is more objective more impersonal more encompassing easier
>
> I could try both ways:
>
> I was standing on the upper deck next to a girl called Mary . . .
> No Peggy
>
> He was standing on the upper deck next to a girl called Mary . . .
> No Peggy
>
> (comes out the same).
>
> (*Double or Nothing,* p. 99)

Throughout *Double or Nothing* Federman also draws the reader's attention to the book as artefact through typographic experiment and manipulation of white space. Laurence Sterne's blank-page 'description' of the Widow Wadman is probably the most famous example of this. The 'description' serves to draw attention to the fact that what is described in the real world exists before its description. In fiction, if there is no description, there can be no existence.

B. S. Johnson uses a similar technique to remind the reader of the material existence of the book. In *Albert Angelo* (*1964*) a hole is cut into a page describing a routine conversation in a school staffroom. Through it, the reader perceives part of a passage describing Christopher Marlowe's death. Turning over the page, he

or she discovers the description of a contemporary café brawl. There is also, however, *another* hole, further deferring the appearance of a context which will 'explain' the Marlowe passage. The reader is thus forced to reflect upon the conventions not only of narrative suspense (which works essentially by deliberately impeding the completion of the action or the explanation of a story, while gradually filling in 'blanks' in the text) but also of the contextual basis of 'meaning' both inside and outside fictional texts.

In G. Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers* (1965), a section heading 'Some Revelations' is followed by four blank pages (pp. 280–3). In Ronald Sukenick's *Out* (1973), Federman's *Double or Nothing* and *Take it or Leave it* (1976), Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru* (1975) and *Between* (1968), and William H. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), the typographic arrangements on the page *visually* imitate the content of the story. Barthelme's 'At the Tolstoy Museum' (1970) reproduces a pencil sketch of Tolstoy, of his coat, of the museum. 'Brain Damage' (1970) presents the reader with pictorial images of disembodied heads and surrealistic rearrangements of the human body.

Elaborate introductions to the novel, footnotes, marginalia, letters to publishers – inclusion of the physical 'scaffolding' of the text – these again are reminders of the text's linguistic condition. Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* (1979) begins with a series of parodic (?) letters written by editors who have rejected the novel for publication. Several of Vladimir Nabokov's novels begin in a similar fashion. *Lolita* begins with a foreword by John Ray (the friend of Humbert Humbert's lawyer), who completes the 'stories' of the personages in Humbert's story, beginning at the point where Humbert's story ends. The novel ends with a comment on the book by Nabokov himself. He admits that such a commentary may strike the reader as 'an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own books' (p. 328).

Although most of these writers draw attention to the 'quasi-referential' linguistic status of the fictional world, they also allow the reader to construct an imaginative reality out of those words. In its pure form a 'non-predication' position would be (and is) clearly restrictive. Philosophers who argue for a 'non-predication' position

come up against the problem that it suggests that sentences in fiction are the same as those that predicate something to an obviously non-existent (nonsensical) person. Metafictional writers come up against the problem that, even if the text is purely a linguistic construct which does not 'hook on to' the real world, language in literature is at a secondary level of signification, words carry their everyday significances into fictional texts, and readers cannot be prevented from constructing imaginative worlds from these words based on their own 'everyday' experiences.

Even more restrictive, however, is the 'falsity' position. Philosophers who view literary fiction in this light would include Plato, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Willard Quine and A. J. Ayer. Plato excluded it from his ideal state, dismissing it as lies. David Hume dismissed poets as skilful liars. For Russell, 'there are no unreal individuals, so that the null-class is the class containing no members, not the class containing as members, all unreal individuals' (Russell 1905, p. 491). For Quine, nothing exists that does not exist within the laws of time and space of the world that we inhabit.[9]

Fiction, though, is clearly not a case of simple falsehood. It does not *set out* to inform. Thus metafictional writers who attempt to view it in this light place upon themselves huge constraints which are ultimately extremely counter-productive. B. S. Johnson is a good example of a writer whose literal and obsessive application of the notion of fiction as lies became damaging to his work. He begins by attempting to write obsessively 'factual' autobiographical accounts 'to understand without generalization' (*The Unfortunates* (1969), unpag.). His aim is to discover an ideal language which could directly transfer his state of mind to the reader's. When this fails, he swings desperately into extreme, defensive, metafictional subversions of the text.

Occasionally he experiments with concrete poetry. It is as if he hopes, through the resemblance of signifier and signified in the iconic sign, to reduce the area of indeterminacy and potential misinterpretation. He also, of course, reduces the freedom of the reader. (Fiction is 'lies' for Johnson because it exists within the public medium of language. It therefore cannot be 'owned' by an 'author' who is its sole creator. Thus Johnson becomes a

metafictionist through a frustrated romanticism.) Often he falls into a naïve imitative fallacy. His use of typographical experiment can be seen as a progression of the view expressed in *Travelling People* (1963) that 'the style of each chapter should spring naturally from its subject matter' (Introduction). Such techniques are probably used most successfully in *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975). Here (in a manner very similar to William H. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*) the arrangement of the letters 'mammarytit' in the shape of a female breast serves to provide a wider perspective on the main theme of the novel: motherhood, England as the motherland. The concrete form allows Johnson to focus simultaneously on the female shape, its biological maternal function, the idea of the Virgin Mary, the infantile phonetic representation of the word 'mother' and the demotic term for the breast.

Johnson's work represents his search for a lost 'sincerity', a truth to the inner human being which will correspond with what he perceives outside. What he discovers, though, is the *lack* of correspondence, the existence of what Borges describes in A *Personal Anthology* (1961): 'through the years a man peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms. . . . Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face' (p. 174). He discovers that 'life does not tell stories, life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification' (*Memoirs* (1973), p. 14).

What threatens to take over, as the gap between feeling and form grows inevitably clearer, is solipsism. As A. Alvarez has suggested, the desperate search for new forms makes 'the dredged up material more available' (Alvarez 1966, p. 73). In attempting to express it, the writer relives it, not under the controlled abreactive situation of psychotherapy, but under the pressure of an intense internalization. Johnson's discovery is that the ironic consequence of writing is its annihilation of what it attempts to 'represent'. He is a metafictionist second and a romantic first. He resembles the character Hugo in Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* (1954). Both believe in the supremacy of the self and the incapacity of language to express that self. Like Hugo, Johnson also failed, tragically and

inevitably, to get out from under a 'net' which increasingly closed in on him until his suicide. His work and life reveal the tragic potential in the assumption by a self-conscious writer of an extreme 'falsity' position.

'Alternative worlds' theories

Most metafictional writers, however, eschew both 'non-predication' and 'falsity' positions. They are self-consciously anxious to assert that, although literary fiction is only a verbal reality, it constructs through language an imaginative world that has, within its own terms, full referential status as an alternative to the world in which we live. Fictional statements exist and have their 'truth' within the context of an 'alternative world' which they also create. Statements in the real world have their 'truth' in the context of a world which *they* help to construct. Fiction is merely a different set of 'frames', a different set of conventions and constructions. In this view, a fictional character is 'unreal' in one sense, but characters who are not persons are still 'real', still exist, within their particular worlds. As William H. Gass suggests: 'Worlds? But the worlds of the novelist I hear you say do not exist. Indeed. As for that – they exist more often than the philosophers' ' (Gass 1970, p. 4).

Metafiction lays bare the linguistic basis of the 'alternative worlds' constructed in literary fictions. Through continual shifts in and therefore revelations of context, metafictional texts expose the creation/description paradox. The more a text insists on its linguistic condition, the further it is removed from the everyday context of 'common sense' invoked by realistic fiction. Metafictional texts show that literary fiction can never imitate or 'represent' the world but always imitates or 'represents' the discourses which in turn construct that world. However, because the medium of all literary fiction is language, the 'alternative worlds' of fiction, as of any other universe of discourse, can never be totally autonomous. Their linguistic construction (however far removed from realism they may be) always implicitly evokes the contexts of everyday life. These too are then revealed as linguistically constructed. As Umberto Eco points out in a

discussion of 'possible worlds' (here referred to as 'alternative worlds'):

> No fictional world could be totally autonomous, since it would be impossible for it to outline a maximal and consistent state of affairs by stipulating ex nihilo the whole of its individuals and of their properties. . . . it is enough for a story to assert that there exists an (imaginary) individual called Raoul; then, by defining him as a man, the text refers to the normal properties attributed to men in the world of reference. A fictional text abundantly overlaps the world of the reader's encyclopedia. But also, from a theoretical point of view, this overlapping is indispensable, and not only for fictional worlds.
>
> (Eco 1981, p. 221)

Metafictional texts thus reveal the ontological status of all literary fiction: its quasi-referentiality, its indeterminacy, its existence as words and world. They may exaggerate the consequence of the creation/description paradox: that language in fiction has to be carefully organized in order to construct contexts which are more fully 'given' or assumed in the real world. Such texts, however, emphasize that the ability to manipulate and construct hypothetical, alternative or ontologically distinct 'worlds' is also a condition of social existence, of life outside novels.

Because of the creation/description paradox, as Wolfgang Iser points out: 'if the literary communication is to be successful it must bring with it all the components necessary for the construction of the situation, since this has no existence outside the literary work' (Iser 1975, p. 21). Metafiction not only exposes the inauthenticity of the realist assumption of a simple extension of the fictive into the real world; it also fails *deliberately* to provide its readers with sufficient or sufficiently consistent components for him or her to be able to construct a satisfactory alternative world. Frames are set up only to be continually broken. Contexts are ostentatiously constructed, only to be subsequently deconstructed.

At first glance, this might appear to be merely an extension of an essentially modernist strategy. Novels with multiple narrators or

points of view axiomatically shift context. In modernist fiction, however, the reader may be *temporarily* dislocated when point of view, for example, is shifted, but is allowed to reorient him or herself to the new perspective and recontextualize each new piece of discourse. Metafiction sets mutually contradictory 'worlds' against each other. Authors enter texts and characters appear to step into the 'real' world of their authors. Words self-consciously displayed as words appear to get up and walk off the page to haunt the author or argue with the reader.

In modernist texts such as *The Waves* (1931), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Sound and the Fury* (1931), the contextual shifts can be 'naturalized' by the construction of a narrator whose ontologically non-problematical 'full' subjectivity gives significance to the discourse. The reader soon realizes that the incoherence of Benjy's discourse in *The Sound and the Fury* is a result of its restriction to a purely perceptual point of view, a lack of reflective consciousness. The complexities of Quentin's discourse, in the same novel, are the result of an excess of reflectiveness. The shift from one to the other causes some uncertainty about the nature of the 'reality' they perceive, but never any doubt whether it exists. The reader is given enough 'components' to construct a context for these discourses which stabilizes their meaning.

B. S. Johnson uses a similar technique throughout *House Mother Normal* (1971). Here the interior monologues of the nine old people are prefaced at each utterance with a dwindling intelligence count. In its 'scientific' accuracy, this provides the only stable context (albeit a highly abstract and dehumanizing one) for the increasingly meaningless monologues. However, the shifts can be recontextualized in terms of a hierarchy of provisional authorities: the individual characters, the scientific information, the author himself. What happens at the end, though, is a shift from modernist perspectivism to post-modernist doubt, for the house mother steps out of the frame of the world *in* the fiction to declare her reality in the world *of* the fiction: to declare her reality, therefore, as language, as B. S. Johnson's invention.

Up to this point, the text can be understood in terms of the modernist strategy of unreliable narration, where *histoire* and *discours* become discrepant. The reader makes sense of such

narratives by recontextualizing the discrepancies at progressively higher levels of the text until an authoritative norm is discovered. This implicitly draws attention to the process of the construction of the 'world', but through *consciousness.* Post-modernist texts draw attention to the process of the construction of the *fictive* 'world' through *writing.* In texts that employ such overtly metafictional strategies, final resolution can only be through either an awareness of the linguistic reality of the text itself or the acceptance of the existence of mutually exclusive realities or 'worlds'.

There are many texts, of course, which are borderline examples. D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981) is, in the manner of Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* 'about' interpretation. It offers an array of textual devices so that the accoutrements of textuality – letters, documents, literary productions to be analysed, footnotes, journals – become the text. Freud's correspondence, the Gastein journal, the poem 'Don Giovanni', the case-history of Frau Anna G., are discrepant 'interpretations' and manifestations of the neurotic symptoms of Elisabeth Erdman. The final resolution of the textual contradictions, these essentially interpretative shifts, is, however, effected through what may or may not be a shift in the definition of reality involving Elisabeth's special 'psychic' powers, her historical foreknowledge. The 'symptoms' which Freud explains by reconstructing Elisabeth's *personal* past turn out to be her intimation of future historical events in relation to her *racial* identity as a Jew. The future is revealed through a documentary account of the Babi Yar massacre and a vision of the 'New Jerusalem' which Lisa discovers after death.

Unlike *Pale Fire,* however, within the novel *The White Hotel* there is no ambiguity about the fact that this place, 'the camp', exists. Within a 'commonsense' order of discourse, the possibility of clairvoyance and the possibility of life after death are not unusual assumptions. The reader does not have to solve the contradictoriness of the narrative shifts through a recourse to the linguistic status of the worlds constructed through the narrative. He or she does, however, have to recognize the ontological flexibility of the norms of the 'everyday' world. It is thus possible to read *The White Hotel,* by means of a modernist aesthetic, as a text which foregrounds uncertainty about our perception of the world; or to

read it perhaps as a post-modernist text which foregrounds uncertainty about its 'reality' status through a flaunting of its condition of textuality and its ostentatious construction of 'alternative worlds'.

Worlds of words: history as an alternative world

Metafictional novels allow the reader not only to observe the textual and linguistic construction of literary fiction, but also to enjoy and engage with the world within the fiction. For the duration of the reading at least, this world is as 'real' as the everyday world. Such novels reveal the duality of literaryfictional texts: all fiction exists as words on the page which are materially 'real', and also exists in consciousness as worlds created through these words: 'the aesthetic object belongs to the ideal but has its basis in the real' (Ingarden 1973, p. xxx). The reader is made aware that, in the fiction-reading process, an act of consciousness creates an 'object' that did not exist before. However, the reader is further reminded that this act cannot create anything that could exist outside the dialectic of text and consciousness (anything that has what Ingarden calls 'ontic autonomy', or demonstrates what Searle refers to as the 'principle of identification').

In *The Literary Work of Art* (1973), Ingarden suggests how realist texts are concretized, or produced, by readers. As in all literary fiction, the author projects, through quasi-judgemental statements, the 'states of affairs' which form the imaginary world. If the work were a 'real' historical or documentary account, the reader would match these with *determinate* individual states of affairs existing historically. However, in realism, the reader matches them with a *general type,* based on the particulars of a given historical time but not coincidental with them. Because of the similarity in the processes of constructing historical texts and realistic fictional texts, the practice is open to abuse. It could be argued that in realism one of these potential abuses is the appropriation and reduction of historical particularity for the support of assumptions about a timeless 'human nature' or a '*Plus ça change* . . .' philosophy.

There is a sub-category of metafictional novels which are particularly effective in foregrounding such abuses. In the midst of their overtly fictional or 'alternative' worlds, these novels *do* present the reader with 'perfect matches'. They offer not 'general matches' (as realism) but historically determinate particulars. Such novels suggest that history itself is a multiplicity of 'alternative worlds', as fictional as, but other than, the worlds of novels. They suggest this by inserting real historical events or personages into an overtly fictional context.

Discussing the development of narrative, Scholes and Kellogg have argued that the novel emerged as a resynthesis on the one hand of the 'empirical' components of epic (history/mimesis) and on the other hand of its 'fictional' components (romance/fable). They go on to argue that the novel is at present breaking down into its original components but reverting to the purely 'fictional' (Scholes and Kellogg 1966). David Lodge has suggested that 'it would be equally possible to move in the opposite direction – towards empirical narrative and away from fiction' (Lodge, 1977b, p. 90). And certainly 'non-fiction' novels like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), the collection in *The New Journalism* (1973) by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, or more recently Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) remind us that, as one critic has said: 'the longest lasting and most incestuous of the novel's many marriages and affairs has been with journalism' (Raban 1970, p. 71).

Novels like E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) are both 'non-fiction' *and* metafictional novels, 'empirical' *and* 'fictional'. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh has, in fact, suggested that both 'non-fiction' and the metafictional novel anyway share 'a radical refusal to neutralize the contingent nature of reality by transforming it into a safe zone of unified meaning' (Zavarzadeh 1976, p. 41). Non-fiction novels suggest that facts are ultimately fictions, and metafictional novels suggest that fictions are facts. In both cases, history is seen as a provisional construct.

Historical writing matches a determinate individual object with a direct representation of a determinate individual object (remaining within Ingarden's terms). Fictional writing matches an imaginatively constructed fictional object with a general class of

possibly real objects. Fiction is thus always incomplete, always to be completed by a reader. Fictional characters, for example, are not epistemologically indeterminate in the way of 'real' people (because the words on the page *are* the people in fiction). As part of an imaginary world they are always ontologically indeterminate, always uncertainly awaiting completion.

However, metafictional texts which introduce real people and events expose not only the illusion of verisimilar writing but also that of historical writing itself. The people and events here may 'match' those in the real world, but these people and events are always recontextualized in the act of writing history. Their meanings and identities always change with the shift in context. So history, although ultimately a material reality (a presence), is shown to exist always within 'textual' boundaries. History, to this extent, is also 'fictional', also a set of 'alternative worlds'.

The paradox is explored in Robert Coover's novel *The Public Burning,* which draws, on the one hand, from factual historical sources about the events leading up to the Rosenberg execution and, on the other hand, from the patently unreal fantasy figures of American myth and popular culture. What is revealed, however, is the fictional construction of history. The cold war period, and particularly the days leading up to the all-American entertainment phantasmagoria of the trial itself, is shown in a kaleidoscope of perspectives. The novel alternates between a narrative provided by a Richard Nixon whose consciousness is, anachronistically, clearly shaped in terms of post-Watergate (1973) experience, and sections of manic carnivalistic prose featuring the circus acts of Uncle Sam.

Uncle Sam is a comic-book embodiment of the dominant ideology of American society during the last thirty years – an ideology predominantly constructed out of a paranoid fear of communism, and a total belief in material progress and in the United States as superpower. It is shown in the novel to depend for its success on its linguistic and symbolic embodiment in the idols of popular culture: in John Wayne and Walt Disney, in figures like Ben Franklin, in the American constitution, in the 'objectivity' of its mass media. (Chapter 10 presents a parodistic 'Pilgrimage to the *New York Times*'. The mystical experience of the pilgrims gathered together outside its central offices is, however, that of 'the illusion

suffered by mystics throughout the ages: the Spirit, annunciating reality, displaces it, and the tangible world dissolves even as it is being proclaimed' (p. 244). They do not, of course, notice the writing on the subway walls – the Hegelian 'OBJECTIFICATION IS THE PRACTICE OF ALIENATION'.)

This ideology is nowhere present more fully than in Nixon's 'personal' chapters. He is absurd because in his desperation to embody Uncle Sam (who finally and ironically as 'Sam Slick the Yankee Fiddler' proves that Nixon has become 'his boy' at last, by sodomizing him in the last few pages of the novel), in his urge to go down in the history of a superpower as its superman, he becomes no man. He completely loses his 'personality'. His identity merges totally with the all-American ideology until he becomes merely its victim. He thus becomes a figure ripe for media scandal and 'historical' reconstruction when the tide of success turns. Since he is a piece of public property, the public can choose to 'sell' him how and when it wishes. Yet all the characters are similarly victims of this ideology. 'History' is the victim of 'fiction'. Julius Rosenberg is determined to 'destroy all this so-called history, so that history can start again' (p. 243). He is also shown to be the victim of ideology in that he naïvely believes that one individual can oppose its hegemony – its pervasive reinforcement and dominance. He naïvely believes that political power can be invested in individuals, that reason can overcome generalized madness.

E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* similarly suggests that history is the ultimate fiction we are all living. It proposes also that our personalities are finally always constructed out of ideology, and that individual heroism and sacrifice in a political cause is therefore ultimately futile. The subject of this novel is also the execution of a couple for supposedly betraying the secret of the atom bomb to the Russians (though this couple, the Isaacsons, are a fictional version of the Rosenbergs). Their 'fictional' story is told, however, within a context of references to historical 'facts'. These include persons such as Norman Mailer, Dr Spock, Bob Taft, Joe McCarthy, Robert Lowell and Richard Burton, and events like the march on the Pentagon. History textbooks are cited (with authentic references) along with sociological analyses of aspects of American culture such as Disneyland.

What emerges again is history as text: history as personal reconstruction. In this novel, however, the 'personal' lives of the fictional characters carry far more of the weight of narrative interest than in *The Public Burning*. The narrative is presented through three levels: the 'story' (*histoire*) of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, imprisoned for betraying their country, and of their children Daniel and Susan, ending with the Isaacsons' execution; the 'story' (at the level of *discours*) of Daniel and Susan in 1967, beginning with the failure of Susan's attempted suicide but still ending with her funeral; and the 'story' (at the level of *narration* itself) of the progress of the novel we are reading, as Daniel sits composing it in the library of Columbia University, and ending with the ending of the novel.

The level of narration keeps the process of fictional/historical construction continually in the reader's mind. Daniel writes instructions to himself to 'strike that' (p. 24) or to 'explore the history of corporal punishment as a class distinction' (p. 133). He even refers to his professor, Sukenick (who is an actual living writer and critic of metafiction), for whom Daniel seems to be writing the story we are reading. The personal stories, the fictional lives, are shown throughout as constructed by 'history'. Daniel's despair and cynicism about revolutionary protest against Vietnam in the sixties, for example, is shown as a consequence of his childhood history, of the effects of his parents' optimistic, austere and fervent socialist commitment in the fifties.

Yet 'history' is itself shown as a fictional construction. Daniel's 'character' and place in it have been fixed by his parentage. He has no more freedom than a character in a fiction (which, of course, he is). There is, he says, 'nothing I can do, mild or extreme, that they cannot have planned for' (p. 74). He is the son of a traitor and therefore a traitor himself. He cannot escape the fiction that is history or the history that is fiction. He cannot escape at a personal level, through his own wife and child, or at a social level, through his acts in the world, or even at the level of language, as a character in a novel, writing like Holden Caulfield his 'David Copperfield kind of crap' (p. 98). At each narrative level the transformation goes on.

Worlds of words: the 'fantastic' as an alternative world

An interesting version of the 'alternative worlds' view of fiction is that presented in Todorov's work on the fantastic. As with all 'alternative worlds' positions, he begins with the view that 'literary discourse cannot be true or false, it can only be valid in relation to its own premises' (Todorov 1973, p. 10). The essence of the 'fantastic' in his view is that it 'hesitates' both understanding and definition of the 'reality' outside the fiction. All metafictional texts question precisely this 'existence of an irreducible opposition between real and unreal' (ibid., p. 167). Many of them pursue their questioning through the self-conscious construction of alternative worlds which contest the 'reality' of the everyday world, or of each other. Angela Carter's strange and mythically allusive kingdoms, Gilbert Sorrentino's and D. M. Thomas's 'hotels', John Fowles's Bourani, John Hawkes's surrealistic portrait of an occupied Germany (*The Cannibal* (1949), Italo Calvino's invisible cities of Kubla Khan's realm: these are all explicitly 'alternative', broadly 'fantastic'.

Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), for example, is not *overtly* metafictional but it does 'hesitate' the distinctions between 'fiction' and 'reality' by setting two alternative worlds against each other. The first, or outer frame, is a futuristic projection of the everyday world, a city recovering from a nuclear holocaust. Set against this is a second, mental world mediated through Jungian symbols and mythic archetypes. The symbol of this world is not a *city* (always in Lessing's work suggesting the alienated contemporary consciousness) but a *room* (again in her novels suggesting the fragile inner psyche). The alternatives are familiar ones in Lessing's fiction. In *The Golden Notebook* Anna's Jungian analyst Mrs Marks tries to persuade her to see her personal past in terms of a Jungian collective unconscious, to heal the divisions within herself by submerging her identity as an individual into that of the archetypal artist-seer. Significantly, Anna identifies Mrs Marks with a room:

> Nothing in my life corresponds with anything in this room – my life has always been crude, unfinished, raw, tentative . . . it occurred to me looking at this room that the raw, unfinished

> quality in my life was precisely what was valuable in it and I should hold on fast to it.
>
> (p. 239)

Anna feels her world at this particular historical moment to be so radically different from any other, however, that she rejects the possibility of discovering unity in archetypal patterns. Art that expresses such an order is invalidated by contemporary experience. She rejects tradition, for the future may be a completely different reality: 'Terrible, perhaps, or marvellous, but something new' (p. 460).

This vision divides in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* into two possible alternative realities: the city is a development of the 'something new', and the inner world of the room is a development of Mrs Marks's 'old and cyclical'. However, Lessing tries to assert in this novel that a radical, historically materialist break (such as that presented in *The Four-Gated City*) will not save civilization. Hope lies only with the reassertion of the inner psyche through its submergence in the greater mind of the collective unconscious. The narrator gradually withdraws from the outer, city world into the inner world of the rooms behind the wall. She enters a mental world where she journeys back into a personal and collective racial and female past. This inner world finally triumphs over the historical one. It becomes the outer frame, as the narrator, Emily and Hugo walk resolutely towards the wall at the end of the novel, 'Out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether' (p. 190).

It has been seen through Berger and Luckmann's work, however, that the everyday world exerts a massive force to resist the attempts of alternative worlds or symbolic systems to become paramount reality. It has been seen through Goffman's work that the outer frame always defines 'reality'. As the novel begins, the reader settles into the basically realistic outer frame of the city world (an extension of the 'everyday'); but he or she is suddenly plunged into a different reality and a different frame (through the wall) where laws of time and space are suspended. Allusions to *Alice in Wonderland,* Freudian oral fantasies and Jungian motifs – the child, the garden, the strange woman – intermingle.

The frames change, but they ignore each other. They even contradict each other. The inner world takes over the superior reality status accorded to the outer frame, but the historical world (now the inner frame) exerts the special claim to paramount status of the 'everyday'. The explicitly symbolic inner world is never integrated with the apparent historical world. The weighty symbolism has no anchorage in any reference to 'literal' objects, either in the city world or in the world of the everyday.

The two worlds question each other throughout. They continue, fantastically, to 'hesitate' each other, even though Lessing tries to resolve this hesitation at the end of the novel by asserting the primacy of the inner world. The validity of this symbolic world has just not been firmly enough established for the reader to abandon his or her historical perspectives. What the novel does powerfully assert, however, is a metafictional affirmation of the inadequacy of a mutually exclusive opposition of the concepts 'reality' and 'fiction'.

John Fowles's *The Magus* (1965, 1977) is another novel which explicitly constructs an 'alternative world' as a metaphor for the processes of fictionality. Bourani provides a classic 'fantastic' setting: 'second meanings hung in the air, ambiguities, unexpectednesses' (p. 85). The protagonist, Nick, arrives there to take up a job. He is immediately drawn into Conchis's (ultimately Fowles's) 'godgame', and responds with the involvement that Todorov sees as essential in securing the reader's identification, and the hesitation that forces him or her to question the ontological status of what is happening. Framed by the humdrum scenes of everyday life in London, Bourani shifts realism to gothic (similar to the structure of Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn* (1963), David Storey's *Radcliffe* (1963) and Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981)). The reader accepts the shift, however, because it is mediated through a character who is not only involved but sceptical too. It is continually indicated that Bourani, like the novel itself and Conchis's masques, is explicitly an art-world, a metaphor. The reader is warned early on of this. Nick, looking back at his inauthentic existence at Oxford, reflects that he misinterpreted 'metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for

straightforward presentation of behaviour' (p. 17). The reader is being warned not to do the same.

Todorov argues further in his work on the fantastic:

> If certain events of a book's universe explicitly account for themselves as imaginary, they thereby contest the imaginary nature of the rest of the book. If a certain apparition is only the fault of an overexcited imagination, then everything around it is real.
>
> (Todorov 1973, p. 168)

Although, as Fowles recognizes, the reality of fiction is primarily verbal, the imaginary world generated by the words of a novel is not less real than, but an *alternative* to, the everyday world. *The Magus* is about Nick's attempts to learn to perceive the fictional basis of everything and to distinguish between different orders of fiction.

One way of reinforcing the notion of literary fiction as an alternative world is the use of literary and mythical allusion which reminds the reader of the existence of this world outside everyday time and space, of its thoroughgoing textuality *and* intertextuality. Fowles's character Conchis is explicitly derived from Shakespeare's (Prospero), the tarot's and Jung's (trickster) magus figures. He is a version of the Jungian 'shadow' who seems to be 'hiding meaningful contents under an unprepossessing exterior' (Jung 1972, p. 150). He takes over the telling of the story for much of the central section of the novel and is frequently compared with a novelist creating 'a world where nothing is certain' (*The Magus,* p. 339). He is a novelist like Fowles himself and, like the definition of a god in *The Aristos* (1965), has 'freedom' and 'hazard' as his first principles.

Conchis demonstrates to Nick the need for existential authorship in all human beings, and Nick is made aware of the existence of multiple worlds or 'realities' which cannot be contained between the covers of any book, the score of a symphony or the parameters of a stage. They refuse such closure, because, in Conchis's own words, the curtain never falls and the play always goes on acting. He steers Nick through a Jungian night journey under the sea. Nick, unravelling Conchis's mysteries, is clearly a

Theseus figure for much of the novel, but on his return to London, and before he reaches the centre, he becomes an Orpheus bringing back his Eurydice from the dead (Alison's 'suicide').

The Magus sets out to explore the artistic process of constructing novels and lives. Ostentatious use of literary and mythic allusion reinforces the notion of fictionality, and the reader's awareness of the construction of alternative worlds. Such explicit intertextual reminders are common in metafictional novels and suggest to the reader that

> The ongoingness of tradition – of social process – makes a 'finite' province of meaning impossible, for the boundaries of universes of discourse are constantly merging into one another and reemerging as transformed fields of meaning.
>
> (Stewart 1979, p. 48)

The Prospero figure, for example, recalled here explicitly in the figure of Conchis, makes frequent appearances in metafictional novels. He is there, ironically cast, in Muriel Spark's *Not to Disturb* (1971). In the figure of Lister the butler, he busily and effectively organizes chaos, informing those around him: 'we have been such stuff as dreams are all through the night' (p. 85). This novel is about the production of art in a society as degenerate in integrity and coherence as that portrayed in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (to which it constantly alludes). This society, however, has the technological apparatus to enable any enterprising entrepreneur to take over the role of its artistic producer. Its aristocracy shut themselves away in large rooms full of useless miniatures. Their servants are left, in a parody of classic theatrical tradition, to hold the stage. As the capitalist entrepreneurs of the future, however, they take over the whole drama (the novel is arranged in five sections which correspond to the structure of a Jacobean tragedy).

Excelling in the *ad hoc* conversion of apparently fortuitous events (though nothing, of course, is ultimately fortuitous in the Spark world), Lister uses the gadgetry that modern science and affluence has put at his disposal in order to arrange the future (the foretold deaths of the aristocrats) into sensationalist documentary art. Here is a divided, alienated, thoroughly mechanized world: tape recorders and food processors have cut the servants off from their

traditional 'modes of production'. In the Klopstock household 'the books are silent' (p. 44), but Victor Passerat's coat, carefully documented on celluloid, 'speaks volumes' (p. 69). Art is produced in the same way as the sliced carrots which stream out of Heloise's food processor.

In this world, artistic virtuosity has become ingenuity and publicity. In an amoral and irreligious world, art is touted – as so often in Spark's novels – as so much 'real estate'. The servants refer to the future as a thing of the past. They exist within a present-tense narrative but discourse in the future tense because they *know* they are a work of art. They are opportunists. Yet, complacent within the world of high-technology production, they are unaware of an ironic authority outside their world creating them. They might produce the 'story' of their lives to sell to the international press, but their lives are Muriel Spark's story. She does, however, allow them success within their world. They are 'successful' according to the norms of a consumerist, technological society which registers the significance of 'art' in terms of cash value. They have realized a lucrative truth expressed by John Berger, comparing art to advertisement:

> Publicity speaks in the future tense and yet the achievement of this future is endlessly deferred. . . . It remains credible because the truthfulness of publicity is judged, not by the real fulfilment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer. Its essential application is not to reality, but to daydreams.
>
> (Berger 1978, p. 146)

What the servants do not realize, however, is that, while they are in the process of creating 'publicity', Muriel Spark is in the process of creating *them,* and creating an alternative world which refers not to 'daydreams' but to the 'reality' of the novel as a work of art. What Lister sees as his self-determined predestination is thus revealed to be merely an aspect of literary form. What we see, in our everyday lives, as self-determined predestination is also revealed to be merely an aspect of eternal form. We too, Spark implies, are created by a higher authority.