

# Notes on Metafiction

José Angel García Landa  
Universidad de Zaragoza  
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<http://www.garcialanda.net>

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## 1. Introduction

Possible definitions of metafiction:

1. Fiction about fiction.
2. Fiction which contains fiction within it.
3. Fiction which comments itself
4. Fiction which calls attention to its own fictional status
5. Fiction which experiments with its own form as a way of creating meaning

But literature has been defined by many critics as a continuous experiment in form, and indeed literature is in constant evolution, always reworking and transforming the genres, motifs and conventions inherited from a past tradition. Is all literature metafictional, then?

"Reflexive" is a better term in this case, because it is less specific, more inclusive. E.g. nonfiction can be reflexive (playing with the time of writing and the time of reading in a letter) or in the arts generally —reflexive structures of

representation in painting are found in artists from Van Eyck to Escher, or indeed any moment a painter includes a frame, a mirror or a painting within his own work.<sup>1</sup>

Yet another factor must be taken into consideration in defining the borders of metafiction. Metafiction can be defined as a way of writing, or more precisely still as a way of consciously manipulating fictional structures, of playing games with fiction. But this would not cover all the metafictional, not to speak of all the reflexive structures we find in literature. Therefore, metafiction must also be defined as a way of reading, a critical paradigm which provides a new way of exploring meaning in literary works, unearthing meaning structures which may be automatic, not deliberately planned by the writer but rather reached through the spontaneous play of meaning or the interplay between writing and reading.

Metafiction as writing would constitute a specific subgenre in which the reflexive element is the dominant. Metafiction as reading would consist in focusing on a specific element or structure in a work.<sup>2</sup> Alter draws a difference between self-conscious novels and novels which contain self-conscious moments. The self-conscious novel must be informed by a consistent effort: self-consciousness must be central to its structure and purpose. On the other end of the line, self-conscious texts cease to be novels when they do not display the defining characteristics of a novel, which are a concern with consecutive human character and quotidian experience.

Larry McCaffery finds the defining characteristic of metafiction in its direct concern with fiction-making itself.<sup>3</sup> We might wonder whether this is sufficient. A symmetry, or a reflexive structure, is announced from the moment fiction-making is thematised, but metafictional works must explore and exploit this reflexivity. E. g. a bestseller about the world of bestsellers, like James A. Michener's *The Novel*,<sup>4</sup> is not really a metafictional work.

The term "reflexive" calls our attention both to mirror structures (doublings, analogies, frames) and to thought, consciousness, reflectiveness, awareness accompanying action. Indeed, metafiction is reflexive fiction in the sense not only that mirror images are found in it, but also that these mirrorings and reflexive structures are used as a meditation on the nature of fiction. According to Scholes, a work of metafiction is "a fiction which, if it is 'about' anything, it is about the possibilities and impossibilities of fiction itself" (qtd. in Christensen 11). For Stanley Fogel, its aim is an "exploration of the theory of fiction through fiction itself" (qtd. in Christensen 11); for Stonehill, a self-conscious novel is "an extended prose narrative that draws attention to its status as fiction."<sup>5</sup> Alter defines the self-conscious novel as "a novel which systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and by so doing

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<sup>1</sup> See Julián Gállego, *El cuadro dentro del cuadro* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Michael Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1983), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Inger Christensen, *The Meaning of Metafiction: A Critical Study of Selected Novels by Sterne, Nabokov, Barth and Beckett* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1981), 11.

<sup>4</sup> James A. Michener, *The Novel*. London: Mandarin, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Stonehill, *The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1988), 3.

probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (x).<sup>6</sup> Alter offers a chronological discussion of a few major self-conscious novels from the 17th to the 20th centuries, in order to demonstrate that when deliberate and sustained self-conscious devices "are integrated into a large critical vision of the dialectic interplay between fiction and reality, they may produce one of the most illuminating dimensions of the experience we undergo in reading a novel" (Alter, xiv).

Christensen is both more restrictive and more naive when she defines metafiction as

fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making. This definition indicates that only those books are considered metafiction where the novelist has a message to convey and is not merely displaying his technical brilliance. (11)

It is significant that there exists something like a kinship between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries as far as taste for metafiction is concerned: writers like Sterne or Fielding are much more willing to thematise their conventions and to play with them in an explicit way than the authors of the nineteenth century realist tradition. According to Gabriel Josipovici,<sup>7</sup> the art of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries defines itself as artifact, artificial construct, while the art of the nineteenth century aspires to be an imitation —if not of life, at least of the author's impression of life. In this sense, metafiction seems to pose a threat to imitation. Instead of focusing on the nature of the world out there, the text viciously returns to itself, imitating not reality but writing.

We usually associate the novel with realism, just as we usually associate art with representation. But realism and mimesis are only one of several ingredients in art and the novel, and they may or may not constitute the dominant code. After all, the novel is also associated (to say the least) with fiction, thus establishing within itself a tension between the strategies of fiction and the drive towards realism. According to William Boyd,

The modern novel defines itself in terms of its rejection of the conventions of formal realism. Recognizing that the relationship between reality and its representation in fictional discourse is problematic, the reflexive novel seeks to examine the act of writing itself, to turn away from the project of representing an imaginary world and to turn inward to examine its own mechanisms. (Boyd 7)

Boyd speaks of "the reflexive novel", in order to stress the reflective, meditative, self-critical character of such fiction. Reflexivity "should be seen as a species of critical activity which subverts the 'normal' disjunction between creative and critical discourse or between literary and nonliterary uses of language. The tension between

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975; 1978), x.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book. A Study of Modern Fiction*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1971; Houndmills: Macmillan, 1977).

reality and representation is perhaps the starting point for metafiction and the best point to begin a discussion about it. Realism, some critics argue, is too simple: it is naive, or, worse, a form of bad faith (Boyd 18) since it "makes believe" that it has nothing to do with fiction. Instead of taking reality or realism for granted, the reflexive novel explores the epistemological foundations of both, lays them bare, opening the way either to a more self-conscious realism or to something else.

Metafiction, due to its links with parody and self-consciousness, often amounts to an act of criticism of previous traditions:

in the self-conscious novel the act of fiction always implies an act of literary criticism, but, broadly speaking, it may move either outward, to the society that supplies the materials for literary representation and that tries to dictate literary convention, or inward, to the experiencing mind that gives the literary artifact whatever life it can have. (Alter 81)

According to Umberto Eco, literary works have a conceptual, quasi-theoretical value which derives from their self-referentiality, which transforms them into meaning-generating devices which effect a reshuffling of the social meanings they use as materials:

El texto estético, lejos de provocar sólo "intuiciones", proporciona, al contrario, un INCREMENTO DE CONOCIMIENTO CONCEPTUAL. Al impulsar a considerar de nuevo los códigos y sus posibilidades, impone una reconsideración del entero lenguaje en que se basa. Mantiene a la semiosis "entrenada". Al hacerlo, desafía a la organización del contenido existente y, por lo tanto, contribuye a cambiar el modo en que una cultura determinada "ve" el mundo.<sup>8</sup>

Note here that the text *imposes* such a revision. It would be more questionable to affirm that it *effects* it. This imposition may lead to different theoretical options; it is therefore more adequate to think of theorising as an activity different from creative writing. Actually, Eco qualifies this position later. Metatexts tell stories which deal with the way stories are told. However, they do not have the same status as theoretical discourse, since they exhibit their contradictions instead of making critical statements.<sup>9</sup> As we shall see later, the German Romantics also developed a theory of the interplay between reflexive literature and the theory of literature.

Metafiction challenges many assumptions of criticism: that the work is silent about itself and waits for the critic to interpret it, for instance. A metafictional work will often be outspoken enough about its aims and technique. It criticises previous literary conventions (to some extent all literature does this), but also its own conventions. Modern art, generally, shares this self-conscious attitude to the past, this anxiety deriving from its belatedness. Josipovici argues that "There is no better way of defining the achievement of Picasso, Stravinski or Eliot than to say that it is an

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<sup>8</sup> Umberto Eco, *Tratado de semiótica general*. (Palabra en el Tiempo, 122; Barcelona: Lumen, 1977m, 3rd. ed. 1985), 434.

<sup>9</sup> Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*. (Palabra en el Tiempo, 142; Barcelona: Lumen, 1981), 305.

exploration both of the medium in which they are working and of the traditional exploration of that medium" (xiv). The artist's exploration of the possibilities of art is perhaps the main characteristic of our century: it is not surprising that these explorers transgress many borders and also reach many dead ends.

## 2. Reflexivity and Metafiction: Some Related Concepts

- 2.1. Reflexivity in Philosophy
- 2.2. Reflexivity in Linguistics, Semiotics, Hermeneutics.
- 2.3. Reflexive elements in classical criticism
- 2.4. Romantic irony
- 2.5. Epic theatre

### 2.1. Reflexivity in Philosophy

In addition to a concern with interpretation, reflexivity is concerned with more fundamental questions: What is the nature of perception? What does it mean to know something, and is knowledge possible? Is language adequate for communication? <sup>10</sup>

The reflexive concern of philosophy begins when the philosopher conceives of his thought as an object of thought, when thought is no longer seen as the evidence of things but as an instrument of representation which modalizes, filters or gives shape to the object of knowledge. The modern form of this enquiry is represented by the schools associated with idealism. For instance, Fichte writes:

En la teoría de la ciencia hay dos series muy distintas del actuar espiritual: la del yo que observa el filósofo y la de las observaciones del filósofo. En las filosofías opuestas . . . sólo hay *una* serie del pensar: la de los pensamientos del filósofo, pues su materia no se introduce como pensante.<sup>11</sup>

This conception is not restricted to philosophical activity. Any self is by definition a reflexive process for Fichte: "*yo y actuar que vuelve sobre sí son conceptos completamente idénticos . . . toda conciencia reposa en la conciencia de sí.*"<sup>12</sup> Fichte's idealist philosophy defines a mechanism as a limited system, whereas the I, by virtue of its reflexivity, is unlimited and eternally productive: "El mecanismo no puede aprehenderse a sí mismo, precisamente porque es un mecanismo."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, for Fichte objects are constituted as such by the activity of the subject —of course there is no sense in speaking of objects without a subject— but *of the activity of the subject upon itself*: that is, objectivity is the result of reflexivity. Reason is defined as the total reflexion of the subject upon itself, a reflexion which produces the object.

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<sup>10</sup> Leonard Orr, "Vraisemblance and Alienation Techniques: The Basis for Reflexivity in Fiction", *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 21.3 (1981): 199-215; 212.

<sup>11</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Segunda introducción a la teoría de la ciencia* 71, in *Primera y segunda introducción a la Teoría de la Ciencia* (Madrid: SARPE, 1984; select. and trans. of *Wissenschaftslehre*, 1794).

<sup>12</sup> Fichte, *Segunda introducción* 81, § 3.

<sup>13</sup> Fichte, *Segunda introducción* 136, § 9.

German idealism will develop along this line, stressing the reflexive activity of the spirit, its return upon itself, as the movement which constitutes reality; reality therefore is not "objective" in a naive way, it is the result of the spirit's return upon itself and its products. Similarly, for Schelling, Nature is the result of the unconscious activity of the I: its order is nothing but the order of thought as it becomes gradually aware of itself.<sup>14</sup> Schelling thus formulates a system in which there is an absolute identity between being and thought, a common root to subject and object. Reason is an absolute term which encompasses both the subject and object; reason, the absolute indifference between the objective and the subjective, splits into a knowing subject and a known object. Each form of the spirit's evolution contains a different proportion between objectivity and subjectivity. Art, in Schelling's theory, is an activity where the unconscious productivity of nature and the conscious activity of the subject go hand in hand. Art is neither conscious nor unconscious, or rather, it is both. This ambivalence of art is present not only at the moment of creation, but also at the moment of reception and interpretation. A work of art is meaningful, and yet it does not have any concrete meaning, it cannot be reduced to this or that meaning: a work of art can be endlessly interpreted.

The importance of reflexivity cannot but increase in Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel, the subject itself is defined as self-consciousness, self-presence, being-for-itself. Hegel's definition of truth and appearance is itself reflexive. Science is defined as the process by which the Spirit knows itself as Spirit. The phenomenology of spirit, beyond any determinate viewpoint, is itself the content of truth, and the more extremely reflexive phases are the more evolved truths. Knowledge in its more elementary forms is sensory knowledge of objects. But this kind of knowledge becomes an object for intellectual knowledge of different kinds, more and more evolved. Hegel insists carefully on the difference between knowledge "for another" and knowledge "for itself" —the criterion therefore is knowledge for us, not knowledge in itself. Our knowledge and the knowledge we study (for instance, philosophy studying religion) are essentially different.

Since what first appeared as the object sinks for consciousness to the level of its way of knowing it, and since the in-itself becomes a *being-for-consciousness* of the in-itself, the latter is now the new object.<sup>15</sup>

At a point, Hegel believes, consciousness will cease to be burdened with the experience of something "other" and appearance will become identical with essence; this will be Absolute Knowledge, the science of the spirit. Hegel's philosophy aims at a complete unwinding of the Spirit's spiral: its ideal end would be not only to classify each institution, discourse or philosophy as a phase in this progression towards an absolute self-consciousness. It must also place itself, explain itself and the status of this explanation. The aim would be the complete transparency of thought, its perfect self-mirroring, pure evidence to itself obtained through logical analysis of its principles —and therefore through an exposition of the mechanisms of the textual functioning of the philosophical text itself.

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<sup>14</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *La relación del arte con la naturaleza* (Madrid: SARPE, 1985; trans. of *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zur Natur*, 1807).

<sup>15</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Oxford UP; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977; trans. of *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807).

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Kierkegaard soon denounced Hegel's reflexive system as an abstract fiction and insisted on a moral philosophy which is a mode of action. He opposes taking reflexivity as a basic principle, and condemns what he considers a selfish immersion of thought trying to think itself. Self-reflection is unending once indulged in: only a qualitative leap into faith will, Kierkegaard argues, will make us avoid the Bad Infinite of reflexivity.<sup>16</sup>

A similar leap is involved in Husserl's phenomenology and its protective devices against infinite regress. Husserl devises an instrument against the potential doubts introduced by reflexivity: *apodicticity* excludes beforehand, as objectless, any imaginable doubt. The evidence of this critical reflection "posee, otra vez, esta dignidad apodíctica, y lo mismo sucede en toda reflexión crítica de orden superior".<sup>17</sup>

There are, according to Husserl, two directions in phenomenological description. The first we might relate to realist literature, the second to metafiction:

- Noematic: this is the direction in description directed towards the qualities of the intentional object described (temporality, possibility, probability...)
- Noetic: this is phenomenological description of the modes of consciousness which face an object: perception, memory, etc. with the modal differences inherent to them (e.g. clarity and distinctness, as in Descartes's famous example).

Husserl's phenomenology rests on the possibility of a transcendental subject, that is, a pure, abstract state of consciousness in which "el yo que medita fenomenológicamente puede así llegar a ser *espectador desinteresado* de sí mismo e

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<sup>16</sup> S. Kierkegaard, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript." Excerpt. In *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986). 169-91.

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Meditaciones cartesianas*, ed. and trans. Mario A. Presas (Madrid: Tecnos, 1986), 23.



incluso de toda objetividad que es para él, y tal como ésta es para él" (Husserl, *Meditaciones cartesianas*, 52).

Philosophers in the 20th century have often defined consciousness as inherently reflexive, and not merely open to the objects of the world. For instance, Husserl claims that time and consciousness of time can be conceived of as being phenomenologically distinct, but we cannot conceive of one without the other:

como estos modos de aparición de la conciencia del tiempo inmanente son, a su vez, vivencias intencionales y, por tanto, tienen que ser nuevamente dados a la reflexión como temporalidades, chocamos con una paradójica propiedad fundamental de la vida de la conciencia, por la cual ésta parece estar sujeta a una regresión al infinito. . .

This leads him to note

un aspecto maravilloso del ser-para-sí mismo del *ego*, a saber, aquí, en primer lugar, el del ser de su vida de conciencia en la forma del estar referido intencionalmente a sí mismo. (Husserl, *Meditaciones cartesianas*, 60)

Reflexive literature could therefore be argued to explore this paradox inherent to human consciousness, to be an image of human identity and existence. The conditions of writing can be used as a metaphor of the conditions of being and knowing.

Sartre's philosophy also conceives of human existence as an ontological drama, described as the impossibility that consciousness-for-itself has of knowing itself as a being-in-itself. A being-for-itself which explores its own nature would fall into an infinite regression of representations:

El para-sí está obligado a no existir jamás sino en la forma de un en-otra-parte con respecto a sí mismo, a existir como un ser que se afecta perpetuamente de una inconsistencia de ser. Esta inconsistencia no remite, por otra parte, a otro ser; no es sino una perpetua remisión de sí a sí, del reflejo al reflejante, del reflejante al reflejo. Empero, esta remisión no provoca en el seno del para-sí un movimiento infinito; está dada en la unidad de un mismo acto: el movimiento infinito no pertenece sino a la mirada reflexiva que quiere captar el fenómeno como totalidad, y que se ve remitida del reflejo al reflejante y del reflejante al reflejo sin poder detenerse nunca.<sup>18</sup>

William H. Gass stresses the fictional nature of philosophy as a creation of models. This analogy allows him to claim that philosophical ideas are an adequate material for fiction, since they are already fictional to some degree.<sup>19</sup> This would involve a reflexive use of fiction, fiction which turns upon itself, using previous fiction as material. Contemporary reflexive fiction therefore seems to be inevitably linked to

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *El ser y la nada*, trans. Juan Valmar and Celia Amorós. Madrid: Alianza, 1984), 112. (Trans. of *L'Être et le néant*, 1943).

<sup>19</sup> William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Boston: Godine, 1979), 1924.

intertextual, allusive and parodical techniques. It incorporates metalanguage within its structure; nowadays

the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafiction. (Gass 25)

The examples mentioned by Gass are Jorge Luis Borges, John Barth, and Flann O'Brien.

## 2.2. Reflexivity in Linguistics, Semiotics and Hermeneutics

Reflexivity is an issue in linguistics at different levels: grammatical, syntactic, lexico-semantic, pragmatic.

William Boyd defines reflexivity quite vaguely as a "bending back." "Theoretically, any transitive verb can become reflexive, but some actions —suicide and masturbation, for example— seem necessarily reflexive" (Boyd 36). Bending back may carry along some form of doubling.

There are many reflexive elements inherent to the use of language. Karl Bühler points out that the temporal structuration of a message into periods enables the use of anaphoric reference, which is a reflexive element in speech (sect. IV).<sup>20</sup> Anaphoric elements refer not to objects as such, but to objects as already named, as represented in language by a previous section of the discourse (Buhler, ch. 26). Deictics may refer to one of two spatio-temporal fields in language: to the one spoken about and to the text itself considered as a physical space or as an temporal unfolding (ch. 19). But language has the power to disconnect itself from deixis and from its actual existence by becoming metalanguage when it discusses its own conditions of possibility (Bühler, ch. 25).

Language which makes an abundant use of situational deixis is called by Benveniste *discours*, while he calls *histoire* the use of speech which tries to disconnect itself from circumstances of enunciation, space and time, as well as from any reference to the enunciating subject.<sup>21</sup>

Roger Fowler notes that the linearity of discourse is used to suggest narrative time—it is obvious that there is no "necessary" connexion between these two lines of unfolding.<sup>22</sup>

Language naming itself is reflexive. Reflexivity could be classified according to whether it occurs at the level of *langue* or at the level of *discourse*. For instance,

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Bühler, *Teoría del lenguaje*. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1950. 1967); sect. IV. (Trans. of *Sprachtheorie*, 1934).

<sup>21</sup> Émile Benveniste, "De la subjectivité dans le langage", *Journal de Psychologie* (1958). Rpt. in Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* 258-266.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (1977; London: Methuen, 1985), 6.

the word "word" is semantically reflexive; an explicit performative verb is reflexive in its performative use (e. g. "I hereby declare. . . " etc).

The fact that explicitly performative utterances have the property of token-reflexivity makes them rather difficult to handle from a logical point of view. They are such notorious instances as *What I am now saying is false* or *This sentence contains five words*.<sup>23</sup>

But there may also be a form of reflexivity which can transform the use of any element in language, something like an inherent possibility of reflexivity in all language. The gap between language and things could be inaugurated by the Greek philosophers (the Stoics, for instance), who pointed out the existence of concepts as an intermediary realm between words and things.

In any utterance, there are signs relating not only what is said, but also the process by which it is said, the utterance itself, the act of speaking.<sup>24</sup> They can occur at the level of *langue* (e.g. in "x, since y" the information in y supports the act of *enouncing* x, rather than the contents of x) or at the level of discourse (e.g. explicit comments on the enunciation). Roman Jakobson<sup>25</sup> provided a basic model to describe the relationship of these elements to communication as a whole.

Context (or referent)

Addresser ..... Message ..... Addressee

Contact

Code

An addresser delivers a message to an addressee. This always occurs in a context, to which the message refers. The message is a complex of signs which can be understood in relationship to a code (for instance, English). The contact includes the elements specific to this act of communication, such as the channel of transmission and the signs which ensure that communication is effectively taking place (e. g. the initial "hello" in a telephone conversation). As in Bühler's scheme, each element is related to a function of language (in italics):

Context (or referent): *referential*

Addresser:

*Emotive* or ..... Message: *poetic* ..... Addressee: *Conative*  
*Expressive*

<sup>23</sup> J. Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 778.

<sup>24</sup> Oswald Ducrot, "Pragmatique linguistique II."

<sup>25</sup> Roman, Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1960), 350-77.

Contact: *Phatic*

Code: *Metalingual*

Language focused on the code is performing a metalingual or metalinguistic function. This may happen in several ways —from the technical vocabulary of linguistics to explicit performative verbs of speech. Jakobson's diagram is easily extended to describe the communicative structure of literature, or more specifically of narrative. Prince has spoken of "metanarrative signs", which explicitly refer to the narrative code. These may be, for instance, direct comments by the narrator, although "a narrator's intrusion or an explanation does not necessarily constitute a metanarrative sign."<sup>26</sup> According to Prince, the main function of such signs is to help decode the text and facilitate textual communicability. He does not consider how they may become a thematic and constructive element, which is when we can speak of metafiction proper.

Structuralist critics will emphasize the reflexive nature of literary texts. According to Eco, the aesthetic text is a locus where the different ways of generating signs (not only signs, but also icons) are activated: the artistic text is more than a text; for Eco, "se plantea, en definitiva, como *aserto metasemiótico* sobre la naturaleza futura de los códigos en que se basa" (*Tratado* 416). It is not clear whether Eco means by this that the aesthetic text has a status similar to that of semiotic theory. He adopts the structuralist principle of the inherent self-referentiality and ambiguity of the poetic message as formulated by Jakobson. Eco defines ambiguity from a semiotic point of view as the violation of the rules of the code. By virtue of its self-referentiality, the literary work draws attention not so much to its content as such, but to its own semiotic organization (*Tratado* 418-20).

El texto estético debe poseer, a escala reducida, las mismas características que una lengua: debe haber en el propio texto un sistema de relaciones mutuas, un diseño semiótico que paradójicamente permita la impresión de a-semiosis. (*Tratado* 429)

Therefore every artistic sense is in some sense a small *mise en abyme* of the signifying capability of language. *Mise en abyme* would seem then to be inherent to the creation of artistic objects. Eco conceives artistic activity as a kind of semiotic gymnastics, an exercise in signification and in the flexibility of signs, in the ability of meanings to generate yet further meanings. The artistic text is a semiotic super-function dedicated to the proliferation of meaning. This is enabled by its self-referential nature: according to Eco, the most important message transmitted by art is this semiotic functioning itself, this ability to generate new meaning. For instance, even noncommunicative art ends up by communicating, according to Eco, since new codes are generated around the works which make them assume a metalinguistic value (*Tratado*).

Metafiction is still literature even if it tries to comment fully on its own status. A possible ground for this phenomenon is to be found in this passage where Searle

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<sup>26</sup> Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*. (Janua linguarum, Series Maior 108; Berlin, New York and Amsterdam: Mouton, 1982), 171, n. 14.

establishes a necessary gap between the explicit and the implicit illocutionary force of any statement, or between implicature and explicitness:

Dondequiera que la fuerza ilocucionaria de una emisión no sea explícita, puede siempre hacerse explícita. Constituye esto una instancia del principio de expresabilidad, el cual enuncia que cualquier cosa que pueda querer decirse puede decirse. Desde luego, un lenguaje dado puede no ser lo suficientemente rico para permitir a los hablantes decir todo lo que quieren decir, pero en principio no existen barreras para enriquecerlo. Otra aplicación de esta ley consiste en que cualquier cosa que pueda ser implicada puede decirse aunque, si mi explicación de las condiciones preparatorias es correcta, no puede decirse sin implicar otras cosas.<sup>27</sup>

We meet here a problem which involves any use of metalanguage. Barthes describes the semiotic structure of metalanguages as the mirror image of myths.<sup>28</sup> Both metalanguages and myths are second-degree elaborations on a given language. Myths duplicate the semiotic structure by taking a previously established sign and draining it of meaning until it becomes an "empty" signifier, which then receives a second-degree signification.

Language	1. Signifier	2. Signified
	3. Sign I. Signifier	II. Signified
Myth	III. Sign	

Myth works in the same way as connotation in this sense: an old sign is associated with a new meaning without losing its earlier one: the whole sign (not just the signifier) becomes a sign for something else.

Metalanguage is the opposite phenomenon:

There is also a reverse situation in which the sign of a prior signifier- signified relationship becomes the *signified* of a further one. In this case, the "second-order" system becomes a *metalanguage*. This is the situation of semiotics itself. It acts as a *metalanguage* in respect of the semiosis which it studies.<sup>29</sup>

Now critical language is also a metalanguage, and therefore it will fall within the principle formulated by Searle. American deconstruction stemming from the work of Paul de Man has made a central concern of the borderline imposed on critical thought and consciousness by the inescapably textual nature they must assume. For de Man, each work is haunted by its own necessity; it is not free to escape or even to recognize

<sup>27</sup> John Searle, *Actos de habla: Ensayo de filosofía del lenguaje*, trans. Luis M. Valdés Villanueva (Madrid: Cátedra, 1980), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, "Le mythe, aujourd'hui." In *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil, 1957. (Points). 191-247.

<sup>29</sup> Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), 134.

it, since its structural laws encompass the consciousness of the text and organize both its conscious and its unconscious manifestations: "Whenever we think we have pushed beyond the borders of language we find that the region we have reached magically reforms itself as still or already included within the borders of language."<sup>30</sup> J. Hillis Miller draws the conclusion that human order (ethical, social) is based on a fictional contract whose bases escape our consciousness; ultimately reflection on such textual contracts enters a vicious circle, since those conventions are what we are made of. They are not understandable, since "we cannot read Reading." According to Kant, we could understand at least *the incomprehensibility* of the categorical imperative which founds human, moral order; according to de Man or Miller, we can't understand even that incomprehensibility —we can only read unreadability (Miller 55, 58). This problem is not unrelated to another favourite reflexive image of hermeneutics —the hermeneutic circle, by which the interpreter himself becomes a part of the situation to be interpreted.

## 2.3. Reflexive elements in classical criticism

### Transparency versus reflexivity

The most classical definition of art is that it is an imitation of reality. Mimesis and realism, not reflexivity, seem therefore to be at the basis of the major classical pronouncements on aesthetics. Art must be used to hide art, not to display it: so the classical doctrine goes. In the realm of narrative, the first anti-reflexive pronouncement is found in Aristotle's *Poetics*: "The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator" (1460 a). This idea is not alien to the twentieth century: one of the hallmarks of modernism in the novel was the reaction against the discursive style of Victorian narrative: James, Joyce, Hemingway, many modern novelists became associated with the idea of "exit author", of the artist paring his fingernails, contemplating his autonomous creation from above, without the hand of the creator being felt in the work. Fiction had to be dramatic, scenic, which means that it had to conceal its own constructive devices.

Just as the mimetic tendency of literature lives on today, there have always been reflexive tendencies in traditional literature and criticism.

### Intrinsic qualities

Though Aristotle defines art as an imitation, he notes that the pleasure produced by an imitation is not the same as the pleasure produced by the original —that is, the imitation has laws or qualities of its own which are not the laws of the represented object. Even if art is supposed to represent reality, in this doctrine the laws of art and of reality must not be confused. Addison notes that descriptions of bad things may

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<sup>30</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, Benjamin* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 57-8.

still please because of their aptness, while descriptions of good things please both as descriptions *and* as the good thing described.<sup>31</sup>

Ignored by Plato and stressed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, the intrinsic qualities of a work of art are opposed to its externally directed value, to its definition as mimesis. Therefore, two different tendencies could be said to exist in a work of literature, or representational art in general: a centrifugal movement which relates the work to the represented objects, art to reality; and a centripetal force which makes the work a self-contained, self-referential whole, the value of whose parts is defined by their relations with the other parts, with the whole of the work. The idea that criticism should restrict itself to judging intrinsic artistic qualities is put forward in Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*.<sup>32</sup> This intrinsic element in the composition of the work is of course a foothold for reflexivity, for the work to develop its own laws which may differ from those of reality. All literary works, therefore, can be said to be self-referential due to the nature of the aesthetic function of sign systems (Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*). However, the New Critics did not push to the extreme this notion. The fact that a work of art has an organic structure does not mean that it is primarily concerned with itself, rather than with reality.<sup>33</sup>

### Imitative form

An early application to narrative and to whole structures is found in the Italian Renaissance, when critics debated the legitimacy of chivalry romances as a literary genre. Romances did not feature the unity of plot recommended by the classics, and were therefore rejected by classicist critics. But some critics defended them on the ground of a harmony between form and content: just as the knights are knights errant, who wander from one adventure to the next, their poets are poets errant, who cannot be satisfied with one single subject, but must seek new adventures. Robortello rejects this analogy.

In his *Essay on Criticism* Alexander Pope gives practical advice to the critic, defining at the same time his ideal of poetic practice. One of his central concerns is the harmony of form and content. The critic must learn to judge the work as a whole, and not its isolated parts; to appreciate the true merits of a work, and not the superficial ornaments like good sound or a good style with no content. The harmony between sound and sense finds in Pope's view its most finished instance in the figure of *imitative harmony* :

'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense;  
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.

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31 Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 418, from "On the Pleasures of Imagination." *The Spectator* 411, 416, 418 (1712). Rpt. in *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. H. Adams. San Diego: Harcourt, 1971. 288-294.

32 René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949).

33 René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950. Vol. 6: American Criticism, 1900-1950* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986) 150.

Soft is the strain when zephyr gently blows,  
 And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;  
 But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,  
 The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar:  
 Whe Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,  
 The line too labours, and the words move slow.  
 Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,  
 Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of "representative verse" as it is also called is classical. It had been noted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus with reference to Homer, and it had been used in Vida's Renaissance *Art of poetry* in order to exemplify qualities of verse such as "heavy, light, slow, fast, rough, smooth." Here Pope takes care to exemplify in his own poem the effects or defects he wants to point out, in bad poets, with examples of imitative verse on several topics of prosody:

- Hiatus (345):

These equal syllables alone require,  
 Though oft' the ear the open vowels tire;

- Forced, monosyllabic lines :

While expletives their feeble aid do join  
 And ten low words oft' creep in one dull line:

- Bad or hackneyed rhyme:

While they ring round the same unvaried chimes,  
 With sure returns of still expected lines  
 Where'er you find "the cooling western breeze"  
 In the next line, it "whispers through the trees"  
 If crystal streams "with pleasing murmurs creep"  
 The reader's threatened (not in vain) with "sleep"

- Or two different uses of the Alexandrine:

A needless Alexandrine ends the song,  
 That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along. (lines 356-7; cf. also the line about Camilla.)

Imitative harmony was popular in the neoclassical age; it was used, for instance, by Dryden in his "Ode on St. Cecilia's Day."

Form is not important in itself, Pope says, but only with respect to subject matter: "Expression is the dress of thought" and so it must be *suited*, not uniformly bright, "For different styles with different subjects sort / As several garbs with country,

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<sup>34</sup> Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*. In *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. San Diego: Harcourt, 1971.



town, and court." Pope's sartorial metaphors have often been criticised, because they betray him into denying what he is trying to assert: that there is an organic relationship between style and content. Defining style as a dress, as something which exists apart from the thing it covers, is not the best way to do it, but we must note that Pope is very careful in not using too much the word "ornamental" (cf. the strictures of Thomas Sprat against ornamental language and the decay of rhetoric as a privileged discipline).<sup>35</sup> In his own poetry, Pope takes care in his poetry not to be too "ornamental." Anyway, the definition of language as a kind of dress for thought is not Pope's own: it is commonplace from medieval criticism (e.g. in Geoffrey of Vinsauf) to the Romantic age, when it will be severely criticised.

The modern notion of "imitative form" is defined and condemned by the New Critics. Yvor Winters coined the term "imitative form"<sup>36</sup> and adds it to the list of fallacies and heresies denounced by the New Critics, like the intentional fallacy or the heresy of paraphrase.

The structure of a work cannot rest on the structure of its materials; the New Critics also speak of the "fallacy of expressive form", the fallacy that something is felt intensely enough, "its mere expression in words will give it satisfactory form."<sup>37</sup> Romantic forms are prone to indulging in this fallacy. Romantic irony is condemned as imitative form by Winters, who rejects forms which betray a state of moral insecurity; he favours consistent motivation.

Imitative form leads to extremely reflexive examples, or to their radical parody, such as Elbert Hubbard's *Essay on Silence* without a single printed word. The avant-garde is not afraid of confusing itself with its own caricature.

## 2.4. Romantic irony

According to Coutinho, the baroque style expresses not a thought in isolation, but rather a mind in the act of thinking.<sup>38</sup> But this is best applied to Romanticism. This conception appears explicitly in the criticism of Herder, who saw in poetry the imitation of a creative process —and not the imitation of the created object.

Other German Romantic critics, notably Friedrich Schlegel, develop this idea of poetry-as-process, expanding its reflexive germ. Schlegel calls for a "transcendental poetry" (*Transzendentalpoesie*) which reflects upon the conditions of poetry just as Kant had inaugurated "transcendental philosophy" which thinks about its own limits and function. More particularly, Schlegel relates such reflexive poetry to Fichte's idealistic philosophy, to the infinite productive energy of the I.

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<sup>35</sup> See Hugh Kenner, *The Mechanic Muse*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

<sup>36</sup> Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, Introd. Kenneth Fields (Athens (OH): Ohio UP-Swallow Press, 1987), 41.

<sup>37</sup> R. P. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture*, qtd. in Wellek, *Modern Criticism* 6.225.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Vítor Manuel de Aguiar e Silva, *Teoría de la literatura* (Trans. Valentín García Yebra. (Biblioteca Románica Hispánica). Madrid: Gredos, 1972).

For Fichte, reality is the product of the shaping energy of an "Absolute I", which manifests a transcendental, not an empirical self-consciousness. In the same way, for the young Friedrich Schlegel poetry is transcendental poetry if it presents and reflects reality exclusively as a reality which is produced and, together with his, it hides and reflects within itself the consciousness of having freely determined the truth.<sup>39</sup>

Schlegel calls this poetry of the future "poetry of poetry" or "a transcendently reflexive art."

*Fr. 116.* Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. . . . Only this poetry may become, as epic did, a mirror of the whole world surrounding it, and an image of its time. But it is also able, more than any other, to float, free from any real or ideal interest, between the representing subject and the represented object, placing itself in the middle, on the pinions of poetic reflexion, perpetually raising to the power of two this reflexion and multiplying it as in an infinite series of mirrors. . . . Romantic poetry is still making itself; rather, its peculiar essence is that it cannot exist but in a state of becoming, without a possibility of completion.

*Fr. 238.* There exists a poetry whose one and only object is the relationship between the real and the ideal, and which therefore should be styled, by analogy with the technical language of philosophy, as transcendental poetry. . . . Doubtless a transcendental philosophy which was not critical, which did not represent the producer simultaneously with the product, and which did not contain, within the system of transcendental thought, the characteristics of the transcendental way of thinking, would receive but little credit. The same thing applies to this poetry. Therefore it should join materials of a transcendental nature and preparatory exercises to the poetic theory of the literary ability which is frequently found in modern writers, to artistic reflection and to that beautiful self-reflection which is at work in Pindar, in the lyrical fragments of the Greeks, in ancient elegy and, among the moderns, in Goethe —representing itself in each of its representations, and being everywhere and at the same time poetry and poetry of poetry.<sup>40</sup>

As noted by Lucien Dällenbach, this conception implies a reflection of a discourse, but also of enunciation, of reception, of criticism and the theory of literature at work, and of the activity of reflection itself.

One concept developed by in the Romantic age is especially relevant for a study of reflexive forms: *irony*, as defined by Friedrich Schlegel and K.W.F. Solger. Schlegel saw in irony the practical instrument by which to develop a transcendental poetry. Irony recuperates the negative element in poetry through an explicit recognition of the impotence expressed in the poet's creation. This *romantic irony*, as

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<sup>39</sup> Wolfgang Schröder, *Reflektierter Roman: Untersuchungen zu Samuel Becketts Romanwerk mit Berücksichtigung seiner impliziten Poetik, seiner Reflexionsstrukturen und seiner Beziehung zur Romantischen Ironie* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1981), 71; translation mine.

<sup>40</sup> *Athenäum*, qtd. in Lucien Dällenbach's *Le Récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 222; I translate from the French.

we shall call it, is therefore a kind of irony directed towards the poetic subject himself, and towards his techniques and attitudes. It does not set the poet above one character, but rather one aspect of the poet's soul against another. Schlegel sees irony as a play between phases of our own stupidity and shrewdness, and sees in it a means to stimulate the evolution of the self. The poet, asserting the essential independence of his creative spirit above the links it has formed with objects and ideas, mocks his own ideals, making them clash with reality and parodying himself. Solger sees irony as co-extensive with poetry: it is the best expression of the poetic imagination breaking the limits of the matter, represented here by the ideals and media of the poet himself. Works written in this fashion, such as the poems or tales of Heine, Hoffmann, Tieck or Brentano, are a series of indulgences in sentiment followed by irony, or a series of Chinese boxes introducing us to yet further levels of reality (Brentano's *Godwi*). Occasionally, romantic irony is carried to the extreme where fictional illusion must be done away with using metafictional strategies. Fiction, for instance, instead of being undervalued as merely fictional and suffering itself to be disguised as truth, is glorified in its fictionality and becomes the measuring rod of reality. Breaking up the conventions poetic craft is one more manifestation of the Romantic titanism that we witness elsewhere in the figures of Childe Harold, Cain or Satan. It is in these writers that we first see the temptation of absurdity hovering around.<sup>41</sup> Romantic irony is not always as self-destructive as it seems: often it is there as a disclaimer, a mere means to justify the previous overflow of sentiment, which is after all more significant. Moreover, this destruction of barriers should be related to the mixture of genres favoured by the Romantic (against Neoclassical prescriptions and conventions), and should be seen as a desire to let self-consciousness guide poetic creation —pure reflexion might consists, as Schröder holds, in a transcendental approach to the conditions of each art and its peculiar mode of productivity.<sup>42</sup> The artistic work becomes ideally a work in process, an investigation into creation, and it does not follow pre-determined forms but creates them as it develops; the theory of art is not previous to art; new theories are implicit in new works of art. Artistic theory and artistic practice go here hand in hand, and are equally deliberate. According to Schlegel, it is criticism which must construct art, giving it a programmatic theory: this is an extreme case of avant-gardist vocation.<sup>43</sup> Twentieth-century avant-garde will provide more examples of work which is implicitly reflexive, since the work is to be read as a theoretical statement of beligerant aesthetic principles.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, romantic irony is also a search for authentic being, as is manifest in a maxim by Novalis: "When we dream that we are dreaming, the moment of awakening is at hand."<sup>45</sup>

Hegel considers reflexive art, such as that written by the Romantic ironists, as a phase of decay after classical purity and perfection of form. Art, he argues, has been displaced in the Romantic age by conceptual thought: "El arte mismo, tal y como es

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41 Aguiar e Silva, *Teoría de la Literatura*. Croce disliked Romantic irony (*Breviario*).

42 Schröder, *Reflektierter Roman*, 111 n. 1.

43 Pedro Aullón de Haro, ed. *Introducción a la crítica literaria actual* (Madrid: Playor, 1983), 42.

44 Aullón de Haro, *op. cit.*

45 Quoted in Bruce Kavin, *The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982), 251.

en nuestros días, está destinado a ser un objeto de pensamientos."<sup>46</sup> Hegel establishes a connection between the Schlegels' concept of romantic irony and the subjective idealism of Fichte, with its central concept of the self-creating "I": "Aplicado al arte, este principio significa que el artista debe vivir como artista, y dar a su vida una forma *artística*" (*Introducción a la estética* 117). The artist therefore assumes an ironic attitude on his own work: his self is too great to be contained by the work; he is far above the specific contents of his work, which will never be serious or absolute. According to Hegel, romantic ironists assume the point of view of a divine, amoral genius. They negate whatever is not their own subjectivity; the artist portrays himself as a beautiful soul dying out of of spleen and boredom:

Un alma verdaderamente hermosa actúa y vive en lo real. Pero el hastío procede del sentimiento que tiene el sujeto de su nulidad, de su vacío y de su vanidad, así como de su impotencia para escapar de esta vanidad y conseguir un contenido substancial . . . . El arte irónico se encuentra reducido a la representación de la subjetividad absoluta (Hegel, *Introducción a la estética* 119)

Irony is for Hegel an unartistic element, and the forms it produces are empty of content. The romantic phase of art is an effort on the part of art to go beyond itself without ceasing to be art. It is a phase of subjectivity and unbalance, where beauty has ceased to be the ruling aim of art.

It has been argued that, for all their elaboration, Wordsworth and Coleridge's theories of the imagination are narrow and restricted, in that they are made *ad hoc*, to suit the special kind of poetry they were writing. The subject of romantic poems is usually inspiration, creation, the poet's own sensibility, etc. They are highly reflexive, and so is Coleridge's theory of the imagination.<sup>47</sup> However,

[i]t is one thing to say that all our knowledge is a "self-realizing intuition" which reconciles subject or conscious self with object or nature. (It is impossible to write a poem which will especially illustrate this transcendental principle. How could any one expression better illustrate or embody it than any other?). It is a vastly different thing to say that the forms of nature are, or are capable of being, suited to moral reflections-or that the latter can be, in any peculiar way, elicited or superinduced from the former. This is a very special showing of how "nature" is "thought", and "thought" is "nature." (It may be quite possible to illustrate this in a special kind of poem.<sup>48</sup>

Surely the Romantics' praise of symbol as opposed to allegory suits their own poems, just as it may lead to an undervaluation of much important literature (Dante, Cervantes, Rabelais are excepted by Coleridge). Their explanation of a parallel working of nature and the human mind makes their projective imagery especially

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<sup>46</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Introducción a la estética* (trans. Ricardo Mazo; Barcelona: Península, 1985), 31.

<sup>47</sup> This reflexivity is most clearly seen in two of the best and most typical poems by Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" and "The Eolian Harp."

<sup>48</sup> W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 399.

suitable; the subjectivization or personification of nature (what Ruskin called "the pathetic fallacy") is the most representative image in romantic poetry. So, their theory of imagination is a description of their own poetry: it is a poetry which suggests similitudes usually without stating them overtly. In the Romantic metaphor "[b]oth tenor and vehicle are wrought in a parallel process out of the same material. The landscape is both the occasion of subjective reflection or transcendental insight and the source of figures by which the reflection or insight is defined" (Wimsatt and Brooks 402; cf. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" or "Intimations of Immortality"). The best poems of the Romantics are philosophically purposive: they are the logical outcome of the approximation between poetry and philosophy made in contemporary theory, of Schelling's doctrine that poetry was the highest kind of philosophy. Romantic poems are over-reflexive, they "contain and *assert* the philosophy of nature and art which is supposedly also their formal principle" (Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*). This is something like Pope's "imitative harmony" translated to purely conceptual terms, and set at the heart of the poem's structure.

This . . . they were led to do and were able to do because of the intimate union which they conceived to obtain between art and nature. The theory was endlessly reflexive and self-conscious . . . . Romantic poems tend to be about Romantic imagination. (Wimsatt and Brooks 402)

This hidden intellectualism leads to some incoherence in Coleridge's criticism. He states that pleasure is the immediate object of a poem, but then he cannot discriminate a good poem from a bad one unless he speaks of the passion and truth behind it. And his undervaluation of all which can be intellectual, of that which is mere "wit" or "fancy" restricts the field of subjects available for poetic treatment. Nothing too playful or merely witty is adequate subject for a romantic poem, which tries to reach the infinity behind the fact.

## 2.5. Epic theatre

Drama, like all artistic activities, takes place within a set of conventions which enable its effects and define the characteristics a play relative to those of other plays. The classical conception of drama understood theater as a regulated activity, taking place not by illusion or *trompe l'œil* but through conventionally established practices. Art was measured with rules different from those of life. According to Sir Joshua Reynolds, theater is not an exercise in deception or a literal representation of life: in the best dramas, actions and dialogues are unnatural compared to those of everyday life. Art and life should not be confused, Reynolds argues: "Quid enim deformius, quam scenam in vitam transferre?"<sup>49</sup> This is precisely what nineteenth-century drama tried to achieve, both in its Romantic and its Naturalist manifestations. Bourgeois drama often tried to ignore its own conventions. What avant-garde drama of the twentieth century has done is often to use self-imposed conventions as a creative frame (as in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*) or to expose conventions as such, in

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<sup>49</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 1770-1786 (select. in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, 355-376).

search for a more complex theatrical experience (this is the case of epic drama or the theater of the absurd).

Lionel Abel has traced reflexivity in drama back to the Renaissance (Marlowe, Shakespeare, Calderón, Molière).<sup>50</sup> And of course it is easy to move even backwards, to the very origin of Western drama, especially to the Old comedy of Aristophanes.

Theorised by Benjamin, Barthes, and Brecht himself, the "epic theater" promoted by Bertolt Brecht presents itself as an alternative to classical or Aristotelian drama. "Epic" suggests narrative, stressing the artificial mediacy which counters immediate presentation. "One of the most interesting paradoxes of twentieth-century literature has been the opposing movement of drama toward narrative forms ('epic theater') and of narrative toward dramatic forms "*show, don't tell*" (Michael Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*, 27).

Aristotle bases his discussion of drama on the principles of *mimesis* and *empathy*: catharsis, for instance, presupposes an emotional involvement of the spectator in the plot. Brecht's epic theatre will emphasize, quite the other way round, the notions of convention, visible artificiality and emotional detachment. The spectator's response is above all intellectual, reflexive, and the use of form and convention is directed to eliciting such a response. According to Benjamin, the audience of epic drama is relaxed and detached, like novel-readers, and their reactions take place in a well-considered way. The plot is best constituted of familiar incidents, without an attempt to introduce suspense or sensational events. It may cover the greatest spans of time without worrying for the respect of the unity of time which is so often an unwritten law in bourgeois drama. The hero of this kind of drama is essentially *untragic*: he is a thinker or an observer, similar to the eighteenth century noblemen who had the right to contemplate the action sitting onstage. Epic theatre is therefore, in a sense, *undramatic* theatre. Brecht eliminates catharsis from his plays, since he aims at producing intellectual astonishment, not emotional empathy. Plot is not all that important, since the aim of the play is "not so much the development of actions as the representation of conditions."<sup>51</sup> Its procedure is *alienation* leading to *discovery*. There is a distance between the spectator and the play —Brecht encouraged his audiences to smoke or look casually on the play— and there is a distance between the actor and his gesture. However, this intellectual distance is lived as a physical *proximity*: epic theatre will encourage the suppression of the fourth wall, and return to such traditional conceptions as theatre in the round and involvement with the audience. That is, the stage of epic drama is an *open* stage, like the stage of classical farce. Actually, the dominance of the closed stage is a fiction established by modern naturalistic theatre.<sup>52</sup> In this way, the epic theatre recognizes that the language and action of drama is directed towards the public.

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<sup>50</sup> Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963).

<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?" (1939; in Benjamin, *Illuminations* New York: Schocken, 1969, 147-54), 150.

<sup>52</sup> Roman Ingarden, "The Functions of Language in the Theater", in Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973, 375-396), 383. (Trans. of "Von den Funktionen der Sprache im Theaterschauspiel", 1958).

Epic drama has its own theory of acting, the polar opposite of Stanislavski's ideal of "living out" the role, which is at bottom an Aristotelian conception. The Brechtian actor must interpret his role at a second remove, a bit as if he interpreted an actor interpreting the role. Gestures are artificial, explicitly conventional; gesture is not an immediate sign of inner reality and emotion, a unique expression: it is a *quotable* gesture. According to Boyd, "Brecht rejects Aristotelian empathy less than he subverts it to serve new modes of communication" (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*, 35).

A difference between *Verfremdung* and *ostranienie*: the ideological and critical stress placed on *Verfremdung*, while the Russian formalists had only an aesthetic experience in mind.

### 3. The Reflexive Novel

#### The Novel and realism

Among the directions in the novelistic imagination: realism, fantasy and self-consciousness (towards this world, towards other worlds, towards wor(l)d-making). The original defense of fiction privileged realism over the fantasies of romance. In order to be serious, fiction had to be realistic, and that involved a consistent and discreet use of conventions (*ars celare artem*). As Alter puts it, the mainstream realistic novel was expected to deal with "moral situations in their social contexts" (*Partial Magic* ix).

In 1975, Alter could still complain about "a lamentable lack of critical appreciation" of self-conscious fiction.

Self-consciousness does not necessarily impede the novel from reaching the effects realistic fiction aims at. For Alter, the self-conscious novel "expresses its seriousness through playfulness", and "is acutely aware of itself as a mere structure of words even as it tries to discover ways of going beyond words to the experiences words seek to indicate" (*Partial Magic* ix). In self-conscious novels, realism "the realistic enterprise has been enormously complicated and qualified by the writer's awareness that fictions are never real things, that literary realism is a tantalizing contradiction in terms" (Alter x).

The moralist school criticism led by F. R. Leavis had dismissed self-conscious novelists from the English tradition —Fielding, Sterne or Joyce are not a part of "the Great Tradition." The Marxist view of the novel as an epic of bourgeois life did not easily lend itself to the study of self-consciousness: on the whole, Marxist criticism tends to concentrate on the novel as a means of representation. The same holds for such influential theories as Auerbach's or Ian Watt's: it is significant that Auerbach's book on writing is called *Mimesis*, and that Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* does not seem to consider Sterne as a major novelist.<sup>53</sup>

#### Realism and *ostranienie*

Realism itself as a set of strategies. Defamiliarization of the familiar by setting it in a literary context. It is always renewed, in one sense.

"But what if the realist's customary methods of distortion become habits of mind?" (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel* 26). Boyd advocates "an art devoted exclusively to exploring its own strangeness, exposing its discontinuity with ordinary experience, while at the same time asserting its own very real existence" (Boyd 26).

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<sup>53</sup> F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. Willard Trask; Garden City (NY): Doubleday-Anchor, 1957); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).



### The novel and self-conscious writing

Whereas realistic fiction presents itself as a form of exposition, self-conscious fiction is a form of exploration: an ontological exploration in fiction through manipulation of form (Alter x). Whereas realistic fiction aims at pure transparency of the medium, self-conscious fiction flaunts its opacity, the mechanisms of its construction.

The overriding subject of the novel in almost all its forms would seem to be the disparity between the structures of the imagination and things as they are, novelistic plot consisting in the multifarious effects of that disparity on the protagonist and the personages involved with him or (often) her . . . . Until the nineteenth century, however, the focus of novels exploring this tension tends to be on the operations of the imagination, on the literary and linguistic materials with which the imagination builds its ambiguous worlds, and therefore on the crisis of traditional literature reflected in the very emergence of the novel as a new genre. The nineteenth-century novel did not entirely abandon these concerns, but it is clear that the center had shifted, broadly speaking, from consciousness and how it shaped the world around it to the world around and how it impinged with its specific gravity, its full concreteness, on consciousness. (Alter, *Partial Magic*, 87)

According to Alter, "the novel begins out of an erosion of belief in the authority of the written word" (*Partial Magic*, 3). The novel has always been a self-parodying genre, and therefore it is not strange to find that metafiction has often been a favourite novelistic structure. Novels which sharply depart or parody contemporary novelistic conventions are frequently called "anti-novels." The term was applied not so long ago to the experimental works of the "nouveau roman" —the work of Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet or Nathalie Sarraute, or, in English, the strange narratives of Christine Brooke-Rose. But then *Tristram Shandy* could be called an "anti-novel" with equal justice; and it was the avowed purpose of Cervantes to ridicule chivalric romances, the popular novels of his own time. The anti-novelistic tendency is found, therefore, at the very heart of the novelistic tradition. Many important novels are "anti-novels", and, as William H. Gass has noted, many of these "anti-novels" are so called because of their use of metafictional structures. Modern art is highly conscious of the tensions within it. "The reflexive novel is distinguished by its practice of exposing the conflict, of allowing the process of making a novel out of a given fictive situation to overshadow the situation itself" (Boyd 15). Samuel Beckett puts this as a conflict between form and chaos, or "the mess", where form not always triumphs: "to swim is true, and to sink is true."<sup>54</sup> Traditional art, Beckett argues, strove to keep the mess out of it, to separate form and chaos; but in our age we must learn to allow it to enter.

Julia Kristeva's structuralist theory of the novel delves deeper into the relationships between form and ideology. The problematic textuality of the novel is

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Tom F. Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine." (*Columbia University Forum* 4 (Summer 1961): 21-25, rpt. in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman; London: Routledge, 1979, 217-223), 219.

linked for Kristeva to its inherent discursive dynamism, its inscribed production.<sup>55</sup> Studying the peculiar kind of writing inaugurated by the novel (in its early form of the picaresque novel), Kristeva argues that structural closure has to be effected through a foregrounding of the act of writing: "El verdadero golpe final está dado por la irrupción, en el enunciado de la novela, del propio trabajo que la produce, ahora, en esta página concreta".<sup>56</sup> She exemplifies the parallel between the fabula and the discourse in novelistic writing with La Salle's *Jehan de Saintré*:

En el doble aspecto del texto (historia de Saintré - historia del proceso de escritura), reflejada la productividad escriptural en el relato, y siendo el relato interrumpido con frecuencia para que aparezca el acto productor, la muerte (de Saintré) como imagen retórica coincide con el final del discurso (la disolución del Actor) (Kristeva, *Texto* 70)

This early form of novel-writing effects a simultaneous closure of the text as fabula and as discourse. This example may serve us to exemplify a general characteristic of the genre:

la novela posee un doble estatuto: es un *fenómeno* lingüístico (relato) y al mismo tiempo un *circuito discursivo* (carta, literatura); el hecho de que sea un *relato* no es más que un aspecto —anterior— de la particularidad fundamental de ser *literatura*. (Kristeva, *Texto* 71)

Once the events of the novel are over, the author claims the language of the work as his:

El relato se presenta como historia, la novela como un discurso (independientemente del hecho de que el autor —más o menos consciente— lo reconozca o no como tal). En este sentido constituye una etapa decisiva en el desarrollo de la conciencia crítica del sujeto hablante en relación a su palabra. (*Texto* 72)

Kristeva associates explicit references to writing to a concept of the novel as *labour*, as cultural production, and distinguishes these intrusions of a *writer* from the intrusions of the novelist as a *speaker* which are characteristic of the classical bourgeois novel. She finds in this classical form of the novel a devaluation of the act of writing which, like Derrida, she associates with the analysis of marginality in the work. Valuation of the work as a discourse is ideological with respect to a more balanced structural analysis of the work as *writing*. Consciousness of the process of writing is for Kristeva an important element in ideological self-awareness and aesthetic progression. It is also linked in a special way to the characteristics of the novel as a genre. But in order to explain this we have to look further into Kristeva's view of the novel and its peculiarities as a mode of discourse.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Robert Weimann's Marxist critique of Formalism in "Erzählerstandpunkt und Point of View : Zur Geschichte und Aesthetik der Perspektive im englischen Roman." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 10 (1962): 369-416.

<sup>56</sup> Julia Kristeva, *El texto de la novela* (trans. Jordi Lloret. Barcelona: Lumen, 1974), 69. (Trans. of *Le texte du roman*. The Hague: Mouton, 1970).

The novel as a genre is a manifestation of ideology, as any other genre. However, this manifestation takes in the novel a peculiar form, which involves also its contestation.<sup>57</sup> The Novel, like other ideological forms, organizes its conceptual field as an opposition (or *disjunction*) between absolute terms. The narrative element of the novel involves some kind of displacement from one structural pole to the other. But in order to effect this, a kind of structural intermediary is needed. That is, in order to exist as a discourse, as a process, the novel must introduce a *non-disjunction*. The non-disjunctive element assumes a form of duplicity or ambiguity, such as a trick, or a double. The process of the novel is dialectical, with disjunction being the thesis and non-disjunction the antithesis. Kristeva explicitly refers to Hegel here: the dynamics produced by this dualism is due to the ambivalent synthesis between the two poles. In this way, the dialectical triad thesis - antithesis - synthesis is constituted. The story and the meaning of the novel are constituted by the unfolding of this dialectical opposition: narrative time is thus traceable back to a structural matrix. The non-disjunctive function is articulated at all levels of the novel; Kristeva is especially interested in its consequences for characterization and psychological depth. The epic, while it shares some traits with the novel, is based on *non-conjunction*: any transition between its structural poles is seen with hostility. This can be seen, for instance, examining the transitional figure of the traitor and its function in the epic and the novel: "En la novela el héroe no se vuelve un traidor (épica) sino que es también un traidor" (*Texto* 88). Non-disjunction involves representing characters with a greater psychological depth: "La psicología aparecerá con la función no-disyuntiva del signo, y hallará en su ambigüedad el terreno propio para sus sinuosidades" (*Texto* 80). The novel is therefore characterized by a peculiar ideological ambivalence and dynamism. This can be readily seen in the use which marginal figures may play in the structure of the novel, precisely because of the readiness with which they take the central role of transitional or movable element. Women, traditionally used as an object of exchange, can become embodiments of this non-disjunctive function. In the novel she analyzes, Kristeva sees the transitional role assumed by the protagonist Jean, because of his homosexuality, which gives him the "exchange value" necessary to accomplish his transitional and ambivalent role. The ideological movility of the novel must not be exaggerated, however. Even if its central structural element is a structural transition, this transition may be pre-determined, already written in cultural schemata, and the role of the writer may become a simple *transcription*. This is why Kristeva sees a greater potential for ideological mobility in those writers who attempt writing as an exploration of the unknown, not as a representation of what already is, of reality:

Será distinto para aquel texto que, renunciando a la representación, se convirtiera en la inscripción de su propia producción. (*Texto* 90)

Kristeva sees this ideal thematization of writing in early Modernist authors like Mallarmé or Lautréamont. In the "carnavalesque" writing of modernists like Joyce or Beckett she examines the value of obstrusive formal devices, like repetitions, disruption of the sentence, enumerations... These techniques have a reflexive value, since they lay bare an unbalance between signifier and signified characteristic of the sign (as opposed to the symbol, where meaning is well defined):

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<sup>57</sup> For these views Kristeva is indebted to Bakhtin's theory of the novel as a dialogic and "carnavalesque" form.

la repetición indica el discurso en tanto que discurso, o, de otro modo, por la repetición el discurso se designa a sí mismo: es un mensaje que remite al código, al decir de Jakobson, y corresponde a lo que se ha llamado en lógica el modo autónimo del discurso. (*Texto* 243)

Repetition is a favourite post-structuralist concept.<sup>58</sup> (See Derrida, "Signature Event Context"; Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*.)

Reflexive fiction is, according to Leslie Fiedler, the last gasp of the Art Novel. But for Schorer, "the virtue of the modern novelist . . . is not only that he pays so much attention to his medium, but that , when he pays most, he discovers through it a new subject matter, and a greater one."<sup>59</sup>

### The self-begetting novel

Steven Kellman defines the self-begetting novel as "a kind of novel whose very form demonstrates a longing to overcome a generation gap by merging parent and child in one enduring unit" (ix). He relates it to the Modernist idea of autogeny, of art which is self-sufficient to the point of emerging from itself:

The self-begetting novel . . . projects the illusion of art creating itself ... it is an account, usually first-person, of the development of a character to the point at which he is able to take up his point and compose the novel we have just finished reading.<sup>60</sup>

This novel is therefore a variation on the theme of the *Bildungsroman*; more specifically it is a novel of the making of the artist. The hero moves from the drabness of ordinary world into the realm of art and his apotheosis as a novelist. Kellman seems consider as more central the novels which beget themselves in a surprising or unexpected way, and which therefore require a second reading in order to become fully significant. This novelist's novel is therefore not only a portrait of the artist, but a portrait of the artist's portrait by himself (Kellman 7). *Circularity*, a frequent self-reflexive motif, is commonly associated with this doubling status of the fiction.

Kellman notes that the "self-begetting" motif is not exclusive to the novel. He mentions Descartes as a self-begetting philosopher, whose maxim could be *scribo, ergo sum*.

"Self-begetting" is a contemporary fad, as noted by Kellman. Among works of this genre we could mention Joyce's *Portrait*, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*,

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<sup>58</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982): 307-30; J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982).

<sup>59</sup> Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," in *The Critical Spectrum*, ed. Gerald Jay Goldberg and Nancy Marmer Goldberg (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962, 70-83), 74.

<sup>60</sup> Kellman, Steven G. Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

Gide's *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, Sartre's *La Nausée*, Pascal Lainé's *La Dentellière*. Each of these novels plays in a different way with the pattern of self-begetting. In Joyce and Proust, the circle is left incomplete: there is no explicit record that the novels we read are those the artists finally manage to write, but an inevitable Gestaltist reflex closes the circle. The novels leave us interrogating art and its possible answer to the drabness of life, but the work has already provided an answer; as Kellman notes, when we read *Le Temps retrouvé*, we already know that Marcel has been able to recover the lost time of his youth. Some critics do not hesitate to say that the *Recherche* is a self-begetting novel (Brée) although it is better to respect the ambiguous status of reflexivity here and allow for a variety of readings. Similarly, *La Nausée*, which is read in principle as the protagonist's abandoned diary, could also be interpreted to be the novel that he intends to write in the end (Kellman 48) —after all, which is the difference between a real novel in the form of a fictional diary and a real novel in the form of a fictional novel in the form of a fictional diary? Surely it is at best paradoxical.

In *La Modification*, another turn is given to the screw of self-begetting, through the use of the second person. The reader is addressed as the protagonist who slowly becomes a writer, and the novel in his hands, *La Modification*, the novel he is reading, slowly becomes the novel he will write.

Beckett's trilogy poses a thematic limit to the genre: his novels "depict their own quest for death. In his hands, the self-begetting novel will also become the self-aborting novel" (Kellman 76). In time, parodies of the technique become more and more frequent.

Is the concept of "self-begetting novel" a unified one? In Kellman it is exploratory and suggestive rather than clearly defined. It is clear that not all self-begetting novels need be self-consciously fictional: any first-person narrative pushed to the extreme would become a self-begetting narrative, without any need to disrupt the realistic motivation if there is one. On the other hand, not all self-conscious novels have to be self-begetting. Nevertheless, the idea of a self-begetting novel is certainly appealing as a metafictional structure. And we can certainly identify more precise modes of self-begetting: for instance, taking into account the parameters of whether the reader is supposed to know the identity of the novel and the character's novel, whether there is a jump from third to first person, etc. This jump is especially typical: the first person form being intrinsically self-begetting, third-person becomes so by being contaminated or absorbed by the first person. If the revelation that the narrative we have just read is the work of one of the characters comes about all of a sudden, we experience an ontological flicker: the vague project in the writer's mind suddenly becomes mind-bogglingly real and tangible: the world is the result of artistic fashioning. What we thought was first-degree reality turns out to be a representation in the mind of a character, or rather, the difference between reality and fiction has been slightly eroded. The ideal limits are those works which in turn demonstrate the unreality of the represented world and assert their own presence to the reader. "Self-begetting" then is a move which threatens the peaceful hierarchy of levels between what is inside the book and what is outside, and is therefore an eminently metafictional maneuver.

## The nonfiction novel

¿Is not the novel inherently fictional? The contemporary non-fiction novel is also influenced by the consciousness of the constraints of realism; it is in some way a deliberate attempt to break the realistic frame and confront writing, fiction, and reality without any concessions.

### **The novel as exploration: the future of the novel**

For many writers the defining characteristic of contemporary literature is the exhaustion of forms. The "death of the novel" was a fashionable topic of discussion in the fifties. John Barth makes the best of this situation when he defines his own model of reflexive literature, the "literature of exhaustion." The post-modernist writer must not be discouraged by his belatedness:

His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work. (in Bradbury 77).

The new novelist must make an occasion of his belatedness and of the failure of modern literature, make a literature which is an interrogation of its own possibility in this context. The models for such an aesthetics are Beckett and Borges.

There is no "death of the novel" for the new novelists: the old novel is dying, but there are enormous possibilities for a transformation of the genre. Robbe-Grillet rejects the idea that the novels of the past can serve as a model for the novels of the future. He defined the "new novel" not as a coherent program or school but as a research for new forms which bring along with them new meanings. Although he did not want to delineate a theory or a fixed model, Robbe-Grillet emphasized that a novel must be self-conscious about its procedures: it must know its historical moment and not try to be like a novel of the past. The novelist needs to be a careful and meditative architect, an inventor of a new form for each novel:

Far from respecting immutable forms, each new book tends to constitute its own laws of functioning and simultaneously to bring about their destruction. Once the work is finished, the writer's critical reflection will serve him to distance himself again from it, giving rise at once to new research, a new starting point. (Robbe-Grillet 11)

The critic and the writer go hand in hand for the new novelists, although of course it is mainly through the process of writing that new forms are developed.

For structuralist criticism, narrative is not just a literary phenomenon. Narrative is a mode of perception which is "one of the essential constituents of our understanding of reality." (Butor 45). Narrative is a way of ordering reality, of making it manageable. Each narrative mode — conversation, history, the novel, journalism, etc.— "links us to a particular segment of reality" (Butor 45). Real narratives translate into one another: they can be compared, checked, falsified. Fictional narrative is different, and this gives it, according to Butor, an interesting structural role:

Even though veracious narrative always has the support, the last resort, of external evidence, the novel must suffice to create what it tells us. That is why it is the phenomenological realm par excellence, the best possible place to study how reality appears to us, or might appear; that is why the novel is the laboratory of narrative. (45-46)

The novel creates new ways of responding to a reality that is changing and becoming more complex every day. Butor sees in experimental narrative the condition of a greater and more complex realism. He feels that reality will escape us if we continue to use exhausted forms to represent it. Literature is not a simple pastime: it is an essential instrument of self-representation in society, "a systematic experiment" (50).

## 4. Reflexive Devices in Fiction

We shall draw now a very general panorama of the main tenets of experimental and reflexive fiction as they are formulated from the fifties to the seventies by structuralist critics or by avant-garde writers. We shall define the characteristics of the new fiction as they bear on the aspects of the novel defined by traditional or modernist criticism. The enterprise of the New Novelists is both to transform the novel and to transform critical vocabulary about the novel. When the new novelists speak of "plot", "character", "atmosphere", "message" as outdated notions,<sup>61</sup> they are rejecting both a form of writing novels and a form of interpreting and criticizing them.

### New Emphases

Three types of narrative structures which become especially common in the age of the reflexive novel: baring the device, or the disruption of classical realistic conventions; metalepsis, or illegitimate mixture of narrative levels (as in *Niebla*) and *mise en abyme*, or the representation of the structure of the work inside the work. These new concepts emphasize the textual, parodic and disruptive nature of modern writing.

### Author

An evident reflexive device is to duplicate within the work the communicative situation of literature of which the work participates. Introducing the question of the author and authorship within the work is a favourite postmodernist device for short-circuiting the gap between the text and the world.<sup>62</sup>

The realist perspective either masks the author or makes it clear how the book is the product of the writer. It is not strange to find how metafictional works invert this relationship and make of the author an image constructed by the work. It is clear that this is so for the reader: an authorial image emerges only through the reading process as directed by the verbal structure of the text. But this may also become the most literal reality: the author may be made and transformed by his work as he writes it, the book being an object used by the writer to transact with himself and construct a stable identity --this process is at work, for instance, in Montaigne's *Essays*, which according to the writer himself are an experiment in self-criticism, a work which modifies the author's movable identity.

The author's role is diminished:

The author: that anachronistic personage, the bearer of messages, the giver of lectures to cultural bodies (Calvino 232)

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<sup>61</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), 25.

<sup>62</sup> David Lodge, "Short Circuit," in *The Modes of Modern Writing*.



Structuralist critics, of course, herald the "death of the author" (Barthes); interpretation goes far beyond intentionality, and there is no definite meaning in a work, but rather a proliferation of meanings. Meaning is a function of reading, it cannot be fixed. It is not under the author's control. Even notions like the "implied author" of Booth become problematic, and tied to a specific kind of fiction.

## Characters

The notion of character as a being which is nearly alive, psychologically credible, engaging or picturesque, with a name, a history, a will and an objective in his life, is ideological. Representing characters like this is not "natural." Character so understood belongs to the golden age of individualism, the age intellectually dominated by the bourgeoisie. The centrality of the notion of character has been devaluated in experimental novels. Boyd notes that novel criticism which attributes primacy to characters instead of language is usually anti-metafictional and anti-theoretical. Such critics care for characters as if they were living beings. Reflexive novelists, on the other hand, "tend either to create characters that are mere surrogates for the author or to undermine the reality of all their characters and thereby draw attention to themselves" (Boyd 30). "Such novelists, by overdistancing their readers' relationship with their characters, hope to reduce the distance between the reader and the writer" (Boyd 34). For Robbe-Grillet, our own age is less confident in the power of the individual and less anthropocentric. Characters have changed accordingly. Characters become "dehumanized": they may become impenetrable and anonymous. Many characters in contemporary fiction do not have clear goals, they are not caught in a plot of intentions, causes and effects. They may also become deliberately allegorical, inordinately formal. In this way, they reveal themselves as fictional beings—they may even become aware of their own fictionality and suffer existential crisis because of this.

Characters in metafiction are often engaged in activities which may be interpreted as analogical to those of the author or the reader, that is, the activities of reading and writing are mirrored within the text. *Don Quijote* is a novel about a reader, *Tristram Shandy* a novel about a writer.

Novels of the artist's development are common at least since the romantic age. The *künstlerroman* itself, however, "need not be reflexive, need not concern itself with the problem of the relation between reality and representation. More often than not the novel of the artist emphasizes the artist's development within society and more or less takes the problems of art itself for granted" (Boyd 31).

The author's activity need not be mirrored in an author within the novel. We may have a simple teller (Marlow in Conrad's tales), a kind of detective-historian, like Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* or even a chess-player like Luzhin in Nabokov's *The Defense*. The activities of ordering, shaping, selecting and polishing all can be understood as analogies of the author's activities.

Characters may also blur the frontiers of the novel in becoming conscious of their own fictionality.

In *Ulysses* there is one single instance of metafictional self-consciousness on the part of the characters, when Molly Bloom exclaims "Jamesy" instead of "God."

### **Commentary**

A favourite reflexive device is explicit commentary. For instance, Trollope comments on the way his own novels suppress curiosity and stimulate recreation in characters and their interaction.

### **Consciousness of text**

Abusive concept of text's consciousness in Eco (*Lector* 302).

### **Description and setting**

As to the role of description, it is too transformed and subverted. Instead of drawing attention to significant details or creating a meaningful atmosphere, description now becomes non-significant. Instead of helping to represent the object, description now de-visualizes, problematizes it or makes it incomprehensible. The logic of its articulation within narrative is also subverted: descriptive images suddenly become narrativized, or narratives become paralyzed into descriptions. The description's motivation disappears; we often find objects described in impossible detail, or from a non-existent viewpoint which is incoherent with the story. Objects become blank, they do not seem to collaborate with the development of the story, they become void of narrative meaning. Roland Barthes said that the new novelists murdered the classical object, emptying it of its correspondences with other objects and with human interpretation.

As happened in the case of the story, the setting of a novel may be defamiliarized taking the opposite direction: some novels do not have any setting. Events do not take place anywhere: except in someone's fantasy (the writer's, the reader's) or on the page. In Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, the page has become the only setting which remains to a metafictional action. This direction in literary representation is perhaps the equivalent of abstraction in the plastic arts. Reflexive fiction is only the literary manifestation of the evolution towards the non-representative of other figurative arts like painting and sculpture. Abstract art should be understood as art in itself rather than as non-figurative art (Rubert de Ventós 22). Non-referentiality is a way of making the attention of the spectator focus only on the intrinsic structure of the work of art, its status as pure form.

### **Fabulation**

Robert Scholes puts forward a work by a medieval Jewish writer from Huesca, Pedro Alfonso, as a model for fabulation. The work contains a tale within a tale within a tale.

For Scholes, fabulation has the following characteristics:

- An extraordinary delight in design, pleasure in the form of the work.
- An emphasis on the art of the designer.
- A love for allegory: the fantasies of fabulation are ethically controlled.

The age of realism in literature is past. "Realism exalts Life and diminishes Art, exalts things and diminishes words" (Scholes, *Fabulators* 11). It is obvious that a non-verbal medium will be an ideal one for the realist aesthetic. Film is now the realistic medium *par excellence*; it has eaten up realistic literature. The ideal aim of realistic literature would be to create a perfect impression of reality mirrored in a text:

For the writer who is willing to accept the word as his medium, however, other problems exist. He must move away from the pseudo-objectivity of realism toward a romance or an irony which will exploit language's distinctively human perspective on life. (Scholes, *Fabulators* 12)

Scholes notes a return of fiction to a more verbal and more artistic (and also less realistic) kind of narrative, a tendency he discerns in authors as varied as Golding, Murdoch, Russell, Burgess, Amis, Nabokov, Vonnegut, Southern, Hawkes, Barth... These writers practise a new mode of writing which is different from the novel--at least as defined within the realist aesthetic. Fiction fully embraces its fictional nature and explores its powers as fiction, and not as something else: renouncing mimesis, it can exploit the values of catharsis as well as those of construction. The movement away from the realistic plot may take several forms: plots may be criticized and abandoned, as in the work of Beckett, or they may be deliberately exaggerated, as in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

The concept of fabulation does not coincide at all points with that of metafiction. For Scholes, fabulation implies in some way a return to a primitive narrative situation --he seems to include the work of Beckett because of the oral quality of his narrative voices-- but it does not include works of elaborate linguistic patterning such as *Finnegans Wake*, which may be highly metafictional but lack the pure narrative values of fabulation.

### **Fictional projection**

The fiction as an Apollonian image created to sustain a flow of dionysian lyrical emotion (Nietzsche, *Nacimiento de la tragedia* 84)

### **Foregrounding of writing**

Fowler notes that foregrounding the physical substance of the text is avoided in naturalistic fiction. Woolf does it for the sake of mimesis in *The Waves*. Postmodern texts like Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru* often employ evident typographical artifice

as part of a meaning. For instance, commas are used in *Thru* to signify the broken breathing of a woman sobbing:

The mimetic commas are only a tiny part of an overall design to promote the *palpability* of the text, to emphasize that it *is* a text, a linguistic artefact, and not a neutral transcription of "reality" (Fowler 67).

Cf. Derrida's own foregrounding of writing in *Of Grammatology*.

## Frames

There are many kinds of frames in a literary work. Some of them are external, that is, they are a necessary element of the conventions of literary communication and frame the literary work as a whole. Others are internal: a work may establish different kinds of organization and hierarchization among its elements.

We may have internal narrators telling secondary narratives. These narratives are framed by a different narrative voice, by their own status of displacement from the spatio-temporal context in which they are told, often by their status or subject-matter, etc. However, if the fabulas of the framing and the framed stories are similar, a *mise en abyme* occurs.<sup>63</sup> This self-inclusion need not imply infinite regress, since usually the resemblance is only partial. Bal speaks of "mirror text" in this case. The functions of such a mirror text may be diverse: it may predict the end of the fabula, or it may introduce a contrast with the main story. Thematic relationships, in one direction or another, are the rule rather than the exception. The intercalated story suggests an interpretation, a recommended reading of the main text: it is therefore a message, whose senders and receivers may be diverse: a classification of these stories might be established along these guidelines. The intended receiver may be a character, or the reader.

The structure of a work can be defined as a series of chinese boxes even if the work does not consist of stories embedded within one another. Description of a work as a system of levels of analysis could be traced back to Aristotle, but perhaps the most elaborate instance is the work of Roman Ingarden. According to Ingarden, the different levels he finds in analyzing the work are functional in the sense that they correspond to the actual aesthetic consciousness of the receiver. He observes that a peculiar literary playfulness in some writers who toy with these strata, like Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet.<sup>64</sup>

Kant speaks of frames in a general way in his *Critique of Judgment*, calling them "parerga", something which is a part of a work of art but not really intrinsic to it: not only picture frames, but also pedestals, columns in some buildings, etc. Derrida develops this concept. Parerga are a borderline between the internal and the external, a composite of interiority and externality, an exterior which penetrates the interior in order to constitute it as such. We follow here Jonathan Culler's account and critique

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<sup>63</sup> Mieke Bal, *Teoría de la narrativa: una introducción a la narratología*. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1985), 150ff.

<sup>64</sup> Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* xxi.

of Derrida's concepts.<sup>65</sup> Using a Derridean term, we can define the frame as a supplement: something which is not and yet is essential to the definition of the work, something that haunts the very essence of that which declares it to be supplementary. According to Derrida, the consequence of this relationship between the frame and the framed object is "a certain repeated dislocation." The Kantian notion of *parerga* or frames is deconstructed and subverted: the work is always contaminated by some definite finality, by representation, morality, human interests, etc. It is only the frame which is purely aesthetic; only the frame exhibits in its pure state that "finality without end" that Kant recognized as the basic relational principle of art, since it is the sole element in the work to accomplish a purely aesthetic function. Once more, as it usually happens with deconstruction, the supplement has revealed itself to be the real center: only the frame is really artistic in a work of art. Indeed, for deconstructive theory, framing can be thought of as the principle by which a work of art is constituted as such. Therefore, frames can be of many kinds, not only physical, but also sets of conventions or contextual practices of presentation of works of art. Even aesthetic theories could be argued to be frames in this sense (Culler 173ff).

The deconstructive conception of parergonality is crucial for a theory of metafiction, since it would imply that metafiction is not a "transgression" of fixed borders, but is instead implicit in the very notion of framing and border: a frame is not a static demarcation, but an active principle of circulation between the work and its surrounding.

This deconstructive principle is called "invagination" by Derrida. In anatomy, the vagina, which is an externality surrounded and internalized by the female body, becomes the emblem of interiority. Likewise, frames are an element of exteriority which, once interiorized, can become the center of the work of art. The same happens, according to Culler, with metalinguistic commentary in literary works:

It can of course be argued that sometimes deconstructive critics indulge in a cultivation of paradox for its own sake. For Culler, "the paradox of parergonality is that a mechanism of framing which affirms or manifests belonging into a class, does not itself belong into that class" (Culler 173). However, this is not surprising in the least --it means merely that the frame is a sign. Signs do not have to be a part of their referent. Still their basic comments on the pairs interiority / exteriority or center / margin are enormously enriching for a theory of metafiction.

Deconstructive criticism points out the paradoxes posed by self-referentiality in a work. It leads to the liar's paradox, an aporia of endless reflexion and mutual self-inclusion of principles. The New Critical conception of the work of art as a "well-wrought urn", self-enclosed and self-sufficient, is rejected, and the work is shown to be immersed in a chain of representations, instead of closing up on itself. Any attempt on the part of the text to draw a frame provokes dislocations, tensions and deformations (Culler 175 ff.)

## Iconicity

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<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982).

Eco relates metafictional texts to iconicity as instances of the semiotic relationship he calls *ratio difficilis*. This textual iconicity occurs when a text imitates in its structure an ambiguity which must ultimately be attributed to the interpretive encyclopedia of the reader (*Lector* 306). Peirce had defined icons as those signs which resemble their referent. Eco prefers a definition which does not use the concept of referent, and speaks instead of signs constituted through *ratio facilis* or *ratio difficilis*:

- *Ratio facilis* is construction of a significant as a specimen interpreted as being derived from a type institutionalized by a code.
- *Ratio difficilis* exists when the significant establishes a direct relationship with its content, without the intermediary of an expressive type (an expressive type may not exist, or it may coincide already with the content type):

En otras palabras, existe *ratio difficilis*, cuando la naturaleza de la expresión va MOTIVADA por la naturaleza del contenido. Sin embargo, ha de quedar claro que no estamos siguiendo el uso común de afirmar que existe motivación, cuando la expresión va motivada por el objeto del signo. (Eco, *Tratado* 312)

Eco is referring to the distinction between meaning and reference already established by Frege. Eco finds iconicity of this type in several linguistic phenomena, such as the linearity of the phrase.

En todos los casos de *ratio difficilis* nos encontramos ante tipos de contenido en que parte de las marcas, las más importantes, son TOPOSENSIBLES, es decir, que son configuraciones espaciales o VECTORES. (*Tratado* 395)

These topographic relationships are not verbalizable —they are spatial, temporal or conceptual images, not linguistic signs.

## The Ineffable

Reflexivity can become a focus on the limitations of fiction or of language.<sup>66</sup> It can become associated therefore to an exploration of the ineffable; instead of naming what cannot be named, language names its own inability to name or the problem of naming (Kawin, *The Mind of the Novel* xiii). The novel simulates a mind's awareness of its own limits, the structure of consciousness, going beyond its narrator's awareness (Kawin).

The self is the mystery at the heart of the reflexive novel. Logic teaches that no system can be entirely self-knowing; complete knowledge implies access to a view from outside the system (the seer, his seeings, and everything that is

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<sup>66</sup> On language and reflexivity, cf. also Ballmer and Brennenstuhl's notion of "full-blown meaning," which modifies itself when it appears in a specific context (Ballmer, Thomas T. Ballmer and W. Brennenstuhl. *Speech Act Classification: A Study in the Lexical Analysis of English Speech Activity Verbs*, Berlin: Springer, 1981; 43).

seen). This is one sense of Wittgenstein's remark that the eye is a limit of the visual field. (Kawin 8).

Fiction is a system within the system of the human mind, and the human mind either is or often likes to see itself as being within a larger system that can be explored only transcendently. Reflexive fiction strives to imitate the structure of the human mind and its territory--to become a limited whole. . . . It is a form that tries to be haunted. (Kawin 13).

Self-awareness can be formulated only through tautology and contradiction, the negation of language which implies a distance, a difference (Kawin 15). In works that push this analogy between mind and text to the limit, the text and the mind become interchangeable, the text is a mind "engaged in an attempt at self-definition," as happens in *The Unnamable* (Kawin 18). Self-consciousness here is *systemic*, that is, there is an attempt to portray an autonomous self-consciousness of the text which does not consist in referring it to the author's activity or personality. Kawin therefore distinguishes between *authorial* and *systemic* self-consciousness in texts. Only the second is called "reflexivity" by him.

Reflexivity calls for a questioning of limits. The notion that a system cannot become fully transparent to itself is implicit in two sayings quoted by Kawin: "If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way" (Chuang Tzu); "When the soul speaks, alas, it is no longer the soul that speaks" (Schiller). The center of the system seems to lie beyond the system's own reach. "¿When a text pays attention to the limits of its means of expression and the limits of its being -- when its self-consciousness attempts self-expression-- then the ineffable is most closely at issue" (Kawin 229). By analogy to a perceptual system, "Closed-system narration has the effect of suggesting that there is something important outside the system" (Kawin 26). Of course, any narration is a "closed-system narration." But reflexive narration highlights this circumstance by virtue of exploring the limits that enclose it, instead of drawing attention to the story enclosed by those limits. The narrator can only be outside the system if that system is a fictional subsystem staked out within the main system. Only in that sense can we say that Proust's, Melville's or Beckett's narrators are "outside the system" as Kawin (26) claims. Kawin explores a variety of such analogical subsystems constructed within fiction, such as "secondary first person narration" conceived as a mediation between the ineffable experience of a character and the reader: "Secondary first-person narration and reflexivity tend naturally to reinforce each other" (79) and the reader becomes an initiate into the experience of the ineffable.

Through its attempts to portray the ineffable, the novel builds up something like a fictional self of its own. Kawin argues that the problems of the self and of ineffability are closely related. The self can apprehend itself only in its immediacy, not through devices like language and logic which are devised to grasp the non-self:

Language and logic amount to a point of view. A point of view cannot observe itself. . . . This philosophical paradox is relevant to the structure of self-conscious texts, many of which are given the task of attempting to describe their own (of course, imitative) awareness of their being limited systems. Not surprisingly, many such texts are organized around the attempts of a first-person narrator to define his own processes and end, as *The*

*Unnamable* does (or peak, as does *As I Lay Dying*), in a silence that cannot be analyzed. The self is the most present manifestation of the ineffable with which any human can deal. (Kawin 100)

In *The Unnamable*, the limit of the analogical self is death, metaphorically equated with the silence which surrounds the text. As Kawin notes, the silence remains extratextual and beyond the reach of the narrator.

The drive towards the ineffable makes literature reflect on its medium: reflexive fiction often leads to the text's discovery that it is a text (Kawin). In so doing, the novel stretches the usual limits and forms of narrative transmission and language use, as happens in *Wuthering Heights*, in *Absalom, Absalom!* or in Beckett's texts.

Another example of mediation between ineffability and textualization is provided by horror fiction. The horror object often becomes enclosed in a narrative, or assumes the shape of a book which becomes the horror object in its turn. This happens in *The Turn of the Screw*, or in Lovecraft's work, which creates a fictional book of horror, the *Necromicon* (Kawin's example). The text is therefore a metaphor of the ideal horrible text it cannot become (Borges, *El libro de arena*). The fantastic intrudes in reality, as it has done indeed, under the shape of a text.

## Materials

Nonnovelistic materials may be used, not just as source, but as parts of the novel, incorporated in a way which foregrounds their strangeness. The same may happen with fragments from other novels.

## Metalepsis

Mark Twain ends a tale admitting his impotence as an author to end it, which does provide a kind of ending<sup>67</sup>

## Metaphor

Horst Ruthrof considers that in narrative there is an interplay of two sequences: the story or "presented world" and the narrative discourse or "presentational process." Starting from Jakobson's characterization of the metaphoric and the metonymic poles of language as governing different principles of composition, Ruthrof combines it to his analysis of narrative as the interplay of presentational process and presented world.

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<sup>67</sup> Tomashevski, *Teoría de la literatura* 255.



When we introduce the distinction to the discussion of narrative structure, we note that both presentational process and presented world can be treated in a predominantly metonymic or predominantly metaphoric manner.<sup>68</sup>

Realistic fiction would lay an emphasis on the presented world, while experimental fiction concentrates most of its interest on the presentational process. Metafiction is defined as that kind of writing where both presentational process and presented world are metaphoric, at the expense of their metonymic potential. On the other pole we find the texts which foreground the presented world --texts which work essentially through metonymical processes. Following up on this view, metafiction would be more "poetic" in Jakobson's terms.

### Mise en abyme

Roland Barthes interprets Robbe-Grillet's novels as a staging of their own problematic meaning. The novels do not mean anything else than themselves: the objects they represent, and their meaninglessness. This meaninglessness is problematic, and the novels recuperate this problematic status within themselves: they contain *en abyme* symbols of their own problematic meaning, such as characters trying to interpret things which resist meaning (*EC* 205).<sup>69</sup> The most extended discussion of various kinds of *mise en abyme* is found in Lucien Dällenbach's *Le récit spéculaire*.

### Motivation

One of the senses of the word "realism" distinguished by Jakobson is the justification of poetic procedures.<sup>70</sup> Realism requires motivation, and an unmotivated use of devices will seem obtrusive and self-conscious.

Since the narrative moment in first person narration is logically speaking a part of the fabula, there must exist a coherence between both, a continuity or some kind. If coherence is impossible, the device is laid bare. Quite often, diary narratives have problems to justify their writing situation (Poe's "Ms. Found in a Bottle", or Victor Hugo's *Le dernier jour d'un condamné à mort*, or Beckett's *Malone Dies*). According to Dorrit Cohn, who notes this problem, there is a general tendency in this form to break rules of formal mimeticism. So-called narratives at some point seem to drift into the area of interior monologue. The opposite phenomenon is also found: "The works of Beckett, Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet, in particular, return the interior monologue to the ambiguous semi-narrative terrain".<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Horst Ruthrof, *The Reader's Construction of Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1981), 21.

<sup>69</sup> Roland Barthes, *Essais Critiques*. Paris: Seuil, 1964. (Rpt. Points, 1971).

<sup>70</sup> Roman Jakobson, "El realismo artístico," in Georg Lukács et al, *Polémica sobre realismo* (Barcelona: Buenos Aires, 1982, 157-76), 165.

<sup>71</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978), 216.

Reflexivity can be used as a device of alienation, a way of resisting the reader's naturalization of the text according to the logic of reality. Conversely, techniques of alienation can be argued to be to some degree reflexive, to draw attention to the constructive principles of the text. Orr sees a basic tension in literature between *vraisemblance* and alienation:

The shared knowledge of *vraisemblance* in conventional fiction depends upon not drawing attention to what is not the already understood. . . . While conventional fiction works to convince the reader that his perceptions of the world are correct, Shklovsky says, Reflexive fiction works to shake the reader from his complaisance and disrupt his confidence in his previous perceptions. This is done through *ostranienie* and the device of impeded form.<sup>72</sup>

A whole battery of devices, from the use of "spoken" forms and a prominent narrator, to strange characters or temporal distortion, may serve the purpose of alienation for the Russian formalists. We could argue that any obstrusive literary form is reflexive to a point, and reflexivity is a major form of deautomatizing perception. From the Formalist viewpoint, ordinary language wants to be transparent, manifesting its object, not itself. Poetic language, on the other hand, concentrates its attention on itself, creating an obstrusive form which draws attention to the message rather than the object. According to Jakobson, automatic perception consists in identifying the sign and its referent. Deautomatization consists in the disruption of this coincidence, forcing signs into new combinations and letting them float away from their usual referents. The Formalist deautomatization is in principle similar to Brecht's alienation techniques, only the end is different. The Formalists seek a fresh perception of reality, and Brecht wants to shake bourgeois self-complacency and develop a political consciousness.

The Russian Formalists favoured those literary works which flaunt their artificiality, by means of an obstrusive use of literary devices, or through the disruption of conventional motivation. They coined the expression "to lay bare the device" in their studies of works like *Tristram Shandy*. To some extent, far from being an exception, this is the spontaneous result of literary evolution; the functionality of motivating devices may disappear while the device is still kept assuming another function.<sup>73</sup> In Tomashevski's definition,

La llamada "puesta al desnudo" del procedimiento, es decir, su uso sin la motivación que tradicionalmente le acompaña, no hace más que revelar la literariedad de la obra literaria, algo así como el "teatro en el teatro."<sup>74</sup>

Different forms of motivation may favour different degrees of self-consciousness. For instance, Lanser observes that "Private narration [narration motivated as a narrative

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<sup>72</sup> Leonard Orr, "Vraisemblance and Alienation Techniques: The Basis for Reflexivity in Fiction", *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 21.3 (1981): 199-215; 206.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Shklovski, "La construction de la nouvelle et du roman", in *Théorie de la littérature: Textes des formalistes Russes*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1965, 170-196), 196. (Trans. from *O teorii prozy*).

<sup>74</sup> Boris Tomashevski, *Teoría de la literatura* (Madrid: Akal, 1982), 200. (Trans. of *Teorija literatury: Poetika*, 1928 ed.). 200.

addressed to other characters rather than an anonymous reader] more easily allows for self-consciousness on the part of the narrator and for commentary on the narrative act" (Lanser 141).

### **Narration and point of view**

If the characteristic of drama is the illusion of the characters' autonomous action and the direct presentation of the story, narrative on the other hand is intrinsically mediated by the narrator's verbal activity. In the novel, even more than in drama, the quality of a story depends on its telling. It is therefore only natural that in many novels the narrator's verbal activity may become a focus of the reader's interest.

Narration and point of view are the filters which transmit the story to the reader. Modernist conventions used a multiplicity of narrators and points of view, or a limited viewpoint and narrative stance, in order to stress the subjective nature of reality, its perspectival nature. Postmodernist narrative extends the use of such devices, stressing their artificiality. For instance, different styles collide in a single work, drawing attention to the artificiality of rhetorical conventions which constitute the fictional world — the first work in this line being, of course, *Ulysses*. Contradictory discourses are used and set against each other: for instance, criticism and fiction — postmodernist fiction often absorbs or parodies critical works (Sukienick, *The Death of the Novel*; Nabokov, *Pale Fire*). Following the Formalist principle of defamiliarization, the roles given to narration and point of view are opposite to those of realist fiction. The narrator may be unable to transmit a story (Beckett) and fragmentation of point of view may dissolve the reality of the fictional world (Brooke-Rose). The parody of multiple styles, of other discourses, is a central resource of postmodernist fiction, which is the ideal place to study the structuralist concept of intertextuality (e. g. *Hawksmoor*).

### **Narrative self-consciousness**

It may exist in any fictional work. For instance, Bordwell analyzes it in the area of cinema, and defines it as "a recognition that it [the narration] is facing an audience."<sup>75</sup> Booth had defined narrative self-consciousness as awareness on the part of the narrator that he is writing a literary work; Sternberg says that awareness of facing an audience is more significant. Actually, it all depends on the use that is made of motivational coherence. Some degree of self-consciousness is inherent in all narration --it could be said to be implied in its very existence. According to Bordwell, "All filmic narrations are self-conscious, but some are more so than others" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 58). Self-consciousness is bound up with other categories of narrative analysis, such as communicativeness. A highly self-conscious narrative will have to justify its degree of communicativeness in a more explicit way. Bordwell measures the degree of self-consciousness with intertextual criteria: deviant or "non-classical" maneuvers are more self-conscious than standard narration. For instance, "The 'serious' postwar European cinema can be characterized by its effort to

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<sup>75</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985), 57.

structure a film around a highly self-conscious narration" (88), through the creation of narrative norms peculiar to each film. Bordwell also notes the association of this self-consciousness with a tendency for open endings and low redundancy, and with a peculiar undecidability of the status of sequences: European art film "often asks us to treat the syuzhet as mixing subjectivity and objectivity with no promise of eventual choice between the two" (88). All these features promote narrative self-consciousness. The "classical" Hollywood style, on the other hand, tends toward traditional plot patterns, high redundancy, objective narration and a localized and controlled use of self-conscious devices, e.g. in "montage" sequences (Bordwell 188)

### Pattern and rhythm

Mechanic patterns and combinations are used as the generative devices of fiction, instead of being an "ornamental" or stylistic by-product. The focus of the works on their own structure, reflexivity, is part of the same game. Ihab Hassan describes Beckett's novel *How It Is* in these terms:

10. The reflexive quality of the narrative becomes evident in the attention each part gives to its relation to the whole, as if the work had no aims but to comment on its own pattern, its geometry.<sup>76</sup>

Literature is invaded by combinatorial games, which are intended to be a generative mechanism for the production of unexpected meanings. Rhythm, then, is no longer at the service of a pre-existing meaning. Rather, it will be used to create meaning in conjunction with the reader's activity. Structural analysis of narrative as a system of permutations and possibilities in a closed field will converge with attention to the combinatorial nature of the unconscious stressed by psychoanalysis. What realist aesthetics would consider mechanic now becomes a road to exploration. Patterns should be used as artificial constraints —a bit like the rigid sonnet form in the Renaissance, a challenge to the writer to refine his attention to words and construction (e.g. Georges Perec, *La Disparition*, Walter Abish, *Alphabetical Africa*).

### Parametric narration

This is narration prominently governed by formalist and stylistic constraints rather than by the dynamics of plot and character. See the accounts in Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, and in Ricardou's *Nouveaux problèmes du roman*.

### Process of composition

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<sup>76</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward A Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), 234.

Incorporation of the textual margins into the body of the text. Among these margins: composition as process, as opposed to the finished product. Now the product may incorporate the process, wholly or partly, or a fictionalised version of the process. "Footnotes and rough drafts will be incorporated into the fiction" (Boyd 29).

Some writers seem to value finished work less than process by which it is reached.<sup>77</sup> We could relate this to the contemporary foregrounding of writing (the marginality of the process is deconstructed and shown to be significant) and to process thought generally.<sup>78</sup>

## Story and plot

The story is one of the pillars of classical realist fiction. A good story must be interesting, credible and coherent, engaging the attention of the reader and making him suspend his disbelief and immerse himself in the fictional world. Robbe-Grillet claims that such concern with coherence and illusion shows that the real aim of the traditional novel is not so much to entertain as to give a certain version of the world, a reassuring one: the world is out there, and we know how it is. The new novel calls into question such assumptions. Federman calls for a blurring of the clear development of plots, for digression, reflection and paradox. The novelist is not a transcriber, but an inventor. If we push this axiom to the extreme, we find that his concern is ultimately not with reality, but with invention. The book tells its own story, the story of its invention, not a story about the world. Telling in a naive way has become an aesthetic impossibility. The traditional coherence of the story was based on the construction of a coherent chronology, the development of a connected plot-line, the predictability of character's attitudes to the story, the tension which connects each episode to the ending of the novel. All of these elements must be called into question. The novel can still tell a story, but it is a story which has lost its naivety, its innocence. The way the story is told becomes the real story: anecdote becomes in the long run unimportant, it is a function of style, instead of the other way round. The time of the story, for instance, is no longer a selection or compression of the time of some pre-existing fabula: it has become self-sufficient, it points to nothing other than itself, and this self-referentiality provokes endless short-circuits between the traditional narrative levels — the represented fabula and its narrative agencing. Time no longer passes, no longer leads to a conclusion; it is not subordinated to meaning or to a human sense of destination. The artificiality of plot construction may also be revealed through the use of parodically magnified plots, such as Pynchon's paranoid conspiracies. In general, the French *nouveau roman* and the American fabulators follow two opposite ways. While the first reduce plot to the play of discourse, many American postmodernists react against realism through an inflation of plot, incredibly complex or unrealistic plots adapted from the popular genres. The common element lies in an explicit manipulation and foregrounding of conventions, instead of the realist invisibility of conventions.

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<sup>77</sup> See Boyd 35, Poirier.

<sup>78</sup> See *Feminism and Process Thought*.

The plot appears as an object of desire for Peter Brooks.<sup>79</sup> The reader's desires channelled and organized through plot finally become desire for the end of the plot: circulation between the object and the place it is given in the plot.

Symbols of plot structure and energy are thematized in *Tristram Shandy* or *La peau de chagrin*.

The role of narration as a form of desire and seduction is also laid bare by narrative—e.g. by *Sarrasine*, in Barthes's account in *S/Z*.

Alternative endings or no endings as a way of deconstructing the significance we attribute to actions through plotting and teleology.

### Reader's role

Structures inside the work may mimic the role of the reader, or vice versa. E.g., Sternberg notes the dynamics of impressions in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and concludes that the implied reader's judgment is made to mimic that of the heroine: the novel "devises in addition a correspondence between the reader's and the protagonist's impression formation."<sup>80</sup> The reader and Elizabeth make the same mistake and discover their error simultaneously.

### Self-consuming artifacts

The term was coined by Stanley Fish with reference to reflexive Metaphysical poems. A self-consuming artifact somehow turns upon itself reflexively to undermine the its own bases. In a wide definition, a bill on a wall saying "Stick no bills" would be a self-consuming artifact; so would the well-known statement by that Cretan who said that Cretans never spoke the truth. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which declares its own rules invalid after use, would be another instance.<sup>81</sup> The word "ineffable" is also one of such artifacts, as St. Augustine recognized when commenting the application of this adjective to God:

A contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then, that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, Augustine concludes that the word "God" is only a convenient sound for an absolute unknown. Many fictions present their self-destruction as a means to create a void which can be filled by a higher category of perception and meaning.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Knopf, 1984.

<sup>80</sup> Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* 130.

<sup>81</sup> Kavin 214.

<sup>82</sup> Qtd. in Kavin 227.

<sup>83</sup> Kavin 211.

## Self-referentiality

French structuralism also adhered to the idea of the self-referential quality of the literary work:

La lengua poética no es referencial como tal lengua poética, es referencial en cuanto no es lengua poética, es decir, en lo que tiene de lengua estándar, por lo que el discurso poético no constituye un acto de comunicación, entendida ésta en el sentido de comunicación de contenidos; el texto poético solamente se comunica a sí mismo y comunica con él mismo, por lo que el poeta cierra el discurso sobre sí mismo, y esta clausura constituye lo que se llama obra.<sup>84</sup>

Writing is for Barthes an "intransitive verb," that is, an essentially self-referential activity. After all, he argues, this is what distinguishes writers (*écrivains*) from mere users of written language (*scripteurs*). Within creative writing, Barthes divides "readerly" from "writerly" texts (*lisible / scriptible*). While the readerly text makes concessions to the reader, submitting itself to a ready-made mode, the writerly text is intrinsically exploratory, and its subject is not so much its content as its form, the new kind of writing it inaugurates --a reflexive concern:

Much modern writing (e.g. Proust, Joyce, Beckett) is clearly in this mode, taking the activity of writing as its subject, and obviously trying, by experimental methods, to establish a new "writerly" status for the writer. Such writing requires a new notion of the concomitant activity of reading. (Hawkes 113)

Readerly texts, because of the concessions they make to tradition and the reader's usual habits, make the reader redundant. On the other hand, writerly texts require the reader's active participation (cf. Eco's opposition between "closed" and "open" texts). Barthes tends to associate readerly texts with classical ones, and writerly texts with avant-garde writing. This position offers some difficulties.

Pushing reflexivity to the extreme seems to lead to two contradictory positions. For some, it leads to a vertigo of language naming itself, a vicious circle of representations; for others, it leads to absolute self-presence and transparency: "This 'literature of consciousness' points not to the apparent dead end of having nothing but talking to talk about, and not to terminal narcissism, but to the foundations of a humble and brilliant self-awareness" (Kawin 215). The dream of such substantiality and transparency is Romantic --it can be associated with the figure of Rousseau, especially as it is expounded in the analyses of Starobinski and Derrida, and with the philosophy of Hegel, which culminates in an ideal self-presence. "Hegel found the greatest value in works of art that achieved self-consciousness without vanishing into silence" (Kawin 218-9). The most advanced spiritual activity is philosophy--the spirit studying its own avatars-- and, in the field of literature, the highest works of the spirit are those in which 'the mind as artist presents to itself the consciousness of itself' (Kawin 219). In its Romantic form, depicting private consciousness present to

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<sup>84</sup> Tomás Albaladejo Mayordomo, "La crítica lingüística." En *Introducción a la crítica literaria actual*. Ed. Pedro Aullón de Haro (Madrid: Playor, 1983, 141-207), 197.

itself, this literature has been superseded. "The literature of consciousness can, however, be seen to have progressed beyond that point, to a stage in which the mind of the text presents to itself the consciousness of itself, displaying on an 'as if' basis its independence from the mortal artist" (Kawin 219). Absolute self-presence, pure self-consciousness, is ineffable, since words always entail an objectivation of what they represent, a fragmentation between subject and object (Kawin 220).

### Stream of consciousness

Kawin argues that the stream of consciousness technique tended from the outset to the reflexive mode, and, in a lesser degree, to a confrontation with the ineffable. In a work such as *Clarissa*, there is a climax of absence: language falters at the moment the heroine is most distressed by her abduction and rape, and her letter-writing becomes anarchic. A chaotic text imitates a chaotic consciousness. A similar technique is found in *A Tale of a Tub*, when gaps are left on the text at the moment it attempts to discuss madness.

Writers of stream of consciousness novels gradually evolve towards self-consciousness.

### Style

A text can be said to be constantly referring to itself through its style: its style is not merely the force which holds it together, unifying the elements of content through comparable techniques of representation.

William H. Gass, who coined the term "metafiction" conceives of style in the New Critical way: style cannot be dissociated from content, since it creates the content through linguistic shaping. In this respect, Gass compares fiction to philosophy: models of reality which we use to interpret and represent the world --or better still, they are the creation of possible worlds, and the shaping of the world we inhabit. But fiction is much more "elastic": due to its intimate contact with the shaping power of language, its creations are more immediate, closer to experience, and unifying facts and feelings. The writer produces in an intuitive way the knowledge that the scientist or the philosopher formulate later in an abstract language. The writer can only do this through his work with *form*, not "content" divorced from its presentation: he thinks in concrete terms, reaching new meanings through the manipulation of linguistic form: "The writer . . . thinks through the medium of which he is master" (Gass 10); fiction is a configuration of things through language. In a novel, everything is form and pattern: "even the apparently literal language of the novel has a figurative function" (Gass 69).

Style is also the link between the work and its author --"style is the man" (Buffon).

In autobiography, Starobinski notes, style is particularly important precisely because of this double link, "since to the explicit self-reference of the narration itself the style adds the implicit self-referential value of a particular mode of speaking"



(286). Style is a self-reference to the moment of writing, and it may lead to conflicts between the narrating and the narrated times.

## Time

A typical narrative involves an interplay of present and past.

One of the paradoxes of the reflexive is stated in the juxtaposition of the theme of making with the theme of the past. In focusing on a past event, the storyteller initially surrenders his freedom. Only if he discovers that the past is irretrievable does he recover the lost freedom, the ability to make. (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel* 37)

The present of the narrating bends itself towards the past only to return to the inescapability of the narrating activity as a making of that past.

## Titles

A title is always a reflexive element in the sense that it stands at the threshold of the work, classifying the fiction as a fiction. The title stands both for itself and for the work, and this role may be further exploited in a reflexive way. The title may be shared by the work and an embedded text (named or fully quoted) which is the work of a character. The identity between the titles ensures a circulation of meaning by which the two texts appear as analogues. E. g.: *The Sot-Weed Factor*. For Kavin, the real text plays the role of a mediator for the internal text.

In Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* "the female man" is not a character to be found within the book; rather, it is the book itself as a construct. The title therefore becomes reflexive.

## Typography

"Typographic form is a guarantee of the content: a normal impression testifies the normality of the discourses" (Barthes, *Essais critiques* 176). A smooth typographic progression goes hand in hand with a standard narration. Any oddity, any interruption or discontinuity is a critique of traditional narrative. But it has a reflexive value. As Barthes argues, discontinuity is the basic form of all communication, and all signs are discrete. Emphasizing typographical design amounts to emphasizing the sign-quality of the narrative text.

Avant-garde novelists are aware of the materiality of writing, they realize that the physical form of a sign contributes to its meaning. Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick (*The Death of the Novel and other Stories*) call for new principles in organizing the syntax and the page of narrative. B. S. Johnson believed that the novel should avoid competing with film, and concentrate on its own intrinsic possibilities. It should exploit in an artistic way the fact that it is a book, written language, made of pages and ink. The novel should concentrate on the use of language and the explication of the inner life, but also on the "exploitation of the technological fact of

the book."<sup>85</sup> In one of his novels (*Albert Angelo*, 1964), there are pages with holes cut into them so that the reader can see the future in advance; another novel by B. S. Johnson (*The Unfortunates*, 1969) is a "novel-in-a-box": it was published in the form of unbound separate sections, and can be ordered by the reader any way he or she wishes.

### Word-games

If literature is a game, then it is a word-game. Paradoxically, insisting on the linguistic nature of literature has often seemed a provocative critical attitude: traditionally-minded criticism hurries to establish links between literature and "the world," discussing characters and their motives, the happiness or unhappiness of the plot's outcome, etc. That both the form and the content of literature are linguistic in nature comes as a shock to this commonsensical approach (Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* 27).

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<sup>85</sup> B. S. Johnson, introd. to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* 1973, rpt. in *The Novel Today; Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990, 165-84), 166.

## 5. Theory of reflexive fiction

### Introduction

It is difficult to write history today. In a postmodern age we have become extremely self-conscious about the artificiality of theories, and the constructedness of history. This problem also affects the historian of literature. The evolution from naturalism into modernism was well documented and theorized some decades ago: it seemed only natural that one literary movement would succeed another. But the transition from modernism into postmodernism seems far more problematic; the concept of postmodernism itself is a strongly debated one. One of the characteristics of the postmodernist era, then, is that we are not so sure that there are such things as eras, that we do not know very well what is postmodernism and whether it is really there that we are. Or what we should do once we are there.

Does the novel go anywhere in particular? It has always been difficult to answer such a question. It is even more difficult now because of our self-consciousness about the artificial and selective nature of an answer, which implies telling a narrative about the novel. Earlier critics often told such narratives. For Henry James, the novel was becoming a form of art, refining its shape and evolving towards a form of psychological drama. For the French new novelists, the novel was becoming an exploration of its own possibilities, an allegory of its own production and its use of language. There was a clear sense of evolution away from certain forms and towards others. Nowadays, there are no such clear aims which novels should fulfil in order to be at the forefront of evolution. There is a reaction against continued abstraction, and a number of mimetic and emotive elements have reasserted themselves; there is also a reaction against the view of novelistic evolution as a kind of competition in experiment. The situation seems pluralistic, in keeping with the postmodern ethos of "anything goes".

A perspective on the evolution of the novel becomes more defined if we examine the theory of fiction over the last few decades and try to discern changing emphases and new elements in the discussion. The history of the novel and the history of its criticism cannot be written apart from one another. On one hand, contemporary discourse on the novel favours certain kinds of writing, which become intellectually dominant; on the other hand, those works which do not conform to the dominant mode are neglected (this can happen to excessively original authors). These works have to be rediscovered by a later critical movement which then rewrites the history of the genre. So, for instance, structuralist criticism contributed to a reappraisal of experimental and self-conscious novels which went against the dominant mode of realism: the production of Sterne, Roussel, Kafka and Nabokov. Later, post-structuralist criticism or feminist criticism have led to different emphases and different re-discoveries (for instance women writers like Fanny Burney, Kate Chopin). Here we shall concentrate on the theory of fiction as it evolved from the earlier to the later phases of Modernism, from about 1955 to about 1975 — a sufficient remove for the main lines of new critical conceptions to emerge with clarity.

## Realism

The early theory of the novel was formulated for the most part under the realistic aesthetic of the nineteenth century. While in this century the theory of the lyric is expressive, the theory of the novel remains largely mimetic. That is, the lyric is defined as an expression of the poet's feelings, and its representative element is subordinated to this expressive function (thence the "pathetic fallacy" in which subjective passions are projected onto the landscape). Victorian theory of the novel often opposed the genres of the romance and the novel. Romance was light entertainment, and it freely used fantasy and stirring adventure. The novel, on the other hand, was on the way to becoming "serious" narrative, through its aesthetic of verisimilitude. The novel is the product of the bourgeois demythologization of the aristocratic ideals. According to Fielding, the novel is born as a comic epic poem in prose—that is, as the parodic genre which results from setting epic conventions against the prosaic reality.

A good novel needed several characteristics:

- A good construction: a coherent plot which is harmonious with the characters and provides a thread of action through the world of the novel.
- The plot is, however, secondary. It belongs with the romance. The novel uses a plot, but it is a loose one, subordinated to the mimetic aim. It is the characters and the setting that are dominant in the novel. Most realist critics of the novel see deliberate plotting as a somewhat extraneous element which may distort the spontaneous revelation of the characters. The novelty of the novel is seen to lie in the representation of character. It should be a psychological study, one which reveals new truths about human feelings and relationships.
- The story takes place in a realistic setting. A credible psychology can be grounded only on a concrete and recognizable social situation. In the English novel this setting is for the most part that of the middle classes, although the naturalistic and the regional novel contributed to the exploration of other social classes and peripheral societies.
- A novel has a theme and is linked to a well-defined moral intention, an authorial stance towards that theme, which is easily identified, whether it is conveyed by direct or by indirect means. It is the moral intention of the novelists that makes realism something more than an attempt at copying nature faithfully.

The coherence of a novel, according to the realistic ethos, is then the coherence with which it portrays its setting and the psychology of its characters through a well-constructed and unobtrusive plot. This is what mainstream readers, writers and publishers understand by "a novel".

## Early Modernism

The emphasis changes as we enter the twentieth century. Among works of criticism which are representative of the early phase of modernism, Henry James's essays and prefaces helped theorize the transition from Victorian realism to modernism. Reality is subjectivized: it now appears as point of view, not as solid fact. James favours the dramatic novel. Two critics, Joseph Warren Beach and Percy Lubbock, systematize and popularize these ideas. Beach coined the phrase "exit author" to describe the new dramatic autonomy of the novel, whose action was to unfold directly under the eyes of the reader, without the mediating value judgements of the narrator. Percy Lubbock's book *The Craft of Fiction* became the official textbook of the Modernist aesthetics of indirection. Lubbock drew an opposition between two methods, "showing" and "telling":

The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself. To hand over to the reader the facts of the story merely as so much information — this is no more than to state the "argument" of the book, the groundwork upon which the novelist proceeds to create. The book is not a row of facts, it is a single image; the facts have no validity in themselves, they are nothing until they have been used. It is not the simple art of narrative, but the comprehensive art of fiction that I am considering; and in fiction there can be no appeal to any authority outside the book itself. . . . The thing has to *look* true, and that is all. It is not made to look true by simple statement.<sup>86</sup>

The aim of the novelist is to create a whole and full impression, to produce a controlled effect on the reader through the careful arrangement of form and subject matter. The aim is still to tell a story which is morally or metaphysically relevant, but the point now is that the reader must experience that story together with the character — as a process, not as a finished product seen from the outside. We have in this age Beach's theory of "exit author", Dos Passos' and Hemingway's impersonal fiction, and Lawrence's injunction to "trust the tale" instead of the teller.

What makes the story to be shown rather than told? It is a problem of composition, of the adequate treatment of the materials of the story through the use of subjective point of view and scenic presentation. The novelist must use a coherent style: the narrative mode must be the same all through the novel. If the subject matter requires transitions between different modes, the seams between the sections must be invisible; the transitions must be done smoothly, without awkwardness. Nothing must remind us of the novelist's presence. Everything that is told in a story must be motivated; it is there on account of some character's experience. Of course, in calling for a limited point of view Lubbock is also assuming a subject that is psychological in nature to start with, some kind of personal drama, not the vast social frescoes of the Victorians. Lubbock's model for such a method is, to be sure, Henry James's in *The Ambassadors*:

The Ambassadors, then, is a story which is seen from one man's point of view, and yet a story in which that point of view is itself a matter for the reader to confront and watch constructively. (Lubbock 170)

Lubbock calls for conscious craftsmanship, an attention to composition, and for the development of an adequate critical vocabulary to describe it. Similar ideas, the stress on character, point of view and composition rather than on the plot, are also found in Ortega y Gasset's theory of the novel, and in various other modernist critics. "For modern novelists . . . this desire to look closely, within a fictive context, at the theoretical foundations of their art comes into sharp conflict with the equally modern imperative to remove the teller from the tale" (Boyd 15). The result will be the suppression of extraneous asides or authorial intrusions: self-consciousness will have to be more closely integrated to the fictional process, it will have to be a part of the tale.

### High Modernism and New Criticism

In the twenties and thirties there is a widespread critical revolution against the aesthetics of the late romanticism. In literature this revolution is called modernism and avant-garde; in the area of critical theory we speak of new criticism or formalism. The modernist / formalist revolution will have deep consequences for the writing and criticism of all literary genres. Lubbock's ideas were representative of the transition between the classical realist novel, with its emphasis on story, setting and character, and the modernist novel, with its stress on writing and composition. Lubbock places an emphasis on composition, but it is a composition designed to favour a particular emergence of character and plot: the writing of the novel is still "invisible", it does not call attention to itself. Even if compositional concerns come to the fore, the assumption of the early modernists is still classical: art must be used to hide art, not to draw attention to itself. According to Ortega,

la novela exige — a diferencia de otros géneros poéticos — que no se la perciba como tal novela, que no se vea el telón de boca ni las tablas del escenario.<sup>87</sup>

The narrative conventions are used to erase themselves, and the author stands apart from his creation, "paring his fingernails".

The New Criticism might be seen as a step further away from mimetic considerations. The New Critics dismissed romanticism and favoured lyric poetry which was complex, ironic and intellectualized. They criticized literature in terms of its structural complexity, not in terms of its immediate fidelity to life. That is, the aesthetic judgements of the New Critics tends to be intrinsic rather than extrinsic. A work is above all a pattern of words, a self-sufficient entity which constructs and manipulates emotions and thoughts which have only an analogical relationship to reality. A work is a structure which is self-enclosed, meaning that any element has to be judged within the pattern, taking its function into account, and not identified in an immediate way with its equivalents in the extratextual world. Originally the New Critics did not pay much attention to fiction, although later we find readings of fiction in terms of pattern, irony and balance. With the "practical criticism" developed by I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, the novel suddenly became a "dramatic

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<sup>87</sup> "Ideas sobre la novela." In Ortega, *Obras completas* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1957. 3: 387-410).

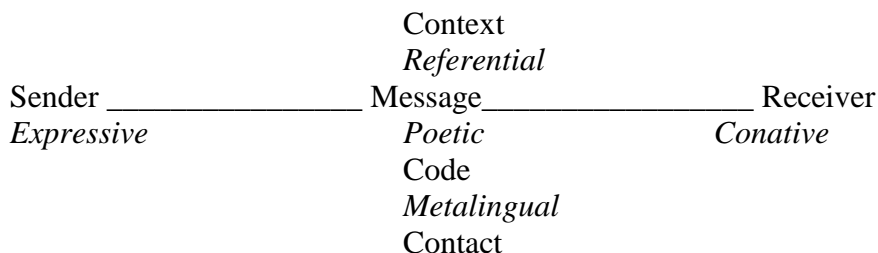
poem" — its language became significant in terms of tension and image, like the language of poetry. Virginia Woolf claimed that modern fiction would assume the quality of a poem. She opposed fiction modelled on fact or report (like that of the naturalists). For the modernists, fiction must work through poetic suggestiveness rather than through narrative.

Plot and character seemed to fade to the background as critical terms, all the emphasis falling on the overall pattern of which they are a part, together with the language and imagery of the work. This "intrinsic turn" in critical thought will favour the development of a reflexive theory of fiction, although it will take some time to be explicitly formulated in the Anglo-Saxon world. For the moment, mimetic concerns still occupy the foreground, even if mimesis has become internalized —Erich Kahler spoke in this respect of an "inward turn" of the novel.<sup>88</sup> Particular attention is paid by the critics from the thirties to the fifties to the modes of representation of inner life developed by the modernist novel, by Joyce, Woolf or Faulkner. Terms such as "free indirect style", "interior monologue", "camera eye" narrative or "stream of consciousness" occupy the center of the critical stage.. We shall not dwell long on this second phase of the development of modernism in the criticism of the novel, because our main concern here is with the third phase — or rather with a third convenient cut we can make in the theory of the novel as it stood in the sixties and seventies. It is with the second wave of formalism, with structuralism, that the theory of the novel suffers a definite transformation. We have seen a shift of the interest of fiction from external reality to psychological reality, from the world to the mind. The next step in this "inward turn" is to focus on the book itself: according to Boyd, "The shift from world to mind and finally out of mind to the words on the page is most strikingly displayed in the writings of James Joyce" (*The Reflexive Novel*, 20).

### Structuralism and Late Modernism

To the traditional mimetic theory of fiction, structuralist criticism opposes a reflexive theory, a theory which favours metafictional works over realistic ones, self-consciousness over conventional verisimilitude. (Non-structuralism too: Robert Alter's book *Partial Magic*, revaluated the tradition of self-conscious novel.

It can be held that each critical school has privileged some form of literature, some particular genre, some period or some literary mood, just as it favours certain structural aspects of the literary work. A structuralist view of the communicative process may help clarify this. We may take as a reference system Jakobson's model of the functions of language:



88 Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of Narrative*. (Princeton (NJ): Princeton UP, 1973).

*Phatic*

If classical criticism underlined the mimetic or referential quality of the work of art and romanticism emphasized the expressive element, structuralism is associated to the metalingual function of language. It is the study of the codes which govern meaning and of the structure of the message. It is also self-conscious about the provisional and heuristic nature of those codes and of the structure discerned. Structuralism contemplates itself as a metalingual activity.

The theory of fiction in the age of structuralism will also assume this reflexive stance. Fiction is now seen not as a naive portrayal of reality, but as a structural game with the codes of literature, an exercise in new ways of meaning. What fiction comments upon is above all its own structure. This is because new meanings can only be produced by new linguistic and perceptual structures. Artistic conventionality is flaunted, it is no longer hidden, and the work unfolds as a drama of different conventions at war with each other, not as the consistent application of an invisible convention.

The new theories of the novel are initially distinctly French, just as structuralism is associated above all with French thinkers. Among professional critics, the work of Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva is most influential in developing these ideas. There are also novelists who write important essays on fiction, like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor and Jean Ricardou. Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman* can be considered to be the manifesto of the third wave of modernism in fiction, which was especially strong in France under the name of *nouveau roman*.

The French structuralists derive and further develop many ideas from the radical formalist movement which developed in Russia around the twenties. The Russian formalists had already conceived of literature as an essentially formal phenomenon, where mimetic considerations were totally submitted to the structural function of the elements in the whole: not only in the whole of the work, but in the whole of literature taken as a continuous evolution of forms, renewed through exhaustion and parody. Formalist ideas were extended in two directions: towards a linguistic structuralism in the Prague School and towards a sociological structuralism in the work of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. All of these influences from the east reach France in the sixties, and contribute to the formation of contemporary literary structuralism.

The most characteristic feature of structuralist criticism lies precisely in a kind of transformation of form into content, in which the form of structuralist research . . . turns into a proposition about content: literary works are about language, take the process of speech itself as their essential subject matter. (Jameson, *Prison-house* 198-99)

Jameson and other critics have criticised this obsessive concern with linguistic problems.

These views take longer to develop in England and the USA. In England, the mainstream tradition of the novel in the fifties was decidedly anti-experimental, a continuation of nineteenth-century realism concerned with typically British problems



of individual spontaneity, moral dilemmas and class consciousness. During the fifties and the sixties, the novelists of the Movement (Amis, Wain, Sillitoe) dominate the scene, with an aesthetics similar to that of writers of the thirties like Orwell or Waugh. Other important novelists (Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson, Graham Greene, C. P. Snow) are also classical realists. In interviews or manifestoes the writers of this tradition often dismiss experimentalism as a dead end, a passing fancy which had failed to take any roots in Britain. For Kingsley Amis, experimentalism was an "obtruded oddity", a kind of perversity in construction or language, and was relegated to the past by "recent developments" in fiction. These realists rejected experimentalism arguing it took human interest out of the novel. Rubin Rabinovitz described the situation in England thus:

The critical mood in England has produced a climate in which traditional novels can flourish and anything out of the ordinary is given the denigratory label 'experiment' and neglected . . . The greatest fear of the English contemporary novelist is to commit a *faux pas*; every step is taken within prescribed limits, and the result is intelligent, technically competent, but ultimately mediocre. The successful novelist in England becomes, too quickly, a part of the literary establishment. . . All too often he uses his position as a critic to endorse the type of fiction he himself is writing and he attacks those whose approach is different.<sup>89</sup>

There are, of course, transitional figures, like Iris Murdoch, Lawrence Durrell, or John Fowles, who are more attentive to the symbolic and mythical patterns of their works and to problems of representation and construction; there are also some hard-line experimentalists like B. S. Johnson or Christine Brooke-Rose, although their work is largely ignored. B. S. Johnson wrote a mixture of confessional narrative and stream-of-consciousness with abundant typographical innovations. As to Brooke-Rose, she was the closest equivalent in English of the aesthetics of the *nouveau roman*. Samuel Beckett, arguably the most important figure of late modernism, and an original theorist in his own right, had installed himself in France and most of his post-war production was originally written in French. In criticism, the British panorama was still dominated by historicism, with Leavis's moralist version of new criticism as the only significant dissenting voice. Until well into the seventies, structuralist ideas were anathema to the British traditional establishment, which defended itself from foreign influences (in literature and criticism) with swift and ironic dismissals (Amis, Snow, Kermode). Only a few critics like David Lodge pioneer the development of structuralism in England. The situation changed in the direction of greater openness and variety, both in writing and criticism, during the seventies, and British fiction of the eighties abounds in postmodernist experiments.

The USA has always afforded more ground to defenders of non-empiricist thought, in philosophy or criticism, and to practitioners of experimental fiction (sect. 6). From the sixties on, novelists like John Barth, Raymond Federman or William H. Gass become known for their combination of practice and theory—not surprisingly, since these novelists (and many other American experimentalists, like Robert Coover, Ronald Sukenick, etc.) are also teachers of literature or of creative writing in major

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<sup>89</sup> Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*, qtd. in Lodge 92.

American universities. They speak for a continuation of the Modernist tradition of experiment which they see themselves as embodying. William Gass coins the popular term "metafiction", fiction which reflects on its own conditions; Barth speaks of "literature of exhaustion" and "literature of replenishment"; Federman coins the term *surfiction*:

The only fiction that still means something today is that kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction, the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it; the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man's imagination and not in man's distorted vision of reality — that reveals man's irrationality rather than man's rationality. This I call surfiction. However, not because it imitates reality but because it exposes the fictionality of reality.<sup>90</sup>

Metafiction was a dominant mood in the experimental novel of the sixties in the USA, although it was already present in France in the *nouveau roman* of the fifties. What many Americans add is a lighter and more playful tone, a tendency to mix the high metafiction of the French with a more readable narrative line and with popular genres: romance, science fiction, pornography, thrillers (Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme). The parodic element is much more important in the American postmodernists than in the French new novelists. Barth, for instance, argues that one can very well use the old-fashioned notions of plot and character provided that one does it parodically and reflexively. Robert Scholes speaks in this respect of *fabulation*, another alternative to the social and psychological novel, a self-conscious return to the pleasures of romance and oral storytelling.

For David Lodge, the best novelists must be aware of these contending elements in representation —realism, journalism, fabulation— and use them reflexively. Metafiction, the "problematic novel", is for Lodge the result of this crisis in representation:

There are formidable discouragements to continuing serenely along the road of fictional realism. The novelist who has any kind of self-awareness must at least hesitate at the crossroads; and the solution many novelists have chosen in their dilemma is to *build their hesitation into the novel itself*. To the novel, the non-fiction novel, and the fabulation, we must add a fourth category: the novel which exploits more than one of these modes without fully committing itself to any, the novel-about-itself, the trick-novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader . . . through a fairground of illusions of deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors that open disconcertingly under his feet, leaving him ultimately not with any simple or reassuring message or meaning but with a paradox about the relation of art to life.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Raymond Federman, "Surfiction: Four propositions in Form of an Introduction." In Federman, *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*. (Chicago: Swallow, 1975, 5-15), 7.

<sup>91</sup> David Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads" (1969), in *The Novel Today; Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, 1977; new ed. London: Fontana, 1990, 87-116), 110.

Lodge encouraged novelists to use the conventions of realism as a basis for these novels. B. S. Johnson, too, believed in metafiction as the way to a greater realism:

I concluded that it was not only permissible to expose the mechanism of a novel, but by so doing I should come nearer to reality and truth: adapting to refute, in fact, the ancients:

*Artis est monstrare artem*

(B. S. Johnson, "Aren't You Rather Young", 174)

However, in the end the tendency to fabulation was apparently stronger than the drive towards realism. It peaks in the late seventies and eighties, which are decidedly postmodern. Latin American magical realism (Rulfo, Fuentes, Cortázar, García Márquez) is a major influence in these years. Fantasy, the picturesque, local traditions, oral narrative, a concern with history, a spirit of carnival and parody, all these traits supplement the formal innovations of previous decades —since it is clear that the modernist concerns with subjective experience, varieties of viewpoints, the problems of representation, etc. are more pervasive than ever. Self-consciousness permeates even the postmodernist version of realism, the "dirty realism" of Raymond Carver or Richard Ford. Just now, metafiction has passed into the background as it is cultural identities and conflicts which seem the most visible concerns of the novel. But the inheritance of the reflexive novel has been absorbed rather than rejected, and we shall concentrate now on the aesthetics of reflexive fiction, which effected a Copernican revolution in thought about prose fiction a quarter of a century ago.

### Metafiction as reading

"A traditional novel is *changed* by our reading of reflexive novels" (Boyd 33). Reflexive reading leads to a revision of the tradition, which appears in a new light.

We may conclude by saying that structuralist criticism, and in a more general way, structuralist thought, led to new ways of criticizing and of conceiving fiction. It has also led to a new outlook on the novels of the past, seeing in them forms and functions which were ignored by the realist perspective. Recent post-structuralist critics are taking the analysis of reflexivity beyond the tradition of experiment studied by Alter, in order to apply notions such as self-staging, mise en abyme, allegory of writing, etc. to "classical" novelists such as Thackeray, Conrad or Robert Penn Warren.<sup>92</sup> In this way, new writing and criticism both add to literature and transform the literature which exists before them—a constant rewriting of history which confirms the hermeneutical basis of this new fiction. The study of reflexivity in fiction is one of the most interesting areas of study for present-day criticism of the novel.

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Siegle, *The Politics of Reflexivity: Narrative and the Constitutive Poetics of Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986).

## 6. Metafiction as Thought

### The Ethics of Metafiction

"In asserting the primacy of language as a mediator between 'reality' and consciousness, the reflexive novel teaches us new ways to look at our fictions and our lives." (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel* 9) According to Boyd, the reflexive novel changes not only our attitudes toward the world but also changing the way in which those attitudes are formed (29); by teaching us to see and read in a different way, "the novel becomes the supreme instrument by which the mind meditates on itself" (34). Self-knowledge, "whether desirable or not, is *necessary*" (Boyd 34)—cf. Johnson's idea of literature as "intellectual light" which allows us to see both pleasant and unpleasant things.

For Samuel Beckett, "neither to live nor to die is 'enough'. One must talk about it. The human condition is self-reflection, self-transcendence."<sup>93</sup> Beckett also stresses, by the way, the active nature of reading: "If the critics and the public see images of despair, one can only deduce that they are themselves despairing".

### Theme and moral outlook

In contrast to the moralizing aims of earlier doctrines, the modernist poetics of the first half of our century required a novelist to be faithful to his vision, and to refuse doctrinal distortions. The new novelists will reassert this view, pushing even further the loyalty of the artist to his writing, and discrediting the Sartrean concept of engaged literature. Didacticism is, more than ever, a heresy. Art can never be a medium; only an end in itself. Writers of the avant-garde do not fear charges of aestheticism and gladly accept the banner of "art for art's sake." The only engagement which is artistically valid is the engagement with writing and language. The artist's duty to society is to confront artistic problems seriously. This leads to a rejection of pre-determined truths. For Raymond Federman, the novel must establish its own kind of truth, a meaning which is not handed out by the author, but arrived at with the participation of the reader — new forms are to more open, in Umberto Eco's terms.

The opposition between "form" and "content" is also rejected. The content of a book is not found in its moral or in its story or its subject matter: it does not exist apart from its form. There are no two ways of writing the same subject. What people seem to perceive as "content" is for the new novelist a secretion of "form", a product of form. He thinks first of all in formal terms; if we disregard the form of a novel, we may have isolated some meaning or other, but it is not the meaning of the novel. The novel, for Robbe-Grillet, need not be more "meaningful" than a piece of music: both must justify themselves through sheer form. The most adequate "theme" for a novel is therefore itself, the play it establishes between fiction and reality,. For Jean Ricardou, new fictions can always be read as an allegory of their own functioning. They are statements about writing, rather than statements about the world.

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<sup>93</sup> Tom F. Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine", 223.

Structuralist criticism did much to promote such conceptions. According to Barthes, all important literature of the twentieth century possesses a problematic quality: it aims at defining literature anew, creating new conventions. Literature is formal by definition, and can only live by questioning itself. Every author ought to found literature anew (*Essais critiques* 134). Barthes held that modern literature had become intrinsically metalinguistic and reflexive.

Probably with the first disturbances of bourgeois consciousness, literature began to feel itself as double: at once an object and a gaze on that object, word and wording of that word, object-literature and metaliterature. (*Essais critiques* 106)

The reader of the new literature must be de-conditioned, counteracting the essentialist assumptions of bourgeois art (*Essais critiques* 69). The novel is just a play of textual functions, and it is naive to analyse it in terms of objects and feelings (*Essais critiques* 92)—"Literature is nothing but its technique" (*Essais critiques* 140). And of course its function is not to transmit a doctrine, a world-view, etc. That is the function of the *écrivain*, or intellectual, not of the *écrivain*, the creative writer. Creative literature is a tautological activity, it is the art of the question rather than that of the answer. Its being is not in one specific meaning, but in an endless play of signification — in the process of meaning-creation, not in the end-result (*Essais critiques* 156 ff, 260). We have already seen that literature is not mimetic, that the function of literature is not to represent the real: "Far from being an analogical copy of reality, literature is on the contrary the conscience itself of language's unreality" (*Essais critiques* 164). The real engagement of literature lies in the exploration of this condition, of its nature as representation and fiction. The most experimental and reflexive literature is therefore the most realist one. The game of reflexivity is a dangerous one: literature is playing there with its own annulment in conceptual thought.

Disappointment, or auto-destruction, then, becomes the latest mask of art for art's sake, an art, nonetheless, requiring of each reader wakeful participation, active assistance. To what end? So that human consciousness may play its role. (Hassan, *The Death of Orpheus*, 171)

But the dialectic between game and thought is undecidable. Literature manages to turn concepts into literary play again. Literature, Barthes says, is a mask which points at its own fictionality. In literature all is duplicitous, and parodies and destructions often turn into their contraries.

A radical questioning of literary conventions leads to a "non-genre literature", that is, a mode of total writing which disrupts conventional generic expectations. Instead of following the pre-established order of genres, writing dramatizes its own attempts to create order using different generic conventions. Works like those of Beckett, Federman, Butor... can no longer be called "narratives" or novels.

### **The metaphysics of metafiction**

Reflexive works are often accused of being narcissistic, of shutting themselves up to reality and indulging into an elitist aestheticism.

Stonehill argues that "the self-conscious novel . . . may be both esthetically neat and ethically right" (*The Self-conscious Novel* ix); metafiction is a playful genre which nevertheless retains its claim to ethical responsibility. It is true that Stonehill does not favour the more extreme kinds of reflexivity, or works excessively formalized, but argues rather for a combination of realism and metafictional technique.

The New Critical ideal of an "intrinsic" criticism is problematized by metafiction, as noted by Stonehill:

The self-conscious novel dramatizes and encapsulates its own context; and even when we approach it through intrinsic criticism, it obliges us to practice biographical, rhetorical, literary-historical and thematic criticism as well. (5)

Thus, we may note, in a paradoxical way the self-conscious novel leads us to practise a form of criticism which reaffirms the links between the work of literature and reality, precisely by blurring the limits between reality and fiction.

Parody seems to be crucial to the development of the novel as a form: "To the degree that it reveals itself as a parody of an earlier form, the metafictional novel has necessarily a satirical aspect" (Christensen, *The Meaning of Metafiction* 154). This establishes at least a bridge between metafictional novels and that aspect of reality which is (after all) literature. But what about metafiction as a world-view? What does it tell us about reality at large? Does it convey a conception of reality?

William Gass suggests that the metafictionist creates his own universe intact with narrator and reader because he sees the actual world crumbling around him . . . . It may be that metafiction for the 20th century writers represents a way of escape but it generally does not work so well for them as it did for Sterne. (Christensen 155)

The intuition of life that, beginning with Cervantes, crystallized in the novel is profoundly paradoxical: the novelist lucidly recognizes the ways man may be painfully frustrated and victimized in a world with no fixed values or ideals, without even a secure sense of what is real and what is not, yet through the exercise of an autonomous art the writer boldly asserts the freedom of consciousness itself. The imagination, then, is alternately, or even simultaneously, the supreme instrument of human realization and the eternal snare of delusion of a creature doomed to futility. (Alter, *Partial Magic* 18)

Language through its layer of associations opens up complex vistas of time, and these tend to reveal —ultimately for cultures, imminently for individuals— loss, decline, and extinction. The continuous acrobatic display of artifice in a self-conscious novel is an enlivening demonstration of human order against a background of chaos and darkness, and it is the tension between artifice and that which annihilates artifice that gives the finest self-conscious novels their urgency in the midst of play. (Alter 235)

And it is that background of chaos, darkness, madness and death that plays a disturbing undertone in many of the theories of metafiction, as a foil to the playfulness and gay irony which they detect in metafictional works.

Fiction and reality: The tension fiction /reality is a main topic of metafiction. We can further approach this topic through Raymond Federman's concept of *surfiction*. Federman argues in favour of a creative aesthetics of the novel. For the postmodernist, reality does not exist before it is created by human meaningful activity.

Gide argues that the central topic of *Les Faux Monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*) "is just that very struggle between what reality offers him and what he himself desires to make of it" (Gide, *The Counterfeiters*). The writer appears as the maker of reality, focused in the process of making it.

We have spoken of two earlier phases in the theoretical development of the novel: realism and modernism. For the realist, reality is self-evident, and it must be represented in fiction which dares to be true to life, to things as they are experienced in the world. The emphasis tends to fall on public life — manners, society, the objectively self-evident and specifiable. We have already noted the "subjective turn" in Modernism. Reality now is private, hidden, perspectival. Fictional representation must help us realize the subjective and multifarious aspect of reality, drawing our attention to phenomena which otherwise would escape unnoticed. The emphasis on the activity of fiction is greater. But the role given to fiction by the new novelists in France and America goes even further: fiction is an expansion of reality, not an imitation of things as they are (public or private) but a constitution, a construction of things as they will be from now on. Fiction is an addition to reality and a reality in its own right: it must not only mean, it must be. These are the terms used by Samuel Beckett to define Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, perhaps the inaugural work of postmodernism:

Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read — or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*.<sup>94</sup>

Brian McHale provides a similar criterion to distinguish modernist from postmodernist fiction. Modernist fiction is concerned above all with questions of perception and knowledge; postmodernist fiction is concerned with the difference between reality and fiction, with its own ontological status as a fictional object, and draws attention to the constructedness of reality as a whole. This is often done through the abolition of the barriers between the real and the imaginary inside the work; the work plays with the status of the real and the fictional inside its own limits, quoting or producing fictions in the second degree and mixing them with the "real" objects of the first degree, establishing an undecidable status (e.g. Coover's "The Babysitter"). The same dissolution of barriers may work between the fictional world and the real world of the reader and author (Fowles).

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<sup>94</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce", in Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (ed. Ruby Cohn, London: John Calder, 1983, 19-34), 27.

It is interesting to see that Robbe-Grillet sees himself as the creator of a new realism.<sup>95</sup> As he notes himself, "all writers think they are realists. None of them pretends ever to be abstract, illusionist, chimaeric, fanciful, a counterfeiter" (135). But the role of the new realists is precisely to define a new reality, to contest the version of reality which has been inherited from the past. The novel, then, does not seek to represent reality, but to construct it. Reality is not a given which can be approached more or less:

The novel is not a tool. It is not designed in order to accomplish a predetermined task. Its role is not to expose, to translate, things existing before itself, outside itself. It does not express, it searches for something. And what it searches for is itself. (Robbe-Grillet 137)

### **The fictionality of reality**

Realism is a set of narrative and rhetorical conventions, a mode of fiction. The next step is to assert that reality itself is the result of fiction-like conventions. And this is what structuralism asserts: reality is the result of codes, of sign systems. Critics have pointed out the importance of the metafictional novel in opening our eyes to the constructedness of reality: "If the realist pretends that fiction is life, the antirealist *knows* that life is a fiction" (Boyd 18). Here literary theory meets contemporary theory of science, which defines certainty as a matter of models, of the translatability of systems, of institutional conventions and paradigms of validity (see e. g. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*).<sup>96</sup>

### **Writing as liberation**

For Boyd, the act of writing as escape from the prison-house of language (39), as a free act, effort at self- definition: the great question in metafiction is *who is writing*. But this conception of writing, he says, can be challenged, as expounded in the final chapters of his book on *The Reflexive novel*.

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<sup>95</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Du réalisme à la réalité." In Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*. 135-44.

<sup>96</sup> Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed., Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970).



## 7. Postmodernism and Reflexivity

According to Graff and Hassan, postmodernist aesthetics emphasizes self-consciousness and role-playing, and favours fictional writing whose subject is yet more fictional writing, not the world in an immediate way. Barth insists that postmodernism is not a rejection of modernism, but rather a synthesis of modernist and pre-modernist elements. Postmodernism is more "democratic" than high modernism, and provides texts which are more readable than James Joyce's or Samuel Beckett's. Postmodernism is a "literature of replenishment" after the exhaustion of literature brought about by Modernism. If we accept Barth's definition, we would doubtless have to recognize that modernism coexists along with postmodernism, for instance in the practitioners of the *nouveau roman*.

For Gass, the controlling author has disappeared; from James on, the novelist allows himself to be governed, has effaced himself from the text. This evolution is concomitant with important changes in the world-view of the West, although Gass puts it more strongly: "Novels in which the novelist has effaced himself create worlds without gods. . . . These days, often, the novelist resumes the guise of God; but he is merely one of us now, full of confusion and error, sin and cleverness" (20).

Barth comments as follows his own works, "*The Sot-Weed Factor* or *Giles Goat-Boy*: novels which imitate the form of the novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" but traces back to Don Quijote this peculiar form of doubling.<sup>97</sup>

Michel Butor demands that every contemporary novel should be self-conscious; Sartre and Barthes note that self-consciousness in art is a sign of modernity.

### The self-conscious novel in England

The English novel in general lacks the sense of being 'in the laboratory of narrative'. The reflexive self-begetting tradition is not as central to Anglo-Saxon fiction as it is to French. . . . Of modern novelists who employ the resources of the reflexive tradition, such writers as Joyce, Durrell, Murdoch and Beckett have served French apprenticeships. (Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel* 78).

Moreover, most of these authors are not English, but either Irish, American, or cosmopolitan. According to Kellmann, Joyce, Huxley or Durrell play with the idea of self-begetting without actually using it--though the conditions he sets are pretty rigid, and these novels, apart from being clearly self-conscious, use the self-begetting theme as a part of their structure.

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<sup>97</sup> Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1967): 29-34.

Doris Lessing is one author who fully exploits the device. *The Golden Notebook* is defined by Kellman as consisting of different levels of fictionalization relates with one another.

Like Beckett's unnamable narrator, whose identity is greater than the sum total of his creations Molloy, Moran, Malone and Macmann, Anna becomes painfully aware of the inadequacy of Ella as an expression of Anna Wulf (Kellman 98).

Other English authors mentioned by Kellman are Iris Murdoch, William Golding and John Fowles.<sup>98</sup>

### **Reflexive criticism**

According to Boyd, "much postmodern fiction needs to catch up with postmodern criticism" —yet he recognises he has tried and managed to suppress in his own text the key reflexive questions it led to: the indeterminacy of self and language. This assumption is a reflexive moment in his work, but still... He presents himself to us as coming out of the labyrinth of reflexivity to tell his story—a trip which is itself an analyzable story. Out of the maze, following the line, the narrative line.<sup>99</sup>

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98 On John Fowles's metafiction see Susana Onega's *Form and Meaning in the Novels of John Fowles* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1989).

99 On the narrative line, see J. Hillis Miller's "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line." *Critical Inquiry* 3.1 (1976): 57-77.

## 8. Appendixes

### 8.1. The Reflexive Moment in...

#### Peter Carey

Gillian Beer ("Gambling in the Novel") observes that gambling is used in *Oscar and Lucinda* as a metaphor for human life, as well as a reflexive commentary on plot construction in this novel, and of the reader's activity. In doing this, this novel lays bare the importance gambling assumes as a central structuring device in many Victorian novels.

#### Cervantes, *Don Quijote*

According to Alter, there is an "ontological doubleness" of language in Cervantes:

In primitive culture, the word is magical, exerting power over the physical world; in the biblical tradition it is sacred, instinct with unfathomable divine meaning. For Cervantes, the word simultaneously resonates with its old magical quality and turns back on itself, exposing its own emptiness as an arbitrary or conventional construct. (Alter, *Partial Magic* 11)

#### Derrida

With reference to Hegel, Derrida noted that discussing in a reflexive way the text's own mechanisms does not lead to any ideal self-evidence. Including the text's procedures among its themes does not result in drawing a frame. It rather blurs the frame and problematizes the procedures of the text. Deconstruction itself faces this problem all the time, as Derrida recognizes already in an early piece ("Structure, sign, and play") and he seems to imply that it is a facile resource for philosophical criticism, almost a ready-made recipe which uses paradox as a way of short-circuiting critical discussion.

Deconstruction is deeply concerned with problems of framing, embedding, inclusion and transgression. The deconstructors' choice of centering the margin in order to reveal the fissures of the text is a suggestive maneuver for the student of reflexivity and metafiction.

Culler notes that in its conception of inclusion and exclusion, deconstruction is the polar opposite of pragmatism. Pragmatism defines truth as a consensus obtained on the basis of accepted methods for knowledge (Peirce defined truth as the real or hypothetical consensus of men of science). But for deconstructive critics, a norm is not the result of a consensus; rather, it is produced by virtue of a structural exclusion. It is maybe revealing that pragmatism excludes as a pseudo-problem reflection on its own procedures. The deconstructors' aim in reflection on the status of their own activity does not result, however, in a more powerful version of truth—at

most it introduces discussion of apories together with a discussion of results (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 124ff.)

### Diderot

The informing insight of *Jacques the Fatalist* . . . is that language can never give us experience itself but must always transmute experience into *récit*, that is, into narration, or, if you will, into fiction. This entrapment in narration, however, does not necessarily imply inauthenticity for Diderot because man as the language-using animal is quintessentially a teller of tales, and narration is his way of *making* experience, or, from another point of view, of making nonverbal experience distinctively human. (Alter 64-5)

Diderot's drama, too, is self-conscious (e.g. his *Entretien sur Le Fils Naturel*).

### Faulkner

Faulkner's technique in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* is often described as stream of consciousness. All stream of consciousness narratives display their artifice to the extent that they seek no realistic motivation in any established mode of textual production other than the stream of consciousness novel itself. But Faulkner's monologues raise a further problem in motivation due to their combination of stream of consciousness techniques with narrative traits incompatible with immediacy. "The question his most famous interior monologues raise is, When is this being thought?" and the answers point to a textual construct of consciousness" (Kawin 252). The monologues of Quentin or Benjy imply a the agency of a transcriber while they do not seek realistic motivation for the transmission of information, any more than Molly Bloom's monologue does. These monologues, Kawin argues, are self-consciously being presented as written language: the mind and the text are fused in one.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin is an author-surrogate which engages into an imaginative reconstruction of the past, but "the past remains hidden, or rather, becomes a fiction of the story-telling present" (Boyd 9). *Absalom, Absalom!* could perhaps lay claim to being the first of Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction", long before the usual date given for postmodernism.

### Michel Frayn

Another "self-begetting" novel, with a twist. At the end of Frayn's *The Tin Man* (1965), a computer begins to compose the novel we have just read.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> George Watson, *The Story of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

## Genet

*Our Lady of the Flowers*: "Genet's writing is literally enacted within the walls of a prison. Its images are consistently reflexive —masturbatory, narcissistic, suicidal" (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel* 39)

## Homer

Penelope weaves a tapestry showing scenes from the Trojan war sung by Homer.

## Henry James

Hillis Miller sees an ethical moment in James's writing which we might characterize as reflexive in the sense that it involves an analogy between the level of the fabula and the level of writing. That is, according to Miller the aesthetic quality of the writing is due in some degree to its ethical nature, and this ethics of writing is parallel to the ethics of behaviour enacted by the characters. Therefore, the quality of James's writing

has something to do with the analogy between the use James makes of the real-life *donnée* or germ of his stories and the act of renunciation or "not getting anything out of it for oneself" which universally forms the climactic moral decision and act of the protagonists of those stories. (Miller, *The Ethics of Fiction*, 105)

Doesn't this quality become once more aesthetic, by virtue of its curious reflexive duplication?

In James's own re-readings, this duplication is if anything repeated; in these re-readings Miller sees "visions, deep visions, depth within depth, a regular *mise en abîme* of seeing" (*Ethics of Fiction*, 109).

## Jonson

See the Introduction to *Bartholomew Fair*.

## Kafka

In *The Burrow*, there is an illicit transposition from one narrative technique to another (from narration to interior monologue) which lays bare the device of motivation (Cohn, *Transparent Minds*).

## Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

"Prior to the twentieth century, only Lawrence Sterne had insisted upon occupying the space of his fiction with the aggressiveness of a Nabokov or a Beckett" (Boyd 33). Critics from Shklovsky to Boyd have argued that Sterne's odd manoeuvres with the novel are less a perversion of novel-writing than a realization of its most characteristic possibilities.

### Steve Katz

In Katz's *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* the book is made to explode as the fiction points out its correspondences with the real author.

What katz dares here is a systemic self-consciousness that includes its real author. The barrier between textual and human being is thus violated, but only to be established at a higher level. The text as a limited system includes Katz-at-the-time-he-was-writing, Katz the author as a construct by Katz the author. (Kawin 249)

### Mallarmé

Mallarmé is one of the founding fathers of modernism; not only in his elevated conception of the nature of art and the craft of the artist, but because of his insistence on the self-contained nature of this craft, of the self-referential nature of writing, his equation of writing as a work effected on language and a struggle of the work against its own limits. According to Kristeva,<sup>101</sup> with Mallarmé and the generation he represents, literature ceases to be a representation and becomes an exploration of the mechanisms of language and signification. Mallarmé is already a writer of *text*, like the self-conscious writers of the Modernist and post-modernist periods—no longer a writer of poems in the traditional sense.

### Mandelstam

Osip Mandelstam, a Russian writer of reflexive poetry.

### Mauriac

Claude Mauriac's *La Marquise sortit à cinq heures* begins with this assertion and ends with its negation. In the meantime, two different fictional authors have contended for the fiction, until they are subsumed by the omniscient author.

### Shakespeare

Shakespeare's reflexive moments are too numerous to mention. See, e.g.:

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<sup>101</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Semanálisis y producción de sentido", in A. J. Greimas et al., *Ensayos de semiótica poética* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1976), 273-306.

- The prologue to *Henry V*.
- The drama scene in *Hamlet*.
- The introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*.
- The use of cross-dressing in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.

### Philippe Sollers

*Noms* is a formalized work which creates its own laws as it goes along (Teun A. van Dijk, "Aspectos").<sup>102</sup>

### Laurence Sterne

Since Sterne equally recognizes that all experience is mediated by mental processes, themselves conditioned by culture, he also frequently evokes the restless dynamic of the mind interacting with itself as the indisputable reality we inhabit, and thus his extreme consciousness of artifice and reader-response becomes an instrument of realism. Here culture is a "mask" because it numbs the mind's awareness of its own liveliness, cripples the creativity of the imagination by acustoming it to work perfunctorily with fixed stereotypes. (Alter, *Partial Magic*, 50-1)

The text of *Tristram Shandy* mirrors the movements of Tristram's mind, and thus the text behaves like a mind. Kavin finds that the narrative self-consciousness of the work demands that we read the book as a mind. Tristram, of course, does not recognise that he is a mere text: the realistic motivation of the work would entirely explode. That is why the parallels between the identities of Tristram and Sterne are not thematized, either: the text does not carry self-consciousness to the point of explosion.

### Wallace Stevens

A writer of Modernist self-conscious poetry.

### Swift

I am now trying an Experiment very frequent among Modern Authors, which is, to write upon Nothing. (Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*)

Although Swift's aim is clearly parodical, writing upon nothing inevitably leads him to the region of self-consciousness, in the same way it did Flaubert.

### Unamuno

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<sup>102</sup> Teun A. van Dijk, "Aspectos de una teoría generativa del texto poético," in Greimas et al., *Ensayos de semiótica poética* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1976), 239-271.

Unamuno's *Niebla* explores the metaphysical implications of novelistic self-consciousness.

### **Valéry**

Self-conscious poetry, and a proto-structuralist theory of poetics.

### **Woolf**

"A close reading of Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* reveals that *The Waves* should be viewed as a dramatization of the author's acts of composition" (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*, 9)



## 8.2. Some Metafictional works

### Poetry

Aesthetic qualities in the poem correlated with the poem's content in:

Ben Jonson, "It is not growing like a tree" In Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*.

It is not growing like a tree  
In bulk, doth make Man better be;  
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,  
To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sere:  
A lily of a day  
Is fairer far in May,  
Although it fall and die that night;  
It was the plant and flower of Light.  
In small proportions we just beauties see;  
And in short measures life may perfect be.

Robert Herrick, "Delight in disorder," In Palgrave.

A sweet disorder in the dress  
Kindles in clothes a wantonness:--  
A lawn about the shoulders thrown  
Into a fine distraction,--  
An erring lace, which here and there  
Enthrals the crimson stomacher--  
A cuff neglectful, and thereby  
Ribbands to flow confusedly,--  
A winning wave, deserving note,  
In the tempestuous petticoat,--  
A careless shoe-string, in whose tie  
I see a wild civility,--  
Do more bewitch me, than when art  
Is too precise in every part.

Ending correlated with death:

Abraham Cowley, "Awake, awake, my Lyre!" In Palgrave.

Edmund Waller, "Go, lovely Rose!" In Palgrave.

Go, lovely Rose!  
Tell her, that wastes her time and me,  
That now she knows,  
When I resemble her to thee,

How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young  
And shuns to have her graces spied,  
That hadst thou sprung  
In deserts, where no men abide,  
Thou must have uncommended died

Small is the worth  
Of beauty from the light retired:  
Bid her come forth,  
Suffer herself to be desired,  
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die! That she  
The common fate of all things rare  
May read in thee:  
How small a part of time they share  
That are so wondrous sweet and fair.

Robert Herrick, "Fair pledges of a fruitful tree" In Palgrave.

Robert Bridges, "I have loved flowers that fade" in Palgrave.

Images of poetic invention:

Keats, "What the Thrush Said." In *Poems*.

O thou whose face hath felt the Winter's wind,  
Whose eye has seen the snow-clouds hung in mist,  
And the black elm-tops 'mong the freezing stars!  
To thee the spring will be a harvest time.  
O thou whose only book has been the light  
Of supreme darkness, which thou feddest on  
Night after night, when Phoebus was away!  
To thee the spring shall be a triple morn.  
O fret not after knowledge. I have none,  
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.  
O fret not after knowledge! I have none.  
And yet the evening listens. He who saddens  
At thought of idleness cannot be idle,  
And he's awake who thinks himself asleep.

Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind." In Palgrave.

Coleridge, "Kubla Khan", in *The Penguin Book of English Verse*.

Wordsworth, "Immortality Ode" in Palgrave.

The poem giving immortality:

A prominent subject in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

O how shall summer's honey breath hold out  
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,  
When rocks impregnable are not so stout  
Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?

O fearful meditation! Where, alack!  
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?  
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back,  
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?

O! none, unless this miracle have might,  
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end;  
Each changing place with that which goes before,  
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

Nativity, once in the main of light,  
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,  
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,  
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.

Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,  
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;  
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,  
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:

And yet, to times in hope, my verse shall stand  
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

See also Charles Williams "After Ronsard" in Palgrave.

Reflexivity points to ineffability

Dante, *Divine Comedy* (Kawin, *The Mind of the Novel*)

### **In Fiction**

Paradoxical self-containing structures:

Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*

Mailer, Norman. *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

### 8.3. Some Other Writers of Metafiction

#### Antiquity

Virgil. *Aeneid*.

#### Renaissance

François Rabelais. *Pantagruel*.

Michel de Montaigne. *Essais*.

#### Baroque

Robert Burton. *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

Miguel de Cervantes. *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*.

#### Augustan

Laurence Sterne. *Tristram Shandy*.

Denis Diderot. *Jacques le Fataliste et son maître*.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Ceci n'est pas un conte." In Diderot, *Oeuvres romanesques*. Paris: Garnier, 1962. 793-812.

#### Romantic

Franz Brentano. *Godwi*.

Heinrich Heine.

Hoffmann.

Tieck.

#### Victorian

Henry James. "The Figure in the Carpet."

#### 20th century

Samuel Beckett. *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Texts for Nothing*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *How It Is*.

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\_\_\_\_\_. *The Lost Ones*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Company*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Worstward Ho*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Stirrings Still*.

Jorge Luis Borges. *Ficciones*.

Italo Calvino. *If on a Winter Night a Traveller*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Imaginary Cities*.

Gabriel García Márquez. *Cien años de soledad*.

Doris Lessing. *The Golden Notebook*.

Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Pale Fire*.

Marcel Proust. *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

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