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MIRROR, MIRROR: DIMENSIONS OF
REFLEXIVITY IN POST-MODERN
BRITISH AND AMERICAN FICTION

By

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ABSTRACT

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Post-World War II British and American fiction has shown a significant increase in reflexivity, particularly during the last two decades. This phenomenon may be obscured by the plethora of critical terms surrounding it, but the reflexive or self-conscious fiction, the story or novel which exhibits literary self-consciousness by baring its artifice and drawing attention to its status as fiction, is an integral part of the contemporary literary scene. Consolidating the many observations which have been made concerning this mode of literature, sorting out and codifying its features, has become a vital critical task.

A pluralistic, theoretical overview shows the relationship of reader to reflexive fiction to be essentially one of dissociation of reader from text. Self-conscious literature disrupts the belief-inducing illusions of literary art, playing with its conventions and reader expectations. Reflexive fiction--rejecting the processes of identification upon which more realistic and romantic modes depend--moves toward the anti-mimetic and anti-realistic, toward comedy, irony, and parody. The relationship of author to reflexive

fiction will often entail the problem of autobiography and lead to a psychological profile of the reflexive author--a profile which may emphasize the order and control afforded by reflexivity or brand the author as narcissistic, solipsistic, and impotent. The relationship of reflexive fiction to other literature may be pursued through the manifold formal features typical of self-conscious fiction (flat characters, disturbances of the prose surface, over- or underplotting, stories-within-stories) or through its connections with poetry and with the comic and ironic modes.

Since it is but one part of the many reflexive aspects of the world, reflexive fiction may be placed in a context of reflexive activity in contemporary television, theater, and film and related to various philosophical, psychological, and sociological movements in this relativistic, skeptical, game-playing age. Contemporary reflexive fiction must also be seen as part of a sprawling but unified body of literature stretching back to early frame-tales, the self-conscious theater of Shakespeare, and the self-conscious novels of Cervantes and Sterne.

Complementing this synoptic theoretical and historical study required consideration of fictionists of the present era. The work of Vladimir Nabokov, the greatest of post-modern reflexive novelists, demanded elucidation. The comparatively diminutive British branch of self-conscious novelists--including Beckett, Durrell, Fowles, and Murdoch--had to be examined and contrasted with the vigorously

reflexive Americans--from John Barth and his Literature of Exhaustion through Pynchon and Vonnegut to the New Journalists and younger disruptivists such as Barthelme, Sukenick, and Sorrentino. The generally neglected field of reflexive short fiction also had to be considered--its history and recent blossoming, the seminal figure of Borges and his ficciones, the collections of reflexive fiction by Barth and Coover, and the recent anthologies and textbooks which have discovered, promoted, and analyzed this contemporary literary self-consciousness.

Establishing the dimensions of reflexivity, erecting a foundation of theory, and examining a wide range of significant post-modern reflexive works and their authors is not sufficient however. Further dissemination and application of this broad, flexible concept of reflexivity, this concept of multiple continua of involution, is needed. Whether the surge of contemporary self-conscious fiction be a product of its time, a necessary result of literary evolution, or an outcropping of some permanent potential of fiction, establishing the dimensions of literary self-consciousness will enable critics to intelligently observe and better comprehend whatever future directions fictional reflexivity may take.

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INTRODUCTION

Cassius: Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?

Brutus: No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself

But by reflection, by some other things.

Julius Caesar

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere.

--Henry James

A Sunday school teacher of mine once related to my class a story she had heard. She told of a man who nightly dreamt that he was pursued by a ferocious dragon. Finally one night the dragon caught the man. The terrified fellow asked the dragon, "What are you going to do with me?" The dragon hesitated a moment and then replied, "How should I know? It's your dream."

Over the years I have encountered numerous phenomena resembling that tale of the self-aware dragon. When I was about twelve, for instance, I was deeply fascinated and disturbed by finding myself reflected seemingly endlessly in two mirrors which had been placed directly opposite one another on the walls of a shoe store. I have noticed many times since then that the screen of a television monitor shown on-screen produces a similar visual regress. And whenever a

cartoon character pops his dialogue bubble, that dragon comes to mind.

Logic and philosophy have afforded me several less visual and more purely intellectual regresses. The sign which says "Do Not Read This Sign" is akin to several paradoxes of logic such as the perturbing assertion "This statement is false." As other examples, two incidents from my year as an exchange student in England may be of some relevance. In the middle of the grass-covered center of a traffic circle, I saw a small sign; I could not read the writing on it. I walked across the highway and onto the grass to get a closer look. When I approached closely enough, I found, of course, that the sign read "Do Not Walk on the Grass." On a slightly more serious level was the problem I encountered in a class in political philosophy. The professor had been discussing theories of political philosophy--not political philosophies themselves but theories which analyzed and discriminated among various such philosophies. At the end of the class period I asked him if, since we now possessed the means for analyzing and judging various political theories, there were a theory of theories of political philosophies which might help us discriminate among the theories he had put forth. He replied that he had never considered such a problem. That was a most disappointing reply--for I had never conceived of a philosopher who had not considered every imaginable intellectual problem--and it made me suspect that here might be some intriguing speculative territory, that

questions concerning third-order systems were perhaps more rare and more rarely asked than I had previously thought. My interest in such other philosophical points as the question of who guards the guardians in Plato's Republic and the circular reasoning of "begging the question" now seems of a piece with these concerns, and in this light the fact that my undergraduate work culminated in a thesis on Solipsism is not at all surprising.

My last memorable experience with related circles or regresses prior to beginning this study occurred when I was watching a comedian on a late night television show. He performed a routine in which he deliberately dropped a puppet he was working with and let it lie on the stage. The sense of eerie wonder and shock in the audience was almost palpable. (Alfred Appel, whose name will appear more than once on these pages, has recorded a similar incident.)¹ These and other such experiences convinced me of the truth of Borges' remark that "the vertiginous regressus in infinitum is perhaps applicable to all subjects"² and paved the way to the following research.

My efforts soon suggested that even within the comparatively restricted realms of literature and literary criticism analogues to the foregoing examples were exceedingly numerous and that I was not alone--that my interests and speculations had been wholly or in part anticipated, paralleled, and sometimes, to my chagrin, duplicated by other critics and commentators. For instance, in C. S. Lewis' delightful Screwtape

Letters there appears an illustration of the regress into infinity when the devil Screwtape writes to his nephew:

All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, "By jove! I'm being humble," and almost immediately pride--pride at his own humility--will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt--and so on through as many stages as you please. But don't try this too long, for fear you awake his sense of humour and proportion, in which case he will merely laugh at you and go to bed.³

I mention this example only to show how the concept of the infinite regress and responses to it are apt to enter literature. The concept of the self-aware dragon is rather different and of more consequence to our study of literary self-awareness. The Southpaw, a novel by Mark Harris, presents one sort of literary self-consciousness. At one point the chapters are numbered 11, 11-A, and then 13. Chapter 11-A, a chapter of advice on writing, discusses how the original Chapter 12 was pared by its author, Henry W. Wiggen (the book is ostensibly the autobiography he has written), to a single sentence. A single-sentence chapter being rather ludicrous, Chapter 12 is omitted and the sentence is used to begin Chapter 13. A more striking and perhaps more familiar example of literary self-awareness and the infinite regress is found in Aldous Huxley's Point Counter Point when Philip Quarles, the novelist-protagonist, writes in his notebook of putting a novelist into his own novel. He goes on to suggest

putting novels within novels "on to infinity, like those advertisements of Quaker Oats where there's a Quaker holding a box of oats on which is a picture of another Quaker holding another box of oats, on which etc., etc."⁵

Edward Honig in his scholarly work on allegory, Dark Conceit, gives several examples of what he refers to as the "inset device" and, almost echoing Huxley's Quarles, says: "A pictorial example of this sort used to appear on the paper wrapping of the old Uneeda biscuit box. It showed the figure of an aged fisherman holding a smaller box on which the same old fisherman was reproduced holding a smaller box, and so on." He goes on to discuss Dr. Theodor Reik's discovery that the inset device is "central to an esthetic principle in Goethe's art" (Goethe calls the process "recurrent reflection").⁶ To indicate a similar process in the work of Samuel Beckett, Frederick J. Hoffman uses the analogy of "the act of appointing a committee to examine the validity of the act of appointing committees."⁷ And while many artists and critics have more or less stumbled onto the infinite regress and its near relatives, a critic such as Alfred Appel, Jr., will discuss their appearance in serious fiction and then in popular culture from Dick Tracy and Bugs Bunny to Alfred Hitchcock.⁸

In sum, my notions that I might be exploring some new and totally obscure territory were rudely shattered. From the Shakespeare of "All the world's a stage" and "Life's but a poor player" down to the comic strips, I found artists and

critics dealing in what I had originally thought to be my private commodity--the system which turns back on itself. Yet such intriguing systems run broadly and deeply through the world, as Ihab Hassan has said, "rooted in the power of human consciousness to view itself both as subject and object."⁹ They could not well be my private province, but they could be made to occupy a more well-administered public realm. Thus the first acts of my new administration were to begin narrowing my focus, seeking clearer lines of interconnection, and coming to terms with my terms.

While it is easy enough to state that the focus of this study will be on post-modern (essentially post-war) British and American fiction and that its plan will be outlined in a moment, the problem of terminology is a slightly more difficult one. Previous writers have applied a profusion of interrelated terms to various aspects of systems which circle back upon themselves. We have already noted the "inset device" of Honig. Among other terms which philosophy and literary criticism present us with are the following: anatomy, a-novelistic, anti-mimetic, anti-realistic, baroque, "composition en abyme," convoluted, fabulation, foregrounding, involuted, metafictional (metatheatrical, metacritical, and the like), reflexive and self-reflexive, self-conscious, self-mimetic ("auto-mimetic" for etymological consistency), self-referential.¹⁰

Consequently, choosing a single adjective to describe and designate the whole range of artistic and literary

phenomena under examination was difficult. As the foregoing list suggests, no single term has achieved general critical acceptance. Each could be faulted as in some way misleading, inadequate, or both. The two terms which seem to have the best critical credentials and a fair amount of critical acceptance are "reflexive" and "self-conscious." "Self-conscious" has probably been employed more extensively by major investigators in this literary field; it also has the virtues of being familiar to non-specialists and of being nearly self-explanatory. It has the drawback, however, of being somewhat misleading in its suggestions. "Self-conscious" strongly suggests consciousness, that is, the human consciousness and self-absorption of an author or fictional character (or perhaps a reader). Yet we are not necessarily concerned with the self-consciousness of any author--though this will certainly be an important consideration of this study. Moreover, many writers are extraordinarily self-conscious without producing literature which refers to itself self-consciously. And we are certainly not dealing solely with the Literature of the Self-Conscious Character, an extremely wide field which has already been explored by Glicksberg among others.¹¹ While the self-consciousness of characters, authors, and narrators will be involved in this study, and though self-consciousness seems quite a useful term in connection with "authorial intrusion," such self-consciousness will not in itself be its principal focus. Despite these drawbacks, "self-conscious" is a very

appropriate term insofar as it suggests the peculiar effect of self-awareness which literature which refers to itself can generate in its audience.

"Reflexive" (the "self" of "self-reflexive" may be considered redundant depending on the dictionary derivation of "reflexive" which one accepts initially) has the advantages of being a fairly neutral term with few misleading connotations and of connecting our literary phenomena with a broad range of similar phenomena in grammar, mathematics, and other fields. It is not, however, either a particularly self-explanatory or familiar term, it is not preferred by as many critics as "self-conscious" is, and, though it is very appropriate when some component of a fiction reflects the work as a whole, it does not suggest the vivid effect of literature that announces itself as such. Thus both terms offer nearly equal mixes of advantages and disadvantages. My policy has been to use them interchangeably when context permitted and to select one or the other when particular connotations seemed desirable.

In any event, fictional self-consciousness or reflexive fiction results when a work of fiction draws attention to its status as fiction. This process of "drawing attention" will involve such elements as deliberate interruption of the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" and the creation of a real or suggested regressus in infinitum by the use of an element of fiction (genre, plot, character, etc.) or necessary participant in the fictional exchange (author or

reader) as the subject of fiction.¹² As Richard A. Lanham puts it, such fiction "deliberately denies us the suspension of disbelief that realism, however indirect, depends on. It continually calls our attention to narrative artifice, stylistic surface, the reader's status as reader (or listener)."¹³ To some degree we can view such fiction as a result, in Frank Kermode's words, of "the use of fiction as an instrument of research into the nature of fiction" which, "though certainly not new, is much more widely recognized."¹⁴ The modern recognition of fictional self-consciousness and its purposes is one of the several concerns of this study which ought now be outlined.

Though they will not all be reflected in the chapter organization, the following repeatedly revisited ideas will be evident in this work:

1. The self-conscious modern and post-modern fiction of Britain and the United States is part of a much larger variety of literary, artistic, and non-artistic reflexivity.
2. Reflexive literature needs recognition as a more or less coherent body or mode.
3. This body of literature has a history.
4. This type or mode of literature has achieved increasing prominence in recent decades and is receiving constantly increasing critical attention; explanation of the growth of self-conscious literature is needed.
5. There is a need for a new, more general critical awareness of the foregoing, if not a new critical theory or

apparatus for dealing with this reflexive literature.

6. Critical theory must distinguish and elucidate the wide variety of types, degrees, and interconnections within this body of literature, in other words, the dimensions of self-consciousness.

The validity of the first point is perhaps evident from the introductory examples I have given. At any rate, when a modern philosopher states that she is "always inclined to suspect that this kind of question--what happens when we apply the principle to itself--is something of a game,"¹⁵ her concern for such reflexivity, her dismissal of its significance, and even her use of the term "game" all have clear connections with both the general modern preoccupation with self-reference and with specific critical responses to self-conscious literature. The relation of this limited literary field to a much larger field of reflexive phenomena, particularly in the modern world, will recur throughout this study.

Point Three--that a certain limited body of contemporary fiction has abundant historical antecedents--will be the focus of an independent chapter. To take one example of this abundance: two modern authors, in thumbnail sketches of the history of the "doubling and turning inward . . . characteristic of much fiction,"¹⁶ both cite the Odyssey as an early instance of self-conscious literature. Attention will be given to numerous other precursors which modern reflexive fiction has had over the centuries.

Point Four--the modern prominence of self-conscious literature and its attendant criticism--will necessarily occupy us to a greater extent than the previous point. The modern production of such literature has been phenomenal; there seems to have been an almost exponential growth of reflexive fiction in recent years. For instance, in the early 1960's, at half the distance from the conclusion of World War Two to the present, Ihab Hassan could survey prominent American novelists and mention only one, Vladimir Nabokov, who must be classified as a writer of reflexive fictions.¹⁷ Yet today, nearly twenty years later, what critic could survey contemporary novelists without mentioning John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, all three of whom write--in their highly individual ways, of course--reflexive works? Likewise, no account of contemporary short fiction could ignore the highly self-conscious contribution of a Donald Barthelme.

Perhaps a better index to the current pervasiveness of the self-conscious mode is this personal experience. During my work on this study my father happened to send me the book review page from one of his Sunday newspapers (the Grand Rapids Press, not exactly a major national publication) so that I might read the lead review, which happened to concern my Alma Mater. After reading that article, I glanced over the rest of the page. I came across a review by one J. L. Hagen of a new book by Mark Dintenfass entitled Montgomery Street. There was nothing terribly exciting about this; none

of the names excited my special interest. But here are two excerpts from that review: "'Montgomery Street' is (1) a real neighborhood; (2) a movie about the same; (3) a book about the movie about the same, and (4) a book about the book about . . . well, you get the drift." And the concluding paragraph: "Nonetheless, in 'Montgomery Street' Mark Dintenfass has captured with great originality the paradox central to all lasting and sophisticated art: esthetic self-consciousness and, simultaneously, illusion more real than life."¹⁸ The serendipity seemed astonishing. Here we have no major author, reviewer, or publication, and yet we find perfect examples of a highly self-conscious contemporary novel and a criticism appropriate to it.

Prior to the last decade some critics had commented, though usually fragmentarily, on the modern writer's tendency toward self-consciousness. In 1962, for example, Frank Kermode says of Durrell's Justine: "The novel is, only half-secretly, about art, the great subject of modern artists."¹⁹ And in 1948 Leslie Fiedler was saying: "Within the last few generations it has become possible to admit openly the aspect of self-concern in a work of art, even to flaunt it in the tradition of épater le bourgeois."²⁰ Certainly critical admission of modern art's preoccupation with itself is not confined to the last few years. Yet, as the bibliography and citations of this study will reveal, the last fifteen or so years have seen increasing critical awareness of various

aspects of reflexive literature. Recent years have seen more and more dissertations written on more and more writers of self-conscious fictions, and now, as Barbara McKenzie's Fiction's Journey proves most admirably, the textbooks have caught up with and tried to examine fiction's increasing reflexivity.

Nonetheless, a reasonably complete explanation for literature's trend toward self-consciousness is still awaited. Is self-conscious literature merely the product of isolated individuals happening onto what may be an eternal substratum of human consciousness? Is reflexivity an almost unavoidable response to the modern world? Or is reflexive literature the product of purely literary developments which have led naturally and inevitably from the epic mode to the modern dominance of the ironic? Or is it none of these causes or some unanalyzable combination of all three? Such questions will be returned to, particularly in the final section of this study.

In view of the foregoing, the fifth point may seem superfluous. Why call for a new, more general awareness of literature's increasing self-consciousness if so many critics have made note of the fact? Is not the day well past when we must say with Hassan (who was speaking of literature that questions its own value) that it is "rather puzzling that this attitude has failed, on the whole, to make an impression on English and American critics"?²¹ For one thing, as was pointed out, critical awareness of literary reflexivity has, with some

important exceptions to be mentioned shortly, been a matter of isolated, fragmentary, or partial awareness. Critics and critical theory have, in general, dealt only with this or that aspect of reflexivity, seemingly without consciousness of any broad pattern. Thus the critical literature is, taken as a whole, extensive but not cohesive. One critic will analyze some author as if that author were writing in isolation, having no contact with other writers doing similar things. Another critic will discuss some aspect of self-consciousness apparently unaware that other critics have said anything on the subject. Critics seem not to have read each other; insights are left to languish in unseen journal articles. There is thus no General Theory of Reflexivity available to the critical world, the academy, and the student. Had there been such a theory available, a good deal of the elaborate preparatory material in this study would have been unnecessary.

Even a fairly complete collection of the prior criticism of reflexive fiction may, however, prove inadequate for a true understanding of the reflexive phenomena; several critics seem to feel that some new theoretical techniques are needed. Irving H. Buchen, for example, suggests that "a serious and perhaps even unbridgeable gulf exists between theory and the form it seeks to comprehend," that the techniques of a time-centered theory of the novel are inadequate for dealing with the works of "anti-fictionists," "new experimental fictionists committed to space."²² Max F. Schulz also sees a need for a

new criticism: "While the fiction of the last twenty-five years is still responsive to conventional tools of criticism, it clearly calls for the development of analytical techniques derived from the same version of reality that may have contributed to its structure."²³ In his essay Schulz goes on to employ a concept of binary codes advanced by Lévi-Strauss for distinguishing the natural and the artificial. While our study will not provide a General Theory of Reflexivity--a simple, unified theory of self-referential systems and human self-consciousness--and will not introduce any radically new theoretical approaches, it will, consolidating previous theoretical work, develop a general theory of literary reflexivity.

We will arrive at this general theory principally by examining Point Six--the various dimensions and boundaries of self-consciousness--before and during an examination of several illustrative novels and works of short fiction. To concentrate on this sixth point is not at all to deny the general coherence of the reflexive mode which is stressed as Point Two; it is simply to consider the diversity, the multiplicity of aspects and emphases present within the reflexive sphere. Some remarks by Robert Alter well convey this sense of variety within unity: "Over the past two decades, as the high tide of modernism ebbed and its masters died off, the baring of literary artifice has come to be more and more a basic procedure--at times almost an obsession--of serious fiction in the West. The creators of self-conscious fiction in

our time do not constitute a school or a movement, and the lines of influence among them, or to them from their common predecessors, often tend to waver and blur when closely examined." He goes on to describe the range of artists producing contemporary self-conscious fiction: "Scattered over three continents, they are an odd mixture of stubbornly private eccentrics, on the one hand, and promulgators of manifestoes, on the other; of powerfully evocative novelists or conductors of ingenious laboratory experiments in fiction; of exuberant comic artists and knowing guides to bleak dead ends of despair" (218-19). Alter then continues with a list of writers whom we will encounter numerous times hereafter--with one conspicuous group of exceptions. Often associated with the nouveau roman, this group is composed of contemporary French writers and theorists, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Roland Barthes, and Raymond Queneau. Although occasional references to these Frenchmen will be made (their level of critical awareness of literary reflexivity seems to have been generally higher than that of their Anglo-American counterparts), in keeping with the limitations of this study these continental writers will be given only limited consideration.

Beyond this, writers like Robbe-Grillet do not seem to have had any acknowledged influence on their English-speaking comrades and have tended to work toward one pole--the "elaborately artful"--of two poles of fictional artifice which Alter also points out. His distinction helps mark one of the

"boundaries" of self-consciousness just mentioned. As Alter puts it, "a self-conscious novel, where the artifice is deliberately exposed, is by no means identical with an elaborately artful novel, where the artifice may perhaps be prominent." "Elaborate artfulness" occurs when "the conspicuous elaboration of narrative artifice is performed in the service of a moral and psychological realism, operating even in its occasional improbabilities as a technique of verisimilitude, not as a testing of the ontological status of the fiction" (xiii).

This "artifice versus "artfulness" continuum is but one of many elements of self-consciousness to be considered. There is, for example, the element of unavoidable self-reference in a work of art. As Leslie Fiedler points out, this "general problem persists outside of the chosen context; in any age a work of art is on one level about the problems of its own composition, the threat to the illusion it attempts to create" (76). Yet another consideration is the degree of immediacy of effect present in a reflexive fiction. That is, there are numerous kinds or techniques of reflexivity which may be more or less ontologically disturbing to the reader (e.g., "obvious" versus "OBVIOUS"). One aspect of immediacy of effect is the narrowness or the limitation of reference involved in the reflexive structure. For example, a book about books or, better yet, a book on how to write a book is certainly a reflexive structure, yet neither author nor reader may make much of the fact. Or, as Richard Poirier has noted,

a writer may well parody other writers or even his own work at an earlier period of his career, but it is quite a different thing for a writer to parody his own work as it progresses.²⁴ In such cases there is a powerfully effective limitation of reference both as to scope and to time. Thus, though some sort of structural parallelism is often pointed to as a technique of self-consciousness, such parallelism is much less likely to disturb the average reader (indeed many structural parallels may escape him altogether) than is, say, an intrusive narrator, an author stepping within his own work, or a self-aware character like our introductory dragon.

If the self-conscious work of fiction often generates a fascination based on some type of infinity, it is well to note that there are several types of infinity. One can distinguish what might be termed a "circular" infinity--the "here-we-go-again" fiction which, say, starts and ends with the same sentence, suggesting that the action it depicts will be repeated again and again forever--with all the interest which a repeating decimal might have for a mathematician. A second sort of infinite series may be formed, or at least suggested, by the replication or duplication of some fictional element such as the plot line. We may find a subplot paralleling the main plot or, to cite a more germane example, we may discover a tale within a tale. Now the tale-within-a-tale pattern may be carried to the third or fourth degree and strongly imply an infinite continuation. Similar structural parallels, with

quite finite continuations, may be found in such hierarchical organizations as single-elimination athletic tournaments (the best-of-the-best pattern) or the medieval pyramids of lords and vassals. A third and more profoundly upsetting infinite regress will result when, let us say, the action in the final tale within a tale within a tale circles back to involve the initial tale, thus forming an infinite repetition of series within series. Lastly we should mention the peculiarly involved figure-eight infinity of an author appearing in his own work as a character writing a book which is, of course, the book in which he is a character, or of the character, like the self-aware dragon, who possesses characteristics which place him simultaneously within and outside a fictional construct and engender a sort of optical illusion of the mind--both cases of fictions which oscillate between some fictional and some extra-fictional status. What mathematical equivalents we should find for this last type of regress (and they are not the most complex infinities we will come across) I cannot say, but it certainly appears that they represent more deeply and immediately disorienting structures than simple circles or replications.

The questioning or disturbance of fictional status which the last sort of examples involve brings us to yet another possible concern: the relations of self-conscious prose fictions to familiar genres or modes of literature which are liable to raise the question of the fictionality of a work or

to disrupt the artistic illusion. The autobiography, for example, is pertinent in this context since we necessarily find the author of an autobiography intimately within his own work (never quite able to catch up with himself, of course, nor able to record his final lines). The artifice or "fictionality" of a given autobiography seems quite problematical --I am thinking now of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. The autobiographically-oriented writer of reflexive fictions (the John Barth of "Lost in the Funhouse" for instance) might well be thought of in this context then--a theoretical context which, I believe, is presently neglected.

The relationship of reflexivity to autobiography has received less critical attention than the relationship between reflexivity and irony and parody. Ortega y Gasset, for example, comments in a section of his essay "The Dehumanization of Art" entitled "Doomed to Irony" that to "look for fiction as fiction--which, we have said, modern art does--is a proposition that cannot be executed except with one's tongue in one's cheek," and he continues by saying, "I much doubt that any young person of our time can be impressed by a poem, a painting, or a piece of music that is not flavored with a dash of irony." Moreover, Ortega reminds us, "this ironical reflection of art upon itself" is not entirely new as an idea and a theory" for the Schlegel brothers (German Romantics of the early nineteenth century) "pronounced irony the foremost aesthetic category."²⁵ Wellek and Warren, in their influential Theory of Literature, remark that there are two ways of

deviating from the omniscient narrator, the "traditional and 'natural' mode of narration." The "romantic-ironic, deliberately magnifies the role of the narrator, delights in violating any possible illusion that this is 'life' and not 'art,' emphasizes the written literary character of the book." They suggest that "Thackeray's much-censured management of Vanity Fair . . . is doubtless a species of this literary irony: literature reminding itself that it is but literature."²⁶ (The other way of deviating, incidentally, is the "objective" or "dramatic" presentation.) Frye observes that "Tristram Shandy and Don Juan illustrate very clearly the constant tendency to self-parody in satiric rhetoric which prevents even the process of writing itself from becoming an oversimplified convention or ideal. In Don Juan we simultaneously read the poem and watch the poet at work writing it: we eavesdrop on his associations, his struggles for rhymes, his tentative and discarded plans, the subjective preferences organizing his choice of details (e.g.: 'Her stature tall--I hate a dumpy woman'), his decisions whether to be 'serious' or mask himself with humor. All this and even more is true of Tristram Shandy" (233). And, finally, Foulke and Smith in their Anatomy of Literature, in a section entitled "Beyond the Conventions of Irony," comment on the following trend: "If conventional irony is founded on a covenant between writer and reader in which the reader, as straight-man, agrees to be tricked according to more or less prescribed rules, then there is

some question as to what can be made of those emerging contemporary works that seem to violate even the minimal rules of the most radical irony." They then list several examples of contemporary self-conscious works which, they contend, "imply a restiveness with the limits of irony and an urge to break through them into another mode."²⁷

If, as we have just seen, there is an intimate connection between reflexivity and irony, there is also a very real one between comedy and self-consciousness. Robert Bernard Martin, who makes a sharp distinction between comedy and the ironic mode of satire, asserts that there is an essential safety to be found in all comedy. Since comedy is so clearly fiction, and thus art, it is consequently less risky than life. Discussing Vanity Fair he finds "the presence of a narrator" a "concealed acknowledgement" of the author, thus "increasing our awareness that what we are reading is a fiction." Our "assurance springs from patent artifice" and the "psychic distance" which is "so much more apparent in comedy" than in tragedy.²⁸ Leslie Fiedler remarks on a more limited relationship of comedy to reflexivity and artistic illusion: "The use in comedy from the Greeks to the Marx Brothers of the deliberate breaking of the illusion (the deprecatory aside: 'That's what it says here!') tries . . . to anticipate the audience's awareness of art's essential hokum, or at least to shock them out of feeling superior in that awareness by a defensive self-exposure." His further comment that "such a method is a

desperate and degrading expedient . . . and is, of course, quite inadequate for serious art" (76) will certainly be subject to challenge throughout this study. And Lanham mentions a modern critic, Albert Cook, who "points to comedy as self-conscious about literary illusion." Cook finds that, while in tragedy the characters are objective to the spectators, "comedy always violates this convention; the actor reaches out of the frame of objectivity and addresses the audience second-personally." Put yet another way, comedy, "violating the stage convention, says 'Ah, but this is only a play.'"²⁹ Any discussion of self-conscious literature surely must take account of the unquestionable connections between irony, comedy, and reflexivity.

Though it may appear that we have virtually exhausted Point Six, the foregoing has been merely suggestive of the range of significant considerations likely to crop up in our discussion of contemporary self-conscious fiction. Questions of value present yet further problems. Speaking of a self-conscious novelistic technique, Alter remarks that "the utilization of such a device says nothing about the relative artistic strength or weakness of the novel in which it may occur" (xiii-xiv). Or as Robert J. Nelson says of the play-within-a-play device: "What counts is the view of reality the dramatist embodies through this form."³⁰ Not only do we face the eternal problem of separating the wheat from the chaff found among the many practitioners of self-conscious art, we must be aware, to quote Alter again, of "the traps,

the inherent limitations, of this mode of fiction" (181). Some of these dangers and limitations may be unavoidable aspects of human self-consciousness. Concerning the "process of I-realization," C. F. Keppler says that "a sharpening of consciousness (and with it of self-consciousness) is inevitable, and is not in itself bad." "What is bad," he goes on, "is the tendency to do it in too easy and limited a way . . . to let consciousness of identity degenerate into egocentricism and ego-cherishing, a closed preoccupation with one's own welfare and one's own importance. When this happens (and apparently it always happens to some extent), the sharpened consciousness brings not expansion of horizon but limitation of it."³¹ Such dangers--of degeneration, closed preoccupation, and limitation of horizons--will be echoed by numerous critics yet to be heard from.

Before proceeding to an outline of the chapters in this work, I would like to discuss briefly two other considerations: first, four critical metaphors and analogies used incessantly in explanations of self-conscious literature; second, some critics who, contrary to generalizations made earlier, have made broad or deep investigations of reflexive literature and have proven of invaluable assistance to my effort here.

A chapter could well be devoted to each of these four metaphors or analogies: (1) the mirror, (2) the stage, (3) the game, and (4) the Chinese box. The mirror analogy is, of course, suggested in the title of this work. It has been

around since the beginnings of literature. Hamlet's advice to the players to "Hold the mirror up to nature" is but the most familiar of innumerable similar cases. M. H. Abrams, for one, has traced the mirror analogy in literary criticism and reminds us that, though a work of art "is very like a mirror, it is also, in important respects, quite different."³² Our purpose is not so much to explore the inadequacy of the analogy as to note the pervasiveness of the mirror analogy in the criticism of modern and post-modern fiction and, especially, a variation in the analogy peculiar to this period. As Appel puts it, "the prose artist can no longer hold the mirror up to nature with the certitude of yore. The book is a book, and 'reality' is --" (Dark Cinema, 151). Thus we find Ortega y Gasset speaking of the inevitable irony in a modern fiction "laughing off everything, itself included-- much as in a system of mirrors which indefinitely reflect one another no shape is ultimate, all are eventually ridiculed and revealed as pure images" (45). (One might well quarrel with this assertion--two quite tangible mirror surfaces are necessary to create such a system in the physical world--but with regard to modern and post-modern literary fabrications the analogy is quite just.) Perhaps the quintessential expression of the contemporary variant is the phrase the "mirror held to the mirror of art held to nature" which Alter employs (245).

A second analogy--world to stage--also is developed regularly in post-modern literature. Sometimes it is seen in a more contemporary version, world-as-film, or, occasionally,

the traditional world-as-book version. Many commentators have remarked on both the antiquity and the ubiquity of the play metaphor. Anne Richter observes that "the idea itself is of great antiquity, as old perhaps as that separation of audience from actors which originally created drama out of ritual."³³ It is thus as ancient as the separation of art and life. A. D. Nuttall traces the notion more specifically back to Cicero and, ultimately, to Plato.³⁴ (This association with Plato, hence with idealism, will be detailed later.) Finally, Wylie Sypher, writing on Pirandello and the boundaries between art and life, observes that "the problem became a traditional one anyhow after Hamlet's advice to the players. This does not, however, make it less contemporary."³⁵ We will come specifically to Shakespeare's use of this artistically reflexive concept when we examine briefly the history of literary self-consciousness. The main point for the present is that the world-as-stage (world-as-film, world-as-book) concept can and does provide the artist with a convenient tool for reflexively examining his particular art; the play-within-a-play, film-within-a-film, etc., can create vividly disorienting audience experiences of ontological uncertainty over the real versus the real-seeming. Nelson rightly terms the use of the play-within-a-play device, which he explores at considerable length, an "index to self-consciousness" (x).

In addition, intermedia exchanges can be valuable; as Alter notes, "the theater within the novel is a conspicuous vehicle for fictional self-consciousness, beginning with

Master Pedro's puppet show in Don Quixote" (78). Likewise, the film-within-the-book, the stage-within-the-film, and other such cross-fertilizations offer the artist the opportunity to probe the perennial issues of appearance versus reality and the status of art.

A related but quite distinct notion, that of the world as a dream, has pervaded the artistic, indeed the human consciousness so thoroughly that no attempt will be made to examine it here. But it is instructive that the concept of world-as-dream--however valuable it may be to those who wish to delve artistically into evanescent, uncanny, or surreal regions, and in spite of its Platonic qualities--cannot present us with a reflexive tool of quite the sort we have just considered. The interpenetration of dream and reality may tantalizingly disorient an audience, but it is not equivalent to artistic reflexivity. Whatever Dream may be, however potent it is as an artistic fount, it is not conscious art. (The world-as-illusion concept is more ambiguous in this respect, as the equation of artist with illusionist allows the element of conscious control to enter.)

In contrast to the world-as-dream, the concept of the world-as-game has close affinities with the concept of world-as-art-form and consequently has been extensively employed in contemporary artistic and critical circles. The discovery of the many "games people play," e.g., Wittgenstein's "language games," has been paralleled by an increasing awareness by both authors and critics of the games artists play. In fact

the idea of the world as stage, hence "play," might even be considered a subcategory of a larger world-as-game concept. Some remarks by George Levine are representative of much current opinion: "The most interesting fiction of our day frequently seems to be game-playing, to be enjoying--as in Borges, Barth, and Nabokov--the possibilities of language and pleasure of literary parody. But the games themselves, while suggesting powerfully the writers' consciousness of the way verbal structures intervene between us and reality, provide for us new possibilities of reality."³⁶ The playful yet deadly serious author and fiction are not new--Alter calls Tristram Shandy "as much an act of pure play as any novel ever written" (55)--but they seem to have become more common recently. The application of theoretical concepts of human play to the activity of the artist has also received increased attention. When Lanham, in his work on Sterne, writes of play being free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and make-believe, and says that "games are played self-consciously," the connection of play with the work of Sterne specifically, self-conscious writers in general, and art more generally should be apparent (40-41).

The last analogy which inevitably greets the student of self-conscious literature in the Chinese box construction. Although the other three analogies are also useful in describing non-reflexive literature, the Chinese box analogy appears almost exclusively in connection with reflexive works, particularly those employing structural parallels.

Of course it too is not limited in applicability to the present century or the last few decades. Anne Richter, referring to The Tempest, speaks of "illusion opening out within illusion like the infinite regression of a set of Chinese boxes" (181), and Nuttal refers to "the 'Chinese Box' treatment of marriage in Chapman's continuation (1598) of Marlowe's Hero and Leander" (104). Though the Elizabethans were uncommonly fond of the work-within-the-work, the regress of illusions goes back much further. Scholes remarks that "the romance is characterized by a multiplicity of narrators and tales within tales like a sequence of Chinese boxes" in Heliodorus (25). The analogy is found virtually everywhere in the criticism of contemporary self-conscious fiction.

As noted previously, my study of such fiction has received particularly significant assistance from the comprehensive studies done by a few earlier investigators. Their influence and my indebtedness undoubtedly will be apparent from the text and citations, but anyone concerned with self-conscious fiction ought to be aware of the general nature of their pioneering works. Robert Alter's Partial Magic is probably the one indispensable work in the field of novelistic self-consciousness. It is an enormously perceptive and readable account of the "Other Great Tradition," the reflexive tradition in the novel from Cervantes to the present. In many ways my own study can only add to Alter's work by concentrating on the contemporary novel, short fiction, and

criticism to a greater extent than he did. I would certainly recommend complementing Alter's study with the works of Alfred Appel, Jr. Appel's writings on Nabokov and especially his entertaining presentations of artistic self-consciousness in art forms other than fiction supplement Alter's work well. In the area of the theater, though this is less pertinent to our study of contemporary fiction, the equivalent of Alter's work is found in Nelson's Play within a Play. For the short story and short fiction there is, as far as I am aware, no real equivalent to Alter. But Barbara McKenzie's introductory chapter in her text, Fiction's Journey, directed as it is toward the undergraduate, provides an eminently clear and concise discussion of the reflexive tendencies of contemporary short fiction. For poetry there is--again, as far as I know--no comprehensive study of its reflexivity. I suspect that the peculiar nature of poetry, particularly lyric poetry--that is, its non-illusionistic quality--tends to make it less congenial to the vividly disorienting involutions of its sister genres. Even so, the reflexive poetry of Wallace Stevens, for example, indicates possibilities for significant further investigation. There are, of course, numerous other names which deserve some mention: Scholes' work with fabulation and Tony Tanner's City of Words deal perceptively with our topic in their separate ways; Leslie Fiedler has written a variety of interesting pieces which illuminate it; many authors of self-conscious fictions, such as John Barth, have commented perceptively on their own work and that of their contemporaries.

But the efforts of Alter, Appel, Nelson, and McKenzie are of such especial value to the student of contemporary literary reflexivity that they cannot pass unnoticed.

My efforts here will center around the half dozen principal ideas previously mentioned; I propose to incorporate these ideas into five sections in this work. First, borrowing M. H. Abrams' scheme, I will develop some of the foregoing remarks by looking at the critical relationships of reflexivity to audience, author, work itself, and larger world. We will consider audience response to reflexive literature, reader-writer relationships, the process of reading, and other matters of concern to psychological and affective criticism; then, using the work of Wayne Booth and others, we will examine the relationship of the author to his work, his presence biographically and psychologically in it; a third chapter of this section will deal with the work itself--the approach of formalists, New Critics, and genre critics--and consider the relations of contemporary literary reflexivity and the formal components of literature, including plot, character, setting, tone, form, and point of view; the last chapter of this section will deal further with the connections of self-conscious fiction and the modern world--with philosophy, with game-playing, and with other media and genres such as the play, television, and the film. Obviously there will be some familiar material here.

The next section will be devoted to the history of self-conscious literature, including the frame tale, the

self-conscious stage from Shakespeare to Pirandello, and the works of such novelists as Cervantes, Sterne, Thackeray, Gide, Joyce, Huxley, and Cabell. The third section will be devoted to contemporary novelists, particularly Nabokov, Vonnegut, Barth, Beckett, Pynchon, and Fowles. Writers of short stories and ficciones, such as Borges, Barth, and Coover, will be covered in Section Four, and the final section will discuss the "Death of the Novel" and the future of fiction.

I hope by this overall arrangement to strike some balance between critical overview and examination of particular works, between the novel and short fiction, and between past and present. Some preliminary discussion of the general problem of artistic self-consciousness seems a necessary part of any examination of all the dimensions of self-consciousness in contemporary fiction. Likewise, an ahistorical approach to the subject of fictional reflexivity would seem to neglect a vital dimension of that subject. Finally, a discussion limited solely to the novel, while useful in focusing one's efforts, is almost certain to neglect such a vitally influential figure in all areas of contemporary fiction as Borges, as well as ignoring the relevant short fiction of a novelist like Barth. Moreover, while, as Buchen says, "virtually every facet of the novel has been subjected to structural, stylistic, formalistic, epistemological processing" (108, n. 7), the same cannot be said for the short story, and a chapter devoted to this

genre might to some degree remedy that deficiency. In sum, I have striven for comprehension through a broad comprehensiveness; I regret the necessary injustice to the totality of a given author's works that such an approach must entail.

The approach of this study is, I realize, also open to an objection raised by Buchen: "Theory," he says, "as it now stands is more a theory of novelistic criticism than that of the novel" (97). Extended to include short fiction, this observation is quite pertinent here. This study is indeed almost as much a study of contemporary criticism as it is of contemporary fiction. My defense is that the symbiotic relationship between fiction and criticism makes the criticism one more major aspect of self-consciousness. Furthermore, a mode of literature so given to parody and self-parody is itself inherently a form, albeit indirect, of literary criticism; such a relationship should not be ignored.

To reiterate: our subject is the reflexive or self-conscious tendency of contemporary British and American fiction; the approach is broadly comprehensive, involving both intrinsic and extrinsic critical techniques. The aims of this study are to place this body of modern self-conscious literature within a larger framework of reflexivity, to examine its history and present popularity, and to investigate its aspects and particular manifestations in a representative group of authors. Let us proceed first to consider the relationship of the reader to such fiction.

Notes

- ¹ Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. xxxi-xxxii.
- ² "Avatars of the Tortoise," in Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, by Jorge Luis Borges, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 207.
- ³ The Screwtape Letters & Screwtape Proposes a Toast (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 63.
- ⁴ The Southpaw (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), esp. pp. 114, 116. Cited by Wayne C. Booth in his The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 225, n. 15.
- ⁵ Point Counter Point (1928; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 302.
- ⁶ Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory (Providence: Brown Univ. Press, 1972), p. 202, n. 1. Chapter V, "Identification," devotes extensive space to the inset device.
- ⁷ Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), p. 79.
- ⁸ Nabokov's Dark Cinema (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974). See esp. pp. 79, 249, and 251 for references to the individuals mentioned in the text.
- ⁹ The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 13.
- ¹⁰ Some of the terms listed have found especial favor with particular authors. "Anatomy" belongs to Northrop Frye. He defines the term in a limited, technical sense in his essay on genres in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 308-14. It is used in this sense by Linda Allyn Westervelt in her dissertation "The Role of the Reader in the Modern Anatomy: A Study of the Fiction of John Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon," Dissertation Abstracts International, 37 (1976), 2188-A (Rice). The term "Menippean satire" is, as Frye indicated, an alternative to "anatomy" and is used, for example, by Elaine Fritz Rice in her dissertation "The Satire of John Barth and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: The Menippean Tradition in the 1960's in America," Dissertation Abstracts International, 35 (1975), 7876-A (Arizona State). "Baroque"

is favored by Robert Rogers in the last chapter of his work The Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), while "fabulation" is obviously associated with Robert Scholes's The Fabulators (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967). "Composition en abyme" comes to us from Gide. Tony Tanner is fond of using "foregrounding," i.e., calling more attention to language itself than to what it signifies, in his City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). Throughout his writings Alfred Appel, Jr., prefers using "involuted" as a substitute for self-conscious or reflexive, and in his introduction to The Annotated Lolita he defines an involuted work as one which "turns in upon itself, is self-referential, conscious of its status as a fiction, and . . . allegorical of itself" (p. xxii). "Reflexive" and "self-reflexive" are, as the text indicates, employed by many authors. I first discovered "self-reflexive" in Marcus Klein's introduction to The American Novel since World War II, ed. Marcus Klein (New York: Fawcett, 1969), which he begins with a series of descriptions of the modern American novel offered by other writers. The series ends with observations that "it has been contrived with a cunningness of technique virtually decadent, it has been purely self-reflexive and respondent to its own development. And the novel has died" (p. 9). All of these observations are met with frequently. Robert Alter, who generally prefers "self-conscious" in his extraordinarily valuable Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), often employs "self-reflexive" and even speaks of "the self-reflexive mode in the novel" (pp. xii, 181, et passim). On the other hand, "reflexive" is the choice of Jill Elyse Jaross for her dissertation "The Dynamics of Discontinuity: Gide and the Reflexive Consciousness," Dissertation Abstracts International, 35 (1975), 5409-A (Cornell); she defines "reflexive consciousness" as "the act by which the author turns his attention from the text he is writing back to himself in order to consider himself as an object of his own thought." "Self-mimetic" seems solely the property of Mary Kate Begnal in her dissertation "Self-Mimesis in the Fiction of John Barth," Dissertation Abstracts International, 35 (1975), 7293-A (Pennsylvania State). "Self-referential" receives extensive examination from Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., Germain Grisez, and Olaf Tollefson in their philosophical treatise Free Choice: A Self-Referential Argument (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1976). On p. 125 we find this admirable definition: "A statement is self-referential if and only if the proposition which is affirmed refers to some aspect of the statement--that is, either to the sentence, or to the performance of affirming or uttering, or to the proposition itself." With some alterations, substituting "literary work" for "statement" would give a passable definition for use in this study.

11 Charles I. Glicksberg, The Self in Modern Literature (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1963).

12 Barbara McKenzie uses very similar terms in her short story text Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 75.

13 Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), p. 23.

14 "Novel and Narrative," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 156.

15 Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Private Languages," American Philosophical Quarterly, 1, No. 1 (1964), rpt. in Philosophy of Mind, ed. Stuart Hampshire (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 142.

16 McKenzie, p. 4. See p. 75 of her work for a brief history of reflexivity in fiction and cf. Alter, p. xi.

17 "The Character of Post-War Fiction in America," English Journal, 51 (Jan. 1962), rpt. in Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1963), pp. 27-35.

18 Grand Rapids Press, 21 May 1978, p. 2-F, cols. 1-2.

19 Puzzles and Epiphanies (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 223.

20 "The Defense of the Illusion and the Creation of Myth," English Institute Essays, 1948, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr., (1949; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965), p. 75.

21 Hassan, Literature of Silence, pp. 15-16. Hereafter throughout the dissertation the following system of annotation will be followed: full reference will be given in an endnote the first time a given work is mentioned in a particular chapter; subsequent references, that is, simple notes involving only page numbers and perhaps the name of the work referred to, will be inserted parenthetically into the text throughout the chapter.

22 "The Aesthetics of the Supra-Novel," in Halperin, p. 107, n. 6.

23 "Characters (Contra Characterization) in the Contemporary Novel," in Halperin, p. 143.

24 "The Politics of Self-Parody," Partisan Review, 35 (Summer 1968), 339.

25 The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture, by José Ortega y Gasset, trans. Willard A. Trask (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 44.

26 René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956), p. 223.

27 Robert Foulke and Paul Smith, An Anatomy of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972), p. 861.

28 "Notes toward a Comic Fiction," in Halperin, pp. 81-82.

29 Quoted in Lanham, Tristram Shandy, p. 153.

30 Play within a Play: The Dramatist's Conception of His Art, Shakespeare to Anouilh (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), p. 151.

31 The Literature of the Second Self (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1972), p. 207.

32 The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 35.

33 Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967), p. 59.

34 Two Concepts of Allegory: A Study of Shakespeare's The Tempest and the Logic of Allegorical Expression (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 102.

35 "Cubist Drama," in Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature (New York: Random House, 1960), rpt. in Pirandello: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Glauco Cambon (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 71.

36 "Realism Reconsidered," in Halperin, p. 234.

SECTION ONE--CRITICAL DIMENSIONS

I. The Reader and Reflexive Fiction

Particularly since 1970 the reader, that essential participant in the literary exchange, has come under increasing, almost faddish scrutiny.¹ In line with this currently popular affective approach, this section on the critical dimensions of reflexive fiction will begin with the literary consumer. Of course, as we shall see, the reader is not merely a literary consumer. He is a second creator or Black in the literary chess game; he is in fact describable by any number of similar analogies which stress his role as an active participant in the communication that is fiction. And while only convenience permits the discussion of the reader's role in substantial isolation from the roles of the author, the literary text, and the larger world, with the permission of convenience we shall begin with that role.

First of all, there is an enormous wealth of material on the reading process in general and, more specifically, on the reading of fiction. It is impossible to encompass all of that material. It may be useful, however, to draw from that material some generally accepted observations and to examine what might be termed the normal process of reading fiction

before engaging the somewhat less ordinary processes involved in reading reflexive works. In an ordinary reading situation, the reader is faced with an organized series of visual symbols, a text. This text is ultimately the product of an author (individual or collective), whose need for self-expression, mastery of the visual symbol system, expectations concerning his readers, knowledge of his subject matter, and so forth have all helped to form that product. The reader, with a variety of needs, expectations, and knowledge of his own, decodes the series of symbols before him. What happens at this point can be variously described as a transfer of meaning or a re-creation of meaning.² However it may be described, the communication process is completed when the reader--given the patterns of the text and the limits of his own language-using capacity--responds to the text.

There is much more to be said concerning reader expectations. For a moment, though, let us look at what is special about reading a novel or a short story.³ First there is the reading process itself. The novel, for example, is not a play, motion picture, or poetry reading. It is even less a sculpture or symphony. All of this is obvious. The novel is not these other art forms because it depends on one sense (the visual), an indirect symbol system, and a particular one-to-one artist to audience relationship.⁴ Though other art forms may depend on sight for their transmission, their symbol systems are direct, e.g., the actor is in an immediate sense taken to be the character he impersonates,

while the novel-reader must actively participate in the creation of mental images through the encouragement of the symbols before him. These symbols in themselves are not the images they suggest. Moreover, art forms such as the play and the motion picture are public forms, produced in theory for an audience of many in a public place. Reading, as is well known, is an extraordinarily private matter; the author, though hoping to communicate with many, must do so one reader at a time.⁵ Perhaps these observations overstate the differences among art forms; many of the effects of self-conscious fiction are paralleled in other art forms. But we can not automatically assume that such is the case, and certain possibilities for inducing self-consciousness--e.g., typological tomfoolery--are peculiar to certain media.

To continue with the process of reading fiction. The reader of fiction becomes involved with a certain psychological process, or rather a tension between two processes, which the reader of non-fiction is not faced with. The distinction is really that between the playgoer during a play and the believer during a ritual. The two psychological movements or functions have been given various names, but their operation is well established. Barbara McKenzie uses the terms overdistancing and underdistancing in her discussion of esthetic and psychic distance.⁶ She is speaking of the same two processes which Nelson, using conventional psychological terms, calls dissociation and identification. Nelson appropriately regards dissociation as a "complementary

mechanism" of identification, for they are both necessary processes in the "willing suspension of disbelief."⁷ We must both believe and not believe in the reality of the play or of the characters of a novel; it is the simultaneous operation of these principles which makes the fiction of the stage or the book possible. These two mechanisms likewise define the poles toward which fictions may move--tragedy, for instance, depending heavily on identification and comedy on dissociation--and the ways in which fictions can break down.

In his very interesting work The Dynamics of Literary Response, Norman N. Holland employs the term introjection for the process of suspending disbelief, and he comments extensively on the ways in which the "artistic frame may fail."⁸ Essentially he contends that to fully experience a work an audience must "fuse with" the work. The work must be pleasing and must not have to be acted upon. If the audience confuses actor and role, fiction and life by, for example, sending flowers to soap opera characters, then the frame has broken. (For McKenzie this would be a case of extreme under-distancing.) The frame can be broken by what might be called intrinsic and extrinsic causes, a point Holland touches on. Extrinsic causes would include interruptions of the reading process such as physical discomforts (a noisy room or an uncomfortable chair) or physical problems such as smudges or faulty printing which make decoding a text difficult. Intrinsic problems would be those caused by text itself, that is,

mental discomfort for the reader after at least some decoding has taken place--problems like the underdistancing just mentioned or, in the opposite direction, boring or offensive content which defeats the expectation that the work will be pleasing. Holland sums it up thus: "The audience can break the dyadic tie to the work if physical or psychic discomfort becomes too severe. The literary work can break it, too. Our [introjection] model helps us to see how tinkering with the introjection process can lead to some of the more exotic effects possible in literature" (98). However, before we examine some of those exotic effects, we should consider some of the many kinds of expectations--all generally subsumed under the heading Expectation of Pleasure--which readers may bring to the reading of fiction.

In the expectation of pleasure the reader grants the writer an enormous license. As Booth says, "Our entire experience of reading fiction is based . . . on a tacit contract with the novelist, a contract granting him the right to know what he is writing about. It is this contract which makes fiction possible."⁹ And the reader voluntarily agrees to believe what the author tells him.¹⁰ When Grossvogel contends that it is the job of writers to "place the reader within a phenomenal situation shaped by their fiction rather than to allow the phenomenal world of the reader to absorb the book as simply another of its hermetic and externally perceived objects,"¹¹ he is certainly correct. But how simple some of us readers (and movie-goers and television

watchers) make things, at least initially, for our artists! Often we are willing to believe almost anything and, once engaged, accept nearly any artistic flaw in the interests, usually, of finding out what happens next. In most cases we ask only that the artist manage to continue the illusion which he has been permitted to create. As Fiedler says, "the maintenance of the illusion is what counts" to the reader.¹² It is important to note that maintaining the illusion means maintaining the illusion appropriate to a given mode. With many fictional genres as well as other art forms, the audience grants an enormous number of ordinarily improbable premises in order to obtain an illusion. Fantasy fiction, fairy tales, and the stage settings of the theater all depend upon some unrealistic premises or conventions being accepted by an audience. Much will be said about the opposition of reflexive narrative to the realistic mode, but the fairytale, though obviously possessing only the barest illusion of everyday reality, is not reflexive however much we may notice its unrealistic premises. It is reflexive only if, as is often the case in modern versions of the fairytale, it comments on itself or on the conventions of fairytales or parodies fairytale situations, characters, language, and so on.

Maintaining the illusion will help fulfill the Expectation of Pleasure, but the reader expects a bit more. Among other things, he expects the unexpected. Such a statement is not meant to apply only to the readers of detective and

mystery fiction. Every reader, consciously or more often unconsciously, develops expectations and attempts to anticipate a fiction as he reads. When Scholes says that the "ideal reader, in his structure building, is probably much like a good chess player, who is always thinking ahead many moves and holding alternative possibilities in mind as structures which the game may actually assume,"¹³ we must observe, first, that he is speaking of an ideal reader and not an ordinary, relaxed, more or less naive reader and, secondly, that his observation is a good one in spite of its emphasis on the conscious, concentrating mind. Readers expect an author to entertain them with a game of some sort, the outcome of which is never quite a foregone conclusion. Readers expect, within limits, surprise. O'Henry made his fortune on such a premise and handbooks for beginning writers never fail to make the point. Iser observes more generally that the difference between expository texts and literary texts is that while the expository text confirms the reader's expectations, the literary text frustrates them (278). The bounds of such frustration are by no means fixed, but texts which leave the reader no moves in the game, which have no room for imagination, lead to boredom--certainly defeating the Expectation of Pleasure (275).

Readers establish the bounds within which the game is to be played based on a multiplicity of clues: word choice, character names, locale and so on all play a part in a complicated, continuous feedback system. From these clues,

consciously or unconsciously, patterns of expectation, of What Is Supposed to Happen develop: this is the world of comedy, so, after such and such happens, the marriage will take place; this is tragedy, so we must take these events seriously. The television viewer acts similarly: this is a half-hour melodrama; in spite of his apparently impossible predicament, the hero must be victorious in the last five minutes--he must or the series will end. Thus the reader (or playgoer or television viewer) anticipates some novelty or surprise within the bounds of the larger expectation that the work of art will resolve matters according to the norms of its mode or genre. A failure to conform to these norms occurs when, for example, what is supposedly a comedy series treats a serious theme and provides little laughter for the audience. The ambiguous, frustrated, disappointed response of the audience is principally a function of expectations: a change of mode was more of a surprise than could be accommodated by the viewers. (Some viewers will try to accommodate the dissonance which develops by broadening their definition of comedy or seeing the series as working in a hybrid mode. The expansion of conceptions can be, as will be reiterated, one consequence of the disruption of conventions.) Yet the modern novel is not only likely to frustrate genre expectations but, as Frank Kermode points out, is likely not to resolve matters at all. Every novel, he says, "should be an affront to the simple hermeneutic expectation that it will work out, because it can only work out if we accept the

false implication that the world itself is simply coded, full of discoverable relations and offering closure."¹⁴

Though there is more to be said concerning the philosophical implications of this statement, Kermode's point that there is "a new understanding that hermeneutic and other forms of closure are contingent not necessary aspects of narrative" (170) is the key point for the time being. Though readers ordinarily expect things to work out, they can no longer be comfortable in that expectation.

There are, of course, other conventions of fiction which have developed. When Ortega y Gasset pronounces the rule that "a novel, in contrast to other literary works, must, while it is read, not be conceived as a novel; the reader must not be conscious of curtain and stage-lights," we recognize the convention that the "effective quasi-reality" of a novel must not be accidentally or deliberately disturbed--the illusion must be maintained.¹⁵ What constitutes a disturbance of this novelistic illusion has varied through the centuries, but from the time of Henry James until recently the predominant principle has been, as Fogle says, "absolute illusion."¹⁶ James censured Trollope for "destroying his fictional illusion by inconsistency in point of view, specifically by way of editorial intrusion" (343) and Trollope, Fogle declares, "seems positively to disperse his illusion deliberately, in repeated asides to his readers" (346). While Wayne Booth's views on editorial intrusion are liberal enough to accommodate much reflexive fiction ("The

author may intrude . . . provided he can convince us that his 'intrusions' are at least as carefully wrought and as pertinent as his presented scenes"), he is careful to acknowledge that intrusions which "call the reader's attention explicitly to the fact that he is reading just a story" are the intrusions "most widely avoided in modern fiction."¹⁷

Thus far we have discussed several of the expectations and conventions, both general and specific, which reading fiction involves: that we can distinguish fiction and fact; that the illusion will be maintained; that the fiction will couple novelty and familiarity--that a large range of responses, but not nearly all, will be controlled by the work of fiction. In a later section, expectations concerning various components of a fiction such as plot, character, narrators, style, and setting will be discussed in greater detail. For the moment, the effects of disturbing the conventions and failing to meet the expectations of readers are our concern, particularly the effects of radically self-conscious fiction. It should be remembered that the concept of reflexivity involves a multi-dimensional continuum and that not all works which upset readers can be considered self-conscious works. An ending out of keeping with the tenor of a given work is not self-conscious and, likewise, equating experimental and self-conscious works, as Barbara McKenzie seems to do, is questionable. Moreover, not all forms of self-consciousness are equally disorienting for the reader.

We could find numerous remarks to the effect of Booth's on "the profound effect achieved by the great authors when they call attention to their works as literature and to themselves as artists" (209) or of Iser's that "the novel no longer confines itself to telling a story or to establishing its own patterns, for now it also deliberately reveals the component parts of its own narrative techniques" (xiv). But the "profound effect" is often one of ambivalence, frustration, disappointment, unease or confusion. When, for example, authorial intrusion accidentally or deliberately interrupts a fiction with an unavoidable reminder that it is a fiction, the ordinary reader's response may well be an irate "What are you doing here?" to the author. When Appel tells us that the "vertiginous conclusion of a Nabokov novel calls for a complicated response which many readers, after a lifetime of realistic novels, are incapable of making,"¹⁸ he observes the confusing, dizzying effects of self-consciousness as well as the pervasive premise of realism which dominates the novel. How can self-conscious fiction avoid such response given the powerful nature of the reader expectations just discussed and, more specifically, the multi-leveled, ambiguous nature of self-conscious devices generally? To illustrate the ambiguous nature of reflexive devices we might look to some comments by Nelson (115) on the play-within-a-play device--remarks also applicable to similar novelistic devices such as the novel within a novel or the author-character. The play within a play, says Nelson, "is a

doubled-edged device. With respect to the spectator's relationship to the outer play, the play within a play is an associative device ('how can people who are looking at a play be unreal?'); conversely, with respect to the spectator's relationship to the play within a play itself, the device is dissociative ('like me, those onstage spectators are looking at a play, something unreal')." Certainly there is an unavoidable ambivalence involved in holding the associative and dissociative elements of the play within a play in suspension.

An even more disturbing effect may result from the use of the play-within-a-play device or its counterparts in fiction. Fiedler calls it "a vortex of infinity" (88). Again Nelson, this time discussing The Tempest, has analyzed things well. He says that "Prospero's pageant for the betrothed Ferdinand and Miranda becomes a play within a play within a play. Now, the reflective spectator will regard the triple convolution--indeed, this logically endless series of convolutions--as implicit in the very use of the technique of the play within a play." He continues by suggesting that "the more reflective will sense with Fiedler the implications of the double convolution: if the players are but looking at a play, what are we but looking at a play, and is there some still more ultimate audience looking upon us and itself being looked upon ad infinitum? The world-stage concept is the very essence of the play-within-a-play idea" (30). We will return to the philosophical implications of

such devices a bit later. The significant point is that the reader of fiction, like the playgoer, may well experience an awesome unease in the face of reflexive devices, particularly if the artist does not, as Shakespeare usually does, try to delimit the potential infinite regress.

The post-modern reader can anticipate other disturbing effects. He can expect to encounter a great deal of irony of the sort found, not surprisingly, in the literature of the double. He can expect to encounter logical puzzles and absurdities in dealing with the strange status of, for instance, characters who seem to be simultaneously inside and outside a fiction. How can he avoid being disturbed by, let us say, the character who talks to his author and throws the authenticity of character, author and even reader into doubt?¹⁹ One reaction is laughter, of course; another is distaste at the "contamination" of a work with such effects. Such reactions can be readily illustrated by the audience responses to some self-conscious scenes in some contemporary American films and, to a lesser degree, with actors in cameo roles. In the comedy What's Up, Doc?, for example, star Ryan O'Neal calls the line "Love means never having to say you're sorry" the stupidest thing he has ever heard. Of course, nearly everyone in the theater is aware that the line is the most famous one from Love Story, the film in which O'Neal rose to fame. It might be worthwhile to note that the audience is delighted while disturbed, perhaps because the comic world is more adaptable to self-conscious

intrusion, and perhaps because the film was nearly finished and the frame of the whole business was about to be reached anyway.

Quite a different response might be observed when early in the Clint Eastwood thriller Dirty Harry Eastwood, as Harry, passes a movie theater marquee. Eastwood looks up at the name of the film playing in the theater--Play Misty for Me--and then back at the camera; then he moves on. Again nearly everyone in the audience recognizes the joke: Eastwood starred in Play Misty for Me. To know that Eastwood acted in the film within the film is to be reminded that Eastwood is acting at the moment in the outer film. Thus character being acted and acting self are momentarily juxtaposed for the audience. This is not excessively blatant cinematic reflexivity; it is relatively clever and indirect--a sort of mass in-joke dependent on at least a modicum of audience knowledge and intelligence. Pretending to break a film is a much more obvious sort of reflexive device, rather like playing with typography in a novel. But the laughter is a trifle uneasy; such an allusive intrusion is not to be anticipated and the reflexivity is not continuous, so the scene remains somewhat of a spot of self-conscious contamination in the otherwise "realistic" world of the film thriller.

This brings us to what might be termed the Reflexivity Reaction Equation. This equation suggests that the degree of distress which a reflexive device causes an audience is in direct proportion to the degree of belief in a fictional

world which the audience holds at the time of the use of the device. Thus the comic world, which elicits less than total faith, may well be intruded upon with little difficulty. Likewise, a reflexive intrusion at either end of a work, in the introduction or near the conclusion, will probably present less difficulties for an audience than one in the middle. On the other hand, a mode which promises verisimilitude can be damaged by a fault in the least detail. An anachronism--which means some necessary incompatibility with an outside reality--may be considered a deliberate jest in a comedy but a worrisome flaw in a tragedy. Critics of Shakespeare seldom fail to point out the anachronisms in his works.

The reader of post-modern reflexive works will be faced with these and a wide range of other possible responses in his contacts with the fiction of the unexpected and he must be prepared for anything. There will be a Nabokov, on the one hand, who will cleverly lead the reader into thinking that a familiar game is being played, a familiar technique being employed. Probably too late the reader will realize that he has been deceived. On the other hand, the reader may encounter a novel in which the expectation of closure is entirely in vain, a text which gives the reader none of the anticipated bearings or clues, which deliberately leaves the task of imposing consistency and coherence to the reader. With a Nabokov the reader must try to discover the next moves of the game; with a Pynchon he must try to discover the game. As Iser indicates, there are two common reactions

to the second sort of fiction: the reader may regard the text as nonsense and close the book, or he may come to regard the text as merely a reflection of his own order-imposing mind (176).

The reader of reflexive fictions may also find that the game he has entered is neither one which he can not make heads nor tails of nor one which exposes his inability to detect an author's deception but is rather one in which he and the author may share a communication over the heads or behind the backs of the characters in the fiction. Booth discusses such exchanges in a brief section of his Rhetoric of Fiction entitled "'Secret Communion' Between Author and Reader" (300-305). Grossvogel touches on similar matters when, writing of the use to which Cervantes puts Don Quixote, he says that "the reader may remain committed to a fiction which he might reject if he did not sense that its author was using it as a pretext for the discussion of matters that involve only the author and his reader" (33). He says of Sterne's fiction that it "is no more than what little interrupts his exchanges with the gallery. But even in the act of writing that fiction, Sterne remains conscious of his parafictional dialogue" (149). There is, it seems, a line of novelists stretching from Cervantes and Sterne through Thackeray to the present--that is, a line of satirical essayists disguised as novelists--who conceive of the fictional world not as all-engrossing but, as Grossvogel put it, as a pretext for dealing with other matters. Any such diminution

of the quasi-reality of the fictional world naturally puts the reader at one emotional and imaginative remove from that world. Many of the criticisms of reflexive fiction, which will be examined shortly, result from just such dissociation or overdistancing.

Of course, the foregoing types of reader responses to reflexive fiction constitute neither an exclusive nor an exhaustive list of such responses. Many similar responses may be found with fiction which can only be described as mildly or inadvertantly reflexive; at the same time, there are several other responses found repeatedly when self-conscious works are dealt with. Only an introductory account of reader responses was intended. Furthermore, it might be well at this point to stress one particular dimension of self-consciousness, a dimension which Alter finds crucial. This might be termed the intensional continuum. That is, among fiction's numerous reflexive possibilities, many will result inevitably from the nature of fiction, or accidentally through authorial incompetence, or will remain only potential, undeveloped sources of reader self-awareness. The self-conscious work must, according to Alter, be both deliberately and continuously reminding the reader of its fictional status.²⁰ Let us concentrate for a moment on the deliberate nature of the reminder, the continuity of reflexivity constituting another dimension. According to Alter, a truly self-conscious work (and here the term self-conscious seems more appropriate than the more neutral reflexive) must

involve a reader's sense that the author has intentionally designed the fiction to play with some of the conventions we have discussed or to call attention to itself in some way. The author must not be felt to have disrupted his illusion through carelessness; he must also have, as far as the reader can determine, emphasized overtly or covertly such potential sources of self-consciousness as are available in his fiction. It is very easy, for example, for readers to miss parallels between the fiction itself and its subject matter or its component parts or its reader's response.²¹ Such parallels, lacking the gross disruptiveness of an authorial intrusion, must be deliberately pointed out or they are apt to be ignored by the reader. It is not enough for a book to discuss printing; it must take such potentially self-conscious subject matter and emphasize the printing of its own pages as printing. Otherwise the reflexive circle may never be closed by the reader and the subject of printing will remain sealed in the quasi-reality of the fictional world. Likewise, in a book in which, let us say, the task of the reader is analogous to the task of some character, such a parallel must be carefully asserted, reinforced sufficiently to be obvious to the reader, or the potential self-consciousness will almost certainly fail to develop except in the most alert and critical of readers.

Beyond this, as Alter also notes (97-98), merely to intensify artifice is not to call attention to or to question

the status of the fiction. The reader must sense that the author is not merely being extremely complex or clever in the use of fictional techniques so that the reader may applaud his skill, but that he is purposefully calling attention to the fictionalizing process itself and examining it. Precisely how a reader is to make all of these judgments concerning authorial intention is much too difficult a question to be answered here, involving as it does the whole enormously complex question of how a reader arrives at any judgment about any fiction whatsoever.

But readers have made a great number of judgments about reflexive works, many of these judgments unfavorable. There are a number of common criticisms made of highly reflexive works, and from earlier discussions of reader psychology and reader expectations some of these might well be anticipated. The most basic complaint seems to concern the overdistancing or dissociation common to self-conscious works--the psychic effect which appears prominently in related modes such as satire, irony, and comedy--but there are other sorts of dissatisfaction. The least supportable criticism of self-conscious works is one made, or apparently made, by Douglas Fowler. Writing of Nabokov, he claims that this author, "in calling attention to himself and his work, is really engaging in a redundancy, for we have been aware of the creator all along--we always are."²² If redundancy is taken in its ordinary, slightly negative sense, Fowler's statement seems to object to an author calling attention to himself, because

such attention getting is unnecessary. Yet the ordinary reader is not always aware of the creator; indeed, he is almost never aware of the creator. In everyday, non-reflexive fiction, the author strives mightily to suppress any such awareness, to keep it on a sub-conscious level; when uninterrupted belief in the reality of the fictional world is intended, only authorial incompetence or an abnormally critical reader will bring such an awareness to the conscious level. Such redundancy is not unnecessary, it is absolutely essential for the operation of a self-conscious work: if reflexivity is not pointed out, self-consciousness ordinarily will not result.

At virtually the opposite pole is an assertion by Ortega y Gasset which, if generalized, might sum up a great deal of reader dissatisfaction with self-conscious fiction. "Average theater-goers," he says, speaking of Pirandello, "resent that he will not deceive them, and refuse to be amused."²³ Average theater-goers and average readers expect the creation of the quasi-reality of a make-believe world. This is, as we noted, a primary expectation when the book is opened or the theater entered. It is not surprising that the denial of such a central expectation should produce profound disappointment and unhappiness. Similar though perhaps less total disappointment will result from the frustration of reader expectations about characterization, plotting, and other aspects of the fiction-making process.

Other complaints about self-conscious fiction--and only the surface is being scratched here--center around the problem of overdistanting. The complaints seem to fall very generally into two categories: that such fiction is too one-sidedly cerebral, and that such fiction is boring. (These categories are not mutually exclusive, as anyone who has encountered a dull lecturer can confirm.) If some often vilified terms may be forgiven, to make form into content--as reflexive fiction so often does--is to risk reader alienation. As Grossvogel says of one of Cocteau's works, it is "never a live vortex into which the spectator might be drawn" for Cocteau "ignores identification."²⁴ Other similar comments on the unbalanced, overly intellectual appeal of self-conscious works include Fiedler's charge that Gide makes reflexivity "an intellectual joke" (75); Tanner's assertion that reflexive fiction may result in "frolicsome evasion," for, at some point, "the arbitrary unimpeded sport of sheer mind damages rather than nourishes a novel;"²⁵ and Grossvogel's contention that the reflexive infinity "serves a literary purpose as long as it helps convey the content of a human consciousness" but that "as an instance of the author's ingenuity, it merely proposes a game to the ingenuity of the reader" (Limits, 294-95). To this series might easily be added Alter's complaints that the self-conscious work often lacks a sense of human experience and becomes an arid, technical study (222) and that nothing in "its fictional realization is quite so interesting as the theorizing

that goes on within it" (157). Nelson's characterization of the spectator's response to Marivaux epitomizes the reaction to the hyper-intellectuality of self-conscious works: "a clever and meaningless manipulation of ambiguities and paradoxes, a sterile intellectual structure of Chinese boxes" (83).

For these and other reasons writers of self-conscious fiction invite reader boredom. As Malcolm Cowley puts it, one "finally yawns in their faces."²⁶ Booth has struck the same vein: "There is nothing more boring," he says, "than a boring 'novelist-hero' searching, for no discernible reason, for a truth which is so commonplace that the reader wonders, when he arrives, why the trip was undertaken in the first place" (292). Alter mentions the self-indulgence which afflicts writers of self-conscious works (182, 222), but Richard Poirier launches the most devastating attack on the boredom induced by long-winded self-conscious fiction. He contends that many writers of self-conscious fiction "share a debilitating assumption: that it is interesting in and of itself to make the formal properties of fiction into the subject matter of fiction. While it isn't wholly uninteresting to do so, those readers most capable of appreciating the idea are also apt to be the most impatient with any lengthy demonstrations, with the repetitive effort, page after page, to show that literature is a hoax" (342). He goes on to ask, "Who can deny a tedious lack of economy in Joyce--or in Beckett or Borges, Burroughs or Barth--an overindulgence in

mostly formal displays where little more is accomplished than a repetitive exposure of some blatantly obtuse formal arrangement?" (346). In sum, reflexive fictions disrupt reader expectations, often through techniques which lead to overdistancing and a consequent rejection of the fiction from boredom or other causes.

One conclusion from all of this, as Tony Tanner indicates, "is that fiction, having acknowledged its fictitiousness, must establish some new relationship between itself, author and reader" (256). Fogle, in a slightly different connection, has called for "a larger, less precise conception of artistic illusion, which will include some general notion of the appropriate state of mind of the reader, in collaboration with the skill of the writer that produces this state of mind" (349). For readers of self-conscious fiction, some new relationship, some expanded sense of artistic illusion is a necessity. Reflexive works are likely to be disturbing, but this disturbance can lead to the expansion of reader consciousness rather than to rejection of the self-conscious work. Conventions and other habits of mind often go unrecognized and unappreciated unless they are vividly exposed. A broadened sense of literary possibility and greater flexibility in incorporating the unanticipated are possible positive results of exposure to reflexive literature. An example of this sort of process is to be found in the responses of television viewers to such contemporary programs as Bonkers, Monty Python's Flying Circus, and Saturday

Night Live. (These shows, it might be mentioned, are comedy shows of controversial merit.) Such shows repeatedly interrupt skits with references to supposedly correct scripts, to the studios and the techniques of taping, to the actors as actors, and to other facets of the act as act. Initial viewer response is often disgust with such inane antics. However, viewers who continue to watch such shows may come to expect and enjoy and even demand the disruption of the skits or acts, discovering that the devastated routine is actually part of a larger routine, an act within an act. They will see that the "straight" skit is a hopeless potentiality, a mere pretext for reflexive playing, and observe that the destruction of the presumed legitimate routine is as planned and rehearsed as any legitimate routine would be, that the outer act is as much art as the inner one. Such observations must result in a heightened appreciation of artistic illusion and of the expectations involved in comedy. A similar awareness may also result from more serious works on the printed page.

Notes

¹ Especially significant have been works like Stanley Fish's Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972) and Wolfgang Iser's The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974). Both of these provide enormously stimulating theoretical and practical approaches to reader involvement in the literary communication.

² There are innumerable descriptions and definitions available. Jean-Paul Satre calls reading "directed creation" in his essay "Why Write?" from What Is Literature?, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), rpt. in Modern Continental Literary Criticism, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr., (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 322. Many authorities would concur.

³ Norman N. Holland in his The Dynamics of Literary Response (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), particularly his chapter "The 'Willing Suspension of Disbelief,'" examines matters relevant to this point.

⁴ It is worth considering the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between an ordinary text and a so-called talking book for the blind or between the oral and written versions of a poem.

⁵ See Iser, p. 283, on the film's single image versus the book's multiple interpretations.

⁶ Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 73.

⁷ Robert J. Nelson, Play within a Play: The Dramatist's Conception of His Art, Shakespeare to Anouilh (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 6-7.

⁸ See especially pp. 96-103.

⁹ Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 52. Robert Alter uses a nearly identical phrase in his discussion of Sterne in Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 33.

¹⁰ "Believe" may be both a more actively positive and a more accurate term than the standard phrase "suspension of disbelief." With J. R. R. Tolkien we might say of the fictional narrative that you "believe it, while you are, as it

were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed." Tolkien goes on to call the suspension of disbelief "a substitute for the genuine thing" in "On Fairie-Stories" from The Tolkien Reader (New York: Ballantine, 1966), p. 37.

¹¹ David I. Grossvogel, Limits of the Novel: Evolutions of a Form from Chaucer to Robbe-Grillet (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), p. 136.

¹² "The Defense of the Illusion and the Creation of Myth," English Institute Essays, 1948, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr., (1949; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965), p. 74.

¹³ Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 108.

¹⁴ "Novel and Narrative," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 167.

¹⁵ "Notes on the Novel," in The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture, by José Ortega y Gasset, trans. Willard A. Trask (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 73.

¹⁶ Richard Harter Fogle, "Illusion, Point of View, and Modern Novel-Criticism," in Halperin, p. 346.

¹⁷ These remarks appear on p. 205 in an interesting sub-section of Ch. 7 entitled "Commenting Directly on the Work Itself" (pp. 205-9).

¹⁸ Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. xxxi.

¹⁹ See Holland, p. 99, on this point.

²⁰ See especially pp. x-xi.

²¹ Fish, p. 399, considers the directions which a response to a work may take in comparison to the direction of the work itself. It is also easy for readers to overlook such minor instances of reflexivity as the appearance of the title of a book as a line in the book itself.

²² Reading Nabokov (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 54.

²³ "The Dehumanization of Art," in The Dehumanization of Art, p. 37.

²⁴ David I. Grossvogel, The Self-Conscious Stage in Modern French Drama (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), p. 66.

²⁵ Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 253.

²⁶ "Storytelling's Tarnished Image," Saturday Review, 25 Sept. 1971, p. 25.

II. The Author and Reflexive Fiction

In reaction to the so-called New Criticism--in "an attempt," as he says, "to put the novelist back into the novel"--Louis D. Rubin, Jr., argues that "much criticism of fiction, and much theorizing about the nature of fiction, is written almost as if the novelist were not supposed to be present."¹ Of course, the author must be present in his fiction in some way; the real question, as Rubin suggests, is "How is he there?" This chapter addresses that question.

One popular opinion is that the author should not be present in his works. Ford Maddox Ford felt that the work of fiction should "keep the reader entirely oblivious of the fact that the author exists--even of the fact that he is reading a book,"² and Wolfgang Iser contends that "the life story of the author must be shut out of the work."³ These injunctions are by no means equivalent, but they are indicative of a strongly negative attitude toward the reflexive appearance of the author in his work. On the other hand there lies the common recognition and admission of the author's unavoidable presence. Leon Edel, speaking of Dorothy Richardson, says that she "recognized that a novelist nearly always writes or rewrites the book of himself."⁴ We encounter nearly the same observation in David Littlejohn's remark that Gide is "telling no more than his own story over and over, under any number of transparent disguises."⁵ The disguises of a given author may be more or less transparent--

but the fingerprints are always there, one way or another. The question still is how.

A writer-centered view of fiction is likely to discover extensions of the author's personality in each fictional detail--in contrast to the theoretical non-existence of the author implicitly postulated in a work-centered view.⁶ As Charles Nicol observes, "One fertile mode of literary investigation has always been to trace remnants of an author's autobiography in his fictional creations."⁷ This is the autobiographical case: the appearance of details or aspects of the historical author's life story in his fiction, the more or less overt invasion of fiction by biography. The biography/fiction boundary is, as we noted, problematic. As Alter says, there is "no rule-of-thumb about how much or how little of an author's actual life can be admitted into a fiction without violating its integrity as an artifice."⁸ The uproar over Arthur Miller's After the Fall illustrates the extent of the problem. One view, hinted at by Barbara McKenzie, is that any material, autobiographical or not, is the legitimate subject of fiction and will be transformed by its very presence in the fictional work.⁹ A more common view, also found in McKenzie (72-73), is that, while autobiographical material is indeed a legitimate source for fiction, a degree of psychic distance, that is, objectification of the material by the author, is essential for successful fiction. Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited" is her well-chosen example of such successful objectification.

But resolution of this problem of autobiography need not be accomplished here, for some valuable observations on self-conscious fiction can be made without such a resolution. The fact of unavoidable reflexivity in fiction may be conceded: fiction will inevitably reflect its creator. With some authors fiction and autobiography may nearly coincide; statements found in the fiction may serve as well for statements of historical fact. With other authors, most notably Shakespeare, gleaning autobiography from art is a hopeless task; while the signature of the artist is unmistakable, its ink does not come from the facts of his life. Between these extremes lie most of our authors, in whose writing we may find anything from minor biographical parallels to real events obviously used but not mentioned directly.¹⁰ From the fiction reader's point of view, however, this inherent authorial reflexivity is ordinarily irrelevant to the self-conscious quality of a work and is consequently usually ignored. For the purpose of reading fiction, readers generally accord all of the work the status of fiction; coincidence between events in an author's life and those in a work of fiction usually has no effect on the naive reader dealing only with the text. Certainly when scholarship and criticism enter with their satchels full of extra-textual evidence, then text may become confession. Most of the time, however, this is not the case.

This is not to say that the reader is never confronted with the autobiographical presence of the author, but that

unless such a presence is highly intrusive, intrusive to the extent that the artistic illusion is disrupted, then such a presence will be conveniently ignored. We may feel that fiction which deliberately and consistently foregrounds the author as Writing Man--the work of Gide or Barth, for example--is bordering on the obsessively autobiographical, though there is a strong case for the view that such a self-conscious concern by the author for his own work must nonetheless be transformed or fictionalized autobiography. Or an author may intrude bits of his biography which he can reasonably expect the reader to be aware of (from extra-fictional sources, a dust cover blurb, an Introduction, etc.) with the intention of disrupting his illusion. Such autobiographical bits may appear inadvertently, but generally such literary self-consciousness results from the author's deliberate efforts. As Alter says, "the self-conscious novelist crosses the border between fiction and autobiographical experience knowingly, archly, with pointed paradox" (120). When the historical author's intrusion on his fiction is both obvious and accidental, the result, as with Thackeray, is confused, discordant fiction.

For the most part, the autobiographical presence of the author, the degree to which fiction involves untransformed information about the author's life, is much less significant a part of self-conscious fiction than are the operations of the implied author and the narrator¹¹ or the presence of some "writer-allegory" (Rogers, 181, n. 19) in the

work of fiction. These latter elements of self-consciousness, however, involve more speculation and inference than, say, the checking of fictional details against an extra-fictional record. And if the historical author's presence in the literary work is usually both unnecessary and irrelevant, the presence of the implied author is neither. The implied author is always a construct potentially available to the reader. This construct must be sharply distinguished from the historical author, with whom it may bear a quite limited relationship, and also from the narrator of a particular work. (The implied author found in a single work by a given author may also be quite different from a composite implied author developed from several of the author's works.) If these distinctions be kept in mind, the "how" of the author's presence may be subject to less confusion.

Discussing the functions of the narrator will actually take us into the techniques and components of fiction, which will be covered more thoroughly in the following chapter. But discussing the narrator now will serve as a reminder of how the author does and does not enter his work, for the narrator may bear many possible relationships to the implied author and the author himself. As Booth points out (155), the narrator, whether or not he is identified in some way with the author, may be self-conscious. The self-conscious narrator or observer who persists in reminding us of his labors as writer or speaker may intrude enough to cause us to regard the narrative as "mere story." (This is by no

means a necessary case, however, since the self-conscious narrator may be used simply to reinforce the reader's awareness that the story is being related from a particular, limited vantage point.)

The narrator, who in other respects may be quite dissimilar to the implied or actual author, may also serve as a slightly less direct self-conscious device by duplicating or paralleling the author's role as artist. The work of Nabokov, for instance, is filled with such author-doubles or author-substitutes--characters such as Hermann in Despair (Rogers, 165). The narrator need not be a writer to fill such a role; any artist figure--a chess player, a craftsman--may be used. In fact, the artist-figure need not be the narrator at all; any character may serve. Of course, the self-conscious effect will probably diminish as the distance between artist figure and author increases, and the more tenuous connections may create no reflexive awareness whatsoever on preliminary readings. The idea is simply that the functional similarity between the narrator as teller and his author as teller will often make the narrator a prime candidate for reflexive comparison.

Yet it must always be remembered that the narrator and the implied and actual authors are separate entities. As Booth has established, narrators are frequently "unreliable." And this is true as well for self-conscious fictions in which narrator and author might be thought most closely associated. "There have been, it is true, many self-conscious

narrators in modern fiction, but they have almost all been dramatized as unreliable characters quite distinct from their authors," says Booth; he notes further that they "all engage in strongly implied praise for the works they are writing," but "despite their pretensions" their works differ a good deal from those of Mann, Gide, and Huxley in which they are found (205, n. 28).

There are good reasons for authors of self-conscious or unself-conscious fictions to divorce themselves from their narrators. As Grossvogel (speaking of Sterne) puts it: "The author who stands clear of his fictional narrator is not necessarily a prankster, a parlor wit or game maker; he is able to so detach himself from his novel that not even its comic cast need contaminate him."¹² This defensive detachment on the part of the clever self-conscious author means that he may stand above the battle and that the criticism of his novel and its narrator may be deflected from him personally. Booth points out that the "indeterminacy" caused by an unreliable narrator "can of course serve as a protective device for the weak author" as well as for the more talented (240). On the other hand, an author may wish to stress the connection between narrator and author. As Robert Bernard Martin explains, "the presence of a narrator" is a "concealed acknowledgement" of the author, "increasing our awareness that what we are reading is a fiction" and thus promoting the "assurance" which "springs from patent artifice."¹³ Thus there is no possible "rule" prescribing the

relationship which the narrator must have to the author of a self-conscious fiction; different relationships may be made to function very differently.

Likewise, there is no rule on the type of narration (first-person, third-person, effaced, omniscient) to be found in self-conscious fiction, although some modern tendencies are clear. W. H. Harvey, among others, has noted with some distress the disinclination of present-day authors to use the omniscient narrator:

Many modern critics, of course, have regarded this god-like vision as illegitimate, as something inimical to the truth of fiction. . . . the novelist's abdication of his god-like prerogatives is a central fact of modern fiction. While it may result from adherence to a philosophical theory or simply from a loss of nerve, this refusal to allow intrinsic knowledge of other characters merely creates a new kind of novel; it does not prove that this new kind is the only truthful sort of fiction. It is surely fair to say that the omniscient author of the classical novel destroys no necessary fictional illusion. On the contrary, he often creates a world which seems more real than many of those created by his more timid or more scrupulous successors.¹⁴

One other possible reason for the less frequent use of omniscient narration, as McKenzie points out, is the danger it presents of unintentional self-consciousness. The "maneuverings, transitional assists, and interpretive comments of the omniscient narrator can disrupt the 'recording consistency' and break the illusion of reality engendered by the people and action. At such times, the machinery of narration calls attention to itself and to the story as artifice--an effect only occasionally desirable as a narrative

technique" (18). While Harvey seems to feel that such an illusion is unnecessary, the risk of destroying it is real nonetheless.

While the omniscient point of view may be falling into disuse, two other sorts, for various reasons, seem to be quite popular: the effaced narrator and the first-person narrator. As Rubin observes, there is "much modern critical rigidity concerning the necessity for the so-called effaced author" (16). This is the author who, with Joyce, pares his fingernails while his narrative seems to present itself dramatically through a camera eye. McKenzie has noticed the popularity of first-person narration and has attempted to explain it: "Like the writer, modern readers are particularly aware that their vision is limited, fragmented, immediate, and egocentric. And, like the first-person narrator, readers, in real life, are bound within a particular frame of action, similarly restricted to the perspective of a single consciousness or 'community' of consciousnesses" (21). Both the first-person and the effaced narrator thus appear to share a common quality opposed to the nature of the omniscient narrator: they, as means of delivering fictional information, themselves reflect the limitations in "real life" which reader and author share in obtaining information about the world. As Harvey points out, these methods of fiction are not necessarily better than others--fiction is not, after all, life. But these narrative methods are partially explicable in terms of their "realistic" qualities and,

insofar as they are, they support some points about the psychology and themes of self-conscious writers which we will turn to shortly. It should be pointed out that among writers of self-conscious fictions as well as other writers there are numerous exceptions to the tendencies just noted. While Nabokov may favor the first-person (and unreliable) narrator, Thomas Pynchon favors the omniscient. There is, to repeat, no rule about these things.

However, there does seem to be a principle, enunciated by Rubin, concerning "authorial personality," a term which may be equated with the implied author of a given text. Rubin argues that the authorial personality is "formally a part of the novel" while the biographical-historical author is not (21). What really matters, says Rubin, is "authorial authority": "We must believe in the personality telling the story" (216). This personality is not to be equated with a particular narrator but with the second-self of the author. Then, according to Rubin (13-14), once this belief is established and as long as the author offers material which is consistent with and artistically appropriate to the work as a whole--including, presumably, autobiography, editorializing, or a self-conscious narrator--the work will in some sense be artistically successful.

This authorial personality or implied author is important in yet another way, for if, as we have seen, the author is often not directly, biographically present in his work, his second-self which is will be the personality actually

possessed of the psychological traits found in a story or novel and attributed to the author. Henry James has said that "there are many separate figures in the carpet of the novel which, taken together, form a special configuration, a psychological self-portrait of the artist--or a portrait, at least, of orientations at war within him."¹⁵ From the evidence of a work of fiction this "special configuration" can be attributed with some certainty only to the implied author. The self-portrait may be enlarged, however, by evidence from other of the author's works and confirmed by extra-fictional evidence. The values and dangers of such psychological investigations are dealt with by Wellek and Warren.¹⁶ With caveats in mind, let us look at some of the psychological self-portraits drawn by authors of self-conscious fictions.

A notable fact about the psychological profiles attributed to authors of self-conscious fiction is the strongly negative psychological qualities which critics have discovered in self-conscious works. For many critics the production of self-conscious fiction seems to be a sign of mental disturbance. It should be pointed out that criticism regularly confuses and intermingles assertions about author psychology, recurrent themes, and the social and intellectual forces which are alleged to produce these undesirable qualities in the fiction. Thus there will be some overlapping of concerns throughout the rest of this chapter and in later chapters dealing with the relationship of self-conscious fiction to the greater world.

Certainly not all critics echo the negative appraisal by Harvey which we met with a moment ago; there are some more positive views of the choices of subject matter, point of view, and so forth made by writers of self-conscious fictions. Many of the positive aspects of self-conscious fiction relate to the positive view of authorial self implied by the self-conscious fiction, and often this positive view derives from the sense of control reflected in the self-conscious work. When Leslie Fiedler complains of the modern artist being thought of "primarily as an illusionist, a perpetrator of hoaxes,"¹⁷ our rejoinder may be that at least the illusionist is self-consciously the manipulator, the controller and not the one controlled. Admittedly this control may be exhibited in an inconsequential game between author and reader, but it is control nevertheless. Many self-conscious authors are called "clever," with all of the subtly derogatory overtones that word carries. Nabokov in particular is hounded by the charge of cleverness. Yet, as Booth says, "clever narrators" will intrude to discuss a book for itself but alter "such intrusions sufficiently to suggest that they know as much about the clichés as any reader possibly can" (207). It must be inferred that the clever creators of such narrators likewise know a good deal about the clichés. To be clever in this sense is to be knowledgable, to be superior to conventions and able to defend against them or use them to advantage--in other words, to control rather than to be controlled. When Alfred Appel,

Jr., talks about the characters of Nabokov's novels trying "to escape from Nabokov's prison of mirrors, struggling toward a self-awareness that only their creator has achieved by creating them" and about Nabokov not being "in this prison" but rather "in control of a book,"¹⁸ we can sense the freedom and the maturity which self-consciousness can mean. Of course, on the other hand, a sense of authorial superiority can lead to the charge of elitism--and once again the self-conscious mode will be tainted.¹⁹

Though on occasion the critics may appraise positively the authorial self which a self-conscious work reveals, most appraisals of such authorial selves are downright bleak. The writer of self-conscious fictions is thought to be at best timid and defensive and at worst paralyzed and self-hating. When Richard Poirier maintains that "efforts to project a self of historical consequence are largely missing or the object of mockery in the literature of self-parody" (that is, highly self-conscious literature) and that, with particular reference to Joyce and Pynchon, "the role of the novelist in the book is equally insecure,"²⁰ he suggests two aspects of the diminution of man and author toward which many self-conscious works seem to lean. Perhaps the least diminished authorial self is the defensive author. We have already met him in the discussion of narrators. This defensively self-conscious author will employ parody, ambiguity, the unreliable narrator, and other means--not necessarily skillfully--to insure that he cannot be convicted of ignorance

or conventionality. Tony Tanner notes of literary parody that it is "a form of defense; it is a way of distancing an influence and reducing its potency."²¹ The defensive author will not be trapped and seeks the protection of self, a certain immunity, through such techniques as parody.

A more devastating sort of charge leveled against some self-conscious fiction is that of authorial paralysis or authorial impotence. Rogers at one point discusses the character Jake Horner from Barth's The End of the Road. He has a description of Jake's aboulia or paralysis of the will which characterizes it as "exaggerated self-observation, hyperintellectualization, depersonalization" (170). This description seems pertinent here, for are not these qualities often thought to characterize self-conscious fiction? Herbert Gold has said that "in anything less than a master, the type of self-absorption in moody fantasies is crippling" and a "fixation."²² Malcolm Cowley loudly denounces the type of "anti-story" in which there is "no character but the author himself" and the subject is "often the extreme difficulty he finds in writing fiction." "In effect," says Cowley, "such authors are proudly announcing that they are sterile."²³ And "the paradigmatic self-conscious novel, Tristram Shandy, turns in its cerebral circuit on a fantasy of impotence," as Alter has noted (112-13). All of which is to say that the author of a self-conscious fiction may expect some rather harsh evaluations if he should focus his

attention on himself, his role as artist, or any number of other inward-looking and presumably hermetic topics.

A work which features the activities of the author or implied author--perhaps by featuring an author-hero--is, at the very least, opening the author to the charge of excessive self-concern. "The patently autobiographical nature of much of his fiction is something deeper and more complex than mere narcissism or exhibitionism," contends Littlejohn in defense of Gide (9); the same might need be said of many other self-conscious writers. Rogers, in connection with character doubling, has remarked as follows: "Hallucinations of seeing oneself constitute a special category, one to be distinguished sharply from hallucinations of anything or anyone else because delusions of encountering one's own self betray a morbid preoccupation of the individual with his own essence. These visions of the self can be characterized without exception as narcissistic" (18). Though not directed at self-conscious writers, these remarks seem relevant--with one major qualification. The writer of self-conscious fictions does not suffer from delusions; he is in control of the visions of himself, at least in considerably greater control than one suffering from hallucinations. This is not to deny the possible applicability of the "pre-occupation" charge, but self-aware artists need not be considered full-fledged neurotics. We all have something to which we devote our attention.

Even if the author of self-conscious fictions does not deserve to be called impotent or narcissistic--and it is almost surprising that references to masturbation are not found more frequently in the criticism of self-conscious literature--there are still difficulties surrounding the authorial introspection so prominent in self-reflexive literature. Of course there is always the risk of reader boredom which was discussed in the previous chapter. Booth puts things quite clearly: "It may be that truths about art itself are the most difficult to make interesting in fiction. Certainly we will not become deeply involved in the confusions shown by a novelist-hero about his own artistic aims unless somehow, as in Proust, those artistic aims tell us something in return about the life of the book itself. Most readers are not novelists--though to read many modern works one would become convinced that the authors thought so--and there are few novelists with sufficient insight into life and art to make their relationship meaningful" (292). But the "final step" in the process of introspection is, as Malcolm Cowley phrases it, "to abolish the audience and let the author rule supreme in his world of private sensations" (54). In other words, the ultimate danger is solipsism. What Alter says of Sterne and the "edge of anxiety in an imagination flourishing under the shadow of solipsism" (82) could be applied to numerous other authors of reflexive fictions.

Yet Charles I. Glicksberg has contended that the "imaginative writer of our time is no solipsist either; his soliloquies are actually dialogues conducted with himself, his solitary cry is addressed to other men. The paradox at the heart of the monologue is that in its struggle with the lack of communication, it rises to the level of dialogue."²⁴ In a similarly positive vein, Alter sees the self-conscious writer involved in "a dialectical self-confrontation." The heroes, or anti-heroes, of many self-conscious works are, like Tristram Shandy and Don Quixote, "fictional projections of the faculty of imagination in their authors; acting out, or writing out, the impulses of the imagination isolated from the rest of the self, they show how circumscribed, how self-frustrating, how solipsistic it can be, at the same time that they demonstrate its peculiar attractions and its elastic strength." In this dialectical self-confrontation, "the writer liberates a principle within himself, a basic aspect of his vocation as a writer, to play out unhampered its ultimate possibilities, both good and bad, in a fictional world" (113). The self-conscious writer, then, is working things out, making some kind of controlled self-examination. This may be art as some kind of therapy--the artist dealing with what seems to many to be a narrow obsession--but this is very much a conscious self-examination and the results may be beneficial for both author and audience.

The foregoing remarks on the psychology of the author of self-conscious fiction (and of course no single author

fits perfectly the patterns described) should provide an excellent foretaste of some thematic concerns which figure prominently in self-conscious fiction. These concerns will not receive their full consideration here; many points must wait until we delve into the relationship between self-conscious fiction and the larger world. But insofar as the author of a work may be said to be reflected in the work's recurrent themes, this is a convenient means of introduction to them. Several points seem quite clear. One is that reflexive fiction is literary criticism--that is, literature embodying and analyzing fiction's technical means, its specific forms and modes, its value, and its relationship to the life beyond the covers of the book. Within the broad range of thoroughly reflexive works, authors have presented an equally broad range of answers to such monumental questions as the purpose and value of art and its relationship to life.

Many authors and critics have espoused self-conscious fiction as a positive emblem of art as order, with the author of such fiction conspicuously displaying man's capacity for invention and control. In his essay "Art and Fortune," Lionel Trilling makes a resounding statement of the ennobling possibilities of fiction. "The banishment of the author from his books," he says, "the stilling of his voice, have but reinforced the faceless hostility of the world and have tended to teach us that we ourselves are not creative agents and that we have no voice, no tone, no style, no

significant existence. Surely what we need is the opposite of this, the opportunity to identify ourselves with a mind that willingly admits that it is a mind." He goes on to qualify and strengthen these remarks: "In speaking against the ideal of the authorless novel I am not, of course, speaking in behalf of the 'personality' of the author consciously displayed--nothing could be more frivolous--but only in behalf of the liberative effects that may be achieved when literature understands itself to be literature and does not identify itself with what it surveys." The "authorial minds" of Tom Jones and Tristram Shandy, he contends, which "play with events and the reader in so nearly divine a way become the great and strangely effective symbols of liberty operating in the world of necessity."²⁵ Alter makes a similar point in several places. Discussing Diderot he says that "as long as one tells tales one is gay not only because man the storyteller relishes stories for their entertainment but also because he experiences through them a kind of freedom, pattern produced in the tale not by blind events but by an ordering consciousness that creates its own time and consequence" (79), or, more simply, that 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" (235).

This is a key idea, for, as Alter declares, it is "death and the decline of culture into ultimate incoherence that powerfully impel the writers to the supreme affirmation

of art" (235). But views of the efficacy of art and the value of the artist need not be positive, and it is just the variety of responses to this dark side of the writing process which serve to distinguish various authors of self-conscious fictions. We sense the mixture of affirmation and negation in Alter's comment about Melville's "ambivalent sense of his vocation, combining great excitement at the idea of what the novel might do with a growing vexation of spirit over the truths it will not yield" (137). The predominance of negation in modern self-conscious writers is focused on by Ihab Hassan in his The Literature of Silence. He affirms that "modern literature allies itself increasingly with the death rather than the pleasure principle."²⁶ He finds evidence of this in the current popularity of "radical irony," which he defines as "any statement that contains its own ironic denial" (12). This radical irony may "reveal art at the end of its tether" and disguise "genuine aggressions against art," for through it "the artist makes his last devotions to the Muse, and through it he desecrates her too" (13). Tanner has also observed this ambivalence in modern writers, and he writes in terms similar to Hassan's of a "new anxiety in fiction . . . a nervous compulsion to undermine the fiction in the process of erecting it--the verbal equivalent of auto-destructive art" (180) and of "near-disabling contortions which thinly conceal something approaching a despair about all forms" (416).

For many self-conscious artists, though, fiction is neither affirmation nor negation but rather inquiry. Art moves from metaphysics to epistemology and asks, not answers, questions. Alter sees this element in the solipsistic Sterne and says that "he is ultimately concerned with epistemological questions" (81); many of his successors are today similarly concerned. Frederick J. Hoffman sees the disappearance of the author as a sign of the "shift from a metaphysical to an epistemological center in twentieth-century fiction" and finds another such sign in modern characters: "Characters who were formerly maneuvered within an accepted frame of extraliterary reference are now represented as seeking their own definitions and their own languages."²⁷ Tanner says as much when he comments that "the dilemma and quest of the hero are often analogous to those of the author" (19). So here the self-conscious author enters again. His views may not coincide with those of Barth, who believes that all documents and indeed reality are to a degree fictional (Tanner, 242), but the writer of reflexive fictions is very likely to be asking Barthian questions about the writing/reality relationship.

In a later chapter we will look further at that relationship, but for the time being let us concentrate on some technical considerations: the components of fiction--including those same narrators and other characters we have just looked at--and what we may expect to find self-conscious artists doing with them in their tales and anti-tales.

Notes

¹ The Teller in the Tale (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1967), p. vii.

² Quoted in Rubin, p. 4.

³ The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. 292.

⁴ The Modern Psychological Novel (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), p. 157.

⁵ "Introduction," Gide: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. David Littlejohn (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 10.

⁶ An obvious choice to represent such a view would be René Wellek and Austin Warren's Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956).

⁷ "The Mirrors of Sebastian Knight," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L. S. Dembo (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 91.

⁸ Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 120.

⁹ Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 11.

¹⁰ See Robert Rogers' The Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), p. 102, on such parallels and Margaret MacDonald, "The Language of Fiction," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1954, rpt. in Perspectives on Fiction, ed. James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 68, on the second point. The problem of autobiography and fiction is, of course, part of the much larger question of the boundaries of fact and fiction, a larger question which is raised by Truman Capote's "non-fiction novel" In Cold Blood as well as by the self-advertisements of Norman Mailer--works at the extremes of the objective/subjective scale. The roman à clef presents another instance of the blurring of the fact/fiction boundary--but one which should be distinguished from that of the typical reflexive work. The roman à clef is fact in the guise of fiction--it is a transparent allegory of historical fact; the reflexive work is

fiction throwing off its guise of fact--it is an allegory of itself. The roman à clef depends heavily on identification and belief; the reflexive work depends on distancing and disbelief. The roman à clef is essentially journalism--with all the imaginative depth of a simple cipher; the reflexive work is art.

11 See Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 75, for a solid definition of the "implied author." Booth is certainly the authority on the topic and should be consulted at length for a full appreciation of the term. I have tried to avoid needlessly duplicating his discussion.

12 David I. Grossvogel, Limits of the Novel: Evolutions of a Form from Chaucer to Robbe-Grillet (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), p. 153.

13 "Notes toward a Comic Fiction," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 82.

14 "Character and the Context of Things," Character and the Novel (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965), rpt. in Calderwood and Toliver, p. 356.

15 Quoted in Rogers, p. 100.

16 Ch. Eight, "Literature and Psychology," pp. 81-93. See also Psychoanalysis and Literary Process, ed. Frederick Crews (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1970).

17 "The Defense of the Illusion and the Creation of Myth," English Institute Essays, 1948, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr., (1949; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965), p. 75.

18 "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. xxxii.

19 Alter discusses "the elitist impulse," pp. 82-83. John Barth seems to suggest the need for such elitism in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," Atlantic Monthly, Aug. 1967, rpt. in The American Novel since World War Two, ed. Marcus Klein (New York: Fawcett, 1969), p. 279.

20 "The Politics of Self-Parody," Partisan Review, 35 (Summer 1968), 346.

21 City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 37.

- 22 "The Mystery of Personality in the Novel," The Age of Happy Problems (New York: Dial, 1952), rpt. in Klein, p. 110.
- 23 "Storytelling's Tarnished Image," Saturday Review, 25 Sept. 1971, p. 25.
- 24 The Self in Modern Literature (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1963), p. 182.
- 25 The Liberal Imagination (New York: Viking, 1948), rpt. in Klein, pp. 93-94.
- 26 The Literature of Silence (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 32.
- 27 Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 58-59. This epistemological dimension of self-conscious literature has been identified by numerous other critics. Charles Russell, for example, speaks of "the self-consciously explorative nature of our art" in connection with the limits of language in "The Vault of Language: Self-Reflective Artifice in Contemporary American Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies, 20 (Autumn 1974), 352.

III. Reflexive Fiction and the Literary Context

The literary work is of course connected not only to its audience and its author but to other literary works as well. We can, using purely literary criteria, analyze the work for itself rather than approaching it as a catalyst for its readers or a reflection of its author's mind. Such a formalistic or New Critical approach is by now well established, and its validity will simply be assumed rather than defended here. Formalistic criticism leads us to a consideration of the technical components of the literary work, and this chapter will, in large part, deal with such matters as point of view, character, plot, form, time, setting, tone and so forth. The discussion here of these elements is patently preliminary and general rather than definitive. (A similar but more thorough discussion appears in Barbara McKenzie's Fiction's Journey.)¹ But, rather than scrutinizing various technical components of a given work, we may choose to elaborate on its interconnections with other literary works in terms of broader literary categories--the categories propounded by genre and myth critics, for example. Such larger categories will also be given limited treatment.

Twentieth-century writers have both preceded and followed the critics--notably the Russian formalists and the New Critics--in recognizing that the work of art is autonomous and in drawing attention to that fact.² A strong reciprocal connection consequently exists between the

formalistic critics and the writer who draws attention to the autonomy of his work, i.e., the author of reflexive fiction. As Alter says, "most self-conscious novels . . . lend themselves splendidly to analytic criticism because they operate by the constant redeployment of fiction's formal categories."³

Among these formal categories, we have already dealt quite extensively with point of view and with the functions which various sorts of narrators may play in self-conscious fiction. Since point of view is generally considered a primary component of fiction, it is not surprising that, among the several "naive" narrative devices which self-conscious fiction may expose, Alter has found the "ostentatious narrator" perhaps most apparent (30). In fact, any ostentatious or intrusive narrator, regardless of the point of view involved, is likely to serve as a conspicuous reminder of the narration's status as story and to produce some version of the "romantic irony," i.e., the inflation of the storyteller's (and perhaps storymaker's) ego and the reduction of the narrative to dependent artifice. Nabokov and Barth are, in their separate ways, quite fond of the ostentatious narrator.

A second major category of analytic criticism is character. The single most important thing about characters in self-conscious fiction is that there are none. In slightly less dramatic terms, reflexive fiction, in a variety of ways, denies to the figures which appear in it their claims to "real life," to depth, to a substantial mimetic

correspondence with humans in the "real world." Character in the old sense--the "round," three-dimensional, independent character of conventional fiction, who develops and grows--is, as Max F. Schulz demonstrates, no longer with us,⁴ and Richard Poirier's remark about Borges that "he gives us no people to remember or care about"⁵ could find application with nearly every author of self-conscious fiction. Of course this is overstating the case. For example, who does not find Humbert Humbert "real" or memorable? Yet any attempt to treat a figure such as Humbert solely and thoroughly as the embodiment of a legitimate case history will collide with the comedy and parody which contest and undercut Humbert's reality throughout Lolita. Whether the loss of the "round" character is solely the result of the modern writer's loss of belief in the old systems of social, moral, philosophical, and psychological order and explanation is an open question. (Schulz, for one, argues strongly that loss of belief is vital to the loss of character.)

Whatever the reasons may be, the critic will repeatedly be faced with static, flat, vague, and inconsistent characters in reflexive fiction--puppets, as Thackeray calls them, and sometimes broken ones at that. And these are deliberately created protagonists, not merely minor characters who in conventional fiction would have these same characteristics. Such characters can often be analyzed in terms of comedy, irony, and parody. The flat, static figures--the mechanical toys--of the comic world are at least next of kin

to the characters of much reflexive fiction; the distance is not always so terribly great from the old humours character. Examine the names found in reflexive fiction. Pynchon in particular has a marvelous roster: Benny Profane, Herbert Stencil, Genghis Cohen, Stanley Koteks, Slothrop--the list goes on. Humbert Humbert is another prime example of a name which continues to introduce an element of the ridiculous and fictional, however suppressed, into a sometimes nearly "believable" world. It should be observed though that such names are often simply preposterous rather than comically meaningful in the manner of Fielding or Dickens.

The character in a reflexive fiction is apt to be denied in yet other ways the single, coherent ego which we ordinarily associate with the normal human being. As Schulz (145-53), Alter (23), and Rogers⁶ all point out, the double is a prominent feature of self-conscious fiction, and this double is not the double of a Poe, Stevenson, or Conrad. The "baroque" double--as Rogers calls it--is not a simple device to investigate artistically such things as the decomposition of personality but may be a sophisticated device by which characters are played with as mere fictional beings, mimicked and mocked. Schulz stresses the double as an anti-linear device, one which creates a timeless vertical hierarchy and a static world, as opposed to the changing, dynamic, horizontal world of development and progress, thus opposing the eternal world of art to the transient world of life. Whether the playfulness or the atemporality of the

double is stressed is not as important as the fact that the double in self-conscious fiction so often serves an anti-realistic function.

In addition to character, the analytic critic will surely make much of plot, form, and time in self-conscious fiction. Here again components of the fiction are likely to function in unconventional and anti- or non-realistic ways. The conventions of the traditional well-made narrative (suspense, causality)--conventions which the reader fails to notice precisely because they are familiar patterns--will be exposed or disposed of in self-conscious fiction. The common proscription against chance and coincidence, a proscription nearly universal in realistic fiction, will be purposefully ignored by a writer like Nabokov.⁷ (The fact that coincidence plays such an important part in comedy only serves to reinforce a point made earlier.)

This anti-realistic, anti-conventional patterning is also true of larger plot structures. In conventional narratives, narrative progression tends to be closed, linear, and chronological; much self-conscious fiction, as Schulz and McKenzie both stress, is open-ended, circular, cyclical, or infinitely regressive. Sometimes the use of unconventional form and the rejection of ordinary plotting seem designed to challenge the view of life implied by the conventional plots of fiction: "Isn't life open-ended? Shouldn't our fictions be so too?" they seem to ask. This sort of attempt to parallel subject matter by form both exposes the artificiality,

indeed the fictionality, of conventional fiction's beginnings, endings, climaxes, and so forth--"there are no plots in nature"--and seeks to establish a higher mimesis and a greater fidelity to the reality of human experience. Such fiction is anti-art because pro-life. Other unconventional narrative patterns--particularly those involving an infinite regress--seem to expose or even proclaim the fictionality of the narrative, not in the service of some greater realism, but rather to the glory of artifice and perhaps artificer. Even in such cases, however, it can be urged (as Alter does, p. 56) that fiction which reflects man's capacity for self-consciousness is faithful to a very special reality of human experience.

Often the pattern of regress in a self-conscious fiction involves plot doubling, though varieties of plot doubling are certainly not restricted to modern self-conscious fiction. The doubling of plot, for whatever purpose, is often accomplished by the interpolated tale, the tale-within-a-tale. This narrative device is a common one in Nabokov (Appel, xxix-xxx) but is found throughout the history of self-conscious fiction and goes back to the earliest frame tales. (A similarly ancient lineage for the play-within-a-play device has been established by Richter and Nelson.)⁸ The enclosed tale pattern may be carried to great lengths. In a most interesting variant the innermost tale in a series of interpolated tales will "contain" or frame the initial frame, leaving the reader with an infinitely circular

regress. But, however complex its context, the work-within-a-work always suggests, however mildly, the fictionality of its frame.

Since character and plot in self-conscious fictions seldom present a conventionally realistic view of the world, it is hardly surprising that the settings of many self-conscious works lack conventional verisimilitude. From the wondrous events of Don Quixote to the science-fiction worlds of Nabokov's Ada, Vonnegut, Barth, and Pynchon, the world of reflexive fiction is not our everyday world. The deadly anacronism--deadly, that is, to the time frame veracity of realistic fiction--may abound; the mythic, fantastic, and domestic realms will literally interpenetrate and centaurs and Tralfmadorians thrive.

It is a bit more difficult to generalize about the matter of tone in contemporary fiction than about character, plot, and setting. There is frequently a sense of playfulness in the modern self-conscious work--an attitude of joy not found in "serious" realistic works. Again the comedy/reflexivity connection can be made. This is not to say that serious matters are not treated in self-conscious fiction. Of course they are. But the seriousness of these matters is not necessarily incorporated into the method of presenting them. Among the novelists writing in America, Nabokov, Barth, Pynchon, and Vonnegut all share a certain playful quality. Yet a Beckett can prevent any easy generalizations about the flipness of self-conscious fiction; satirical

mockery and earnest irony are other tonalities of reflexive works.

Such qualities as playfulness and lack of closure are also elements of that slippery category style. In much contemporary reflexive fiction we are reminded that literature is a special use of language, as language itself, the raw material of literary art, is foregrounded. In everything from the names of characters to the transitions between paragraphs, our attention will be focused on words--and the prose medium will depart from its traditional transparency and move toward the translucence and opacity of poetry. Language becomes concerned with its own nature and points inward rather than outward to some non-verbal reality. Beyond this, our ordinary expectations about the consistency of style and tone will often be shattered and the indeterminacy of the collage technique, in style as in other matters, will become prominent with some authors. Established, recognizable styles, of course, are conventionalized and thus to a degree predictable arrangements of literary materials. Mixing styles is one means of calling attention to these automatic patternings.

This concern of self-conscious literature for preconceived patterns shows itself in one of the most common stylistic features of reflexive fiction: its propensity for parody and self-parody. This should come as no surprise. With the theme and subject matter of self-conscious literature so often the elements of literature itself, it is no

wonder that parody--that is, a literature built critically and often humorously from previous literature--should so frequently play a part in that self-consciousness.

Several aspects of this strong parodic tendency deserve comment. Since parody depends upon prior literature rather than The World for subject matter, it may seem, like criticism, to be attenuated, to be a step away from some more primary process. It will also never be entirely realistic. (Parody's affinity with comedy might be one indication of this nonrealistic quality.) And, given its subject matter, parody will always function to some extent, at least by implication, as literary criticism--literary criticism as imaginative art.⁹ It will incorporate attitudes toward previous fictional models and often, as Alter points out (177), keep outworn conventions alive while mocking them.¹⁰ The target of a parody, of course, may be more or less broad--any familiar plot, theme, or style may be involved. Though any literary target will introduce at least a slight self-conscious element, one type of parody is more intensely self-conscious than the rest. This is, of course, self-parody. As we noted, Frye mentions a tendency to self-parody in satiric rhetoric.¹¹ Poirier's article treats the concept of self-parody quite fully.

Perhaps it is not straying too far from our discussion of formalistic concerns to observe that a fondness for irony, parody, and self-parody is one of the most significant bonds between post-modern reflexive fiction and

Modernism. As Poirier says, Joyce "initiates a tradition of self-parody now conspicuously at work in literature" (349). As we saw in earlier chapters, Ortega y Gasset described modern art in terms of ironical and self-ridiculing tendencies--and these descriptions are certainly applicable to much post-modern literature, literature with which he could not have been familiar. Any discussion of Nabokov, as a later chapter will reveal, must disclose the enormous and essential role which parody and self-parody play in his work. Whether he should be seen as a bridge from Modernism to the post-modern period or as a remnant of that earlier period is an intriguing question. Is he a Bach, who culminates an artistic period, or is he a Beethoven, who both culminates and inaugurates? Leslie Fiedler, for one, would see Nabokov, along with the Barth of Giles Goat-Boy, as makers of the "Anti-Art Art Novel," who "have in common a way of using typical devices of the Modernist Art Novel, like irony, parody, travesty, exhibitionist allusion, redundant erudition, and dogged experimentalism, not to extend the possibilities of the form but to destroy it."¹² He sees them at the end of "the dying tradition of Modernism" (202). Whatever the exact position of these artists, parody and its cousins help to connect some writers of post-modern reflexive literature quite solidly to an earlier period.

Thus far we have touched on numerous major components of fiction, from parodic style to point of view. We should remember, however, that they have only been touched on, and

the comments which have been made can only be usefully applied to particular works if employed with the necessary qualifications. For example, simply because a work of fiction includes only one-dimensional characters, we should not therefore assume that the fiction is particularly self-conscious. Such characters may cause the reader to recognize that he is only reading a fiction, but their presence in a work is not a sign that the author created them as part of a thoroughly reflexive construct. Self-conscious works share numerous features with works which are not primarily self-conscious. The successful critic must recognize not only the given feature but also the overall structure of which it is a part and the intensity with which it appears. Obviously this sensitive discrimination among treatments is not going to be taught by the guidelines which this chapter may provide.

Not only are the various features which we have looked at not the private preserves of either self-conscious or non-self-conscious fiction, but, to reiterate a point made earlier, some of the elements of fiction can be more disruptive of the fictional illusion than others. For many readers the impossible settings of some science fiction are rather easily accepted premises, yet the slightest plot contortions cause dismay. Many readers will "read through" (ignore) the linguistic play of a deliberately reflexive prose surface but shudder at the appearance of an unexpectedly intrusive narrator. Probably most readers would agree

that a character who talks to his author will disrupt some illusion of reality, but the primary thing to be recognized is that the degree to which these components of fiction disrupt the illusion varies among components and among readers. There are, as we said, degrees of self-consciousness.

The remainder of the chapter will deal with some critical approaches which are not quite the textbook formalism we have been using but which nonetheless concentrate on the literary work in a literary context. (There are undoubtedly a dozen other approaches which deserve treatment, but this is not--in spite of some appearances to the contrary--solely a dissertation on criticism.) One approach which might be discussed in connection with genre criticism is that of Joseph Frank.¹³ His controversial proposition is that some novels, such as Ulysses, Nightwood, and Mrs Dalloway, are "self-reflexive" like poetry; they must be treated not in terms of time and narrative but in terms of space and stasis. His remarks, though based on Modernist texts, seem applicable to post-modern fiction; the fact, observed earlier, that the prose of reflexive fiction often suggests poetry in that it focuses on language itself rather than other subject matter might be another indicator of the proximity of poetry and reflexive fiction.

Frank's suggestion seems to have drawn quite a response--much of it negative. Though Wellek and Warren mention it positively,¹⁴ Malcolm Cowley objects that it ignores

the space plus time equation,¹⁵ and McKenzie (94) contends that there is an "inherent linearity" in fiction (narrative), that single temporal dimension working against any multi-dimensional formulations of fiction. William York Tindall, dealing with the symbolist novel, grants that it is "true that reflexive relationships would be plainer if displayed in a space that is not too large for apprehension in time" but notes that they are not so displayed in fiction.¹⁶

(They might be, of course, in a poem or in some sort of diagrammatic criticism.) Poirier has perhaps the harshest words for Frank's theory, at least as it is applied by some novelists. These writers, he says, have the "illusion that their own works exist not in time but in space, like a painting" (343). "A novel is not a painting, however," he goes on, "and the perpetrated notion of similarity has a great deal to do with some of the innocent lies we tell ourselves about what it's like to read a book. Reading is a very special activity, quite different if not more arduous than looking intensely at a painting or listening to music." Even if the critical community has not taken up Frank's suggestion enthusiastically, his notion will serve as a useful reminder that prose and poetry form a continuum, while the opposition to his view serves to remind us of their generic distinctions.

Of course, the various genre criticisms may go in many directions. In later chapters we will be looking at reflexivity in other literary and non-literary modes (the drama

and film, for instance). For the moment some observations of a typological nature might tie together some remarks made previously. Perhaps the simplest formulation is this: if we take Frye's seasonal division of myths, self-conscious fiction has its greatest affinities with Winter (Irony) and Spring (Comedy) and its least with Summer (Romance) and Autumn (Tragedy). While the processes of identification necessary for Romance and Tragedy cannot bear self-conscious punctures, the dual vision of Irony and the dissociation of Comedy each involve powerful aspects of the self-conscious mode. Though the ironic mode seems more integrally related to self-consciousness (we cannot conceive of either irony or self-consciousness without some duality), we have seen how often the comic element appears in reflexive fiction.¹⁷

Richard A. Lanham, however, using a slightly different scheme of modes, discusses self-consciousness as primarily related to tragicomedy. Tragicomedy, he says, "always keeps us audience and reminds us of it. No suspension of disbelief." It is further self-conscious in that it "takes as artistic subject the relationship between the tragic and comic views of man." We see this in "attitudes toward language. Comedy tends to look at it, tragedy through it. Our form thus has at its center a stylistic self-consciousness, acute attention to both views of language. Tragedy puts us in the play. Comedy keeps us outside it. Tragicomedy strives to make us see both possibilities as choices."¹⁸ If

we accept his definition of tragicomedy, Lanham's scheme is quite useful.

Ihab Hassan has taken Frye's work in yet another direction. "An earnest typologist, taking his cue from Northrop Frye," says Hassan, "may wish to claim that just as literature seems to have developed from the mythical to the ironic modes, so do literary forms seem to develop from closed to open to anti-forms."¹⁹ Hassan's version of literary evolution would make both the form and content of self-conscious literature inevitable results of literary history--a history shaped by some apparently underlying or pre-existing mold. This contention will be considered again in the final chapter of this work.

The patterns of literary history are also very important in the stylistic matter of literary realism. Numerous references have been made already to the relationship between self-conscious fiction and realism, but perhaps these prior remarks may be unified in this way: realism and reflexivity are antithetical. Of course this proposition is overstated and of course "realism" is an insufficiently defined concept. But any working definition of realism will eventually lead to a recognition that, in Lanham's words, self-consciousness "deliberately denies us the suspension of disbelief that realism, however indirect, depends on" (23).

The realism referred to here is a set of conventions, a style, a "mode of illusion" as Wellek and Warren so aptly put it (213). It is not a particular philosophical approach,

although the literary and philosophical meanings of realism are often related. Literary realism is generally treated in terms of a focus on the ordinary, on social situation, on plot probability, on verisimilitude in detail in description, setting, and characterization, and so forth. It has been particularly associated with the novel, both as a general association and in connection with particular historical movements in the novel.²⁰ Thus we will repeatedly find generalizations like the following: "The novel is realistic; the romance is poetic or epic" (Wellek and Warren, 216). When Maurice Z. Shroder declares that the novel would "seem to be an essentially ironic fictional form,"²¹ he is making basically the same point: the novel, which develops after the romance, deflates the characters, incidents, and world view of the romance to embody a realistic view of the world. (Moving toward irony, the novel seems to plant the seeds of current intensely ironic anti-forms.)

Studies of the origin of the novel repeatedly emphasize the connection of the genre with the eminently documented field of history. The journal, the letter, the biography, the "true account"--the novel proceeds from and incorporates all of these forms, forms overflowing with detail and looking ever so much like evidence. In Hugh Kenner's words, the novel "aspires, or feigns to aspire, to the truth of history, of scientific history" and is "the one form of literary art that traffics in empirical certainties."²² One difficulty with such a connection is that novels, or at least those

novels which stress the genuineness of their subject matter, may cease to be art to the extent that they are governed by the material they seek to represent. As René Wellek says (speaking of realism as one method or set of conventions among many), "the pitfall of realism lies not so much in the rigidity of its conventions and exclusions as in the likelihood that it might, supported as it is by theory, lose all distinction between art and the conveyance of information or practical exhortation."²³ Wellek goes on to say that realism often "declined into journalism, treatise writing, scientific description, in short, into non-art" and that the theory of realism "is ultimately bad aesthetics because all art is 'making' and is a world in itself of illusion and symbolic forms" (255). The assertion here is that the novel may sacrifice art in a movement toward one conventionalized approach to life. Such comments might even be interpreted as an indirect endorsement of that reflexive art which continuously recognizes itself as "a world in itself of illusion and symbolic forms."

There are several constraints within which any realistic narrative must work. One major constraint is on language itself. "The premises of realistic fiction are not only scientific but Platonic," contends Lanham, and for the Platonist words are "essentially neutral" (30). David Morrell elaborates on the same observation: "A novelist of realism must always limit his power of language; his words must not distract from the action; they must be invisible,

like windows through which the action is seen."²⁴ Poetry and reflexive fiction regularly stain their windows. another constraint, which we have seen previously, is that "the realist must avoid the serious paradoxes of the relationship between fiction and reality, even when his material would seem to invite them" (Alter, 108). The realist's material cannot reflect on his means; realism is the most self-effacing of methods. Robert J. Nelson, speaking of naturalism (one form of realism) in the theater, points out a consequence for the audience of this sort of restraint. Naturalism, he says, "denies the duality of the theater: suppressing the principle of dissociation, it gives free rein to that of identification" (120). The same might be said for the reader of realistic prose fiction: realism denies the duality of the work of fiction. The anti-mimetic, anti-realistic tendency in contemporary fiction, which McKenzie so emphasizes, sometimes, of course, denies the duality of fiction in quite the opposite manner by suppressing the principal of identification and giving free rein to that of dissociation.

The general observations on the techniques of reflexive fiction made earlier in the chapter will confirm the anti-realistic, dissociating tendencies of self-conscious fiction. And many writers actually intend their fictions to be attacks on the premises of realism, for they see that reflexive fiction can convey certain philosophical ideas which realists dare not acknowledge. Poirier says bluntly that

literature, along with "nearly everything in print, is in a realistic and rationalistic trap" and that "to talk or to write is to fictionalize" (340). Only self-conscious fiction successfully acknowledges and draws strength from this startling anti-realistic proposition. A writer like Nabokov will relentlessly parody realistic techniques knowing that, as Schulz says, "the realistic novel can never be anything other than a parody of the external world, no matter how hard it tries to imitate it, since the image of that world can never be equivalent to the object" (145). This view that all writing is fiction would seem to leave open the possibility of various degrees of fictionality, the possibility that all writing is not equally fictional. But here we are really on the border of realism as a philosophical as much as a literary concept. The closer examination of the relationship between the work of fiction and the non-literary worlds surrounding it is to come in the following chapter.

Notes

¹ Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 74-100. As will become clear, I have drawn extensively from McKenzie without repeatedly citing her. The order in which she discusses the elements of fiction and the attitude she expresses toward mimesis are both parts of this debt.

² See John Halperin, "The Theory of the Novel: A Critical Introduction," The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), esp. p. 18.

³ Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 220.

⁴ "Characters (Contra Characterization) in the Contemporary Novel," in Halperin, pp. 143-54. See esp. p. 143.

⁵ "The Politics of Self-Parody," Partisan Review, 35 (Summer 1968), 353.

⁶ Robert Rogers, The Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), esp. the chapter "The Baroque Double."

⁷ Alfred Appel, Jr., "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. xxvii-xxviii.

⁸ Anne Righter, Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967) and Robert J. Nelson, Play within a Play: The Dramatist's Conception of His Art, Shakespeare to Anouilh (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958).

⁹ Poirier, among others, makes this point several times. Gary Michael Boyd lays heavy emphasis on the concept of self-conscious fiction as literary criticism in his dissertation "The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique," Dissertation Abstracts International, 37 (1976), 293-A (Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison).

¹⁰ Alter goes on to observe that the "gross, endearing vitality" of vulgar forms (like the detective novel) helps to enliven parodic literature "from below." Perhaps such vitality is essential to counterbalance a possibly deadening intellectualism in the self-conscious work.

11 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 237.

12 "The Death and Rebirth of the Novel," in Halperin, p. 200.

13 "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Sewanee Review, 53 (1945), 221-40; 433-56; 643-54.

14 René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p. 215.

15 "Storytelling's Tarnished Image," Saturday Review, 25 Sept. 1971, p. 26.

16 The Literary Symbol (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1955), p. 263.

17 Frye's theory of "forms" is also relevant to our present discussion. (See particularly the section on "Specific Continuous Forms" in the "Theory of Genres" essay, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 303-14.) Frye divides prose fiction into the confession, the anatomy, the novel, and the romance. We might observe that reflexive fiction, very generally, will mock or reject the romance, play with the novel form, and move toward the autobiographical confession and the intellectualized anatomy. One indication of the connection of contemporary reflexive fiction and the anatomy may be found in Linda Allyne Westervelt's dissertation "The Role of the Reader in the Modern Anatomy: A Study of the Fiction of John Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon," Dissertation Abstracts International, 37 (1976), 2188-A (Rice).

18 Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), pp. 160-61. The relationship of tragicomedy to reflexivity might be apparent from incidental comments made by such critics as Nelson (p. 154) and Maurice Z. Shroder, "The Novel as a Genre," The Massachusetts Review (1963), rpt. in The Theory of the Novel, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 25-26.

19 The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 19.

20 Among many fine considerations of these and the following relationships, see first Ian Watt's "Realism and the Novel Form" from his well-regarded study The Rise of the Novel (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957).

21 In Stevick, p. 20.

22 Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians (Boston: Beacon, 1962), p. 70.

²³ "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship,"
in Concepts of Criticism, by René Wellek, ed. Stephen G.
Nichols, Jr., (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 254.

²⁴ John Barth: An Introduction (University Park,
Penn.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 67.

IV. Reflexive Fiction and the General Culture

"The novel, as we can see, has been sensitive to the essential historical conditions--the very mood and atmosphere--of our time."¹ The novel, as well as the short story, will then be sensitive to a time in which, as Alter says, "the self-consciousness of our whole culture becomes progressively more pronounced."² Or, as Barbara McKenzie phrases it, "we live in a society that is increasingly infatuated with itself and its own processes; the experimentalists, like all artists, are responding to a dominant attitude in the general culture."³ Whether or not one accepts the explanation of contemporary self-conscious fiction implicit in these remarks, that is, that the work of fiction can be explained as a cultural artifact reflecting contemporary social, intellectual, and artistic currents, considering such currents will open a further dimension of reflexive fiction to us and provide a larger frame for discussion of reader, author, and reflexive work. In this chapter self-conscious fiction will first be placed in a context of contemporary literature and media and then in some relation to such disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Although illustrations of these larger interrelationships have appeared in previous chapters, this chapter will present them a bit more systematically.

Post-modern self-conscious fiction is, by definition, one sub-classification of post-modern fiction in general.

The evidence of anthologies, college texts, and best seller lists suggests that this sub-category is a strong and increasingly recognized but by no means dominant current in that fiction. (The ever more frequent appearance of Borges, Nabokov, Barth, Barthelme, Vonnegut, and Coover in college texts is perhaps the most convenient index of the trend toward recognition.) Surrounding the intensely self-conscious works of these and like-minded authors is the great body of essentially unreflexive fiction still expected and beloved by so many readers--the slice-of-life stories, mysteries, science and fantasy fiction, romances, and so forth.

The relationship between reflexive fiction and other more popular modes is in part the subject of a provocative essay by Leslie Fiedler on the death of the novel. Fiedler argues that "the essentially popular nature of the novel" produces "its necessary hostility to the modes and canons of High Art."⁴ He claims that Art or Avant-Garde novels are decadent and dying and that "the most vital and moving novels of the period" are of two kinds: the Anti-Art Art Novel and the neo-Pop Novel (199). He observes the same tendency we noted in the previous chapter--the tendency for self-conscious fiction to incorporate the vigor of popular styles--when he discusses the influence of popular genres like science fiction and pornography on the contemporary novel (200-203). (Though there is a natural inclination to equate Fiedler's Anti-Art Art Novel with the contemporary

self-conscious novel, his "neo-Pop" classification can be legitimately applied to several of the reflexive works with which we will be dealing.) The important thing is that Fiedler recognizes the self-conscious counter-current to the mainstream of present-day fiction.

In the realm of the literary arts proper, self-conscious fiction not only intermingles in complex ways with other fiction but extends, as we have seen, into the domain of poetry. Thus far we have generally neglected poetry--largely because our subject is fiction. But beyond this, as we saw in the last chapter, poetry is inherently reflexive in a way in which fiction and more broadly prose are not. In many cases the poetic medium is the message; the perennial comments on the untranslatableness of poetry attest to this condition. It might be interesting to approach poetry as a self-conscious genre by taking the self-conscious style and form of the genre as given and moving toward subject matter as the central criterion of poetic reflexivity. The question would become not "Does poetry call attention to itself?" but rather "Does the poem discuss some aspect of literature or the poetic process?" With such a focus Pope's line "the sound should be an echo to the sense," MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," and many works of Wallace Stevens would be seen as intensely reflexive. The work of MacLeish and Stevens would support a contention that the poetry of this century is often reflexive in terms of subject matter, but whether the poetry of today parallels the fiction of today

by being particularly reflexive is another matter. The need, of course, is for an extended, independent study of poetry as reflexive art.

We can look beyond the borders of the written arts to other forms of art in which studies of reflexivity have been or can be made. McKenzie observes that the "well-made story has counterparts in the novel, drama, painting, and film" (7). "Yet in each of these arts," she goes on, "There also exists a parallel tradition that uses and abuses the conventions of the established genre, resulting in works that turn the tenets of the conventional art-form inside out." To her list we might add television and the cartoon--two popular communication forms that, if they have no parallel reflexive tradition, at least offer occasional examples of self-consciousness. (We might even consider examining song lyrics in this respect.)⁵

Not surprisingly, the theater, that hybrid of word and action which has been with us so long, has a long history of self-consciousness. From before Shakespeare to beyond Pirandello, the theater has seen devices like the aside, the soliloquy, and especially the play-within-a-play call attention to the illusion demanded by the stage. In the next chapter discussion of some of the major figures in this reflexive tradition will be integrated with a discussion of the history of self-conscious fiction. The significant consideration at this point is the place of the self-conscious theater in the contemporary world. If the work of Grossvogel

is any indication, there is a strong impetus to self-consciousness in the modern theater, particularly the French theater.⁶ Why this tendency should appear during the middle third of this century is suggested by Robert J. Nelson in his study of the play-within-the-play. Nelson contends that a "new spatial perspective" of the Renaissance brought on the embedded play device. "The play within a play," he says, "is the invention of the modern world."⁷ Though he examines instances of the device in every period from the Renaissance onward, he feels that "certain periods do show an understandable predilection for it" (ix). Implicitly contending that the theater reflects the age, he echoes earlier suggestions as to why the twentieth century should see such a profusion of self-conscious works: "In a world in which all values are examined, it is inevitable that the instrument of evaluation be itself examined. . . . Conscious of all doubt, man becomes self-conscious. Not only the meaning of action but the meaning of meaning is examined. The theater mirrors this introversion in that literary form of self-consciousness called the play within a play" (10).

A striking example of the contemporary self-conscious play is Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,⁸ a work too recent for inclusion in Nelson's book. A thorough analysis of the play would be excessively digressive, but even a partial listing of some of the elements found in the play will serve to indicate its intensely reflexive character and its connections with current reflexive

works of fiction. The play obviously involves the re-use of previous art, the revitalizing of dramatic characters from an earlier era. The play is filled with anachronisms. References to the theater and literary criticism abound. Numerous philosophical questions, especially the question of the reality, the status, of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters within more than one play, vex the audience.

To illustrate the tenor of the work, we might note the type of epistemological quandry referred to within the play-- a quandry which, incidentally, is clearly applicable to the play itself. The two central characters discuss a Chinese philosopher; he "dreamed he was a butterfly, and from that moment he was never quite sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming it was a Chinese philosopher" (60). We can see the theatrical illusion momentarily disrupted when Rosencrantz (demonstrating the misuse of free speech) shouts "Fire!" and, after looking in the direction of the audience, says, "Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes" (60). As an illustration of the humorous play with reflexivity that pervades the play, there is an incident involving the leader of the traveling players who appear throughout the drama. He tells of an actor of his who, since he had been condemned to be hanged, was to be so executed in the middle of a play. But "he just wasn't convincing! It was impossible to suspend one's disbelief . . . he did nothing but cry all the time--right out of character--just stood there and cried" (84). More upsetting for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, not

to mention the audience, is their encounter with players dressed like their doubles and described as being in an identical situation (81-83). Eerie doublings and fluctuations of ontological status--these are clearly indicative of the contemporary literary reflexivity we have become so familiar with.

Such effects may be even more prevalent in the film, first cousin of the theater and "the preeminent illusionistic art,"⁹ wherein the opportunity for the disruption of the realistic illusion is most powerfully present. The relationship between contemporary reflexive fiction and contemporary cinema is summarized by Alter: "The whole reflexive tendency in contemporary fiction has been reinforced by the prominence of self-conscious cinema since the early sixties in the work of directors like Fellini, Antonioni, Resnais, and Godard. . . . The close parallels between what is happening now in the two media suggest that the self-consciousness of both may reflect a heightened new stage of modern culture's general commitment to knowing all that can be known about its own components and dynamics" (219-20). We have already encountered some mild examples of self-consciousness in the American cinema; in general, however, reflexive devices do not seem to have caught on with American film makers and audiences. The best study to date of cinematic self-consciousness and its relation to fiction is Appel's Nabokov's Dark Cinema. Lest self-consciousness seem the property of the Continent, Appel includes discussion of such directors as Welles, Kubrick, and Hitchcock.

No purpose would be served by repeating many of Appel's points, but Appel does stress (17, 18, 79, 80) the debt of the "anti-film" to popular culture, particularly the comics. Not only does this reinforce what has been said about the sometimes parasitic relationship of High Culture to Low, but it also suggests yet another area--the cartoon--whose potential for self-consciousness might be examined further.¹⁰ We can hardly speak of popular culture, though, without discussing the most popular medium of artistic communication in this era--television. Some comedy shows now on the air have already been mentioned, but television is a new medium and the full possibilities of television reflexivity remain to be explored by producers and critics alike. Appel makes some mention of television in his Dark Cinema when he says that one aspect of "Pop culture's new-found ability to make fun of itself" is that "even radio and TV commercials are self-referential, in the manner of the most advanced fiction" (18).

Perhaps even more interesting than television's self-conscious commercials are the indirect effects of television programming in increasing self-consciousness in fiction. According to McKenzie, the mimetic capacities of television are responsible for diminishing the potency of old-fashioned mimetic fiction. Discussing the history of the short story, she says that by the fifties "the mass-circulation magazines that carried short fiction began to disappear--replaced largely by television, which not only appeals to a mass

audience with its formulaic dramatic and comedy series but reproduces reality more immediately, vividly, and believably than fiction can. As a result many writers turned away from the well-made story with its mimetic impulse and began to write deliberately non-mimetic stories" (76). It would be difficult to gauge the extent to which this cause-effect relationship actually holds, but it seems plausible that fiction writers might to some degree sense the futility of pitting their written reality against the instantaneous audiovisual reality of television and, presumably, film and attempt instead to achieve some new, anti-mimetic perspectives.

Certainly television and film have influenced fiction--both reflexive and non-reflexive--in other ways. Screen techniques such as montage are imitated on the printed page. Authors write novels and stories with an eye to their translation onto film and tape; scenes are conceived and dialogue written as much for the director's script as for the reader. In addition to these technical influences the creative writer may come to treat the larger world as TV show or film in order to consider enduring problems of Appearance and Reality and Man as Actor. These are but a few of the ways in which contemporary visual media may reinforce reflexivity in fiction.

A truly thorough examination of artistic reflexivity would require considerable discussion of that ancient visual artistic medium--painting. Several scholars and critics have commented on the tradition of the self-conscious canvas.

Nelson devotes a paragraph to it (156) and Appel, in Nabokov's Dark Cinema (246), remarks that "the numerous a-novelistic components of Nabokov's novels are as self-referential as the rear-wall mirror that magically captures the image of Van Eyck in his Arnolfini Wedding (1434)." The impulse toward reflexivity appears at one time or another in all of the arts, both ancient and modern--even in music where, for example, parody is possible. The question still remains: Why should self-consciousness appear so strongly in so many artistic media, each with its own internal development, at this time?

One answer to this question is to approach it through what Wellek and Warren call "a comparison of the arts on the basis of their common social and cultural background," on the basis of the "general cultural 'climate'."¹¹ This climate in the twentieth century is, as we have repeatedly seen, one of questioning, doubt, and analysis. The Zeitgeist, the ideas in the air, all proclaim insecurity and uncertainty. As we found in our examination of author psychology, epistemology not metaphysics dominates the century. Thus, however weakly literature may be thought to embody ideas and philosophies, there seems to be no doubt that modern literature will reflect to some degree the dominant philosophical mood of today. At the risk of being repetitious, we must observe that today's authors will reflect the relativism, skepticism, and solipsism which surround us.

Such philosophical influences are universally acknowledged by literary critics: Glicksberg entitles a chapter on Pirandello, Gide, and Durrell "The Relativity of the Self."¹² "Many novelists of our time," he says, "are convinced that relativism is the fate of modern man" (95). Tanner, discussing Barth, speaks of "a state of affairs in which authentic intersubjectivity has all but vanished."¹³ Hassan says almost the same thing when, in discussing Beckett, he says that "literature becomes the inaudible game of a solipsist."¹⁴ Kermode identifies the nouveau roman as manifesting a "deliberately limited, solipsistic realism."¹⁵

Several critics have attempted to tie the works of contemporary authors of reflexive fiction more directly to the particular formal philosophies of the century. Ruby Cohn links Beckett to Logical Positivism and Existentialism and the solipsism inherent in these outlooks.¹⁶ In her essay "On Literary Realism," Alice R. Kaminsky traces philosophy from Platonism through empiricism to solipsism and argues that contemporary philosophy conceives of a post-solipsistic world, that is, "a real, pluralistic universe" based on "the truths of intersubjective experience."¹⁷ She contends that "if science is permitted a relativistic view of reality, surely it is permissible for the truths of the novel to be equally relativistic" (223). She goes on to discuss the anti-novel in terms of one of contemporary philosophy's favorite concepts--private language--and the novel generally in terms of another such concept--verifiability.

"Everything the novelist writes," she explains, "is incapable of being falsified and the novel becomes the prime example of the tautology" (228).

It is not surprising that fiction, built as it is on the paradoxical formulation of the "true lie," should develop numerous connections with that ancient branch of philosophy that concerns itself with reasoning and truth, that is, the field of logic. John Barth, in his seminal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," discusses Borges' fondness for the infinite regress and traces the notion (as Borges has done) from Zeno's Tortoise through Schopenhauer.¹⁸ Fascination with self-reference, paradox, and the infinite regress has not slackened in this century and even seems to have increased in recent years. W. V. Quine's essay "The Ways of Paradox" provides a concise introduction to the field and summarizes efforts by Bertrand Russell and others, especially in this century, to deal with the many paradoxes and antinomies created by self-referential patterns in logic and mathematics.¹⁹ In 1931, for instance, Kurt Gödel proved that the entire system of pure mathematics rested on a paradox, that it could not be both complete and consistent. In 1976, as a note in our introductory chapter indicates, a philosophical work appeared that semantically analyzed and then employed self-referentiality in an attempt to decide the old question of free will versus determinism.²⁰ This type of signal self-scrutiny, in this century of self-analysis, has obvious parallels in that fiction which

questions or denies its own existence. We should not, however, let such parallels between contemporary fiction and present-day formal philosophy obscure the solid connections which reflexive fiction also has with the much older philosophy of Platonism.

It is not some philosophy of antiquity but rather contemporary psychology and sociology which bear most immediately on the problem of explaining the phenomenon of intensified reflexivity in contemporary fiction. In a previous chapter some observations were made on the psychology of the authors of reflexive fiction. Here we should emphasize how some of the vital concerns of reflexive fiction relate to the psychological analysis of modern man. The problem of paralysis mentioned in connection with authors of reflexive fiction can be extended to their characters and further to modern man--though the paralyzed character is by no means the special province of reflexive fiction. Beckett and Barth give us particularly memorable paralyzed characters, characters paralyzed by self-consciousness, and the critics respond to the lessons of Watt and Jake Horner. "Abnormal sensitivity leads to inaction," says Frederick J. Hoffman in his study of Beckett,²¹ and Tony Tanner, speaking of Barth, observes that "reflection does not necessarily help you to live" (251).

Besides pointing out the perils of self-observation, self-conscious fiction often addresses itself to the crucial problems of identity, in particular the element of

role-playing in man's quest for selfhood. Barth's early novel The End of the Road, though not nearly so reflexive as his later works, provides a marvelous casebook for psychologists in this regard.²² Thoughts on the relationship of art to life and fiction to self appear frequently, both casually--"I felt like the end of an Ellery Queen novel" (132)--and in more extended fashion, as in the fascinating Mythotherapy discussion (82-85). "Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story," the Doctor tells Jake (83), attempting to convince him that "a man's integrity consists in being faithful to the script he's written for himself" (84). The section is filled with illustrations of deliberate role-playing, of advice on how to pick parts in life and play them. We can sense Barth's own observations on the nature of literature lurking closely behind the Doctor's contention that "fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life" (83).

Barth's work is not alone in coupling reflexive fiction with observations on the function of role-playing in establishing an identity, that is, on the fictionalizing of life. The confluence of such concerns recurs throughout the history of reflexive literature. Reverberating through Lanham's study of Sterne are references to man as "an incorrigible role player" and to men as "incurable poseurs."²³ "Every action is an acting" in the self-conscious world (155). Glauco Cambon finds many of the same concerns raised in

Pirandello's work, though Cambon emphasizes the danger of the unconscious adoption of roles: "But what are the real selves, and can they be known? Conversely, do not the fictive selves (or personal masks) at times acquire greater validity than the so-called 'real' ones?"²⁴ Masks, Appearance versus Reality--the history of self-conscious fiction is a playground filled with Confidence Men and counterfeiters.

Of course, the term "playground" was chosen intentionally, for self-conscious fiction is fiction most cognizant of the game that is literature and the playing with words that constitutes it. This element in reflexive fiction helps explain why the first chapter in Tony Tanner's City of Words, a chapter devoted to Nabokov and Borges, is entitled "On Lexical Playfields." When Ortega y Gasset writes that the modern style will "consider art as play and nothing else,"²⁵ his meaning is clear: self-conscious literature considers itself and admits itself to be a game. The author of self-conscious fiction will not only arrange a game for us but will act as commentator, forever interrupting the action to remind us of the rules of the game and of himself as director-announcer. Why people write and why they create any art whatsoever are always lively topics for speculation. What need does creation or game playing fill? It may well be, as Tanner says, that "there is some very radical urge for stability, for known and familiarized territory, in the human instinct to invent games" (38)--and hence art. The creation of art gives the artist a control not otherwise

possible in the world. But if this is the role of playing fiction for all authors, what further role will the exposure of the game perform for authors of self-conscious fiction or for the spectators at these games? How will the psychologists explain the profusion of stage, book, and game metaphors in self-conscious fiction? What deeper stage of human control may they be a response to or a sign of? And what applications may any discoveries concerning reflexive creativity have for modern man? The psychology of self-consciousness has yet to explore such matters.

If we cannot answer this sort of question concerning the connection between reflexivity and the psychology of this or any other age, we can at least enjoy speculating about it and establishing the kinds of questions we need to ask. We can do likewise with the socio-economic and political dimensions of reflexive fiction. As Alter has categorized things, "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" (81). We have already looked at a good deal of the inward movement of reflexive fiction and said something about "the society that supplies the materials for literary representation," but what kind of society will "dictate the literary convention" of reflexivity? What sort

of social structures may underlie and encourage the growth of ideas which in turn promote literary self-consciousness? How is the relationship between the perhaps alienated writer of self-conscious literature and the society in which he lives mirrored in that solipsistic, introverted mode? Is there an economic basis for literary self-consciousness? What is the nature of the audience for reflexive fiction, is it a general one or is it elite? These and other similar questions have only begun to be answered in the most fragmentary way and only tentative suggestions will be made here.²⁶

The problem of the social basis of particular literary modes is immediately complicated by the dimension dealt with in the next chapter--the historical. If we discover, as we will, that reflexive literature develops in a variety of times and places, in a variety of social contexts, we may be inclined to attempt to isolate some social common denominator generating the reflexive phenomena. We would then face the difficult task of determining what social conditions are shared by periods as diverse as the times of the Roman Comedy, the Renaissance frame-tale, Shakespearean England, late-eighteenth-century England, and mid-twentieth-century America. If we are defeated in this attempt, we may conclude that differing social conditions can produce similar literary developments and that literary fashions and individual creative efforts are not functions of social conditions. The contemporary rash of reflexivity would then seem to be a

product of a high but random incidence of individual efforts in a similar direction, the result of a strong but purely literary development, or the manifestation of some independent, intermediate causal factor (e.g., a movement in the "history of ideas" which would not correlate directly with social conditions). We have looked at these possibilities already and they will be examined further in our final chapter.

We might simplistically conjecture though that if realistic, mimetic fiction prospers in social environments characterized by shared values, societally-determined attitudes, outer-directedness, and a general optimism (for example, Victorian England or Soviet Russia), then reflexivity will signal a lack of shared values (or lack of faith by the individual in communally-held values), inner-directedness, and general pessimism. The individual will be left to his own resources, unwilling or unable to accept and have faith in society's conventions. He will question those conventions and then question his own substitute vision. We might think of an eccentric Sterne here. It also seems plausible that societal change or disruption would tend to increase the incidence of reflexive literature, since older conventions would be thrown into sharp relief by newer ones and varying degrees of adherence to the old would result in increased uncertainty about what was "correct" and "true." On the other hand, of course, if the societal changes are too catastrophic, attention may be focused entirely on the society

undergoing the change rather than on the individual, and there may be little opportunity for individual reflection. But if the former premise is correct, the disunifying social changes of this century would help to explain the decline of realism and the rise of reflexivity.

It is not certain how reflexivity is to be related to economic considerations. Since realism in one form or another appears to dominate both a bourgeois nineteenth-century England and a proletarian twentieth-century Russia, it may be difficult to identify current literary reflexivity with any economic system. Presumably a Marxist would contend that reflexivity is a sign of capitalist decadence and that the individualism so essential to the operation of the capitalistic system is fundamentally inimical to collective realism.

Though broad questions such as these can excite considerable debate, it may be more fruitful either to gather a good deal more evidence in these areas or to turn to a narrower question concerning the relation of fiction to society. We might, for example, ask about the nature of the audience or public for reflexive fiction. Consideration of this question does appear in the Fiedler article mentioned earlier, but this may be an isolated case. Fiedler seems to think that Art Novels and their reflexive progeny--the Anti-Art Art novels--are directed toward an elite but outmoded audience (194), while Pop forms are the wave of the future. The principal audience for the intensely reflexive works by

the direct heirs of Modernism may be elitists, poring over arcane allusions and literary references. But, if the sales records of many of the works we will discuss in later chapters are any indication (admittedly not all of these are direct descendants of the works of the ironic Modernists), these elitists are members of a rather large community, for recent self-conscious fiction has achieved popularity with a general audience. Obviously some works, such as Lolita and Slaughterhouse-Five, will be enjoyed by many readers who are unconcerned with or unaware of their self-conscious elements, and other works may be solely the darlings of the elitist academic community. But works with pronounced reflexive qualities have certainly touched some deep feeling in a wide public, a public apparently well aware of society's numerous false fronts, its acts and games, and appreciative of the freedom, ingenuity, irreverence, and self-depreciation (even in their obsessive authorial presence) shown by self-conscious artists. We thus find in self-conscious fiction what amounts to In-jokes and introversion for the masses. How such introverted literature has arisen over the centuries is the subject of the following chapter.

Notes

¹ Leon Edel, The Modern Psychological Novel (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), p. 203.

² Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 238.

³ Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 89. Probably the most comprehensive study of contemporary America's self-consciousness in Christopher Lasch's Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations (New York: Norton, 1979). Lasch displays a rather negative attitude toward the self-consciousness surrounding him, saying, for example, that Art "not only fails to create the illusion of reality but suffers from the same crisis of self-consciousness that afflicts the man in the street" (p. 175). See esp. pp. 160-79 on the literary and psychological consequences Lasch perceives as stemming from the narcissistic society.

⁴ "The Death and Rebirth of the Novel," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 195.

⁵ Perhaps the most striking candidate for examination would be the song "Now You've Got a Hit Record." Not only do its lyrics explain how to make a hit record, but it too became a hit.

⁶ David I. Grossvogel, The Self-Conscious Stage in Modern French Drama (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958).

⁷ Play within a Play: The Dramatist's Conception of His Art, Shakespeare to Anouilh (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), p. 8.

⁸ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (New York: Grove, 1967).

⁹ Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov's Dark Cinema (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 255.

¹⁰ See Appel's "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. xxxiv-xxv, for examples of self-consciousness in the comics and p. 251 in Dark Cinema for some illustrations from animated cartoons.

- 11 René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956), pp. 129 and 105.
- 12 Charles I. Glicksberg, The Self in Modern Literature (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1963), Ch. 7.
- 13 Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 180.
- 14 Ihab Hassan, The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 30.
- 15 Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 131.
- 16 "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett," Criticism, 6, No. 1 (Winter 1964), rpt. in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 169-77.
- 17 "On Literary Realism," in Halperin, pp. 218-19.
- 18 "The Literature of Exhaustion," Atlantic Monthly, Aug. 1967, rpt. in The American Novel since World War II, ed. Marcus Klein (New York: Fawcett, 1969), p. 278.
- 19 "The Ways of Paradox," The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 3-20.
- 20 Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., Germain Grisez, and Olaf Tollefson, Free Choice: A Self-Referential Argument (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1976).
- 21 Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962), p. 31.
- 22 John Barth, The End of the Road (1958; rev. ed. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969).
- 23 Richard A. Lanham, Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), pp. 30-31, 51.
- 24 "Introduction," Pirandello: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Glauco Cambon (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 7.
- 25 "The Dehumanization of Art," The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture, by José Ortega y Gasset, trans. Willard A. Trask (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 13.

26 The methodological problems of the "sociology of literature" are treated intensively in Chapter Nine, "Literature and Society," in Wellek and Warren's Theory of Literature.

SECTION TWO--THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

A section devoted to the history of reflexive literature may seem somewhat superfluous. We have, after all, briefly encountered several of the major figures in that history, so that many key names are already familiar. Moreover, since Robert Alter's Partial Magic¹ has firmly established and examined the roots of the self-conscious mode in the novel, duplicating his fine work is certainly unnecessary. Beyond this, if we are to keep such a history within manageable length, we will have to omit some authors (for example, Fielding, Proust, Mann, and Woolf) who probably deserve inclusion in a comprehensive review of this international literary tendency.

Despite such difficulties this historical section will serve a number of useful purposes: it will help dispel a limiting temporal perspective and disabuse us of any lingering notion that self-conscious literature is, because of its contemporary popularity, a peculiarly contemporary development; it will allow us to compare more specifically the techniques of reflexivity operating in past literature with those in vogue today; it will, by considering both some stronger currents and some weaker tributaries of reflexivity, allow us to "place" some otherwise anomalous works as well

as to reconsider some established ones. (Alter's study serves this last purpose especially well and I am indebted to him for providing an approach which can make sense of those hard-to-classify concoctions that self-consciousness often produces.)

In Western literature self-conscious devices have, as previously stated, been found in the Odyssey and in Greek comedy,² and the Roman comedy of Plautus, with its "deliberate and carefully planned breaches of an established barrier between audience and actors,"³ has attracted considerable attention as the precursor of the intensely self-conscious theater of the Renaissance.⁴ Between the end of the Roman theater and the advent of the Renaissance, the most significant instances of literary reflexivity in the West seem to have been not in the drama but in the structural and narrative reflexivity of the medieval frame tales⁵ and the "toying with supposed source-manuscripts in medieval romance" (Alter, 34). An "extraordinary delight in design" and a "sense of pleasure in form" are, as Scholes suggests (10), the central features expressed by such narrative framing devices.

It is the Renaissance theater, however, which represents the first major eruption of reflexivity in the modern world. While Nelson says "Medwall's Fulgens and Lucre (1497) is probably the first use of the play within a play" (8) and Righter claims Edwardes' Damon and Pythias was "the first play in which an attempt was made to use the image of

the world as a stage in a consistent and structural fashion" (68), the significant point is, as Nelson indicates (8-10), that reflexive techniques such as these are found throughout the European drama of the period--a period marking the end of faith and the beginning of questionings. From Calderon to Corneille to Kyd, Inductions and plays within plays attest to the general arrival of theatrical self-consciousness.

It is thus not surprising that elements of theatrical reflexivity should be found extensively in the works of the greatest dramatist in English of this or any other period--Shakespeare. Shakespeare employs reflexive devices with enormous range and depth and uses them to a degree which moved Fiedler to call "All the world's a stage" Shakespeare's "most obsessive figure" (89). Anne Righter finds that, though the Bard was dealing with a by then familiar metaphor, he was "concerned with the play metaphor to a degree unusual even among his contemporaries" (81). Righter thoroughly details the operation of "the reflexive power of the play metaphor" (102) in Shakespeare and links it to the dramatist's changing views of the relationship of life to his art; generally she feels that the progress of the play metaphor in Shakespeare reflects his progressive "disillusionment with the stage" (153). Fiedler too considers the reflexivity of the play metaphor in Shakespeare but suggests the more positive view that Shakespeare's final conception of the play was enveloped in the cosmic comedy of

the Christian myth (92).

Nelson, working as he is with the plan within a play, focuses his attention on this self-conscious device in plays from The Taming of the Shrew to The Tempest (11-35). He sees the reflexive works of Shakespeare's first period as primarily playful about the stage--the theatrical illusions of Puck and Bottom, for example, bring us laughter, not resonance. But "the sense of metaphysical anguish" (13) associated with Hamlet's "Mousetrap" is of most concern to Nelson, and he devotes much attention to the "serious" reflexivity of Hamlet--a work in which Shakespeare "moves away from the positivistic separation of art and life implicit in the earlier plays toward an idealistic correspondence of them" (28)--and The Tempest. Nelson makes a valuable contribution when he discusses how Shakespeare, aware of their metaphysical implications, "tried by various means to delimit the series of convolutions" of play within play (30).

Another excellent discussion of the metaphysics of Shakespeare's self-consciousness appears in A. D. Nuttal's Two Concepts of Allegory.⁶ Nuttal, who also discovers illusion-breaking in Milton's Comus (98-100), points to marvelous examples in Antony and Cleopatra and Hamlet of yet another reflexive Shakespearean technique--the practice of having actors deliver lines designed so that "in stage-performance the fancy coincides startlingly with the fact" (102). At such points the Elizabethan audience was jolted by the sudden recognition of the illusion, a recognition

which, in a manner common to much self-consciousness, coupled "mysteriousness" and "a kind of fear" with laughter (102). Nuttall's discussions of the mysteriousness of the Platonic overtones of the regress of fictions and the supernatural quality of Prospero's "Our revels now are ended" speech (102-04, 146-51) are especially enlightening.⁷

All of this is not to say that Shakespeare founded a flourishing school of theatrical self-consciousness or that he in any way influenced the self-conscious novel and short story. The contention is rather that self-consciousness--whether in jest or in earnest, whether presented in a single line or via the larger structure of an embedded play--has been extensively recognized and analyzed as an integral element of the work of this universal genius. The fascination which artistic self-consciousness held for this consummate artist is a reflection not only of an era but of a great mind.

Another great artistic mind of the same era of Western thought, and the father of the novel, Cervantes is even more widely recognized than Shakespeare as having incorporated self-consciousness into his work. Alter, who treats Don Quixote at some length, sees Cervantes as "the initiator of both traditions of the novel" (3)--the two traditions being the realistic and the self-conscious. Harry Levin, who first suggested Cervantes' place at the head of these traditions, also suggests that Cervantes is reflecting the age in which he lived; as we proposed earlier, reflexive works of

the period "seem to express the self-questionings of a traditional culture during an epoch of rapid and far-reaching change." The literature of the Renaissance is "the register of a violent effort to catch up with the expanding conditions of life" and reflects "the feeling that certain techniques are becoming outmoded."⁸ E. C. Riley, who has written an extensive discussion of the reflexivity of Cervantes, concurs that by "the early 1600's art had become thoroughly introverted" and that Cervantes was of his time. That he was both of his own time and ours is made clear by Lowry Nelson, Jr., who, in his introduction to a collection of essays on Cervantes, links him to Shakespeare and then goes on to say that "Don Quijote as a work of literary art is, in fact, supremely self-aware; it is the first modern novel, and it is about, among other things, the writing of the first modern novel."⁹ Similar remarks on the position of Cervantes in literary history are to be found in numerous quarters.

If we consider the nature of Cervantes' self-conscious novel a bit more specifically, we will also find a good deal of critical agreement about the reflexive techniques of Don Quixote. Parody and an attendant element of literary criticism are clearly central to Cervantes' creation. Both Riley (124) and Alter (13, 25) stress the parodic aspect of his work, and Grossvogel emphasizes the literary criticism when he contends that Cervantes to a large extent "relies on the reader's critical interest--the mode of the essay rather

than that of the novel" and that "the literary debate" is an "integral part of his fiction."¹⁰

This element of parody has several functions, one of which, as in the modern case of Nabokov, is to foreground the artist. In Alter's phrase it "affirms a new sense of the autonomy of the artist" (15); to Riley it is part of "a piece of artistic exhibitionism displaying the power of the writer" (129). Leo Spitzer vividly makes the same observation when he says that "although the protagonists of our novel seem to be Quijote . . . and Sancho . . . they are overshadowed by CERVANTES, the artist of the word, who combines a critical and illusionistic art according to his free will. From the moment we open the book to the moment we put it down, we are given to understand that an almighty overlord is directing us, who leads us where he pleases."¹¹ Spitzer speaks of the "outspoken self-glorification of the artist" in Don Quixote and calls Cervantes a "puppeteer" who "lets us see the strings of his puppet-show" (93). It is not surprising that these remarks have a certain familiar ring to them, given Cervantes' bag of self-conscious tricks. Many of these tricks not only enhance the status of Cervantes but also increase the "reality" of his two central characters. As Riley puts it: "They give the novel the appearance of receding depths, by comparison with which most other prose fiction is two-dimensional. They also give solidity and vividness to the figures of Quixote and Sancho and make them appear to exist independently of the book that

was written about them" (130).

Among the many devices which Cervantes uses to deepen our appreciation of his fiction and his fictionalizing: he blurs the fiction/reality boundary; he will, as Riley says, "manipulate the story so that the principal characters are actually conscious of the world outside the covers of the book" (128). While not working with the self-consciousness of confession and autobiography (he is, in fact, quite detached from his creation), he does write himself into his book, as Alter explains (16-17). Alter also discusses coincidence, naming, doublings of plot and character, and other now-familiar means by which an author of self-conscious fictions may work his magic. Cervantes' repertoire is so extensive that, as Alter says, "Cervantes does not merely anticipate a later mode of imagination but fully realizes its possibilities; subsequent writers would only explore from different angles the imaginative potentialities of a kind of fiction that he authoritatively conceived" (29).

Among the subsequent writers in this mode the most prominent novelist in English before our own century is probably Laurence Sterne, to whom we have several times referred. (Among prose writers who are not novelists, Swift, with his The Tale of a Tub, has attracted the most attention for his reflexivity.)¹² Sterne's Tristram Shandy has always troubled the classifiers, as John M. Stedmond amply demonstrates,¹³ and the value of approaching novels in terms of their self-consciousness is most evident when an "oddity"

like this novel comes up. The concept of reflexivity allows us to analyze and categorize Tristram Shandy quite handily.

While Tristram Shandy is, as Alter establishes (30-56, esp. 37), grounded on the philosophy and Lockean psychology of Sterne's day, it is, by virtue of its reflexive qualities, often tied to the twentieth century. It is not surprising that, as Stedmond points out, "Sterne's name crops up frequently in discussions of the twentieth-century novel" (5, n. 4). Among specific concerns frequently used to link Sterne to our century are his concern with and representation of the individual human mind, existentially isolated and solipsistic; Tristram Shandy, according to Lanham, "comes near to being a mirror for the private life."¹⁴ Sterne's representation of the mind of his eccentric narrator has a distinctly modern touch: "We come closer here to the subtle movements of consciousness than the novel will bring us until Joyce and Proust," says Alter (49). The prominence of Tristram as narrator attempting in frustration to tell his tale and the preoccupation with sex which suffuses the novel further serve to identify Sterne with the concerns of this century.

In order to characterize Sterne, we might select a few reflexive techniques from among the many in his work which have been catalogued. Sterne was enormously concerned with reader/writer relationships and at the same time uncomfortable with the demands of the novel form. "His purpose was," says Stedmond, "not to tell a story, but to examine the

drama inherent in the very act of writing a book--the give and take between author and reader, the eager efforts of the one to overcome the stolid indifference of the other. Thus Sterne was extremely conscious not only of the workings of his own mind during the act of creation but also of the possible actions and reactions in the minds of his readers" (28). For Stedmond, Sterne's digressions, typographical antics, visual devices, and so forth are really "shock tactics" that are "designed to keep the reader alert" (39). While "attempting to keep himself and his reader aware of the compromises necessary in all forms of verbal art, Sterne inevitably subjected his artistic medium, language, to critical scrutiny" (47).

Sterne's novel also has strong connections with the modes of the essay and the confession. Grossvogel finds a "lingering distaste of Sterne for the ways of fiction" (155), while Lanham believes that "Tristram reasserts the claim of an older reader/writer relationship that . . . acknowledges illusion and invites the reader to reflection rather than entrancement" (20). The result is that Sterne gives us a very self-conscious novel because he is as much conversationalist as he is novelist (Grossvogel, 144).

One major element of Sterne's self-consciousness is his use of parody. "Parody," says Alter, "together with direct imitation and plain borrowing, is pervasive in Tristram Shandy, Sterne's models including Rabelais, Montaigne, Burton, Descartes, Locke, Swift, and a host of lesser

writers, scholastic, scientific, historical, and satirical" (39). The interesting thing about Alter's list of models is not that it shows Tristram Shandy to be yet another book based on books (though it does that) but how it unintentionally reveals Sterne's connections with the mode of the essay. Sterne does not derive from fictional sources so much as from non-fictional. Such a non-novelistic heritage is almost bound to make for unconventional fiction. Parody, though, is but one course in the comic feast of Tristram Shandy. We have neglected the fun and games, the hilarity and high spirits of the novel--the way Sterne wraps seriousness in a smile. Of course, recognizing this comic cast will reinforce awareness of the novel's connections with the anti-realistic and the reflexive.

The next major figure in the history of novelistic self-consciousness (omitting Fielding) is William Makepeace Thackeray--and to say Thackeray is to say controversy. Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century at the height of realism in the novel, Thackeray--whom nearly everyone classifies as some sort of realist--employs enough anti-realistic devices in Vanity Fair to cause problems for himself and his critics. Maurice Z. Shroder, for example, suggests that "the closing words of Vanity Fair . . . only make explicit what is implicit in every novel. The novelist is a puppeteer, the novel is a puppet show."¹⁵ Richard Harter Fogle, however, feels that "Thackeray was perhaps unfortunate in presenting himself as puppetmaster."¹⁶ The

same sort of critical ambivalence and disagreement extends throughout Thackeray criticism and not only with regard to reflexive devices.

That Thackeray manipulates reflexive elements in his novel is not debatable. Alter (115-16) lists a number of these elements which figure prominently in Vanity Fair: Thackeray's prologue "Before the Curtain" and his Vanitas Vanitatum ending, his asides to the reader, his parodies of popular novelistic practices, and his admitted authorial omniscience. The problem, argues Alter, is that Thackeray wavers, that he botches his self-conscious effort because he, like his fellow Victorians, believes too strongly in the power of fiction to evoke and to change reality. Thus, says Alter, the reflexivity in Vanity Fair "does not produce the general effect of a self-conscious novel because it is intermittent, inconsistent, repeatedly broken into by a very different conception of the fictional events and the narrator's relation to them. The discrepancy, from one point of view, could be stated as a matter of literary history: Thackeray is imaginatively excited by the kind of novel he discovered in Fielding but caught up rather more than he knows in his own age's prevalent assumptions about fiction" (116). Contending that "the metaphor of the puppet show is not really sustained," that in fact "the pretense of a puppet show utterly vanishes when the narrator enters the picture anecdotally as a British tourist" (118), Alter, logically enough, finds Vanity Fair to be a confused and finally

unsuccessful self-conscious novel. Alter's basic contention is that Vanity Fair is an inadequate blend of the reflexive and the realistic. The bulk of the novel is made up of realistic observation and criticism of Thackeray's near-contemporary social world; it compels belief. And, as we have found, destruction of the illusion at a work's boundaries--the sort Thackeray produces in his prologue and concluding pages--may not produce the necessary resonance or, if you prefer, contamination to disrupt that belief and render the entire work reflexive. The result, in Alter's view, is a conspicuous failure in the mixing of modes.

Wolfgang Iser, on the other hand, rather admires Thackeray's manipulation of the illusion, his handling of the narrator, and his control of the reader. He endorses the "narrator's guises" that Thackeray uses to control his reader's distance from events described.¹⁷ Thackeray, according to Iser, goads the reader, making him a critic who sees the action from many perspectives. Thackeray's "'split level' technique," says Iser, "conveys a far stronger impression of reality than does the illusion which claims that the world of the novel corresponds to the whole world" (112). How closely these words of Iser resemble those of other critics who have felt the sense of completeness which the reflexive disruption of the illusion can produce! Fogle, for example, speaks of Trollope's work "in which a confessed unreality is used to enhance the reality that matters" (347); Wayne Booth, as we saw, acknowledged "the profound effect

achieved by the great authors when they call attention to their works as literature and to themselves as artists."¹⁸ And René Wellek conveniently links Thackeray to precisely those authors we have been considering when he remarks that "Sancho Panza, Uncle Toby, Becky Sharp seem more alive, more 'real' than many a figure in a completely objective novel by Henry James or Joseph Conrad."¹⁹ If Thackeray does not then belong in the same league with Cervantes and Sterne, he undoubtedly belongs in the same line.

This line also extends to such a minor (if nonetheless well-known) literary figure as Lewis Carroll²⁰ and to such a major one as Melville. Fogle identifies Melville's reflexive proclivities in *Pierre*--"Herman Melville strained hard at the fictional leash, and anticipated Gide's Counterfeiters in his Pierre by writing a novel about writing a novel" (339)--while Alter finds The Confidence-Man to be a precursor of Beckett's work and says that it "comes closer to being an achieved self-conscious novel than any other major fictional work of its age" (128). Once again a major writer in English--and Melville, it should be pointed out, is the first American author we have had occasion to mention in this historical survey--can be unambiguously identified with the reflexive tradition.

It is with the arrival of the twentieth century and the onset of Modernism, of course, that the self-conscious mode truly begins to flourish, not only in the novel in the English-speaking world but in the arts of many lands. Many

well-known reflexive works appear in the first third of the century. In Spain the appearance of Miguel de Unamuno's novel Mist (1914), with its regresses of dreams and its demand for chance art, announces the century's novelistic directions,²¹ while in Italy the theater of Luigi Pirandello --as Six Characters in Search of an Author makes the world's playgoers familiar with theatrical reflexivity--sets the stage, as it were, for the rampant reflexivity of the modern French stage. Indeed nearly every critical observation on Pirandello seems to reinforce his claim to a prominent position on the roster of the century's reflexive artists. In his concern with his own role ("Pirandello was the main character of Pirandello," says Glauco Cambon)²² and with his "view of human life as itself theatrical" (Nelson, Play, 132), Pirandello is reflexive. The way in which he "inverts the convention of modern realism" is reflexive,²³ and Pirandello's combination of "humor and cerebralism" is a familiar combination in reflexive literature.²⁴

But we need not travel to Italy in search of self-consciousness, for Pirandello's great contemporary in the writing of fiction was Ireland's James Joyce. Though he seldom indulges in the sort of overt intrusions, disruptions, and personal appearances characteristic of John Barth, Joyce's fingernail parings are evident throughout his work. The many reflexive aspects of his works may be approached in several ways. We might, for instance, focus on the most striking reflexive qualities in each of the

major fictional works. With Dubliners this might be the considerable number of characters resembling author-surrogates, that is, the many aloof, intellectual writers and artists found in that collection of stories. With The Portrait of the Artist--even the title suggests the reflexivity of the visual arts--the problems of autobiography and artistic distance predominate. In the acknowledged masterpiece that is Ulysses, self-conscious aspects proliferate. We can find them in something as small as Virag's direct address to Joyce ("That suits your book, eh?")²⁵ or in the book's elaborate circularity, the thoroughness of cross-reference of the Comedy of Inventory which Kenner identifies (32, 54). Insofar as the novel is a roman à clef (and "Ulysses largely is," according to Joyce's biographer Richard Ellmann),²⁶ the Life/Art boundary and the problem of the disruption of the illusion by the real must concern us. Perhaps the most unmistakably reflexive quality of the novel, though, is its abundant parody. Few critics fail to note how Joyce foregrounds and exposes literary styles--from cheap romance to Expressionist play to a sort of scientific catechism--though not all would go as far as Richard Poirier: "The drama of Ulysses," says Poirier, "is only incidentally [sic] that of Stephen, Bloom and Molly; more poignantly it is the drama of Joyce himself making the book. The fact that the many and various techniques in the chapters of Ulysses are made to appear forced, superimposed and mechanical, that each in turn is dispensed with so that

another might be tried--this fact in itself constitutes the drama of the novel" (348). With Finnegans Wake, though we might view it as a portrait of the artist's mind as receptacle for all European culture, the foregrounding of the prose surface--that incredible paronomastic eruption--would have to be the most obvious manifestation of self-consciousness. Most importantly, in each of his major works there is evidence that the one undisputed master of English fiction in this century is working in the self-conscious mode.

At the same time that Joyce was building his reputation on one side of the Atlantic, a comet appeared on the other. Although he has never achieved or maintained a reputation to rival Joyce's, the now rather neglected James Branch Cabell is nonetheless worthy of consideration as a self-conscious novelist. In fact, his greatest novel, Jurgen,²⁷ presents such an anomaly for most critical accountants--so different is it from the predominantly realistic fiction of the period--that perhaps the ledger of reflexive fictions is one of the few places that it can be conveniently recorded. This witty and fantastic philosophical romance tells of the journey of the pawnbroker Jurgen through many mythical realms, of his amorous adventures with a variety of attractive women, and of his final return to ambiguous domestic contentment with his wife. Cabell fills the tale with double-entendre and keeps his tongue well into his cheek. It is a sly and recurrent awareness of the fiction he is playing

with that, among other qualities (not the least of which is the inherent interest of Cabell's philosophical speculations), places him solidly in the self-conscious camp. Among many specific examples of this self-conscious awareness: the inclusion of mock reviews of the book; a baffling Forward dealing with the authenticity of the work; numerous references to the telling of the tale; and gently satirical acknowledgment of the conventions of romance--"Now this was a gloomy and high-paneled apartment, with exactly the traditional amount of moonlight streaming through two windows" (122). At one point (363) Cabell includes reference to The Cream of the Jest, an earlier work of his. Even more strikingly reflexive are the comments by some of the characters concerning authorship. Jurgen, in a declaration which might have been made by the Doctor in Barth's The End of the Road, says "it seems to me indisputable that each one of us is the hero in his own romance" (221). But the character Horvendile most seriously disrupts the illusion: "I wonder," he remarks, "if the Author gets much pleasure from these simple characters. At least they must be easy to handle" (220). A short while later he asks Jurgen what there is in them "to attest that our Author has not composed our romances with his tongue in his cheek" (221). We could further discuss such matters as how Cabell's blend of fantasy, mythology, and domesticity links him to Joyce, Barth, Nabokov, Gardner (Grendel), and Updike (The Centaur). But the point has probably been made: approaching Jurgen as a

self-conscious novel may give us a new perspective which will make it appear less of an oddity and more at home in the century to which it belongs.

The next surge of self-conscious fiction in the twentieth century came in France, where André Gide published Les Faux-Monnayeurs (The Counterfeiters) in 1925.²⁸ Gide is certainly, as Alter says, "a central figure in the development of modern fictional self-consciousness" (159), and it would behoove us to try to understand why. He must be considered a central figure because he is perhaps the first widely read author of intensely and overtly reflexive fiction in his era. He openly parades his reflexive intentions in a way Joyce does not. His range of obvious reflexive devices is great, and he produces direct imitators and descendants in reflexivity. As Leon Edel declares, "Gide's Counterfeiters, in its self-conscious virtuosity, must be reckoned an important ancestor of the nouveau roman. His idea of having each chapter start as if he were beginning all over again, telling a new story; his use of the novel within the novel, the journal within the journal; his concern with multiple mirror-effects--these were a harbinger of the newest experimnts."²⁹

The patently self-conscious techniques of the novel have been variously received by the critics. Within the novel there is Edouard's Journal, for example. Germaine Bree calls it "the most original part of The Counterfeiters and by far the most arresting."³⁰ But Gide himself views it

in a somewhat different light. "I see," he proclaims, "this notebook in which I am writing the very history of the novel poured into the book in its entirety and forming its principal interest--for the greater irritation of the reader."³¹ There is the obvious problem of the autobiographical relationship of Edouard to Gide. There is no question about Edouard's reflexive relationship to Gide as author; the parallels could not be made more explicitly. The Chinese box effect is pointed out by Bree, who describes how Edouard "plagiarizes Gide, imagining a novel whose hero, a novelist, writes the story of the genesis of a novel" (126)--the novel being called The Counterfeiters. Edouard's critical remarks are often unnervingly applicable to Gide's own situation as author. "I invent the character of a novelist, whom I make my central figure; and the subject of the book, if you must have one, is just that very struggle between what reality offers him and what he himself desires to make of it" (The Counterfeiters, 173). Shortly thereafter another character remarks--Gide speaks here for the benefit of both Edouard and himself--that "in this novelist of yours you won't be able to help painting yourself" (173). How perceptive Edouard appears when, reaching out of the frame of the novel into Gide's own journals, he suggests that his journal, "a running criticism of my novel," may be "more interesting than the work itself" (174). But precisely how far we can identify Edouard with Gide is a tricky question. While Wayne Booth suggests that Edouard is an unreliable character

quite distinct from his author (205, n. 28), Alter feels that "Edouard is of course not André Gide, but the distance between the two is often close enough to blur the realized outlines of the character" (160). Gide seems to have recognized his problems in distancing Edouard--"A character all the more difficult since I am lending him much of myself. I have to step back and put him at some distance from me to see him properly" (Journal, 400). As if Edouard's presence were not problem enough for the maintenance of the illusion, Gide includes a chapter entitled "The Author Reviews His Characters," in which he intrudes as narrator to interject his opinions on his creations, quite in the manner of the novelists of earlier ages.

In the end there has been what amounts to a hung jury in the critical judgment on Gide's accomplishment in The Counterfeiters, in part because of failings common to many self-conscious novels. Alter, who is quite enthusiastic about Les Caves du Vatican (an earlier self-conscious fiction by Gide), contends that one major reason for the relative failure of The Counterfeiters is that characters "either seem to drag on inconclusively or are put to an abrupt, melodramatically improbable end" and that "it is Gide's failure to make his characters go anywhere after the exposition that leaves this an interesting but fundamentally flawed experiment" (161). The same criticism is found in many quarters and put most generally by Carlos Lynes, Jr., when he declares that The Counterfeiters "fails to sustain

that mysterious quality of life which would place it among the real masterpieces of the novel."³² These problems of characterization and imaginative life which overtake so many novels of ideas are compounded, in Alter's opinion, by the inadequacy, the inconsistency of the self-consciousness in the novel: Edouard's journal, "a central reflexive device" in the novel, "does not in itself insure that the book will be a sustained self-conscious novel" (160). While Alter objects that Gide's self-consciousness is not sustained, Leslie Fiedler objects that Gide's whole approach to the mythic power of reflexivity (the "contribing of fictive infinities") "has finally the air of an intellectual joke, a suitable fraud in a world in which we are all coiners," and that Gide's novel is "a profanation, an honorific parody, that is to say, a critical analysis of the myth" (75, 77). Poor Gide seems to satisfy no one in his final production. But, for all that, he introduces, or reintroduces, unmistakable reflexivity to the literary world and paves the way for the open and defiant self-conscious fictions of later writers.

The earliest of these "later writers" was Gide's English contemporary Alduous Huxley. Huxley's Point Counter Point (1928) virtually demands comparison with The Counterfeiters. Several of our familiar self-conscious devices are found in Huxley's work. Chief among them are the centrally positioned novelist character, Philip Quarles, and the passages from his notebook interspersed among the chapters of

the novel. Naturally the novelist character presents us with the problem of autobiography. Huxley critic Peter Bowering calls Quarles a "deliberately autobiographical character" and says of the image of Huxley found in Quarles that "although at times the portrait verges on parody it contains a good measure of self-criticism."³³ The most immediate instance of Huxleyan self-consciousness occurs in Chapter XXII, "From Philip Quarles's Notebook," where Quarles without a doubt is discussing the novel he is in (though, unlike the characters in Barth, he does not express any awareness that he is in a novel). We cannot help hearing Huxley's voice when Quarles writes of the "musicalization of fiction," of the use of "parrallel, contrapuntal plots," and of the "personal appearances" of authors.³⁴ "Put a novelist into the novel," suggests Quarles (301), discussing the potential for a fictional regress such an idea offers; he further calls for working with "the novel of ideas" (302).

Huxley obviously perceives one of the criticisms that his self-conscious novel of ideas is open to when he has Quarles note the "monstrous" quality of characters who are solely idea bearers (302). But Huxley, as Bowering points out (80), is further open to the charge that the title of his novel promises more than the novel delivers. In this, and other matters, as Bowering says, "Huxley, undoubtedly, did himself an injustice by inviting comparison with Gide's The Coiners" (79), though, Bowering goes on, "apart from a

few minor borrowings the resemblance is largely superficial" (80). Walter Allen, who feels that Huxley "borrows heavily" from Gide, also feels that there is something superficial about the techniques Huxley uses--that "although not in any real sense interested in extending the bounds of fiction, Huxley was determined to appear as though he was."³⁵ The truth would seem to be that Huxley does borrow heavily for appearance sake but that his experimentalism really does not extend very far. Even with the author-surrogate Quarles and the specific notebook entry already cited, Huxley's use of the resources of the reflexive mode barely colors the predominantly satirical mode of the novel and certainly does not harm Huxley's brilliantly witty satiric performance.

With Huxley's Point Counter Point we reach the last major (or at least the last well-known) work of fiction in England or America before the post-war era to incorporate overtly self-conscious devices. Yes, there are novels from France which work the self-conscious vein in the thirties, and self-conscious poetry does not disappear. Of course, stylistic virtuosi like Virginia Woolf will distract us with the poetry of their prose. But it is not until the fifties--after the oppressive reality of two decades of depression and war--that reflexive fiction again makes an appreciable noise in the English-speaking world. When it does--when Nabokov is recognized, when writers as diverse as Vonnegut and Durrell burst forth--the chorus of self-consciousness is cacophonous but undeniable.

Notes

¹ Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975).

² See Alter, p. xi, and Leslie Fiedler, "The Defense of the Illusion and the Creation of Myth," English Institute Essays, 1948, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr., (1949; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965), p. 76.

³ Anne Richter, Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967), p. 44.

⁴ Robert J. Nelson, Play within a Play: The Dramatist's Conception of His Art, Shakespeare to Anouilh (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), p. 10.

⁵ Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), esp. pp. 6-11.

⁶ Two Concepts of Allegory: A Study of Shakespeare's The Tempest and the Logic of Allegorical Expression (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).

⁷ Explicit linking of the reflexive creations of the great Elizabethan dramatist and a great modern novelist occurs when Time entitles its cover story on Nabokov "Prospero's Progress" (23 May 1969, pp. 81-90).

⁸ "The Example of Cervantes," from Contexts of Criticism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), rpt. in Cervantes: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Lowry Nelson, Jr., (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 40.

⁹ The Riley quotation is taken from "Literature and Life in Don Quixote," Cervantes's Theory of the Novel (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), rpt. in the Nelson collection just cited, p. 135; the Nelson remarks are from his "Introduction" to that same text, p. 9.

¹⁰ David I. Grossvogel, Limits of the Novel: Evolutions of a Form from Chaucer to Robbe-Grillet (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), p. 34.

¹¹ "On the Significance of Don Quijote," Modern Language Notes, 77 (1962), rpt. in the Nelson collection, p. 92.

¹² On Swift see Alter, p. xii; Ihab Hassan, The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 114; Hugh Kenner, Flaubert, Joyce,

and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians (Boxton: Beacon, 1962), p. 39; John M. Stedmond, The Comic Art of Laurence Sterne: Convention and Innovation in Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 16.

¹³ See Ch. II, "Genre and Tristram Shandy."

¹⁴ Richard A. Lanham, Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), p. 27.

¹⁵ "The Novel as a Genre," The Massachusetts Review (1963), rpt. in The Theory of the Novel, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 24.

¹⁶ "Illusion, Point of View, and Modern Novel Criticism," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 347.

¹⁷ "The Reader as a Component Part of the Realistic Novel: Esthetic Effects in Thackeray's Vanity Fair," in The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. 104.

¹⁸ The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 209.

¹⁹ "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship," in Concepts of Criticism, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 251.

²⁰ Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. xxiii-xxiv.

²¹ See Alter, pp. 154-58.

²² "Introduction," Pirandello: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Glauco Cambon (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 3.

²³ Francis Fergusson, "Action as Theatrical: Six Characters in Search of an Author," from The Idea of a Theater (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), rpt. in the Cambon collection just cited, p. 37.

²⁴ Adriano Tilgher, "Life versus Form," in Studi sul teatro contemporaneo (Rome: Libreria di Scienze e Lettere, 1923), trans. Glauco Cambon and rpt. in the collection just cited.

²⁵ Ulysses (1914; rpt. New York: Random House, 1961),

p. 513. Appel points out this and similar incidents, p. xxv.

²⁶ James Joyce (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), p. 374.

²⁷ Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice (New York: Crown, 1919). Some indication of Cabell's self-conscious methods is found in Booth (208-09) and in Desmond Tarrant's James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1967), esp. pp. 134-35.

²⁸ The Counterfeiters, with Journal of The Counterfeiters, trans. Dorothy Bussy, Journal trans. and annotated by Justin O'Brien (1927; rpt. New York: Modern Library, 1955).

²⁹ The Modern Psychological Novel (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), p. 183.

³⁰ "The Counterfeiters," in Gide (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1963), rpt. in Gide: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. David Littlejohn (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 125.

³¹ Journal of The Counterfeiters, p. 392.

³² "André Gide and the Problem of Form in the Novel," in Forms of Modern Fiction, ed. William Van O'Connor (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1964), p. 188.

³³ Aldous Huxley: A Study of the Major Novels (London: Athlone, 1968), p. 85.

³⁴ Point Counter Point (1928; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 301.

³⁵ The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States (New York: Dutton, 1965), p. 42.

SECTION THREE--CONTEMPORARY NOVELISTS

I. Nabokov: Combinational Delight

"It happens that in our phase of civility," says Frank Kermode, "the novel is the central form of literary art."¹ It is therefore fitting that we begin our consideration of contemporary reflexive literary art with an examination of the central form of self-conscious fiction, the reflexive novel. It is also fitting that we begin the examination of this rather various entity, the contemporary reflexive novel, by discussing one of its central figures, Vladimir Nabokov.

It is both necessary and presumptuous to discuss the work of Vladimir Nabokov: necessary because of his titanic presence in the field of self-conscious fiction--and presumptuous for the same reason. Polyglot, lepidopterist, he is one of few writers of reflexive fictions to couple critical and popular success. His admirers describe his novels in the most glowing terms, and even his detractors show him the utmost respect. To illustrate his lofty standing: Nabokov is the only contemporary novelist to whom Robert Alter devotes a separate chapter in Partial Magic. Alter describes him as "the preeminent practitioner of partial

magic in the novel, from Cervantes' days down to our own," that is, "he has been more self-conscious about his novelistic self-consciousness than any of his predecessors or imitators."² Alter goes on to say that Nabokov has "an oeuvre of an abundance and variety scarcely equaled among self-conscious novelists" (181). An enthusiastic Nabokovian, Alfred Appel, Jr., calls him "the most well-armed of self-conscious artists."³ Elsewhere Appel says, "Nabokov's self-consciousness is supreme; and the range and scale of his effects, his mastery and control, make him unique."⁴ A more recent and rather more impartial Nabokov critic, Douglas Fowler, can still ecstatically describe Nabokov's writing as "perhaps the most dazzling prose ever written in English,"⁵ and an even more recent magazine article could speak of him as "the greatest living novelist writing in English."⁶ A cover story in Time magazine and numerous laudatory acknowledgements from fellow novelists testify to Nabokov's position as the premier post-modern self-conscious novelist.⁷ This is not to suggest that Nabokov the man is by any means beloved (to some he is easily dislikable as a personality or an implied author); nor is it to suggest that he should have reached the highest literary firmament and have been awarded a Nobel prize. It is only to indicate that his works are an unavoidable challenge to the student of novelistic self-consciousness.⁸

That challenge has become much less formidable now that nearly two decades of often insightful criticism is

available on Nabokov's two masterpieces, Lolita and Pale Fire.⁹ The volume of Nabokov criticism is attributable in part to the fact that these two works were published fairly early in the post-modern era, in part to the fact that Nabokov had developed a following for his reflexive fictions prior to the arrival of these two works, and partly, obviously, to the quality of the fictions themselves. This chapter will often recapitulate the critical material available, and, since Lolita and Pale Fire offer ample illustrations of Nabokov's characteristic tactics and concerns, these two novels will receive most of our attention.

In engaging any of Nabokov's major works the reader finds himself expected to play various roles, some of which engender rather harsh responses to Nabokov. The reader will certainly be expected to delight in the stylistic surface of the Nabokovian novel, a task which is seldom onerous. The cultivation of "style," as we have seen, is a practice which is to some degree unavoidable and which generally involves the reader in only the mildest sorts of self-consciousness and produces minimal disruption of his belief in a given fictive world, since he may well "read through" the style, that is, look through the prose lens however curved, smudged, or scratched it might be. Nonetheless, the typical Nabokovian prose surface, with all of the anagrams, alliteration, allusion, punning, and other components which have been examined at length by scholars,¹⁰ is likely to cause some discomfort as well as enjoyment. Alter, speaking of



Nabokov's 1947 novel Bend Sinister, finds its prose "often wonderfully strange and sumptuous" but at times "overwrought, gratuitously arcane," and he describes the much later Ada (1969) as having "baroque" prose and "little spots of over-ripeness" (183). This is not to say that these criticisms are leveled against Nabokov's best works; nonetheless, the reader is often faced with a distracting surface when reading Nabokov.

Less pleasant is the parodying of his expectations which the reader must undergo. John O. Stark speaks of the Nabokov who "parodies the conceptions of the reader" (85). Appel talks of Nabokov's "parodying the reader's complete, self-indulgent identification with a character" ("Introduction," xxxii) and says that in Ada "by parodying the reader's conception of story--his stereotyped expectations and preoccupation with 'plot' machinations--Nabokov frees him to experience a fiction intellectually, aesthetically, ecstatically" ("Ada Described," 174). Though there is more to be said concerning the role of parody in Nabokov's work, the point for the moment is that reader enjoyment is not the inevitable result of the use of parody. Any fiction which introduces the unexpected and unconventional--be it subject matter, plot structure, prose style, point of view, or whatever--may discomfit the reader, and self-conscious fictions are more prone than most to upsetting the unprepared and naive.

But Nabokov's work involves more than a natural reader disorientation in the face of reflexivity. There is a sense in Nabokov's work--and this is reflected in the criticism--of the author as a rather disdainful God creating and playing with his readers as well as his characters, of a master concoctor of chess problems laughing at the efforts of amateurs to solve his puzzles. (References to games, particularly chess, are endemic in Nabokov criticism as well as Nabokov's writings.) This sense of the author as superior being does not, of course, sit well with all readers. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point about the author as omnipotent gamester. Stark notes that Nabokov "uses an enormous number of allusions" and "he sometimes misleads with his allusions," planting them "in order to lead down wrong paths critics who think they can match learning with him" (79). This game of the learned is the object of Page Stegner's somewhat notorious comment that Pale Fire, like Finnegans Wake, is "like playing a long tiresome game of Scrabble and losing." "The reader," he claims, "is not being involved in an intellectual game that can be played with only the book in hand," and the result is "a research problem" which "can reduce art to the level of the crossword puzzle."¹¹

The reader, whether or not he decides to play Match the Master, will find a good deal of what Stark calls "academic humor" in Nabokov, that is, "satire directed at other writers and at intellectual projects, comic allusions and

other jokes, all of which take some knowledge to appreciate" (115). Using numerous allusions is, of course, not in itself an especially potent reflexive technique, but in Nabokov's hands it constitutes a further means for directing the reader's attention outward from "the book in hand" and reminding him of the book's derivative, literary quality. In any event, it is characteristic of Nabokov's fiction--and this is not necessarily true of all contemporary reflexive literature--that it tends to be "second order," not second-rate, but heavily dependent on the enormous accumulation of literary tradition, dependent like the works of Eliot and Joyce on the wealth of the past, and hence broadly reflexive in that it is a literature incorporating, examining, and playing with literature.

The reader of Nabokov is not faced merely (as with Pynchon, for instance) with works which do not meet his general expectations concerning closure, plot development, etc., but with demands for a detailed knowledge of literary history. This demand for erudition in his readers is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Nabokovian self-consciousness and has led to determined scholarly pursuit of his often obscure references. No other modern author of self-conscious fictions can boast of having caused his critics to keep so many libraries so busy. This erudition has also certainly contributed to the charges, made with some pique, that Nabokov is "'too brilliant for his own good'" (Field, 322) and that he "thinks too much" (Proffer,

78). Of course, there are many other elements of Nabokov's manipulation and occasional humiliation of him, and we shall examine these other elements shortly, but for the moment let us see what part Nabokov's "abrasive hauteur," as George Feifer calls it (20), may play in the Nabokovian conception of the artist's role.¹²

Often Nabokov seems to view his role as artist as constituting an adversary relationship with the reader, and Nabokov's egocentricism is well-known. Thus Nabokov--with, it may be added, considerable justification--may believe himself to be superior to his readers. He may wish to play what amounts to solitaire in his fictions--a game which others can merely watch attentively. Nabokov confirms this possibility when he remarks in his introduction to Bend Sinister that in the long run "it is only the author's private satisfaction that counts."¹³ Nabokov's self-concern might appear to be ubiquitous, though often subtly disguised. Douglas Fowler, for example, has made the interesting suggestion that Nabokov repeatedly appears indirectly in his own works in his "equivalent" characters. "In other words," contends Fowler, "Nabokov creates in his fiction a character who could have created Nabokov's fiction" (14). Nabokov then shows enormous favoritism toward such a character--he is not, for example, allowed major failings. (Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote, protagonists of Lolita and Pale Fire respectively, do not fit such a pattern very well. Moreover, biographical and psychological critics examining

basically non-reflexive literature can easily discover such author-equivalents. Insofar as the style is the man, the author's fingerprints will inevitably appear on his handiwork.) It would seem that a fiction which involves writers or, more indirectly, artists of some sort is necessarily somewhat self-conscious, and Nabokov's fiction offers us many such writer-artist figures. Humbert is writing his confession and autobiography; both John Shade and Kinbote in Pale Fire are writers. But while the appearance of writer-protagonists may result in more self-conscious works, it does not necessarily imply a particularly egocentric author. And while Nabokov's "signature appearance" in a short story like "Spring in Fialta"¹⁴ or the introduction of the artist Rippleton into Pale Fire¹⁵ may make for a sly yet undeniable literary self-consciousness, they serve purposes (such as distinguishing author from narrator) other than simply inflating the author's ego. The appearance of these various Nabokov-substitutes--and Nabokov's cross-references to his own works--can be explained or justified on other grounds than of authorial arrogance.

The evidence of Nabokov's egocentricism available from his works themselves is not found in semi-autobiographical touches, the direct or disguised movement of the author himself into the work, but rather in the techniques which develop the authorial voice, the tone, and the implied author of the works. These techniques will be discussed in more detail shortly, but the extent and brilliant modulation of

such techniques surely lends support to a view of Nabokov as omnipotent and omniscient being. The knowledge, exquisite control, power, and liberty of the author is especially apparent by contrast with the limited consciousnesses of his characters. As several critics have pointed out, Nabokov's many tricks of presentation serve to reveal the author as superior to his work, free from the constricting patterns which his characters must follow. Speaking of the artist figures in Nabokov's work, Appel says, "the involuted design of each novel reveals that these characters all exist in a universe of fiction arrayed around the consciousness of Vladimir Nabokov, the only artist of major stature who appears in Nabokov's work."¹⁶

Of course there is an element in this of self-glorification: give your characters the partial reality of puppets and you will enjoy the full reality of the puppeteer. But the reader who is undaunted by Nabokov's manipulations may well draw some less negative conclusions concerning Nabokov's conception of his role as artist. For Nabokov's works reveal the author not only as narcissist and demon but also as esthetician and epistemologist, teacher and guide. Nabokov's ability to transcend so completely the constrictions which old conventions and expectations impose, to play so successfully with the boundaries of fiction and reality, serves not only as testimony to Nabokov's knowledge and self-knowledge but as an example to his readers of their own capabilities. In exploring his own relationships to his

fictions, Nabokov can lead the alert reader to a new consciousness. Appel makes this point in several places. Concerning the role of parody and self-parody in Nabokov he writes: "The detachment created by parody and self-parody ultimately defines a way of viewing and judging the self. Characters (and their creators) can never objectively observe their own existence, but self-imitation is one way towards self-reflection and an expanded consciousness."¹⁷ He need only have added that the reader of Nabokov's work is nearly forced to share in the process of self-examination.

In a slightly different vein, Appel contends that identity "is a kind of artistic construct" and that if "the artist does indeed embody in himself and formulate in his work the fears and needs and desires of his race, then a 'story' about his mastery of form, his triumph in art is but a heightened emblem of all of our own efforts to confront, order and structure the chaos of life, and to endure, if not master, the demons within and around us."¹⁸ Thus Nabokov's fiction may be taken as emblematic of the Self-Conscious Man. Moreover, Nabokov's evident love of and mastery of man's greatest tool--language itself--bespeaks an underlying humanism; a special sort of humanism, perhaps, but nonetheless a further sign of human triumph (Appel, "Springboard," 137).

But acclaiming the liberating and ennobling qualities which Nabokov's work may possess will not, of course, rebut (though it may temper) charges of authorial sadism and

art-for-art's-sake thinness. "Few of Vladimir Nabokov's books have moved me as much as the best critics said they should," says George Feifer, voicing a rather commonly held feeling; he goes on to call Nabokov's virtuosity "empty" and "nihilistic."¹⁹ Even if such criticisms are less applicable to Nabokov's two masterworks--works in which realism and self-consciousness, human life and reflexive art engage in a relatively balanced dialectic--similar responses are probably unavoidable, at least to some extent, for readers unfamiliar with reflexive novels and their devices. And Nabokov, master that he is, has created a virtual handbook of reflexive devices. We would do well to examine his catalogue, with the caveat that Nabokov's intermingling of techniques is so delicate and complex that our critical approach here can be only a blunt instrument.²⁰

Given Nabokov's predilection for parody, it is not surprising that the Nabokov plot is often a parodic version of the conventions of a familiar genre. The mystery, the detective story, the political novel, the confession, the biography, the critical edition--these are but some of the familiar literary sub-genres around which Nabokov develops his fiction. (A penchant for parody--a feature, as we noted, of modernism--connects Nabokov to that rather familiar ground.) Nabokov is likewise prone to basing his fictions on his own most recent literary endeavors, reflexively "answering" the premises of his prior work.²¹ Lolita is thus a response to his autobiography, Speak, Memory, and Pale

Fire a reply to his critical edition of Eugene Onegin.

In addition to plot and genre parodies (outward-looking reflexive devices), Nabokov also employs that favorite internally-directed device, the work-within-the-work. A good example is Quilty's play The Enchanted Hunters in Lolita. In general, however, Nabokov does not push the work-within-the-work concept to extremes; he prefers to play with the status of fictions or levels of fictionality within his work rather than merely piling up narration within narration and counting his Chinese boxes. His originality and mastery of reflexive techniques is astonishing, but he does not depend for his effects on experimentalistic overkill, the repetition of ad infinitum devices ad nauseam (Poirier, 342-46).

He is similarly quite chary about the use of such "mechanical" infinity-generators as the circular or open-ended plot. At least the surface or ostensible action of his novels is closed. However disturbing the process might be for the reader, Nabokov usually shuts the covers on his book with a flourish of authorial intrusion and dissolving stage sets. Here, for example, is Nabokov's dismissal of the cast in Bend Sinister: Krug, the Nabokov-like protagonist, charged the detestable dictator Paduk (Toad) "and the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages" (216). Lolita and Pale Fire, though perhaps not so blatantly, likewise conclude (if we except

the Index in Pale Fire) with reflexive sign-offs.

While comparatively sparing with a technique like the work-within-the-work, Nabokov is more than generous with his "inset devices," his authorial signatures. For example, Nabokov, with lepidopteristic indulgence, loves to insert butterflies of one fashion or another into his works. The use of the lemniscate in Pale Fire is an extraordinarily subtle instance of a Nabokov inset.²² While his favorite signature may be the butterfly, Nabokov's most significant inset device is that old reflexive standby--the mirror. As Appel puts it, "As a literal image and overriding metaphor, the mirror is central to the form and content of Nabokov's novels" ("Springboard," 107). His mirror images and mirrored plots are suggestive in many of the ways we have mentioned previously: symbolizing differences between primary and secondary reality; paralleling the role of the artist, book, or language in reflecting reality; exploring the nature of identity. The incredibly inter-reflective nature of Pale Fire, for instance, is perfectly signified, as Alter has observed (191), by the glass fashioned by Sudarg of Bokay, with its "infinite regress of multiplied images." To explore the precise nature of the mirror imagery in each of Nabokov's works is much too extensive a project to be undertaken here though.

These signatures and inserted reflectors ultimately reveal the presence of an author working around, through, beyond the characters of a given book. (It should be obvious

by now that such signatures and insets are a deliberate, conscious, intentional intrusion of the author and not merely some unintentional or unavoidable by-product of the writing process.) This presence can be felt more or less strongly in nearly all of Nabokov's fiction, but in his finest works Nabokov avoids overwhelming all of his characters with his authorial presence and, consequently, obviates the criticisms leveled against him that there are "no real characters" in his work,²³ that the moral life of his characters "typically shows no development at all" (Fowler, 56), that he creates "mere manipulated puppets" (Alter, 215), that his characters are "like chessmen" who are there "mainly to reveal the brilliance of the chessplayer and the rules of the game" (Tanner, 48). In other words, Nabokov at his finest avoids the charges of two-dimensionality which can be brought against the characters in so many self-conscious fictions because these characters are made to assume so many purely literary functions which cannot be reconciled with a "real life" existence.

As an example of the literary functions of his characters, we might cite Nabokov's frequent use of the double, that is, a character who mirrors in some way, who parallels and yet opposes another character. Robert Rogers discusses Nabokov at some length in a chapter on the "baroque" double and is particularly enthusiastic about Despair, a Nabokov novel which Rogers calls "a tour de force on the subject."²⁴ In that novel Nabokov creatively transcends the simplistic

patterns of most literary doubling, but, nevertheless, characterization is bound to suffer. In Nabokov's greater works, the Humbert-Quilty and Shade-Kinbote pairs of doubles perform unobtrusively this literary function and their characterizations are not "damaged" by the duty. It might be added that character doubling per se is only a marginally self-conscious technique and that playing with the trite conventions of the double, as Nabokov does in Despair, is much more significantly self-conscious. As a further illustration of similar sorts of anti-realistic literary qualities, there is Nabokov's fondness for anagrams and other language games which, as Alter observes, reaches a pinnacle in Pale Fire (193-95). There the Game of the Name involves numerous anagram-doubles (Kinbote-Botkin, Sudarg-Gradus) and a literary portmanteau name (Goldsworth). Bend Sinister's Krug owes his name to the Russian word for "circle" (Field, 200). Nabokov has some rather consistent gaming habits, habits which serve, of course, to reinforce the sense of the literariness, of the merely linguistic reality of his characters.

Much more could be said (and has been said) about the Nabokov character--about, for instance, the unsavory qualities of a protagonist such as Humbert or Kinbote and their effect on reader identification, that is, the ambiguous responses they provoke in morally-judgmental readers. Some comments have already been made here about the Nabokov-proxy characters and their self-referential functions, so they

need not detain us. Beyond plot and character, novels require settings. Nabokov's settings range from America to Zembla (the "distant northern land" of Pale Fire). Usually they do not stray far from a fairly familiar world, that is, the everyday world we recognize from our own experience and from newspapers and novels--primarily realistic novels. Nabokov does not, with the notable exception of Ada's Antiterra, set his novels far into the realms of the fantastic--however fantastic the activities within them. This is not to argue that Nabokov's cunning reflexive techniques do not remove them to a very special fictional locale but only to suggest that the ostensible settings of his novels are not so transparently unreal that the reader must make a radical leap to achieve his suspension of disbelief. Nabokov's settings thus sufficiently resemble the ordinary world that his various reflexive intrusions do not instantaneously dissolve the credibility of his created worlds. It is one thing to conceive and present a remote universe, obtain a tenuous belief in that realm, and then prick the cartoon bubble which surrounds it; it is another thing to obtain faith in what seems to be a representation of the everyday and then maintain that faith to some degree in the midst of myriad self-conscious incursions. Thus Nabokov's relative conservatism in matters of setting may further help to account for the provocative tension between reality and illusion in his best work.

Nabokov's temporal settings are similarly familiar; as a rule the action takes place in the twentieth century. Though Nabokov plays with numerous fictional conventions, he does not play with myth, that is, he does not join in the contemporary revival, reinvigoration and domestication of mythical characters, a trend associated with artists such as John Barth and John Gardner (Grendel). And Nabokov is nearly as conventional with his manipulation of fictional time as he is with his fictional settings. He may employ occasional flashbacks or a dual time scheme--time of composition and event time in Humbert's confessions, for example--but he does not resort to extravagant experiments in dislocating reader time-sense. It might be added that Nabokov shuns such obvious reflexive devices as typographical gimmickry too. Perhaps Nabokov is really a super-modernist who has learned his lessons from the modernists and formalists but continues to play many of the aspects of the game according to the old rules.

At any rate, Nabokov's accomplishments in the field of self-conscious fictions, aside from the subtlety with which he manages all of his effects, lie principally in the area of what Appel terms the "authorial voice" and in the narrative techniques which make so problematic the status of fictions within his works. Examine Pale Fire for instance. Who has invented whom in that novel? Is the whole novel, Forward through Index, merely the fabrication of a madman, Charles Kinbote? Or is Kinbote actually John Shade's alter

ego, and is King Charles a further figment of Shade's mind? Or must we conclude that, as we knew all along, the fabrications are the author's and that no other resolution of such questions is possible? Numerous critics have explored questions of fact and fictionality which pervade this work of interlocking circularities, and there is no need to restate their analyses and hypotheses at this point. The essential observation is that Nabokov's fiction repeatedly generates such questions.

These questions of fictionality revolve centrally around the authorial voice. All of the reflexive techniques "spiral into the authorial voice," which, as Appel says, "intrudes continually in all of his novels after Despair" ("Introduction," xxxi). These intrusions may involve stopping scenes or providing information to the reader which no character could possibly possess, in other words, any number of reminders that author and reader are staging productions, playing games around the characters and their situations. Coincidence is one of Nabokov's means for establishing this author-reader connection.²⁵ Stegner feels that "the most interesting thing about Nabokov's narrative technique is the way in which he always manages to impress the presence of the implied author on the reader's consciousness without making direct intrusions into the action and without switching into omniscient comment," and he notes that in Nabokov's English novels, except for Bend Sinister, "the point of view is always a character's." Thus, as Stegner

puts it, the author and narrator must "intertwine and separate and intertwine again" (48, 95).

The implied author is likewise evidently intermingling with his show whenever parody and self-parody are present. The importance of parody and self-parody to Nabokov's mode of fiction must be stressed more than it has been heretofore, for as Time magazine indicated, the "essence of Nabokov's creative method is parody" (81). As Appel has shown in many places, parody "provides the main basis for Nabokov's involution." "Only an authorial sensibility," he says, "can be responsible for the texture of parody and self-parody; it is a verbal vaudeville, a series of literary impersonations performed by the author" ("Introduction," xxvii). There is certainly no better examination of the many facets of parody in Nabokov than Appel's article "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody,"²⁶ but Dabney Stuart,²⁷ Page Stegner,²⁸ and others have commented at length on Nabokov's dependence on parody for reflexive effects. But, it must be recalled, parody's intensity of self-conscious effect on the reader is not nearly so great nor so gross as, say, direct authorial intrusion. Particularly given Nabokov's erudition, the possibility of a parodic presentation not being recognized as such (a possibility everpresent with parody, which is so highly dependent on the participation of a reader as knowing as the author) is especially acute. Hence the moderately intense reflexive process of parody may be extensively employed and yet simultaneously

reduced in intensity by an author such as Nabokov.

One of Nabokov's more familiar opinions is that satire is a lesson but parody is a game.²⁹ This sort of expression can only reinforce the idea that Nabokov regards literature as a grand game. He does. Games ought to be fun, and Nabokov, and oftentimes his reader, evidently enjoys his literary games--the puns, the allusions, the verbal texture, the parody, everything. There is an enormous amount of humor in Nabokov. At one point in Lolita, for example, Humbert says of a woman that she "would have given herself to any pathetic creature or fallacy."³⁰ Both author and reader have great fun here--with a pun which reminds us of the book's status as literature by introducing the terminology of literary criticism.

And games ought to challenge the intellect. Nabokov's games, as we have seen, more than challenge the greatest intellects and have led to comments like Booth's that Nabokov's story "The Vane Sisters" is "mere cryptography"³¹ and Alter's that The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is a "conundrum-novel" (182) and to warnings that "Nabokov should not be given over to the pedants and the puzzle-solvers" (Field, 312) and that "puzzle-solving exegesis is absorbing and entertaining, but it is a peripheral function of criticism" (Stegner, Escape, 126).

But games can have an even more serious side, as Nabokov's do. Amid all the literary frolicking, there are some darker moods and deeper themes--some lessons which, if

never the lessons of satire, are lessons nonetheless, for, as the article in Time says, "games can be both creative and profound" (81). Many critics have found a pervasive nostalgia within or behind some Nabokovian worlds, including those of Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada.³² As we might anticipate, this nostalgia is parodied by Nabokov, but it is not entirely exorcised. It is intimately bound up with a concern for time (a concept Nabokov does so much with in Ada) and, ultimately, with death. (In Partial Magic Alter argues that this deepest concern can be found in novels generally.) Such serious concerns may well be absorbed into what Field calls Nabokov's "sole thematic concern"--Art (315). As Poirier warns us, Nabokov's creations are infinitely more complex than simplistic art-life, fiction-reality distinctions suggest (350). Even so, extensively reflexive works of art must necessarily involve the theme of art and express in one way or another a view of what Art is--and Nabokov's works are extensively reflexive if any works of art are.

No critic of Nabokov fails to point out this preoccupation with fiction and art, though there is no unanimity on the precise status of art implied by Nabokov's writings. That is, critics disagree on the relation of Nabokov's created worlds to the "reality" of the everyday world. Are we to concur with Stark that for Nabokov "reality is purely linguistic" (101)? Or is a remark by Tony Tanner that "we live in fictions anyway" a better indication of Nabokov's import (39)? Or do assertions such as Merivale's that

Nabokov will "prick the richly iridescent bubble of artifice with a tiny touch from a world more real," that Nabokov "asserts the primacy of 'reality' over insane phantasy" rightly stress the central importance of "reality" to Nabokov (221)? Perhaps a more balanced combination of emphases is needed--a combination like Alter's contention that "Pale Fire urges the idea of art as the sole way of coping with chaos" (the primacy of Art) but that "the idea is sharply qualified with a philosophical realism by the steady awareness that any poetic invention is, after all, a farrago of words, a delusional system, a form of madness" (the primacy of Reality) (198). This combination of emphases is also found in an extremely penetrating summation by Poirier: "When it comes to living there is nothing in Nabokov other than games and fiction to live by; when it comes to dying or to the passage of time, then all fictions are equally good and equally useless" (350). Given such a difficult interpretive problem, such a formulation is probably as close to judicious as we will come.

For the reader who wishes to make his own interpretations, many of Nabokov's earlier novels might be recommended as introductions to his reflexive world. Each critic has his special favorites, though The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Invitation to a Beheading, and Bend Sinister seem especially well-regarded. Nabokov's finest reflexive creations, though, are Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada. Ada, while certainly a marvelous compendium of reflexive techniques, is

probably too much, particularly for the neophyte. It is of nearly overwhelming length and complexity, with a great richness of literary parody. Appel calls it a "self-contained survey course" ("Ada Described," 171). It is, moreover, less balanced in its dialectic of realism and reflexivity than is Lolita or Pale Fire. Its science-fictional setting, Antiterra, surrenders the believability of a setting like Lolita's America. In Ada we are so obviously in an unreal world that, however engaging that world may become, the intrusion of reflexive techniques will not likely have the same disruptive force that they would in Lolita. Yet there is the Nabokov-substitute, Van Been, whose initials, as Appel points out, are identical with the first two initials of Nabokov's early pseudonym, V. V. Sirin ("Ada Described," 185). There is an intrusive awareness of the reading process; at one point, for example, there is the passage: "The modest narrator has to remind the rereader of all this, because in April (my favorite month), 1869 (by no means a mirabilic year). . . ." ³³ There is a mock review of the book itself which concludes the novel with the typical promotional phrase "and much, much more" (589). There are sections in which the novel is treated as painting (Stark, 77). In other words, Nabokov's whole reflexive gallery is there for the intrepid art lover--which likewise may be read "lover of intrepid art."

Undoubtedly the two Nabokov novels which have claim to greatness are Lolita and Pale Fire. Lolita has enjoyed the

wider public reception; given its notorious subject matter and its translation onto film, this is not surprising. Yet, as was suggested earlier, its critical reputation has been very high. Field calls Lolita "a meeting ground and perfect blending of all the major themes in Nabokov's art" and says the novel "can claim pre-eminence among all his other novels because its central reality remains ever firm and vibrant, even while its diabolically artful reflections play around it" (325, 349). Appel speaks in much the same manner when he says that Lolita's greatness is due "in part" to the fact that "Nabokov is able to have it both ways," that is, give the reader a reflexive novel which is at the same time "a deeply moving yet outrageously comic story, rich in verisimilitude" (Dark Cinema, 61). This balance of modes, the realistic and reflexive, the engaging and the distancing, is rarely attained and is enormously satisfying to the reader at all willing to accept the psychological demands of reflexivity. Thus, for example, Humbert's final meeting with Lo, however undercut by Nabokovian self-consciousness, is still a very poignant scene, and it is so because there are two fully-realized characters and genuine emotions involved, not merely intellectual conjurings. For more details of Nabokov's tricks and games in Lolita--notes to the printer, addresses to the reader, etc.--Carl Proffer's Keys to Lolita and Appel's Annotated Lolita are excellent starting points amid a wealth of valuable criticism.

If Lolita is Nabokov's greatest popular success (and it is probably the most widely read novel of intensely reflexive character since Ulysses), Pale Fire is probably his greatest critical success. As Time puts it, Pale Fire "elicited the high-water mark of Nabokov's critical acceptance" (90). Perhaps this critical acclaim can be accounted for in part by the intriguing "epistemological puzzle" (Stark, 68) which Pale Fire challenges the reader with and perhaps in part by its concentrated reflexive focus on Art per se. Field contends that Pale Fire's "primary pattern" is "a complete and precise portrayal of the artist and his creation" and that the Shade-Kinbote relationship is "the best and truest allegorical portrait of 'the literary process' that we have or are likely to get" (317). From the ironic title, taken from Timon of Athens, to the last entry in the Index, Pale Fire is art about the components of Art (308). Reflexive mirrors and self-replications are "absolutely ubiquitous" and reach an "apotheosis" in this novel (Alter, 187). Anagrams, doubles, parodied literary forms--all are present in concentrated doses. There is mocking self-reference when Nabokov has Kinbote say, "Although I am capable of imitating any prose in the world (but singularly enough not verse--I am a miserable rhymester). . . ." ³⁴

There is a similar touch when Kinbote, disparaging Shade's use of Browning, speaks of "the talent that substitutes the easy allusiveness of literacy for original fancy" (240). (Since allusion is a characteristic Nabokovian technique,

Nabokov may be subtly attacking the critics who would disparage him for it by putting the criticism in Kinbote's hand.) And there is a clever mockery of the omniscience of author and reader: "We can even make out (as, head-on but quite safely, phantom-like, we pass through him, through the shimmering propeller of his flying machine, through the delegates waving and grinning at us) his magenta and mulberry insides" (278). There is no finer intensified course in literary self-consciousness than Pale Fire. Yet there is still room for a gripping story with odd but fascinating characters--fascinating though not appealing, as Lolita does, to a voyeuristic heterosexuality. The realism/reflexivity balance is nearly as satisfying in Pale Fire as in Lolita. Moreover, as Alter suggests, Pale Fire is the darker and deeper of the two books (215). Its worlds of cold, delusion, and death will probably always keep it from attaining the broad popularity of Lolita and thus render it perpetually safe to the hands of the critics--who, it might be supposed, will be well aware of the mockery of their vain critical enterprises which Kinbote embodies.

This may well be the point at which to close this particular critical enterprise, for too much has been said and there is yet too much to say. The essential characteristics of Nabokov should be clear: Nabokov's reflexivity is of a remarkably varied and subtle sort, employing a full range of self-conscious devices, particularly parody. The authorial voice is very important in Nabokov; much of his emphasis is

on the relation of author to work. The game element is prominent in Nabokov and in this the Nabokov reader is likely to feel that he is contending with a Master.

Nabokov's finest works balance realism and reflexivity, and, though Nabokov tends to be an intellectual's novelist, he does not merely perform interesting, intricate experiments but creates lastingly appealing fictional worlds--which is, of course, what great novelists of any persuasion have always done.

Notes

¹ "Literary Fiction and Reality," The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 128.

² Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 180.

³ Nabokov's Dark Cinema (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 245.

⁴ "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. xxvi.

⁵ Reading Nabokov (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 17.

⁶ George Feifer, "Vladimir Nabokov," Saturday Review, 27 Nov. 1976, p. 20.

⁷ "Prospero's Progress," Time, 23 May 1969, pp. 81-90. See Alfred Appel, Jr., and Charles Newman, eds., Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations, and Tributes (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970) for comments by fellow novelists.

⁸ The fact that that other pre-eminent writer of self-conscious fictions, Borges, has not received the prize makes for some interesting discussions of their relative greatness. For some representative comparisons and some comments on their links to each other, see Alfred Appel, Jr., "Ada Described," Nabokov: Criticism, p. 193; Jeffrey Leonard, "In Place of Lost Time: Ada," Nabokov: Criticism, p. 137; Richard Poirier, "The Politics of Self-Parody," Partisan Review, 35 (Summer 1968), 342; "Prospero's Progress," p. 83. For longer pieces linking the two, see Patricia Merivale, "The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, ed. L. S. Dembo (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 209-24, and Tony Tanner's first chapter, "On Lexical Playfields," in his City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), esp. p. 48. See also John O. Stark, The Literature of Exhaustion (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), p. 179, n.1.

⁹ This designation is not used lightly. See Partial Magic, pp. 181, 183; Andrew Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 322; Barbara Heldt Monter, "'Spring in Fialta': The Choice That Mimics Chance," in Nabokov: Criticism, p. 129; Stark, p. 117.

¹⁰ See esp. Carl R. Proffer, Keys to Lolita (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968).

¹¹ Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Dial, 1966), p. 131.

¹² There is a good deal of evidence of Nabokov's manipulative, haughty attitudes outside of his fiction. Feifer refers in his article (p. 26) to Nabokov's reworking of interviews; there seems to be a clear case of an interviewer being caught in a put-on when Nabokov answers a question by Alfred Appel concerning Joyce's "paring his fingernails" line, in "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov," in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, p. 26. Though Stegner (p. 43) argues that Nabokov's nonfictional image-making is beside the point, an intellectually aggressive and manipulative personality seems to lurk behind Nabokov's many masks. Without speculating on his toilet training, we might suspect that Nabokov is overcontrolled.

¹³ "Introduction," Bend Sinister (New York: Time, Inc., 1964), p. xvii.

¹⁴ See Monter, p. 129.

¹⁵ See Alter, p. 188.

¹⁶ "Backgrounds of Lolita," Nabokov: Criticism, p. 39.

¹⁷ "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," Nabokov: The Man and His Work, p. 120.

¹⁸ "Backgrounds of Lolita," p. 39. This is quite a distance from the Freudian concept of artist as neurotic. See Stegner, p. 41.

¹⁹ Feifer makes these remarks on the same page (20) upon which he refers to Nabokov as "the greatest living novelist writing in English." Many critics sense a hollowness at the center of the incredible technical performances of reflexive writers and express their ambivalence about this condition in phrases of qualified admiration for the artists.

²⁰ The best introduction to this handbook is Appel's "Introduction" to The Annotated Lolita.

²¹ The breadth of Nabokov's borrowing from his own work is pointed out by Peter Lubin in "Kickshaws and Motley," Nabokov: Criticism, p. 187.

²² See Alter's very perceptive remarks on this, pp. 189-90.

- 23 Vladislav Khodasevich, "On Sirin," Nabokov: Criticism, p. 97.
- 24 The Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), p. 164.
- 25 On the role of coincidence in Nabokov, see Stark, pp. 96, 112, and Appel, "Introduction," pp. xxvii-xxviii.
- 26 The complete article in Nabokov: The Man and His Work, pp. 106-43.
- 27 "Laughter in the Dark: Dimensions of Parody," Nabokov: Criticism, pp. 72-95.
- 28 "Editor's Introduction," Nabokov's Congeries, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Viking, 1968).
- 29 Appel, "An Interview," Nabokov: The Man and His Work, p. 36.
- 30 Lolita (New York: Putnam's, 1955), p. 260.
- 31 Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 301.
- 32 See esp. Poirier, pp. 347-48.
- 33 Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 19.
- 34 Pale Fire (New York: Putnam's, 1962), p. 289.

II. The British Branch: Beckett to Murdoch

Chapter titles may be misleading conveniences, and certainly there is cause to believe that the title of this chapter is a case in point. How can Samuel Beckett, with all of his French connections, be considered British? Well, British is, after all, not exclusively English, and Beckett, like his fellow expatriate Joyce, is one of a long line of Irish writers who have contributed enormously to British letters. Moreover, Beckett often translates his own works from the French and can be said to be working in two cultures. Since it also helps to have a literary heavyweight to help balance this chapter against the previous one on Nabokov, for our purposes Beckett becomes British--even as he reminds us of the international scope of literary reflexivity.

Best known for Waiting for Godot, the quintessentially contemporary play, Beckett is today regarded as one of the grand old men of post-modern writing. J. D. O'Hara called him "the foremost living writer of drama and fiction" in 1970,¹ and such accolades ordinarily come only as the result of talent coupled with the passage of time. Alter links him to Nabokov as one of the successful "elder statesmen" of the self-conscious novel.² To indicate just how "elder" he has become, there is the assertion by Jerome Klinkowitz that for "the newer fictionists, Beckett is as traditional as Joyce."³

Obviously such an ancient figure will become quite familiar and a great body of exegetic material will develop around him. For example, when Alter refers to "knowing guides to bleak ends of despair" (219), we have no difficulty identifying Beckett as the object of the remark; his pessimism is well-known. His ties to the Existentialists are similarly well-known, and he is often associated with the styles of dramatists such as Artaud, Ionesco, and Pirandello (O'Hara, "Introduction," 2). More importantly for this study, Beckett's ties with self-conscious fiction, the anti-novel, and the nouveau roman have been well-established for some time. In 1962 Ruby Cohn was saying that the "'New Novel' in France today is often said to date from 1951" with the publication of Beckett's Molloy.⁴ According to John Fletcher, Christine Brook-Rose, "as early as 1958," had found that the novels of Beckett "fitted with surprising ease into the tradition of the anti-novel in European literature."⁵ For several reasons Fletcher feels that "Beckett's most striking affinity is with Laurence Sterne" (95)--a conclusion quite in keeping with the historical background we have already established. Our purpose here then is to concentrate on Beckett's fiction--and, as Fletcher says, "his fiction, the most vital part of his work, still has very little following among the general reading public" (145)--to identify the self-conscious techniques and concerns it displays.

Beckett's whole body of work illustrates remarkably well some of the points made in earlier chapters concerning the philosophical tendencies in reflexive literature. Beckett has, of course, been extensively analyzed in terms of his formal philosophical qualities, having, as he has, "ranged freely among the writings of many philosophers" (Fletcher, 137). There is no need to dwell on the nihilism, doubt, and despair found in his works, but some other attributes have a more direct bearing on literary reflexivity. Certainly Beckett is the great exemplar of the age's epistemologically-inclined artist. He is forever bound up with those twin strands of the problem of knowledge--the self and logic. How does one know? What can one know? Who am I? Frederick J. Hoffman has one of the chapters in his Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self entitled "The Elusive Ego."⁶ Throughout Beckett's fiction the hunt for the ego goes on. The pattern of regress it follows is found in all reflexive systems. As O'Hara describes it, it is the familiar "infinite regression" of the self turned inward: "What perceives that self? A deeper self, which, when itself perceived, becomes the object of yet another self's perception, and so on down to what Beckett calls 'the ideal core of the onion.' It's an old puzzle . . . but it has not lost its point or pain with age" (14). An old puzzle indeed and one quite fitting for a solipsistic century. As Ihab Hassan says of Godot, Beckett gives us "a sense of experience that is entirely private."⁷

So we watch Beckett's characters search and perhaps we see ourselves searching likewise. But there are significant literary as well as philosophical repercussions to all this. One rather unstartling literary result is that Beckett's works leave the labor of interpretation to baffled readers. But Beckett goes far beyond this toward an almost compulsive destruction of the bases of fiction, producing a self-negating fiction at the opposite pole from the exuberant inventions of some other dealers in reflexivity. Hugh Kenner discusses Beckett in connection with unreliability, the relation of the novel form to empiricism, and the Cretan Liar paradox (that is, the paradox of the Cretan who claims that all Cretans are liars). Kenner says that "Beckett, on the whole, takes Thackeray's hint; it is, indeed, all made up, and, gripping as it is, we aren't to rely on it. Alas, the man who makes it up is made up too, may even be making himself up."⁸ Wolfgang Iser has noted other logically infinite regresses arising from Beckett's method. Iser says, for example, that "the attempt to reveal the basis of fiction through fiction itself means that the process of revelation can never end."⁹ (This is reminiscent of Tristram Shandy's trouble catching up with his story.) And Iser also contends that Beckett "would like to get to the point where he is only writing about the fact that he is writing" (266). Here (though the dead-end involution does not belong exclusively to Beckett) we reach an extreme case: the process operating solely and immediately on itself. While Iser argues that

such fictions can not be destructive of themselves (268), Hassan contends just the opposite: that such fictions move toward ultimate silence, toward "an empty canvas," through their process of "radical irony," that is, their ironic self-denial. "This reflective technique," he says, "was probably developed by Beckett; it was certainly perfected by him. The conclusion of his latest novel, How It Is, is that the book is really about 'How It Wasn't'" (12-13). Cohn suggests a slightly different case: "The modern man of letters who turns against letters was not fathered by Beckett, but no other modern writer--not Proust or Gide or Joyce or Mann--has integrated the act of creation so consistently and ironically into his own creation" (296). Whoever might be named the father of the technique, fiction has seldom been more clearly exposed as falsehood by its confidence-man author.¹⁰

An examination of specific techniques in specific novels by Beckett will reveal a thoroughgoing reflexivity. His trilogy--Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable--is a useful starting point because it contains works independently significant as well as generally illustrative.¹¹ Certainly the three novels illustrate the reflexivity of subject matter; as Ruby Cohn says, "Molloy shows the making of the artist, Malone Dies the artist making, and The Unnamable the artist's reflections upon art and the artist" (118). This subject-matter reflexivity is particularly pronounced in Malone Dies, since it is distinguished, as O'Hara points

out, "by its attention to the subject of writing itself." Malone, the protagonist-narrator, "approaches the task professionally . . . commenting professionally on such topics as the relation between art and life and between author and character, and pointing up the absurdity of it all."¹² But, as Edith Kern's article "Moran-Molloy: The Hero as Author" stresses, the author-writing-about-author circularity is often present in other of Beckett's works too.¹³

With or without writing as subject matter, the Beckett protagonist-narrator will be far from the Victorian omniscient narrator in world view, much more self-conscious as narrator than his distant nineteenth-century relatives usually were. (This is not to say that the narrating voice in the nineteenth century could not be extremely intrusive at times.) Beckett's narrators are also at a considerable remove from the effaced, omniscient narrators in Joyce. Beckett's exposed and ignorant self-conscious narrator becomes a vital component in his novels. Fletcher describes the process: "By Molloy (c. 1947) the device of the self-conscious narrator has become an essential ingredient of the plot" (91). In Malone Dies "the self-conscious narrator comes fully into his own;" the protagonist "watches himself, writing, remembering, etc." (92) in obsessive self-observance.

Discussion of self-observing, book-writing narrators naturally raises the question of autobiography. "In both Beckett and Sterne," says Fletcher, "we have several layers

of personality: the real author himself, his fictional surrogates (Malone, Tristram), and their fictional creatures." Beckett enters his novels "just as Sterne does not hesitate to put his public persona into Tristram's narrative" (92). But critics disagree about the extent of the autobiographical elements in Beckett. Hassan calls Beckett and Henry Miller "autobiographical writers, poets of the Self" (212). O'Hara mentions that Sapo, a character in Malone Dies, is described by Beckett's narrator as having eyes which "resemble those of a gull"--just as Beckett's eyes do. "They make us conscious," says O'Hara, "of Sapo as created not only by Malone and Beckett but also out of Malone and Beckett." O'Hara also refers to the work's "other autobiographical elements" ("Structure," 66). But Cohn says that "Beckett's 'I's' are only incidentally Sam Beckett. . . . Even as Dante's fictional 'I' approaches the writing sinner, Beckett's successive 'I's' approach the strife-torn writer. In each case, the profound importance of the work is not autobiographical but paradigmatic" (165). Thus the recurrent problem of defining and disentangling autobiography appears in acute form in the analysis of Beckett. (Given the generally absurd incidents in the novels, Cohn is probably right in suggesting that Beckett's significance is not found in minor autobiographical detail but in compelling autobiographical situation.)

Under the weight of autobiography and philosophy the traditional boundaries of "character" completely collapse in

Beckett. It is hard to see characters as independent, autonomous beings when, as Cohn put it, "Beckett's art-lies, his fictions, know each other, if they know anything at all" (296). And the characters of The Unnamable "are so alike as to be interchangeable, and the hero occasionally underlines this similarity by grouping them together with himself" (125). As with character, so with form and plot; that is, Beckett breaks down the traditional boundaries. But, as O'Hara explains, Beckett works through the traditional in the destruction of the conventions: "The narrative shapes that Beckett employs--the detective story pursuit in Molloy, for instance, and the writer-at-work in Malone Dies--are so conventional that the reader is never tempted to take them with complete seriousness. They give a form to the material they contain, but the reader repeatedly finds himself looking through that form rather than at it." Beyond this, "the unrealistic improbability or impossibility of the narrating itself in all three novels preserves the recognizable formal qualities of the first-person voice while discouraging us from any 'realistic' credulity." O'Hara concludes that, "so far as the novels of the trilogy have recognizable forms, we can see Beckett simultaneously imposing and undercutting these forms" ("Introduction," 19).

The simultaneous imposition and undercutting of forms is the modus operandi of parody, an element of Beckett's work which has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.¹⁴ Cohn emphasizes the connection between parody and anti-form which

develops in Beckett: "Within each literary genre, Beckett undermines that very genre--fictional formulae in the fiction and dramatic conventions in the drama. By mocking the literary form within that form, Beckett questions the boundary between art and life, between fiction and fact" (298). Cohn also emphasizes how Beckett--in contrast to Nabokov's fondness for playful parody--darkens and dispirits his fiction with insistent irony: "Of all Beckett's comic techniques none is more prevalent than irony" which "in the trilogy is often ambivalent, usually bitter and always anguished" (136).

As if these many self-conscious devices were not enough, Beckett also learned some things from his mentor Joyce about stylistic reflexivity--the form and appearance of the prose. In The Unnamable, as Cohn tells us, "sentences run to pages in length, are composed of breathless, mutually interactive phrases, and render difficult all isolation of language from event" (121). Beckett's prose can be difficult, though it is not Dadaist.

The real difficulty with Beckett usually lies not in the obscurity of his prose--he can write with remarkable clarity--but with comprehending the situations his simple declarative sentences convey. Beckett is forever, as O'Hara puts it, "leaving us no level of understanding on which we may perch with confidence" ("Introduction," 23). He persists in toying with the reader, retracting what he has just given. This process of perpetual denial may be found on both small and large scales. In Molloy we get the

following: "A little dog followed him, a pomeranian I think, but I don't think so" (11). A similar retraction occurs on the grand scale when Beckett begins Part II of Molloy so: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (92). He concludes Part II and the novel this way: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (176). The whole section is thus one great self-cancelling falsehood--presuming that we can accept the retraction in good faith, a rather risky presumption. As always with Beckett, we are left finally with the deep reflexivity of the troubled "I" and the problem of fiction--left, as Cohn says, "with a single protagonist in the generalized human situation, an 'I' in quest of his 'I' through fiction, who is in quest of his 'I' through fiction, who, etc." (299).

From the gloomy games of Beckett's France to the sensuous games of Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria is in many ways a longer journey than the mapmaker might show. Yet, at the same time, Beckett and Durrell are related by more than expatriation. Their self-conscious constructs serve almost as outposts on opposite borders of the realm of reflexivity. The elements of Durrell's reflexivity have been recognized for some time. The Alexandria Quartet is, according to Robert Scholes, "a portrait of the artist, a Künstlerroman, about a character in a book who is writing a book in which he is a character."¹⁵ Scholes also calls the Quartet "an

esthetic allegory, mainly, about ways of storytelling" (30). Walter Allen contends that "from one point of view its subject is precisely the writing of a novel."¹⁶ The three novelist characters in the Quartet produce considerable discussion of novel-writing--and they are not the only characters who comment on novels from within the novel. As Allen says, "the whole work abounds in descriptions, even prescriptions, of the kind of novel the Alexandria Quartet is" (284). Here, for example, are some comments by Justine in Justine: "Now if I wrote I would try for a multi-dimensional effect in character, a sort of prism-sightedness. Why should not people show more than one profile at a time?"¹⁷ A "multi-dimensional effect in character" is, of course, one major aim of the Quartet. When Arnauti writes that he "maintains for example that real people can only exist in the imagination of an artist strong enough to contain them and give them form" (Justine, 75), it is difficult for the reader not to reflect, at least momentarily, on the "reality" of Arnauti and the imagination of Durrell which contains him.

There are other ways in which Durrell is reflexive. The mirror, as we have noted, is a symbol which often hangs in and around reflexive fiction, and the Quartet, as Scholes puts it, "is alive with mirrors" (22). There are, for instance, the "multiple mirrors at the dressmaker's" where Justine makes her remark (Justine, 27). Leon Edel picks up the symbol: "What Durrell achieves that is different from

his predecessors is to make us aware of the presence of mirrors all around us."¹⁸ These mirrors play an integral part in Durrell's treatment of the Art/Life boundary and in expressing his relativistic world-view. Scholes emphasizes the Art/Life boundary: "Appearance and reality are continually confused, and the line between life and art continually blurred" (22). Others, like Allen (284-85), Alter (157), and G. S. Fraser,¹⁹ concentrate on the relativistic qualities. To the extent that Durrell's mirrors focus on his art they add to the reflexivity of his work.

This reflexivity certainly qualifies the Alexandria Quartet as an anti-novel, but Scholes makes the interesting point that it is an anti-novel with a difference. He claims that it "is an anti-novel in the same sense as Cervantes's work was an anti-romance. Both men were faced with a constricting literary tradition and revolted against it" (19). Durrell revolted by returning to romance, and the realistic tradition was thus assaulted both by his reflexive and by his neo-romantic inclinations.

Durrell is often compared with well-known figures in the history of self-conscious fiction, particularly with Joyce and Proust, as well as being linked to Beckett. Allen calls the Quartet "an experimental novel possessing affinities both with Joyce and with Proust" (284). Edel cites Proust, Joyce, and Gide (180). Fraser, calling Durrell a "lyrical comedian," says Beckett is "a writer much in phase with his time" while Durrell is "out of phase with it" (134).

Scholes manages to embrace all four writers when he says that "Samuel Beckett is the heir of Joyce" while "Durrell is the heir of Proust" (20). Does Durrell really belong in the illustrious company of Proust and Joyce? Probably not. As Allen puts it, "It is his misfortune that he cannot stand comparison with them" (286). Allen goes on to fault the "easy, florid romanticism" of the Quartet, its amorality, its "decadence," and the superficiality of its characterization (286-87). Durrell's prose is unquestionably overripe. The real question is the meaning of such faults for the student of reflexive literature. Scholes feels that Durrell manages a "peculiar combination" of the "primitive" and the "sophisticated" (18). If we take "primitive" to mean that the storyteller is engrossed in his story and "sophisticated" to mean that the storyteller is self-conscious and capable of stepping aside from his narration, then we can see why Alter is not enthusiastic about the Quartet, why he sees Durrell's combination as unsuccessful. Alter contrasts Nabokov's Pale Fire with Justine so that we may "see the difference between a novel where fictional self-consciousness is continuous and one where it is episodic," episodic because of the numerous sections "in which Durrell's own enjoyment of kitschy prattle tends to extinguish his critical consciousness of the problematic relationship between literature and reality" (209). (For similar reasons Thackeray fails to meet Alter's standards of thoroughgoing and undeviating self-consciousness.) But if

the Alexandria Quartet is not a great work of reflexive literature, it is still an interesting example of the varieties of such literature produced by British writers in the post-war period.

Durrell crossbreeds reflexivity with romanticism. In The French Lieutenant's Woman John Fowles mixes his reflexivity with . . . what? A return to Victorianism? No, not with that, but with the clever adoption of some Victorian conventions of fiction. Of course Fowles does not accept these conventions naively; he does not simply resurrect the Victorian novel by reviving its techniques. Yet throughout The French Lieutenant's Woman the reader will find long stretches of old-fashioned, unreflexive narrative with old-fashioned plotting and characterization to entertain him--if he is not sufficiently delighted by the reflexive intrusions. And this novel apparently was enormously entertaining to a lot of readers, topping the bestseller lists for months as it did. The French Lieutenant's Woman vividly demonstrates that self-consciousness need not mean obscurity and dullness, as long as that self-consciousness is but a piquant sauce and not the main course.

Fowles blends his reflexive sauce of several ingredients. For example, he sets up a distance between us and the story by quite explicitly maintaining a twentieth-century view of the nineteenth-century events he brings before us. He makes numerous references which preclude any mistaking of the story for a nineteenth-century production.

In one allusion to our world he calls a character named Mrs. Poulteney "an inhabitant of the Victorian valley of the dolls."²⁰ This tension of centuries is a fairly unobtrusive element which might either go unseen altogether or be seen as but one part of a central reflexive device--the self-conscious narrator.

Fowles' "ostentatious narrator" (Alter, 30) serves more than one purpose. To some extent this narrator revives the convention of the comfortable first-person storyteller and thereby marks a contrast with modern "objective narration." This narrator also moves beyond mere revivals to make quite evident the novelist's power to control his work and to play with its conventions--something which his Victorian predecessors would not have done. When, for instance, Fowles has his narrator say "I will not make her teeter on the window-sill" (93), he playfully exposes powers ordinarily disguised. "But let us leave Sam and Mary" says our narrator (256), and the modulation is patently and exquisitely trite. And when he says "let us leave Charles for a paragraph" (437), well, Fowles is having obvious reflexive fun.

Interruptions by the narrator range from an aside like an "I am overdoing the exclamation marks" (208) to extended digressions, in the old manner, on relevant topics. (See Chapter 35 on chivalry and sex.) Fowles scatters throughout the novel several digressions which deal directly with the problems of writing the Victorian novel or The French Lieutenant's Woman itself. In Chapter 13 Fowles interrupts his

narrative for a few pages and says, "This story I am telling is all imagination. I am writing in a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God" (95). Much later, near the end of the book, we get another bit of advice on the novel: "It is a time-proven rule of the novelist's craft never to introduce any but very minor new characters at the end of a book" (461). Chapter 55 comprises the most interesting and extended such digression; it is summarized by Alter (xiii). Its epigraph, not really surprisingly, comes from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass--the same passage cited by Appel.²¹ In this chapter Fowles, not very convincingly disguised, steps into his creation (for a time in the third person), and, while ostensibly trying to determine what to do with Charles, his protagonist, exhibits the delightful ambiguity of a character simultaneously inside and outside a novel. (He visits his creation directly, in the third person, again in Chapter 61.) Fowles affirms his power to control his narrative most overtly in the matter of alternative endings. In Chapter 45 he brings "this fiction to a thoroughly traditional ending" (339) and then we find a further sixteen chapters before the final close. This playing with plot is not frivolous. Fowles rightly and self-consciously says that "we are all novelists, that is, we have a habit of writing fictional futures for ourselves, although perhaps today we incline more to put ourselves into a film" (339). We should remember, too, that Fowles' multiple endings are

"realistic" in a sense; that by presenting them he is attempting to incorporate into his fiction the openness he finds in human life.

Fowles' blend of the philosophical, the conventional and the humorous is, to reiterate, enormously successful. Like Nabokov in Lolita, Fowles astutely balances straight narration and self-conscious comment. Unlike Nabokov--and this may help explain the greater esteem accorded the older novelist--Fowles plays his games entirely aboveboard so that even a beginner cannot fail to see the author's hand. Where Nabokov hides, Fowles exposes; where Nabokov tricks, Fowles explains. But if Fowles must be classed as a popularizer rather than a pioneer of novelistic self-consciousness, we can only wish for more such popularizers.

One further name might be placed on the list of significant contemporary British novelists writing in the self-conscious tradition: the name of Iris Murdoch. But the qualifying modal is important, for the varied work of Miss Murdoch does not fit comfortably into any simple categories. There are elements and passages and aspects of the reflexive, yes, but Murdoch is far from the overt fun of Fowles and the determined bleakness of Beckett. She seems only tangentially associated with the highly reflexive movement of these other writers. Her corner of the self-conscious map is a strange one.

One of the best short guides to that corner is found in William Van O'Connor's The New University Wits.²² O'Connor

discusses the Existentialistic qualities of Murdoch's Under the Net and the novel's ties to Beckett and Queneau; he examines the "allegory-in-wonderland quality" of The Flight from the Enchanter (63) and its resemblance to The Tempest; he considers her attempts to oppose the formal, self-contained Symbolist novel with contingency and lack of closure in her own works (68-70). Discussing A Severed Head, O'Connor concludes his piece with the following remarks: "Her characters are interesting puppets and interesting symbols, and she can make them dance or place them erect in an eerie green light. An intellectual game is going on. There is no sweat, no anguish, and no real love making. All of these are illusions. The real game is between Miss Murdoch and her reader, not between the reader and the characters. This is her strength and her limitation" (74).

Obviously there are plenty of elements of the reflexive tradition waiting to be explored here: direct ties to Beckett, allegory and anti-realism, Symbolism and things-in-themselves, puppetry and characterization. It is an interesting thing about Symbolism, for example, that, while Walter Allen is calling Miss Murdoch "the leading symbolist novelist of the period" (282), O'Connor is asserting her differences with that movement. One senses a nice theoretical path spreading before one, a path leading to endless fields of verbiage about reflexivity and the Symbolist's hermetically-sealed fiction versus reflexivity and fiction's approximation of "real life" through lack of closure.²³

Then there is the matter of Murdoch's "interesting puppets," her characters, which O'Connor elsewhere speaks of as "Comic grotesques" (69-70). Here again we approach those characters in self-conscious fiction in whom the reader can have only limited primary belief because of authorial manipulation which exposes their status as characters. Finally there is the matter of the writer playing games with her readers, a practice featured in many self-conscious works. Scholes analyzes this aspect of her novel The Unicorn. He says that she "uses the conventions of soft-boiled English mystery fiction" and that "the conventions provide a frame of reference for the reader . . . but they also provide material for ironic or parodic scrutiny by the author, who manipulates the conventions with a certain amount of disdain." Murdoch is "redirecting the alert reader . . . to a more abstract and philosophical level" (110-11). Scholes also notices that a very familiar reflexive move appears at the conclusion of The Unicorn. A major character, Marian, sees herself "as entering a 'tale' which has materialized around her: a tale in which nothing happens at random. This is, of course, strictly true in an ironic way. Marian is a character in a tale by Iris Murdoch, who is certainly the God of this little fictional universe--a very careful God, who will let nothing happen at random" (120). Again we find an obvious element of reflexivity.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to place Iris Murdoch unequivocally in the ranks of those who write reflexive

fiction. Her primary concern is almost always philosophy or something else other than the exposure of her art. The reflexive intensity is lacking. We find no intrusive narrators and seldom find writer-characters concerned with writing. Joyce, Huxley, and Gide might never have existed. As O'Connor says, Murdoch is like many of her compatriots in being "largely indifferent to the experiments of the twenties and thirties" (148). The bits and pieces of reflexivity are there all right, but they are parts of a different puzzle.

Somewhat puzzling too is the relative scarcity of intense reflexivity in the contemporary British novel, in contrast to the robust development of its American counterpart.²⁴ The heritage of Joyce, Gide and Huxley is, after all, available to both literatures--and to the British more directly. Yet to make it presentable we have had to stuff this chapter with Beckett and trim it with Murdoch. The imbalance between the American and the British literatures is also evident in Alter's study: of major contemporary practitioners of the reflexive mode he lists five Americans and only a single Briton--John Fowles (219).

We can only speculate about the reasons for this American predominance, but there are several plausible suggestions. For one, the American critic and researcher may have an understandable bias toward the homegrown. This concentration on the native literature may slight similar activity elsewhere. On the other hand, the perceptions of

critics may have little to do with the matter. Perhaps the contemporary British novel is reacting to earlier experiments by grounding itself in social reality, in the many varieties of Lucky Jim for example, and ignoring the subject of writing per se. Thus, as the literary artists look outward, we would find social and class consciousness precluding literary self-consciousness.

Then there is the Two Literary Traditions hypothesis which suggests that American novelists have always been inclined toward literary self-consciousness. The Americans, so the argument would run, have--for a complex variety of historical reasons--tended toward the romantic, the symbolic, the allegorical, and the fabulous, while the British have been addicted to the commonsensical and the realistic. The Americans, drawn toward the Idea and the Ideal, have thus found it comparatively easy to deal with worlds which the reader need not identify with the everyday reality surrounding him. Other versions of the Two Traditions hypothesis would stress the Americans' fondness for questioning the old and seeking the new, contending that literary experimentalism is but another facet of the Americans' nouveau-everything philosophy, or would emphasize the familiar notion of the isolated American, contending that lack of a stable, comfortable society has increased his alienation and predisposed him to an introspection which is reflected in his fiction.

Of course, it may be that there are simply more American writers of all sorts than there are British writers and that the imbalance can be explained statistically. And who knows what combination of speculations might strike nearest the truth? It might then be wise to put up our speculative shafts and look more closely at the particulars of our next target, contemporary American writers of reflexive novels.

Notes

¹ "Introduction," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 3.

² Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 225.

³ Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 2.

⁴ Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1962), p. 114.

⁵ Samuel Beckett's Art (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), p. 82. The Brooke-Rose article, "Samuel Beckett and the Anti-Novel," appeared in the December 1958 issue of London Magazine, pp. 38-46.

⁶ Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962).

⁷ The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 19.

⁸ Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians (Boston: Beacon, 1962), p. 69.

⁹ The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. 262.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the endless disillusionings in Beckett's novels, see Dieter Wellershoff's piece, "Failure of an Attempt at De-Mythologization: Samuel Beckett's Novels," from Der Gleichgültige (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1963), trans. by Martin Esslin and rpt. in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 92-107.

¹¹ Specific page references to the three novels will be made from the convenient Grove Press collection, Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (New York: Grove, 1965).

- 12 "About Structure in Malone Dies," in Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 68.
- 13 Perspective, 11 (Autumn 1959), rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations, pp. 35-45.
- 14 See the Jean-Jacques Mayoux piece, "Samuel Beckett and Universal Parody," from Vivants Piliers (Paris: Editions René Julliard, 1960), trans. by Barbara Bray and rpt. in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 77-91.
- 15 The Fabulators (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 18.
- 16 The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States (New York: Dutton, 1965), p. 284.
- 17 Justine (New York: Dutton, 1958), p. 27.
- 18 The Modern Psychological Novel (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), p. 190.
- 19 Lawrence Durrell: A Critical Study (New York: Dutton, 1968), esp. p. 135.
- 20 The French Lieutenant's Woman (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p. 92.
- 21 Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., "Introduction," The Annotated Lolita, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. xxiii-xxiv.
- 22 The New University Wits and the End of Modernism (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1963).
- 23 Richard Poirier complains about the tediousness of such approximations in Murdoch's The Red and the Green in "The Politics of Self-Parody," Partisan Review, 35 (Summer 1968), 345; my own feeling is quite the opposite, that is, that Miss Murdoch has written a very entertaining but conventionally shaped novel which is neither tedious nor intellectually devious. Of course, novels can be underread as well as overread.
- 24 Susan Sontag confirms this scarcity by remarking to Joe David Bellamy--in an interview in his New Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 115--that in England "the novel has remained extremely conservative."

III. The Americans: Barth, Pynchon, Vonnegut, and Others

Of the five Americans listed by Robert Alter as representative current practitioners of the reflexive mode of fiction,¹ two--Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme--may be treated for our purposes principally as writers of short fiction in spite of their novelistic efforts. Two others--Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.--will be treated in this chapter purely as novelists. The fifth practitioner, John Barth, belongs squarely in both categories. When it comes to the production and discussion of self-conscious fiction, the well-rounded Barth is the central figure in contemporary America. He is, as Gerhard Joseph says, "one of the two or three most aware, most technically experimental writers of acknowledged power at work in America today."² He is also well-known and has been analyzed in many respects (in connection with the anatomy, Black Humor, the Absurd, and so forth), so that there is no need to build a case for considering him and no need for exhaustive analyses of his substantial body of work.

Barth serves quite conveniently as a home-grown counterpart to Vladimir Nabokov. Indeed it is possible to see Nabokov as a sort of Bach of the reflexive novel, a master of the intricately polyphonic, and Barth as a sort of Beethoven, pounding away at his self-conscious themes. (The analogy should not be pushed very far.) Barth may also serve as a convenient watershed in contemporary reflexive

fiction, as the last great representative of the literature of exhaustion that he identified.³ At least this is the contention often reiterated by Jerome Klinkowitz, a critic highly attuned to the writing of the 1970's, who sees Barth and Pynchon as the old guard of the avant-garde and Barthelme, Vonnegut, and company as the under-recognized new wave.⁴ Yet if Klinkowitz overstates the differences between Barth and other, often younger, writers, he nonetheless reinforces Barth's centrality in post-modern American reflexive fiction.

Additionally, as essayist and interviewee, Barth has helped to create the critical context in which he is judged. His widely known and controversial essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" is called "seminal" by Klinkowitz (Disruptions, 4) and, by John O. Stark, "one of the most provocative recent essays on literature, codifying for the first time an important school of writing."⁵ It defined the terms for much of the discussion of literary reflexivity which followed. By promoting Borges, and to a lesser extent Nabokov and Beckett, Barth established the illustrious company which he was to try to keep. He also touched on many of the topics we have found associated again and again with reflexive literature: the death of the novel, the supposed decadence of literary self-consciousness, the philosophical implications of the infinite regress, the story-within-the-story and the reflexivity of form. Thus, self-conscious in nonfiction as well as fiction, Barth has, as Stark puts it, "publicly

demonstrated more awareness" than Borges or Nabokov "that he belongs to the Literature of Exhaustion" (172).

In interviews he has further voiced many of the attitudes and concerns of the reflexive novelist. His anti-realistic bent was evident as early as his remark in 1965 that "God wasn't too bad a novelist, except he was a Realist."⁶ In the same interview the typical response of the writer of reflexive fictions to the idea of putting social criticism into literature appears: "I can't," says Barth, "in fiction get very interested in such things" (13). As "The Literature of Exhaustion" suggests, he has an informed awareness of the tradition in which he has placed himself; Borges, Beckett, and Nabokov, his "very favorite writers," are "echoing a kind of experimentation that has been going on since the beginning of the century and harks back to such works as Tristram Shandy."⁷

He is more than aware of the problems and promises the reflexive mode presents. When asked by an interviewer if he thought that there was a basic conflict between "anti-illusionistic" writing and the storytelling impulse, he replied, "No, I don't think there's a conflict, only a kind of tension, which can be used. When we talk about it this way it all sounds dreadfully self-conscious, involuted, vertiginous, dull. In the actual execution it doesn't have to be that at all; it can be charming, entertaining; it can even be illusionist" (Bellamy, 10). He continues by saying that, as a reader, "while there are lots of pleasures,

including the pleasure of vertigo, I myself like a kind of fiction that, if it's going to be self-conscious, is at least comic about its own self-consciousness. Otherwise, self-consciousness can be a bloody bore" (11). As a writer, and in spite of the abundant reflexivity in his fiction, Barth says "the problem is how to be conscious of what one's doing, which can be a fruitful thing, without being in an inhibitory way self-conscious about what one's doing--in other words, to avoid being paralyzed by your own knowledge" (13). Self-awareness has not protected Barth from criticism however.

Some of the criticisms of Barth arise from his individual, idiosyncratic failings, but others must be laid in part to the mode in which he is working. Barth, who employs and illustrates so many aspects of literary self-consciousness, becomes a textbook case, *The Complete Reflexive Writer*. As a good representative, he is also a good target. Hence, when Alter calls Barth "an impressively original writer as well as an embarrassingly puerile one" (225), we suspect this remark reflects Barth's personal abilities and achievements. But when Klinkowitz, no Barth enthusiast, writes that "Barth has suffered an exhaustion (if not castration) of the imagination" (*Disruptions*, 10), we must be conscious that these words are not only a harsh criticism of Barth personally but are also a consequence of the critic's repudiation of one major department of the reflexive school, of those whose self-consciousness turns explicitly and parodically to the

literary past. As Klinkowitz builds his case for a new breed of writer, for a new philosophy of and attitude toward reflexivity, Barth is made whipping boy. And when Richard Poirier speaks of his "confining, prolonged and often exasperating experience"⁸ reading Giles Goat-Boy (and it is easy to sympathize after plowing through that work or The Sot-Weed Factor), we should note how many self-parodic novelists Poirier finds to have succumbed along with Barth to the tendency to compulsively elaborate self-conscious messages--a tendency which spells boredom for readers. It seems that the mode itself holds some pitfalls from which not even its most self-aware devotees always escape.

The qualities of characterization in reflexive fiction are so inherent in the mode that Barth cannot reasonably be faulted for the characterization in his later works. The so-called faults come with the territory. When Stark says, for example, that Barth's characters are "flat and stereotyped" (160) or Joseph says that "his characters frequently do not have much emotional depth" and that they "cannot possess the achieved sense of clearly observed humanity, the degree of characterological 'originality,' that one feels in the great characters of realistic fiction or even in the parodic characters of the early novel" (30), the descriptions have a familiar ring, particularly after the Schulz article.⁹ Schulz also discusses at length the doubling of characters in the contemporary novel; it is therefore no surprise to find Stark speaking of Barth's doubles and of

doubles generally as "another typical strategy of the Literature of Exhaustion" (159). This same sort of thing might be done with Barth's plots or narrative methods; Barth's work fits the general patterns of the reflexive mode extraordinarily well. The erudition, the parody, the fantasy, the sense of game, the philosophy at the expense of psychology--as Stark puts it, Barth represents "a classic variety of the Literature of Exhaustion" (158).

Barth is not simply representative, of course; he is a unique reflexive artist with individual predilections and special affinities. For one thing, as Stark points out, Barth "uses fewer allusions than Borges and Nabokov, and unlike them he alludes more often to history than to literature" (133); for another, he has, unlike Borges, "little interest in dreams" (146). On the other hand, he has an enormous interest in myth. Certain characters and motifs based on his personal interests will thus appear regularly in Barth's works. For example, Klinkowitz observes that "the writer seeking immortality" is a "figure in most of Barth's work" (Disruptions, 8). In works such as Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera Barth's obsession with the nature of narrative is pronounced; few works take storytelling and the storyteller as their subjects more transparently than these. In sum, Barth presents himself while representing his type.

Barth's journey into the heart of reflexivity, his development, as Schulz puts it, "from a writer of traditional stories to a mythicist, parodist, artificer, and Black

Humorist" is "a fascinating authorial odyssey" (148). Schulz sees Barth's major break with convention coming with The Sot-Weed Factor in 1960, though it is possible, as Mary Kate Begnal appears to have done,¹⁰ to identify in retrospect the self-conscious elements, especially the parody of forms, in The Floating Opera and The End of the Road. There seems to be no question that the overall pattern of Barth's fiction is toward intensifying reflexivity and that the story collection Lost in the Funhouse and the novella-trilogy Chimera are the most intimately and thoroughly reflexive of his works. A closer look at some of the novels may make the path a bit clearer and simultaneously shed some light on Barth's short fiction.

In Section One, Chapter IV we saw that the connection of fiction and life through role-playing constituted one element of reflexivity in Barth's early work The End of the Road. Other previews of reflexive things to come include the instances of "pure language, devoid of any referent except itself" noted by David Morrell,¹¹ and the highly self-conscious protagonist and first-person narrator, Jake Horner, who, at one point, finds himself aware that he is watching himself act bewildered¹² and who is continually facing a paralysis of the will from such excessive knowledge and self-observation. Jake is thus prototypical, a precursor of other Barth protagonists and perhaps indirectly of the supposedly sterile creator, Barth himself. It is not surprising then to find Morrell observing that "each book

displays an instance of a hero's paralysis" (106). Besides hero-paralysis Barth's works often display the doubling of the hero--or even greater multiplication--and this often reflexive process starts, as Robert Rogers¹³ and Max Schulz (148) suggest, with the pairing of Horner with Joe Morgan. Even this early and substantially realistic novel then contains hints of more intensely reflexive efforts to follow.

Barth's first such effort, The Sot-Weed Factor, introduces parody--that familiar element in so much of the century's fiction--in large doses. In such matters as its chapter titles and plot, the work parodies the comic and picaresque novels of the eighteenth century. It has, as Barth himself notes (Bellamy, 7), a "fantastically baroque plot" which, by "turning vigorously against the modernist notion that plot is an anachronistic element in contemporary fiction," supports the notion that reflexivity may result from the excess of some fictional element as well as from its absence. The baroque plot also represents one attempt at that form of the literature of exhaustion which grows to enormous size attempting to exhaust possibilities. On the other hand, the characterization in The Sot-Weed Factor serves as a prelude to the monstrously baroque, mythical characterization of Giles Goat-Boy; as Schulz says, the "increasing artifice of his fabling is also indicated by his conception, in Ebenezer Cooke and Henry Burlingame, of not one protagonist but two who are in many respects each other's double" (148).

In Giles Goat-Boy Barth carries exhaustion by elaboration and parody to their furthest extremes. He is not always acclaimed for his effort: "Barth seems to have made out of nothing a novel of 766 pages," says Stark (120), and Joseph calls Giles a "Bildungsroman ad absurdum" (31). But if Giles is too long or, say, too transparent as political allegory, it magnificently displays several reflexive techniques and does so in the encyclopedic league of Finnegans Wake. Parody plays a most central role in this massive transmutation of literary and historical material. Barth himself describes Giles as "a novel which would consciously, even self-consciously, follow the patterns, parody the patterns, satirize the patterns, but with good luck transcend the satire a little bit" in order to say some of the serious things he wanted to say (Bellamy, 13). "Nabokov-like publisher's disclaimers," as Joseph calls them (31), start the playing with patterns, and they allow Barth all the pleasures of an author's mock-criticism of his own work and frame the novel with suspect authenticity. Such complex preliminaries--which are quite as clearly exhibited in the earlier mythological fantasy of Cabell's Jurgen--serve delightfully the self-conscious purpose of certifying the work's fictionality. Barth, in his thoroughness, ends his playing by balancing and completing his frame in a diminishing, parasitic series of "Posttape," "Postscript to the Posttape," and "Footnote to the Postscript to the Posttape." (The whole business of the tapes foreshadows the playing with media in

Lost in the Funhouse.)

Barth's invigoration of the monomyth has already received detailed analyses in many places, so working out the seemingly endless allusions would be repetitious and unenlightening. A more interesting reflexive device, which Stark somewhat exaggeratedly terms "the most striking announcement of artifice in Barth's work" (133), appears when Giles encounters a librarian reading, we are led to believe, the book Giles is in and the very book we are reading.¹⁴ Many critics have spotted this passage, including Morrell (175, n. 28) and Robert Scholes (whose chapter on Barth, "Fabulation and Epic Vision," is excellent).¹⁵ As Morrell's note details, this involuting incident connects quite directly with the combination of Proteus and Plato central to Barth, with his notion that everything is imaginary. While parody, conglomerated characters, and authorial intrusion are major reflexive devices in Giles, we should not overlook the role which a less obvious element like style plays. In naming and, as Stark has seen, in the language of Giles the Grand Tutor the words call attention to themselves, and this self-conscious method, "like Barth's use of comedy and fantasy, is a reaction against realism" (67).

If Barth had stopped, exhausted, with the assault on realism of Giles, he would have earned a place in the pantheon of contemporary self-conscious fictionists. But, having used a few self-conscious devices extensively, he

went on to produce the story collection Lost in the Funhouse (1968) and a trio of longer fictions, Chimera (1972), in which he increased the intensity of his self-consciousness. Indeed it is hard to conceive of a viable long fiction more exclusively about itself than Chimera is. The profusion of anti-illusionistic devices in Chimera reflects a more purely aesthetic preoccupation than Barth showed in Giles. In fact we can almost make a checklist of the dimensions of self-consciousness from Barth's techniques in Chimera. What have we come to expect from reflexive fiction when point of view is discussed? We may expect the author to interpolate critical comments directly applicable to the work before us so that the work may incorporate criticism of itself, be auto-critical. We see this in Barth's discussion of the Pattern of Mythic Heroism in the middle of a book of mythic heroes.¹⁶ We see this technique most startlingly illustrated in Barth's "lecture" in the Bellerophoniad (198-203), a section in which Barth considers such matters as the mythical elements in his earlier works, his plans for Chimera, its mythic elements, and so forth. He concludes this cleverly arranged interpolation with a definition of the "Principle of Metaphoric Means," a principle of the utmost utility in the criticism of Chimera. The principle involves "the investiture by the writer of as many of the elements and aspects of his fiction as possible with emblematic as well as dramatic value" including "the very process of narration--even the fact of the artifact itself" (203). This is, of

course, the very search for emblematic reflexivity we have already embarked upon here.

Barth is, as we see by this lecture, not afraid to mention other of his works, though he is not always blatant in doing so. There is, for example, his mention of "a night-sea journey" (168) which recalls the story "Night-Sea Journey" in Lost in the Funhouse. This means of interlocking his fictional worlds is not found in his earlier novels. Barth is likewise unafraid of putting himself on-stage or, shall we say, in-book. For example, he talks about himself in the third person when he appears as a fortyish genie to Scheherazade and her sister Dunyazade (8-9). Stark has remarked that Barth, though less consistently than Borges and Nabokov, "denies the validity of autobiographical fiction, and he less successfully eliminates traces of autobiography from his works" (128). In Chimera Barth is unabashedly autobiographical--and his references are nearly all in fun. Besides the author-as-character, the many-faced Polyeidus and the updated and deflated mythical personages in Chimera are also quite typical of the characterization in reflexive fiction.

The reflexivity does not end with such elements as point of view, characterization, and autobiography. Structurally the book is highly digressive, full of the telling of stories. The plot also plays a clever variation on the familiar theme of the continuous cycle when (as Stark astutely points out, 124) the last line of the novel requires

the title of the book for its completion. The tone, for the most part, is that of comedy. As for language and style, anachronism is rampant as is parody: "Storytelling isn't my cup of wine," says Bellerophon, the apparent storyteller, in one minor example (196). The punning is of an appropriately atrocious variety: "Dee-Dee (dead) had daydreamed of riding that white horse till the night mares made hay of him" (170). And the all-too-frequent curse of the clever--preciousness--sometimes strikes: ". . . I thought to overtake with understanding my present paragraph as it were be examining my paged past, and thus pointed, proceed serene to the future's sentence" (81).

It is not difficult to see how this sort of thing might overwhelm many readers, and yet we have not even begun to touch on many sorts of reflexive material in Chimera. We find, for example, the emblematic image of the conch shell, a natural symbol of involution. On another level, Barth's philosophical concerns repeatedly crop up quite explicitly, as when he writes that "the very concept of objective truth, especially as regards the historical past, is problematical" (194), or when he speaks of a history which "would forever approach a present point but never reach it" (103). (This latter idea is, of course, a version of Zeno's paradox and Tristram Shandy's problem.) Both statements are tangentially reflexive in that they can be easily related to thematic concerns of the whole work, as can the paradoxical self-referentiality of the pronouncement of the "Second Rule for

Amazonian Prisoners of War" (215). In a similar vein, though more immediately relevant to the concept of the reflexive novel, are such components as the refrain in the Dunyazadiad--"The key to the treasure is the treasure"--and, even more unmistakably, the description of "the Revolutionary Novel NOTES" which "will represent nothing beyond itself, have no content except its own form, no subject but its own processes" (256). Barth avoids this absolute in abstract aridity by injecting sufficient sex to hold our attention, though, as we might expect, he does not fail to point out the available comparison between narrative and sexual art (24-26). (We might also note the contrast between the way Nabokov detaches himself from the sexual enticements in Lolita and the way Barth involves himself with the same in Chimera.) In sex then, as in so much else, the subject matter of the novel is bent back toward Chimera itself.

Chimera stands as one of the ultimate reflexive romps in contemporary long fiction in English, a baroque extravaganza of interconnected self-consciousness not likely to be flattered by general imitation. This is not to say that Barth has written the best reflexive fiction of our time, but in Chimera he has been unflagging in his dedication to reflexive techniques, with an almost academic conscientiousness about his self-consciousness. Other contemporary writers may not share Barth's sense of the burden of past literature nor deal with it as he does; they surely do not mimic him in their choices of reflexive paths. But they must

acknowledge the presence of his complex distillations of reflexivity.

One contemporary American author who shares with Barth the status of a major figure and--in the view of Klinkowitz (Disruptions, "Preface")--the status of an older generation figure is Thomas Pynchon. Though he is no real match for Barth's involitional intrepidity, Pynchon shares certain of Barth's tendencies while persistently using some reflexive techniques more extensively than any other self-conscious novelist.

Like Barth, Pynchon is, in Richard Poirier's words, "burdened with the wastes of time, with cultural shards and rubbish" (347). The two novelists may be distinguished, however, by differences in the cultural wastes and debris they gravitate toward. Barth's fondness for the mythic might find its equivalent in Pynchon's devotion to the two world wars of our century. While Barth certainly does not avoid history, he often brings it to us via the art of the past; while Pynchon does not avoid art, he brings it to us via modern history. Both authors are inclined to overwhelm their readers (cf., not at one sitting, Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy and Pynchon's V. and Gravity's Rainbow), but Poirier's characterizations of Barth as "learned" and Pynchon as "encyclopedic" suggest somewhat differing impulses at work in their monuments to exhaustion (347).

If Barth's principal concern in his later works seems to be the narrating self--a concern which nudges his work in the direction of the confession--Pynchon's main concern, as everyone has noticed, has always been with plot. One peculiar consequence of this fascination with plot is that while a reasonable facsimile of Barth the Ultimate Narrator may appear in Chimera, there is no such appearance of a Pynchon impersonator in Pynchon's novels. As Poirier suggests (346), Pynchon is not to be located directly in his works but indirectly, through his works. Hence, while we may identify Pynchon as the Ultimate Plotter, his is a much more anonymous and inferential presence than is Barth's in his novels.

A great many other observations might be made about Pynchon's plots. Klinkowitz, for instance, notes that "in his first and third novels characters numbered in the hundreds and plots became Byzantine if not fully incomprehensible" (Disruptions, 12). In his two longer works Pynchon couples complication with lack of closure, producing an involved openendedness which resembles an intricate tangle more than an intricate weave. Pynchon thus in part achieves his reflexivity by carrying one element of fiction to excess. But more than this, Pynchon's plots may be examined, as they are by Tanner, in relation to their underlying philosophy. As Tanner says, in Pynchon we find "the need to see patterns which may easily turn into the tendency to suspect plots."¹⁷ (Pynchon's case may be the best illustration of Tanner's thesis that contemporary American writers fear being

controlled.) Thus the dual sense of plot, as both conspiracy and arrangement of literary materials, is particularly important in the criticism of Pynchon. Tanner speculates a good deal about the relationship between Pynchon and his conspiracy-laden work, suggesting that "the novelist is clearly inwardly affected by the Manichaeism of his characters" (156) and that the character's "epistemological stance--looking for possible clues to possible plots--is only a projection of that of the novelist himself" (166).

Another fruitful approach to Pynchon's conspiracies is to consider their relationship not to the author but to the reader. The situation of Pynchon's characters then becomes analogous to that of his readers (both in relation to the book and to the larger contemporary world): both character and reader must sort out and impose order upon highly indeterminate information, and neither can be certain that the order is "out there" and not a fantasy, delusion, or projection of the perceiver. As the reader's search parallels that of the character there is the everpresent problem of epistemology--that "the plots men see may be their own inventions" (Tanner, 156). Thus the Pynchon novel becomes a reader Rorschach test. Whether we approach Pynchon's plots in relation to himself or to his readers, however, his attention to this aspect of narrative leads to reflexive considerations.

Though plots play a most prominent part in Pynchon, we cannot divorce plot from other aspects of narrative such as

character. Poirier, for example, emphasizes the inconsequential, unheroic selves who are caught up in the vase pre-existing, self-generating, impersonal plots (346). But a much more obvious quality of Pynchon characters comes to mind: the artifice of their names. Pynchon may hold some sort of record for Most Most Bizarre Names. Benny Profane, Herbert Stencil, Pig Bodine, Oedipa Maas, Koteks, Corydon Throsp, Slothrop, Osbie Feel, Dr. Hilarius--the list is incredible. As Heller often does in Catch-22, Pynchon uses names to establish comic distancing, a practice dating back at least as far as seventeenth-century humours comedy. But in some cases--for example, that of Oedipa Maas--there seems to be more than a simple comedic impulse operating. The tantalizing intimation of significance (Oedipa--Oedipus complex?; Maas--Mass Man?) hovers about. Yet this might easily be a critical blind alley, a little joke on the critical reader quite consonant with Pynchon's penchant for hoaxes, plots, and such. It is interesting to contrast some of Nabokov's names, which lead us to literary footnotes, and some of Barth's names, which lead us to myth and history, with some of Pynchon's names, which lead us to despair.

Of course Pynchon has a great deal of fun with his readers in matters of language besides naming. Certainly his extravagant, absurd, surreal, parodic, fragmented, comic book style draws attention to itself. And Pynchon's self-conscious techniques extend to the inclusion of such reflexive elements as art criticism and communication theory as

subject matter. Entropy is the key word in connection with communication theory, while Klinkowitz points out (Disruptions, 14-15) that--an example of embedded literary criticism--Pynchon's remarks about "Catatonic Expressionism" in V. predate its embodiment in Barth's later works.

Much of Pynchon appears in V.,¹⁸ his first novel; the intriguing title itself, signaling strangeness to come; the names, like Morris Teflon, Dewey Gland, Elena Xemxi, Chiclitz and his Yoyodyne company (in addition to others already mentioned); the idiosyncratic fascination with German things; the continual changes in time, location, and center of consciousness; the vivid events yielding obscurity and incoherence; the central idea of the cabal. Typically, Pynchon never appears directly--the narrator is omniscient, not first-person--but Pynchon's presence is evident from the devices just mentioned and from intrusive comments such as "If we've not already guessed, 'the woman' is, again, the lady V. of Stencil's mad time-search" (406) and those on the meaning of V. (226). With Pynchon's manic inventiveness Gravity's Rainbow¹⁹ cannot be labeled merely more of the same. But the Pynchon touch is unmistakable when we can find Mickey Rooney meeting Rocketman at one point (382) and, at another, a discussion of the recursive, self-cancelling effects (via Gödel's Theorem) of a little ditty entitled "Sold on Suicide" (320). (The inclusion of songs and poems--a feature which might suggest the anatomy--marks all three of Pynchon's novels.)

But readers need not experience World War Two as a "trip" in the lengthy Gravity's Rainbow; the abridged Pynchon is available in The Crying of Lot 49.²⁰ The essentials are all there: the epistemological obsession, the parody, the paranoia, the wild surface, and the names, of course. The work is set more exclusively in the contemporary world than is either of Pynchon's other two works, but the century's cultural debris is as vital an ingredient as ever. Reflexive subjects--including discussion of communication theory on the one hand and the play-within-the-play device on the other--are plentiful. Even the smallest, apparently irrelevant passages may reinforce the novel's self-consciousness: the possible convolutions of theater and life when actors impersonate lawyers (20) is one instance. There is also the case of the lawyer who "cherished a fierce ambivalence, wanting at once to be a successful trial lawyer like Perry Mason and, since this was impossible, to destroy Perry Mason by undermining him" (8). Not unsuccessful artists, Pynchon and many of his contemporaries are likewise ambivalent, finding it impossible to produce conventional fictions and, in their idiosyncratic ways, undermining their own creations.

One artist whose idiosyncracies have made him enormously popular is Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Vonnegut, who had been writing for twenty years, seemingly vaulted to the literary forefront with the publication of Slaughterhouse-Five in 1969.²¹ No figure of such prominence could avoid critical

categorization and Vonnegut soon found himself subject to several labels. Long known to science-fiction fans, he was connected by Leslie Fiedler to the science-fiction genre and to the recent rise of that and other popular modes such as pornography.²² In her 1974 dissertation Elaine Fritz Rice linked Vonnegut to Barth, discussed how they had been filed in drawers marked Black Humor and the Absurd, and went on to study their connections to the ancient conventions of the Menippean satire.²³ (As such categorizations show, we can find strong evidence that literary self-consciousness does not confine the writer to particular attitudes and genres but that it may be found in conjunction with quite heterogeneous tendencies.)

Vonnegut's earlier work exhibits some reflexive tendencies. As Tanner points out, Winston Rumford, who moves people through time and space in The Sirens of Titan, is "a suitably fantastic analogue of Vonnegut himself who is doing just that in his book" (183). Glenn Meeter, whose article conveniently identifies a number of Vonnegut's reflexive devices, observes a rather broader but nonetheless valid current of reflexivity in Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle. The philosophy of Bokonism in that novel may be seen in terms of either literature or religion, and in either case "the point of the parody is the same: we recognize our conventions as conventions. We are made to see that meaning, in life or in art, is invented rather than discovered."²⁴

But it is Slaughterhouse-Five that is Vonnegut's greatest work and the one in which many of his concerns mesh most successfully. Though the ethical and political qualities of Billy Pilgrim's Dresden experience deserve more comment, the reflexive qualities are many. "Here for the first time," says Tanner (194), "Vonnegut appears in one of his own novels, juxtaposing and merging the fantasies of his own life in a book which almost seems to summarize and conclude the sequence of his previous five novels." Thus a principal aspect of this inclusive novelistic effort is Vonnegut's autobiographical appearance in it, particularly in the introductory first chapter. As Klinkowitz says, Vonnegut "proceeds to involve himself at the center of his story" (Disruptions, 55). In partial explanation of this practice, Klinkowitz later quotes Vonnegut's remark to the effect that he wants to be a character in all of his works, as he can be in print (58).

When it comes to addressing us in his own person, however, Vonnegut does not limit himself to the introductory frame. His unique narrating voice and its "So it goes" refrain are two means of making us especially mindful of his presence. Even more directly and startlingly, his autobiographical presence leaps at us in the following incident: "An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go.' He meant his brains." The next paragraph continues: "That was I. That was me. That was the

author of this book" (109). (Note the world of difference between such a blunt intrusion of the author's autobiography and the disguised and transformed autobiography of, say, Sons and Lovers, wherein knowledge of the novel's autobiographical nature may be easily ignored or suppressed while the reading experience continues.)

Vonnegut also includes analyses of his novel as it progresses. Near the end of his introductory chapter, for example, Vonnegut says, "I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun" (19). One hundred odd pages later he explains why we find "almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations" (140). Further along he explains "why the epigraph of this book is the quatrain from the famous Christmas carol" (170). In a way this sort of thing is a milder version of what Barth is doing in a story like "Lost in the Funhouse."

In addition to the self-consciousness of the narrator-as-commentator-on-the-work-itself, Vonnegut uses such devices as the emblematic infinite regress. The song about Yon Yonson (2-3) is a very obvious instance. Meeter spotted this and similar techniques and made an important point: "These devices are used much more extensively, of course, by Borges, Nabokov, and others; Vonnegut is certainly a popularizer in that he uses them sparingly and easily" (207). Somewhat like Fowles, Vonnegut can use casually what in others might yield only ingenuity or a solemn experimentalism. Among the similar techniques is Vonnegut's inclusion of

characters, such as Eliot Rosewater and Howard Campbell, who "belong" in other of his fictions. As Tanner says (194), Billy is "not only slipping backwards and forwards in time; he is also astray in Vonnegut's own fictions." We may, if we are not familiar with the Vonnegut canon, miss this trick, but, like Nabokov's games with his pseudonyms and other such in-jokes, ignorance will detract only slightly from our pleasure with the work as a whole.

The matter of time and space travel, though its self-consciousness may not be of an obvious sort, has a broad reflexive importance. In one sense it plays a vital part in what Meeter calls "a different alignment of fantasy and reality" in which the two realms are "portrayed side by side, as if both are equally fantastic and equally real" (205). Although we have seen challenges to the reality/fantasy distinction quite often through the intermingling of the ordinary with the traditionally mythological, here we are dealing with the combination of a writer's original science-fictional mythology and, among other things, historical fact--a rather different mix.

In addition to this fantasy/reality tension, there is the question of Vonnegut's relationship to the theory of the novel. In Chapter Nine, for instance, Billy Pilgrim, standing in for Vonnegut, appears on a radio discussion of the death of the novel. (Again we find the novelist dealing with the conditions of the novel's inception.) In contrast to Mailer, who is mentioned by name (178), Vonnegut does not

seek to move his reality toward his fiction. We see rather, in Meeter's words, "Vonnegut's own version of the new role of fiction" (211) and "the suggestion of a 'new novel' or 'anti-novel'" (212). This "new novel" is embodied in Slaughterhouse-Five. Vonnegut's fantasy race, the Tralfamadorians, have spatialized time, can see all moments as one (Klinkowitz, Disruptions, 51). They would probably produce a spatial form novel, quite in accordance with Joseph Frank's theory. And what more is Vonnegut attempting to create within his novel with his "adventures in space and time travel" (Meeter, 211)? The marvelous passages on the reversal of a war-movie bombing (63-65) brilliantly exemplify the "reconstruction of reality" (Klinkowitz, Disruptions, 53) which such a spatialized view of time affords. The general reflexive effects of this novel are, to repeat, considerable.

Vonnegut has continued and indeed intensified such effects. In Breakfast of Champions (1973) he, according to Klinkowitz (Life of Fiction, 86), "takes the artistic self-consciousness emerging in the earlier novels and makes it part of the novel's subject." Vonnegut appears in his role as author and frees his old fictional characters at the end of the novel. To the extent that it is "a much more self-conscious novel" than Slaughterhouse-Five (Life of Fiction, 87), it is right in tune with the work of those newer novelists who put themselves--live, on-stage, in person--unashamedly at the center of their imaginative endeavors.

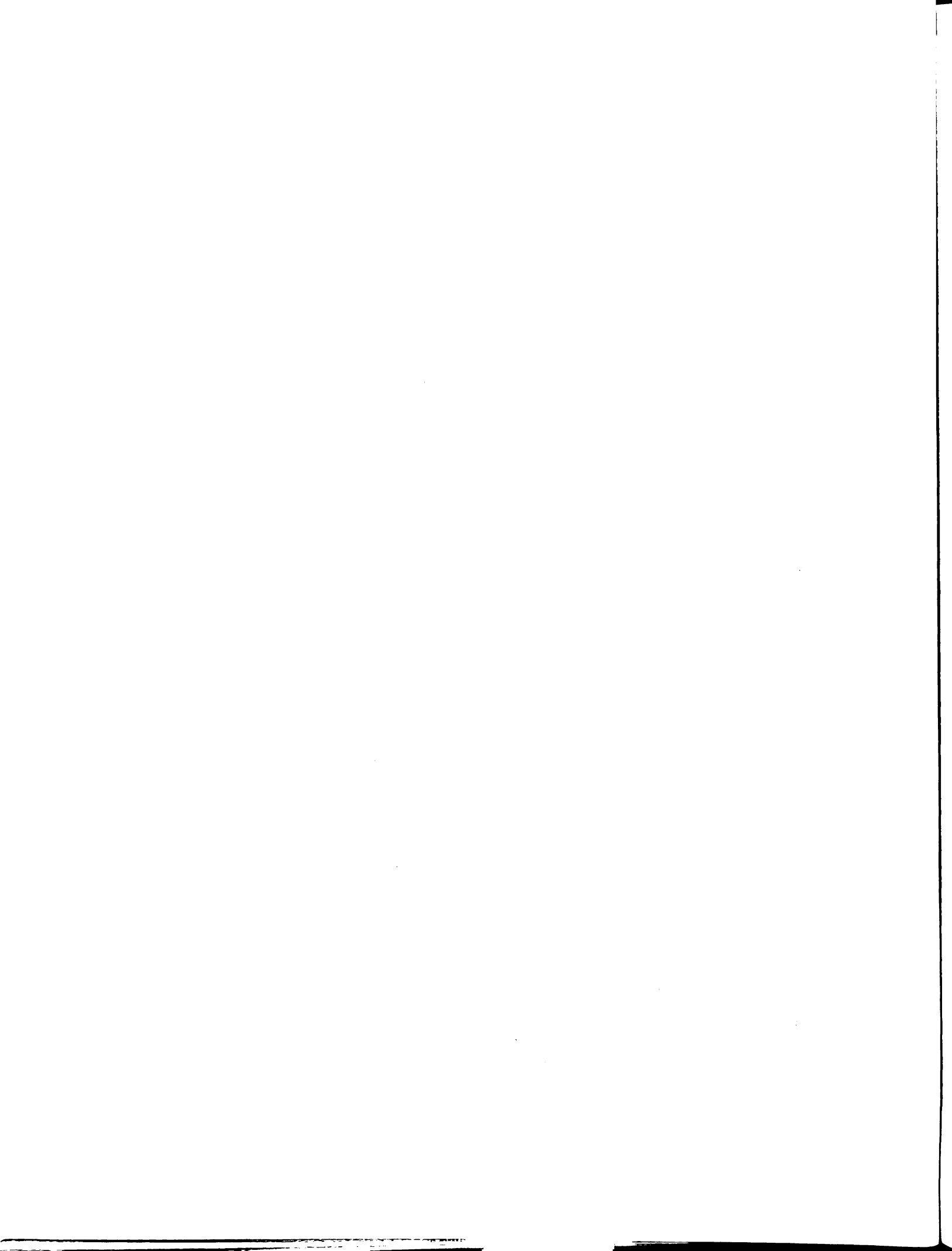
Collectively these newer fiction writers have been, as noted earlier, discovered and most enthusiastically promoted and analyzed by Klinkowitz. To diminish the dangers of diffuseness we have been concerned thus far with a fairly small number of writers who might be called "established" figures working in the reflexive mode. But Klinkowitz has championed many other, often less well-known self-conscious artists. (A convenient list of those he has worked with appears in The Life of Fiction, 155.) To avoid both diffuseness and duplication, we might try to extract the essentials of the new aesthetic which Klinkowitz perceives and do so by focusing briefly on such authors as Donald Barthelme, Ronald Sukenick, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Hunter Thompson.

Klinkowitz claims a lot for his new fictionists. He asserts that "by the 1960's writers had abandoned the Great American Novel, and had turned fiction instead--like poetry before it--into an elitist, academic diversion" (Disruptions, 4). Against this pallid cul-de-sac, epitomized for him by Barth's sterile funhouses, Klinkowitz argues that the "disruption witnessed in American fiction, beginning in force with the season of 1967-68 and continuing through the 1970's, signals not only a major development in the genre, but also its rebirth" (Disruptions, 195) and its "greatest renaissance" (32).

Klinkowitz outlines some of the attitudes generally associated with this rebirth in the prologue of The Life of Fiction. It is "peculiarly American" and "defies the

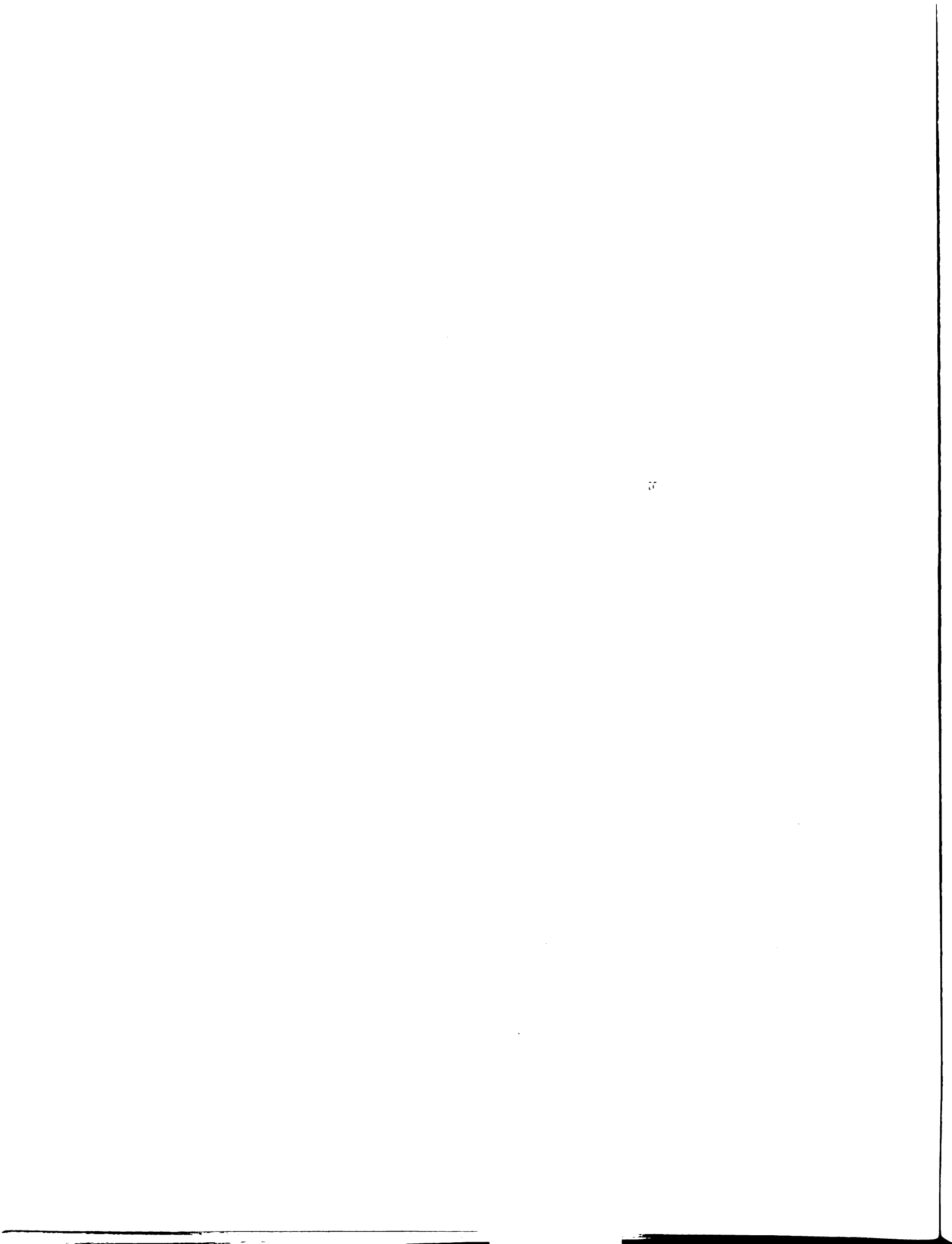
academic influence which has favored fiction echoing older European models" (3). It is fun; its practitioners are "out to create a good time" (4), taking the reader on a trip with gusto. "On performance, on the excitement of doing, on what literature creates by way of fun--that's where more of the emphasis should be," said Poirier (344), and that is where the newer fictionists put it. The new fiction demands a new status for the fictional creation, one which stresses the expressive, inventive, and imaginative. The new fictionists establish their books not just as linguistic games but as imaginatively created objects in the world, where fiction can have the same appreciated existence as painting, sculpture, music or any of the arts" (Disruptions, 175). And the new fiction, like the New Journalism, tends to foreground the artist.

Even Klinkowitz' definitions of the new post-post-modern fiction do not sever it completely from the post-modern reflexivity we have considered. Klinkowitz himself declares the new fiction to be "both self-reflective and self-reflexive, respectively making the conditions under which one writes the subject of one's writing (a Post-Modern technique), but also using the writer's own self-created personalist mythology (see especially Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Hunter S. Thompson) as the very substance of one's approach to the world" (Life of Fiction, 4). So, at the risk of over-stressing, with Klinkowitz, the differences between attitudes found among the newer self-conscious



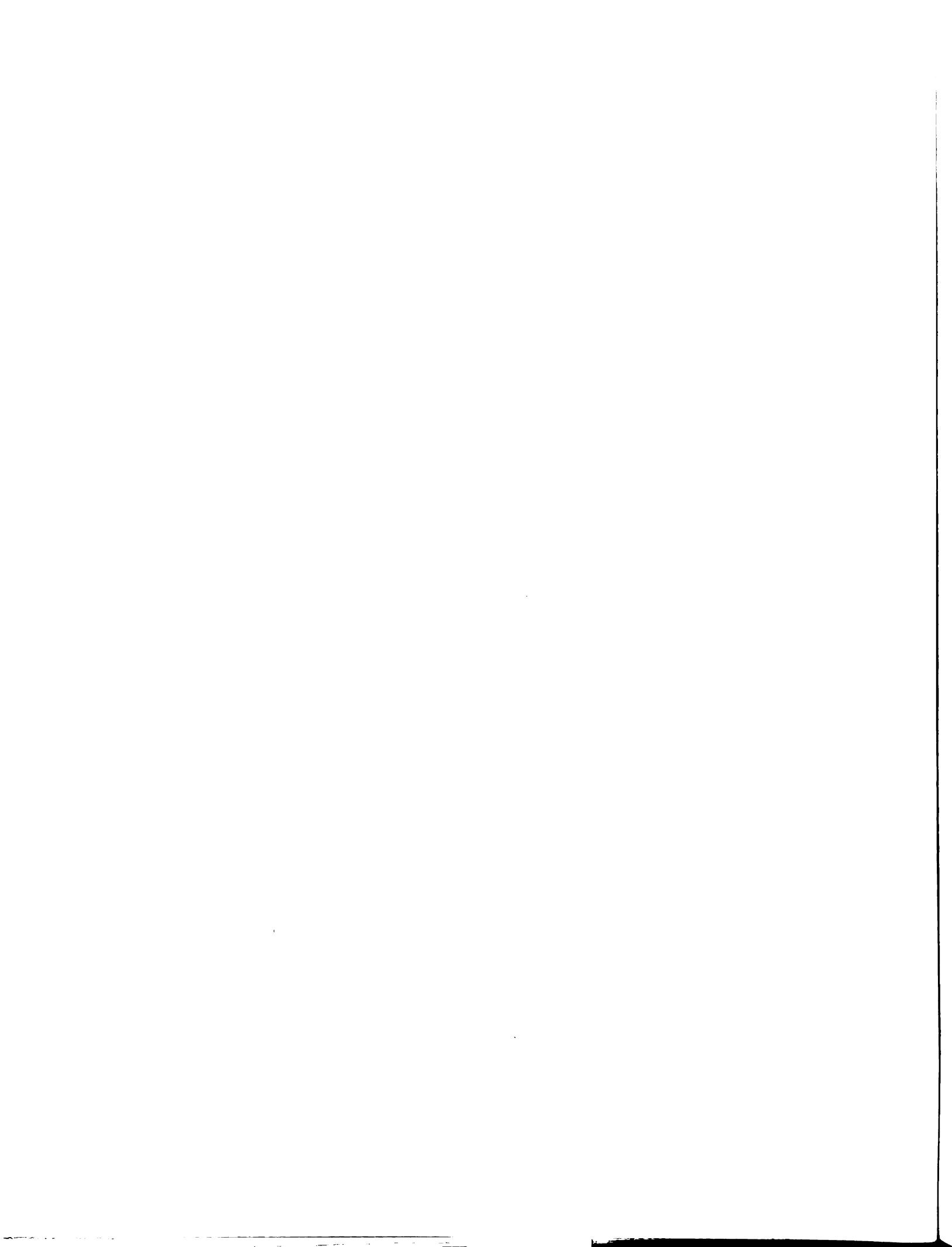
fictionists and their predecessors, we might consider the following division of approaches to fiction. First we have the Realists, who say, in effect, "Of course it's fiction, but let's pretend that it's reality," and who eliminate, ignore, or suppress the tension between their illusion-making and reality. Realists, in the broadest possible sense, may be contrasted with Reflexivists, both old and new. The older self-conscious novelists say, essentially, "It's fiction; let's be aware of and exploit the tension between fiction and reality." The new breed of self-conscious novelist will, at least to some degree, say, "Of course it's fiction, but let's not pretend it's Reality; let's admit it's a new reality of the imagination and admire and enjoy it as such." In one way, then, the new self-conscious fictionists resemble the Realists: both avoid playing with the tension between fiction and reality, playing the games of the old self-conscious artists. But the new fictionists do not, like the Realists, wish us to take or mistake their fictions for life--they wish us to take them for fictions; they do not disrupt their illusions of life as the older reflexivists do, for they do not allow these illusions to develop. This at least is the theoretical arrangement which follows from the analyses of Klinkowitz.

But an excerpt (from The Exaggerations of Peter Prince by Steven Katz) chosen by Klinkowitz to represent the distance fiction has traveled from the exhausted self-consciousness of Barth (Disruptions, 18) suggests not that



the new fiction goes "beyond" Barth but that it strongly resembles the self-consciousness Barth displays in Lost in the Funhouse. For instance, we find the familiar writer-at-his-desk device being exploited in the Katz excerpt. Moreover, we often find Klinkowitz contending with the old realistic fiction rather than other, earlier self-conscious fiction. So, if the new fiction is more relentless in revealing the autobiographical writer at work and the work as process, more intent on exposing the writing self by throwing off disguises and identifying the narrator with the author, more interested in the "Happenings" of the present than with the libraries of the past, we must still be careful to qualify Klinkowitz' formulation. The divergence in attitudes he perceives between the old and new self-conscious writers--between those who shout "The King is dead" and those who reply "Long live the King"--and the differing emphases he points out do not mark a radical technical severance from the self-conscious fiction of previous eras. The newer writers may do more overtly and single-mindedly what earlier writers did covertly, but overall they represent an excursion along one of the many paths of development available within the broad range of the reflexive mode.

Perhaps the most well-known of Klinkowitz' new fictionists, aside from Vonnegut, is Donald Barthelme. Since Barthelme is primarily a writer of short fiction he will receive further attention in the next chapter. But even a glance at his novel Snow White²⁵ will help confirm both the



attitudinal changes perceived by Klinkowitz in the new fictionists and Barthelme's unquestionably reflexive manner. (Snow White will also, in its fragmented form, show how little may be the distance between novel and short fiction.) An obvious instance of the reflexive appears at the end of Part One (82-83) where Barthelme interrupts his narrative with a quiz for the reader and asks such questions as "Do you like the story so far?" and "Have you understood, in the reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure?" The reader's participation is clearly exposed and toyed with by the author. Yet even in this brief section we can find a sense of fun, lightness, and "put-on" which contrast with a seriousness often present in Barth and which create a tonality not characteristic of all previous self-conscious fiction. Barthelme's tonality develops in large part because Barthelme has an enormous amount of fun with language throughout this novel, performing, as he does, a rapid-fire series of imaginative and linguistic contortions. Of course, performing with words has been the way of poets and self-conscious fiction writers for some time now.

Two writers not nearly as well-known as Barthelme are favorites of Klinkowitz: Ronald Sukenick and Gilbert Sorrentino. They too will appear in the following chapter. Sukenick's second novel, Out (1973), may have been, according to Klinkowitz, "the climax of the disruptive phenomenon, as the new methods of fiction finally established themselves in a tradition and cleared the way for spatial experimentation

on the American novel" (Disruptions, 134). Now many of these new methods had already established themselves in the long tradition of self-conscious fiction, and Vonnegut, according to Klinkowitz himself, had cleared the way for such spatial experimentation. But Klinkowitz manages, amid overstatements, to establish Sukenick in the reflexive tradition and to establish some legitimate differences between the new fictionist and his elders. "Sukenick," says Klinkowitz, "is the ultimately self-reflective and self-reflexive novelist, since his books are largely about themselves and he's the major character in each" (Life of Fiction, 17). There is nothing here which would exclude Sukenick from the ranks of the reflexive; his author foregrounding is merely a special reflexive emphasis. "But," continues Klinkowitz, "this self-created self confronts a very recognizable world . . . the experiences of a human imagination within a definite historical context: America of the Sixties and Seventies." "His fiction," Klinkowitz goes on, "boasts a sexual exuberance reflected in the times and a comic approach to life quite welcome after the seriousness of his predecessors. His books parody themselves not with the heavy irony of Barth and Pynchon, but with a playfulness which indicates a strong self-confidence as well as self-consciousness" (17). We must grant that Barth and Pynchon often shy away from the contemporary scene, that they can be awfully serious in spite of all their games, and that they do not always exhibit much confidence in fiction as "an

alternative reality." Insofar as the new fictionists share Sukenick's traits, Klinkowitz' dichotomy between old and new may be justified.

Besides offering us novels which exemplify the new fiction, Sukenick also provides us with some of the theory behind its tendencies. Klinkowitz cites Sukenick's academic writing many times, and Sukenick's participation at a conference titled "Imagination/Dead Imagine: The Self-Reflective Artwork in Contemporary Literature and Art" (Disruptions, 149-50) should confirm his theoretical bent. Most enlightening is a set of twenty excerpts from Sukenick's essays (Life of Fiction, 25-26). Many of the samples--and they offer some impressive critical thinking--reflect an anti-realist attitude which older self-conscious writers would certainly share; others point toward new emphases in fiction. When Sukenick castigates realism for imitating life, for being counterfeit ("if art is illusion, then documentary is better because it's the real thing"), for offering an artificial form to life, we are in familiar territory; the reflexive mode has always involved this sort of complaint to some degree. When he says that "the work of art is a conscious tautology in which there is always an implicit (and sometimes explicit) reference to its own nature as artifact--self-reflexive, not self-reflective," we are still dealing with typical concepts of reflexivity. However, when Sukenick attacks the "hermeticism of the Moderns" and their "academicism" and argues that "Art delivers us from

abstraction and solipsism with a newly vitalized sense of experience" that "does not cage us in the crystal perfection of art," then we may acknowledge an accurate characterization of some earlier self-conscious fiction and also feel the vitality of the new.

Of Gilbert Sorrentino, whose best known novel is probably Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things (1971), Klinkowitz writes that "the sense of the book itself" is "the most real quality of his writing" (Disruptions, 160). Sorrentino seems to be consistent, for certainly this is the opinion of a reviewer of his latest work, Mulligan Stew (1979), who finds that the "only thing in the novel that is ultimately 'real' is Sorrentino's own comic exuberance and excess."²⁶ The reviewer places Mulligan Stew squarely in line with the history of reflexive fiction, identifying the "ghosts of the experimental novel" who hover over it--ghosts of Joyce, Gide, Barth, Borges, Barthelme, and Nabokov. The novel is both in and about the reflexive tradition, carrying the literature of exhaustion to new involuntional lengths. In fact, the review cites so many facets typical of the reflexive novel--the novelist-at-his-desk device, the satire and parodies, the bawdiness coupled with literariness, the verbosity--that it almost appears as if Mulligan Stew were intended as the latest Great Reflexive Novel and an ideal illustration of the contention that Klinkowitz' novelists, whatever their theories and assertions, are essentially the newest species in the evolution of literary self-

consciousness.

Representing a related subspecies of literary reflexivists are the New Journalists like Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson. "Placing oneself at the imaginative center of an otherwise documentary experience," explains Klinkowitz, "is an innovation dating from the late 1960's" and found most prominently in the "nonfiction novels" of Capote and Mailer (Disruptions, 23). This inclination to foreground the performing writer, which we already have seen to be typical of the novelists Klinkowitz discusses, is also characteristic of Thompson and his colleagues; we find "no illusion whatsoever that there isn't a very real and stunningly idiosyncratic writer at the center of each work" giving it an "ultimate self-reflexiveness" (Life of Fiction, 31). Though writers like Wolfe and Thompson share with them some reflexive attributes, these New Journalists occupy "a world not shared by the celebrated Post-Modernist writers, whose works one can read without having any sense at all that they were written during the student revolution . . . the war in Vietnam, and countless other events from the major . . . to the transitory" (32). In contrast to the atemporality and abstraction found in certain reflexive novelists, these authors focus on the contemporary detail. Thompson, for instance, says he "prefers 'the joys of detailed realism' which he finds woefully absent in the works of Borges and Coover, to name just two" (33). In a way, of course, the New Journalist's idea of fictionalized documentary is the

mirror image of the old Realist's documented fiction, allowing those writers who "appropriate and revive" the novel's "discarded techniques" (Disruptions, 22) to enter both realistic and reflexive camps.

Yet the contemporary reflexive camp includes a much larger assemblage than even those many self-conscious writers Klinkowitz seizes upon. We have not mentioned Richard Brautigan. We have not found a place for the imaginative comic extravaganza which Robert Coover makes of the 1950's in his The Public Burning (1977). And in our rush to the young and the new we might easily overlook the interesting case of John Updike. Updike, an older artist often seen as a sort of novelist of the American Middle, has departed in the 1970's from the central paths of realism and introduced elements of self-consciousness into his work. (This is less surprising than it might seem at first; Updike's idiosyncracies of style have long called attention to themselves and Updike's willingness to experiment is evident in his mix of mythology and middleness in The Centaur.) His Bech: A Book²⁷ is even cited by Barbara McKenzie for its two-pronged assault on mimesis.²⁸ Bech, though substantially in the realistic and comic modes, has several touches of self-consciousness. For example, Bech himself is a writer. There is a sham "Foreword" addressed by character Bech to "John" (obviously Updike himself), and there are comic appendices and a pseudo-bibliography. Numerous remarks on writing--such as "A gap in the dialogue. Fill in later"

(149) and the simile "like a good paragraph in a book too bulky to reread" (165)--also dot the book. Pretending that chapters are lectures accompanied by slides allows Updike to interrupt his illusions several times. Updike continues this subdued reflexivity in A Month of Sundays²⁹ in which the central character is supposedly writing a diary for an "Ideal Reader," Ms. Prynne (fellow sinner Hester?) and in which, for example, typing errors are footnoted.

In sum then, literary self-consciousness is a major influence on the American novel in the post-war period, particularly in the 1960's and 1970'a. It ranges in degree from the mild to the madcap, exhibiting, as we have seen, all sorts of divergent emphases and techniques. Barth, Pynchon, and their energetic younger brethren thus join with their somewhat more sedate English cousins and with the imposing Nabokov in a great branch of post-modern fiction--the reflexive novel. This stream, as suggested, meets other literary tributaries, most particularly the reflexive short fiction which we shall now proceed to explore.

Notes

¹ Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 219.

² John Barth, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 91 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 39.

³ "The Literature of Exhaustion," Atlantic Monthly, Aug. 1967, rpt. in The American Novel since World War Two, ed. Marcus Klein (New York: Fawcett, 1969), pp. 267-79.

⁴ See, for example, Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975) and a later companion work The Life of Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977).

⁵ The Literature of Exhaustion (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), p. 172. One wonders where Stark may have come upon his title.

⁶ John J. Enck, "John Barth: An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 6 (1965), 8.

⁷ Barth in an interview with Joe David Bellamy, "John Barth," in The New Fiction, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 3.

⁸ "The Politics of Self-Parody," Partisan Review, 35 (Summer 1968), 343.

⁹ Max F. Schulz, "Characters (Contra Characterization) in the Contemporary Novel," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 141-54.

¹⁰ "Self-Mimesis in the Fiction of John Barth," Dissertation Abstracts International, 35 (1975), 7293-A (Pennsylvania State).

¹¹ John Barth: An Introduction (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 112.

¹² The End of the Road (1958; rev. ed. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969), p. 73.

¹³ The Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), p. 168.

- 14 Giles Goat-Boy (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 666.
- 15 The Fabulators (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 169.
- 16 Chimera (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 140-41.
- 17 Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 155.
- 18 V: A Novel (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1961).
- 19 Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973).
- 20 The Crying of Lot 49 (New York: Bantam, 1967).
- 21 Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade (New York: Delacorte, 1969).
- 22 "The Death and Rebirth of the Novel," in Halperin, pp. 200-04.
- 23 "The Satire of John Barth and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: The Menippean Tradition in the 1960's in America," Dissertation Abstracts International, 35 (1975), 7876-A (Arizona State).
- 24 "Vonnegut's Formal and Moral Otherworldliness: Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five," in The Vonnegut Statement, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (New York: Delacorte, 1973), p. 210.
- 25 Snow White (New York: Atheneum, 1967).
- 26 Robert Emmet Long, "Experimental Novel Turns on Its Creator--and Reader," The Christian Science Monitor, 17 May 1969, p. 14.
- 27 Bech: A Book (New York: Knopf, 1970).
- 28 Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 75.
- 29 A Month of Sundays (New York: Knopf, 1975).

SECTION FOUR--SHORT FICTION

The predominant direction of our investigation thus far has been toward the self-conscious novel, and much of what has been said about the novel has been, explicitly or implicitly, made applicable to prose fiction generally. Yet, whatever its importance, the novel cannot be equated with the whole of prose fiction. The other major contemporary form of fiction, the short story, has its own history and nature, which have been generally neglected and which deserve more comment than they have usually been given.

The novel, of course, is the older form, developing, as we noted, from a variety of other literary forms--forms which may or may not be evident in any given novel. The history of the short story is somewhat different. First of all, the short story has affinities with other forms of short fiction, but it does not "emerge as a literary genre separate from short fiction" until the early nineteenth century--growing up during the "great period of realism in fiction."¹ In some part, it seems certain, from the pressures of realism exerted by its cousin the novel, the short story develops its distinctive characteristics as an imaginative form congenial to the realistic mode. The so-called well-made short story will, as McKenzie indicates (7), be a work

of the imagination (not a case history) which possesses a formal structure (unlike a reported incident) and includes a plot and characters (unlike a lyric rhapsody in prose) which illuminate human action (unlike jokes or anecdotes, which are primarily amusements). There is a strong sense in such a definition that the short story is an artfully conceived representation of reality, that we should "believe" in the people and events portrayed in such stories, and that, were it not for the story being "artfully conceived," we might well fall into the realities of case histories and reported incidents.

A realism-biased conception of fiction has certainly predominated throughout the history of the short story, but the post-modern period has seen challenges to many of the premises of "the most conservative of literary genres" (McKenzie, 7). We find in abundance stories that resemble all of those things which the well-made story is not supposed to be. The experimenters and innovators have produced a "superfiction," as Joe David Bellamy terms it, given to fantasy, fabulation, irrealism, the neo-gothic, myth and parable, parody, put-on, and metafiction.² In some cases reviving earlier fictional forms, they have, in their self-conscious anti-realism, stretched the short story into short fiction.

When did this transformation come about? As Joyce Carol Oates reminds us, writers of fiction "have broken out of the 'conventions of the so-called realistic tradition'

years ago, decades ago; it's a commonplace of critical thought to point all the way back to Tristram Shandy as a convention-breaking work."³ Since the inception of the short story genre any number of individual stories might be found to fall outside even the most broadly interpreted "realistic tradition," but the large-scale abandonment of realistic conventions is generally believed to have begun in the 1960's. Among the more specific dates for the advent of mass fictional self-consciousness is that offered by Jerome Klinkowitz, who regularly refers to the "literary disruption witnessed in American fiction, beginning in force with the season of 1967-68 and continuing throughout the 1970's."⁴ John Gardner, a bit less specific in his dates, feels that "the tradition of the short story and the novel as it came to be defined straight across the forties and fifties gives way in the sixties to a sort of tale-and-yarn tradition, where there is a distinct voice, a narrator, a guy talking who is definitely not the writer and who is fun to listen to and fun to watch and who tells you all kinds of things that may be true and may be false."⁵ Gardner thus links both short story and novel to the fun-filled fabulation of the sixties. He makes it clear that such fabulating is self-conscious when he goes on to say that now "everyone is doing Fielding" and that we are "always aware of a page" (171). Raymond Olderman is equally insistent about the reflexive nature of current fabulation: "The most obvious characteristic of the contemporary fable is its return to a

self-conscious form that announces itself as contrived. There is a regained joy in storytelling and in the pleasures of manipulated form."⁶

More important than the question of precisely when the contemporary short story turned self-conscious is the question of why it did so. Certainly there is the matter of potential: though the short story developed strongly mimetic and representational conventions, the potential for the short story to expand into other forms of short fiction was always present. But why should the short story be transformed in the post-modern period? Bellamy nicely recapitulates the major hypotheses in his "Introduction" to Super-Fiction (3-5). One plausible suggestion is that other forms of communication--other media (the film, television) and the new journalism--better "represent reality," better represent things than fiction can and that fictionists have responded by turning to fiction's strong suit--the realm of the imagination. If people were turning to television rather than having their world reproduced indirectly via the written word, then the solution was to refuse to compete with television's representational power. (McKenzie on page 76 mentions the demise of the mass-circulation magazine in the face of television's onslaught.) Others suggest, observes Bellamy, that the short story, a relatively new and still conservative genre, is simply outgrowing its worn-out conventions as other art forms had done earlier, that the short story is catching up with the experimentalism which we have

seen so well-established elsewhere (4).

Bellamy's final explanation--one often given for the rise of reflexivity in American fiction in the sixties--might be called the "surreal reality" hypothesis. This hypothesis, somewhat at odds with the Swing to Imagination hypothesis, is explained by Raymond Olderman. The contemporary fictionist, he says (with special reference to the novel), "is attempting deal with the vital mysteries of contemporary fact. If we enter fully into the spirit of the sixties, we will not only lose ourselves in the paradoxes of fact, but we will begin to see the strangely paradoxical possibility that fable, in a fabulous world, may be 'realism,' for only through fable can we be faithful to the strange details of contemporary life" (21). In the face of a bewildering contemporary reality, fiction "announces itself as fiction through a series of self-conscious devices in order to . . . bring some order and form to the chaos of human experience" (26). The self-conscious artifice gives us "some small sense of control" (26), a point stressed in earlier chapters of this dissertation.

One further explanation for the reflexive tendencies in contemporary short fiction--one not mentioned by Bellamy--appears in Robert Scholes' article "Metafiction." Scholes (as if in answer to complaints about the long-windedness of some reflexive novels) argues that, if extended, "metafiction," which combines criticism and fiction, "must either lapse into a more fundamental mode of fiction or risk losing

all fictional interest in order to maintain its intellectual perspectives. The ideas that govern fiction assert themselves more powerfully in direct proportion to the length of a fictional work. Metafiction, then, tends toward brevity because it attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction--an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form."⁸ The forms of short fiction are thus ideally suited to the distilled display of the reflexive balancing act.

It is impossible here to do much more than sample a small portion of the reflexive short fictions available today. Fortunately, we need not search out individual examples in obscure places; some sampling has already been done for us by various collectors of contemporary fiction. We have collections of the works of individual authors, such as Barth, Coover, and Barthelme--collections like those analyzed by Scholes in "Metafiction." We also may avail ourselves of the anthologies of short fiction, such as Bellamy's Super-Fiction, which exhibit works by several authors. Finally, there are the college texts--like the McKenzie text, of course, and Elements of Literature⁹ on which Scholes collaborated--which consider at some length the nature of fictional reflexivity, as well as the many which, if not developing coherent critical analyses of current reflexive trends, are nevertheless devoting increasing space to premier reflexivists like Borges, Barth, and Barthelme.

We must devote some small space to a literary figure who, while not writing in English and not producing the bulk of his fictions in the sixties, has provided enormous direct and indirect impetus for the reflexive short fiction which has swept the American literary scene in the last two decades. Borges, whose name has appeared so frequently in these pages, is certainly the leading fictionist of the post-modern period. As John Wright says, in "these ironic, participational, and self-referring modes of fiction to which more and more modern writers have turned . . . Borges is now the undoubted and astonishing master."¹⁰ A man "whose work is exerting a strong influence on the American fiction of the present,"¹¹ he is lauded by John Barth as the man who succeeded Joyce and Kafka.¹² In sum, in the words of Susan Sontag, "Borges . . . has mattered a lot."¹³

Borges, "the archetypal writer of the Literature of Exhaustion,"¹⁴ has mattered so much in part because of the remarkable consistency, concentration, and purity of his reflexive vision, a vision "so remote from any of the conventions of European naturalism" (Tanner, 40). "You've really based your whole literature on literature itself in a way," says Richard Burgin to Borges, voicing a sentiment to which Borges assents (112). Indeed, the self-conscious features which appear repeatedly in Borges' work are widely recognized are now familiar in critical circles. Robert Alter, for instance, says that Borges' "parables and paradoxes" are "concerned with a series of metaphysical enigmas about

identity, recurrence, and cyclicity, time, thought, and extension."¹⁵ Tanner talks of the "recurrent furniture," the "mirrors, chess, games, labyrinths, doubles," in Borges (39). Ever self-aware, Borges recognizes his own uniformities and fears that he may be "becoming rather mechanical" in "producing stories about mistaken identity, about mazes, about tigers, about mirrors, about people being somebody else or about all men being the same man or one man being his own mortal foe" (Burgin, 130). Each of the particular features of Borges' corpus is not, of course, emulated by every other fictionist, but his total effort forms a remarkably concise compendium of reflexivity.

Games and play are among the familiar "furniture" of self-conscious literature incorporated into the self-referring fictions of Borges. To take but one example: in "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," in the volume Ficciones, Borges is quite obviously self-referential. "In judging this novel," says Borges' narrator, "no one would fail to discover that it is a game; it is only fair to remember that the author never considered it anything else."¹⁶ Among the many games Borges plays in Ficciones is the game of self-referring cross-reference: in "Herbert Quain" (28) he refers to his own story "The Circular Ruins," and in a footnote to "Three Versions of Judas" (155) he refers to his character Jaromir Hladik of "The Secret Miracle." Both cases are examples of the "artifice within artifice which is the hallmark of Borges."¹⁷

Besides games, other devices typical of self-conscious literature which are found in Borges are mirrors of all kinds and labyrinths. Borges confesses that an early fear--"being afraid of mirrors . . . being afraid of being repeated" (Burgin, 131)--helps explain the frequent appearance of mirror images in his work. And mirror images in the work of art, as we noted, often encourage mirror-analogies in the criticism. Such is the case with Carter Wheelock, who says (in a rather good defense of the artist against the charge of narcissism) that Borges' "polyvalent creations do not point to anything in nature but rather to the form of the creating intellect at the moment of creating. Borges is faithful to this idea, and his self-depicting literature is mirror-writing in which the artist sits painting his own portrait. This is not narcissism, but universalism--dehumanization and obliteration of the self--because the artist takes himself not as an individual, but as Man."¹⁸ The same sort of critical analogies develop in the case of Borges' labyrinths: Borges is fascinated by mazes, even entitles one of his most influential collections Labyrinths,¹⁹ and the critics start talking about the modern writer as Ariadne and the reader as Theseus (Christ, 38-9).

Rather than elaborate on the many features of Borges' work and Borges' criticism typical of reflexive fiction generally--the doublings, the allusions, the characters without individuality, the infinite regresses, and so on--we might better concentrate our attention on some characteristically

Borgesian concerns shared by many writers of reflexive works. Borges has a distinct, overt fondness for metaphysical speculation and a devotion to the dream-within-a-dream motif with its underlying idealism. In this devotion he differs from some other renowned reflexivists. "Unlike Borges," says Stark, "Nabokov does not propose that life is a dream," and he exhibits a "relative lack of interest in idealism" (100). Stark goes on to say that, like Nabokov, "Barth does not frontally attack reality by claiming that it is a dream" and that he shows "little interest in dreams" (146). In contrast to Nabokov and Barth, "Borges frequently notes, always positively, the conjunction of dream and literature" (42). ("The Circular Ruins," with its dream-within-a-dream, dreamer-dreaming-dreamer pattern, perfectly embodies these favorite Borgesian preoccupations.) In these preoccupations Borges continues the strong line of life-is-but-a-dream literature in Spanish which extends from Calderón through Unamuno; as Anthony Kerigan indicates, "Unamuno, and then Borges, both wonder (Unamuno, desperately; Borges, deviously) whether we have anything whatsoever to do with molding and imagining life--either in terms of dreams or dreamers or . . . as dreamed."²⁰

It is the fascination with the philosophical, with unsettling speculations, with "terrifying infinities (Burgin, 137), which distinguishes Borges' work from the shimmering literary ironies of Nabokov and the involutions-unto-death of Barth. As many analysts have explained (Stark, 29;

Christ, at length), the idealism of Berkeley--"A denial of objective, external reality" (Christ, 19)--provides Borges' philosophical center. Christ argues that "what the stylistics made possible in the way of expression, the metaphysic provided in the way of thought. Both serve to inform an oeuvre characterized by brevity and quintessence achieved through a denial of all that is either decorative or superficial" (18). Borges' fictions are brief, allusive, and gem-like because they are not operating at the level of extended realistic detail but in the realm of Idea.

This adherence to the ideal and the abstract has also helped to foster the characteristically Borgesian blending of essay and fiction (the essay being the non-fiction equivalent of the short story) which simultaneously evokes and analyzes. As Poirier puts it, Borges "altogether obliterates any distinction between fiction and the analysis of it."²¹ Or as Christ says, Borges' "cleverly superimposed planes of . . . review and story" create an Op Art of "vibrating ambiguity" (108), and "the reflecting diptych of critical fiction and fictional criticism in a peculiarly compact, intellectual, literary format is characteristically Borgesean. Before him, no one could astound or please in quite that way" (210-11).

Because no major writer of short fiction could astound or please in quite that way, Borges "seems to have founded the Literature of Exhaustion, identifying its opponent to be realism and working out its basic themes and techniques"

(Stark, 61). But, as Wright's article indicates, Borges, while very special and very influential, is not the first writer of short fiction to employ certain "Borgesian" reflexive techniques. As Wright shows, Borges discovered his kinship with Hawthorne. "Neither is a mimetic artist in the usual sense," and, as with many other reflexivists, "their fictions approximate meditation and approach the condition of poetry" (336). The art of each "tends to refer to itself, to depict, often secretively, the process of its own making and its being read" (335). Such Hawthorne tales as "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" and "Rappacini's Daughter" precede Borges' "Death and the Compass" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in "incorporating analogues for our reading of the work in the work" (344) and generating that "special form of self-referring fiction, the regressus ad infinitum" (346). The natural parallels of reader and character which the fiction of detection affords are exploited by both; the story-within-the-story device is common to both. The nineteenth-century American allegorizer and the patriarch of post-modern short fiction thus share the "participational mode."

But Hawthorne is not the only figure in American letters to offer a precedent for the reflexive short fiction which blossoms in the post-modern period. Henry James, for instance, has attracted attention for making the subjects of his short fiction parallel the process of fictionalizing. Wayne C. Booth, for example, cites James' story "The Liar" as a case of "the story of one's story."²² We could

undoubtedly find further stories by James and others which would provide incidents of the mildly metafictional, but it is not until the post-modern appearance of the Barths, Coovers, and Barthelme that literary self-consciousness becomes flagrant in American short fiction.

Not surprisingly, in light of the discussion in the previous chapter, the most self-conscious among them is Barth. Having clearly "followed the lead of Borges,"²³ in 1969 Barth gathered some of his fictions together and produced the remarkable short-story collection Lost in the Funhouse.²⁴ The work introduced many critics and readers to the reflexive mode of contemporary American short fiction--and baffled them in the process.²⁵ As Stark said, Lost in the Funhouse is "even more basically about literature" than Barth's other works in that it contains "many statements about narrative technique and sometimes discusses the state of fiction from the perspective of the Literature of Exhaustion" which Barth and Borges share (138).

Of course, the pieces in Lost in the Funhouse may be discussed in terms of Barth's arrangement of them as a story cycle. Max F. Schulz notes that Barth, the artificer, has arrested the narrative development in the collection "by freezing it into segmental short stories," thus de-emphasizing the organic while moving toward artificial patterning (154, n. 13). At the same time, the collection "has a sequence that dissolves into circularity" (150). Consequently, the pieces are distinct yet substantially unified.

The unifying circularity is "the circle of the artist self," as Mary Kate Begnal says.²⁶ Schulz makes it clear that the stories "act out a pattern of development, which dramatizes the life of the protagonist-narrator. Who am I as person? And who am I as author?" These are the central questions (143). In answer to them, "Lost in the Funhouse develops simultaneously a chronological narrative and a recurrent mythos. By this means the author-narrator sees himself both in the serialized growth of his protagonist into a writer and in the archetypal dimensions of the eternal artist" (151). In his movement toward the impersonal and archetypal, Barth is quite Borgesian; in his movement toward the personal, biographical self, he appears more characteristically Barthian.

Though the structuring of the story collection is an important consideration, several of the individual pieces, particularly the title story, merit and have received attention. The first piece, the two-page "Frame Tale," which might at first glance appear to be merely a precious, trifling joke, is in fact a clever emblem, physically and philosophically framing the work as a whole. "The actual structure of the book," Schulz observes, "is emphasized at the outset (although we understand the significance only after reading to the end) by the 'Frame Tale,' which consists of the endless sentence: 'Once upon a time there was a story that began "Once upon a time there was . . ."'" (150). A Moebius strip, a three-dimensional lemniscate, "Frame Tale,"

as Morrell notes, is circular, involuted, and continuous (92)--representing the circularity, involution, and continuousness of the collection.

In the slightly more substantial piece "Title" (105-113), Barth both exemplifies and analyzes hyper-aware, dead-end self-consciousness--entwining the theory and practice of reflexivity intensively and at tolerable length. This may, indeed, be the second-best example of concentrated, analytic, reflexive short fiction in existence--after Barth's "Life-Story" in the same volume. The reader is taken on a dizzying roller-coaster ride with Barth's self-aware narrator. Rapid shifts of point of view; self-quotation; the substitution of the names of parts of speech, grammatical units, and punctuation marks for the things themselves--all of these "tricks" are in evidence. Yet in the midst of such self-conscious devices is a sort of fictionalized version of Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion." Barth manages to discuss the current state of fiction and the four alternatives he sees to fiction's present stalemated condition: rejuvenating fiction, developing new genres, using the impossibility of creating anything new as the basis of something new, and lapsing into silence. (In his own work Barth, of course, repeatedly turns to the third and most self-conscious alternative.) When we have finished this story we may be tempted, as Robert Alter is (224), to quote the partially self-negating sentence which begins its final paragraph: "Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness." But,

if we can manage to put aside our abhorrence temporarily, we may be able to enjoy other facets of Barth's reflexive canon.

"Menelaiad," for instance, focuses on problems of voice and storytelling. Structurally, the tale is a Chinese box pattern par excellence. As Morrell says, "The structure of the story is like a set of Chinese boxes, a tale within a tale within a tale to the seventh degree" (94); Stark claims the tale "sets the world record for Chinese boxes" and he feels that the last of its interlocking boxes is "only the impetus of story-telling" (121). We find a bewildering profusion of quotation marks as we get the consecutive parentheses of the various tellings of the telling of Menelaus' tale. An enlightening comparison may be drawn between the quotations within quotations of Barth and the slightly less extended series of such quotations in Conrad's Lord Jim. Though we may recognize in the two authors a kindred concern with narrative processes, the Conradian conventions of quotations seem to exhibit a realist's concern for verisimilitude--despite the real-world impossibility of quoting accurately and extensively at two or three removes without the aid of printed or taped records; Barth's conventions of quotations exhibit their absurdities and point to fabulation and form. The difference is that between inadvertently self-conscious patterns and deliberately self-conscious investigation.

Though "Frame-Tale," "Title," and "Menelaiad" are interesting pieces, two other stories, "Life-Story" and "Lost

in the Funhouse," appear to be more significant works, if we can take being reprinted as an index of significance. The newest edition of the respected Norton Anthology of Literature reprints "Life-Story" as its representative Barth work.²⁷ "Life-Story" also represents Barth in the "Metafiction" section of Bellamy's SuperFiction (197-212); Bellamy calls it "a self-conscious satiric story" and, "more importantly, a sophisticated essay on the state of the art" (15). (Here again we find the story-essay form seen earlier in "Title.") Philosophically, "Life-Story" urges the idealistic notions that life is a fiction and that the author may be equated with God. It also contains, as Joseph says (41), some extremely "puzzled voices." "The main character suspects that he is a fictional character," explains Morrell (93), and "the problems of his fiction and the problems of the fiction he is in mirror each other and merge." Schulz, speaking of stories such as "Title" and "Life-Story," argues that, unlike earlier fiction "in which self-knowledge accompanies the protagonist's catching up to the narrator, these stories fuse protagonist-narrator with author-narrator in a regressus in infinitum barren of self-discovery. Protagonist and narrator become merely unending echoes of each other's creative blocks" (150). Schulz contends that Barth does not "break out of this vortex" until he moves his protagonist into the realms of myth, archetype, and impersonality. In addition to these rather philosophical matters, "Life-Story" also contains one of the most vivid (and most

frequently quoted) authorial addresses to the reader to be found anywhere: "The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction" (Lost in the Funhouse, 127). As we have noted, self-consciousness and reader masochism are quite compatible.

Of all the stories in the labyrinths of Lost in the Funhouse, the title piece--literally and figuratively the central story--is the most significant and has achieved the greatest critical recognition. "Lost in the Funhouse," Morrell exclaims, "seems in retrospect the most important, progressive, trend-defining American short fiction of its decade" (46). References to the funhouse--"that excruciatingly self-conscious symbol" (Joseph, 39)--and to the analogy between funhouse and fiction appear frequently in discussions of Barth's work and of contemporary fiction generally. The story is reprinted in the "Metafiction" section of Scholes' Elements of Fiction (485-505); the textbook stresses Barth's ridiculing of writing rules. "Lost in the Funhouse" is not only reprinted but featured in McKenzie's Fiction's Journey; culminating the collection (520-537), it is given a fairly thorough--if somewhat intermittent--formalistic analysis throughout that textbook. The analysis, incidentally, confirms the contention Scholes makes in his "Metafiction" article (105)--that the esthetically-oriented "fiction of forms," the anti-romance Barth works with, is particularly susceptible to esthetically-oriented formalistic analysis.

"Metafiction" itself discusses the story, stressing Barth's estheticism--"Because life is a rather badly made funhouse the artist tries to imagine a better one," says Scholes (111)--and the character Ambrose as "figure of thinking man" (111). The Schulz article, among sources already cited here, also discusses the role of Ambrose. Indeed, to attempt to review the criticism of "Lost in the Funhouse" is a futile and redundant exercise, and this much-examined piece does not need further elaborate analysis.

However, a few points which Morrell touches on may be emphasized. The story's central character, Ambrose, faces, in Morrell's words (87), the "problems of a sensitive adolescent." The implications of the natural confluence of adolescence and a coming to self-consciousness, the analogy of adolescent to self-conscious artist, have seldom received much attention. Moreover, as Morrell points out, in this story "technical advancement takes the form of technical--as opposed to philosophical or moralistic--intrusion" (87). With the technical intrusions in "Lost in the Funhouse," Barth shows his mastery of what might be called the art of parenthetical self-consciousness. This parenthetical commentary makes the self-consciousness of the story particularly easy to identify and talk about (which perhaps helps to explain why "Lost in the Funhouse" is such a favorite of textbook editors). The high visibility of his reflexive devices in this story seems to put Barth's practice at odds with Alter's assertion that the artifice of a self-conscious

fiction "should not be flatly 'self-evident' but cunningly revealed, a hide-and-seek presence . . . a stubbornly ambiguous substratum of the whole fictional world" (224). At least one of Barth's larger battles is quite self-evident: the stock forms and rules of the conventional, realistic story versus the self-conscious artist. And, though the self-consciousness in "Lost in the Funhouse" is highly visible, the tension between life and fiction is not thereby lost, as it may be in works consisting solely of endless invention; the tension may, in fact, be heightened by its obviousness. It is also obvious that Barth's story and the collection in which it is found have increased the general awareness of the self-consciousness of contemporary fiction.

While we often find Barth's reflexivity acting at one remove--that is, talking about writing or an inability to write--the reflexivity of Robert Coover involves substantially less convoluted display of overt theorizing and more direct, creative disruption of fiction's expected techniques. In other words, Barth talks about writing, while Coover writes. Arlen J. Hansen suggests that Coover is a part of "a new solipsism, one that has more to do with the actuating and liberating imagination than with the entrapment of selfhood," that Coover is involved in "the solipsistic act of making his own, new stories."²⁸ In any event, though Coover's perspective on creativity may differ from Barth's, Pricksongs and Descants, his 1969 collection of fictions, is, like Lost in the Funhouse, a landmark in contemporary

short fiction.²⁹ Klinkowitz enthusiastically calls it Coover's "full exploitation of the new imaginative mode in fiction" (17). While Alter seems ambivalent about the quality of Pricksongs (222, 225) and contests some of Coover's assertions (made in the prologue to "Seven Exemplary Fictions") about fabulation being the wave of the future in all fiction (229-232), he does recognize the collection as important enough to deserve extensive comment.

Though they will not receive extensive analysis here, several of the tales in this collection "where fantasy and reality enrich one another" (Alter, 225) have received attention elsewhere. The fantasy of "The Elevator," for instance, is reprinted in the "Fantasy-Fabulation-Irrealism" section of Bellamy's Superfiction and is briefly commented upon in the introduction to that collection (5-6). "The Baby Sitter" seems to appeal to Klinkowitz, who rightly calls it "the author's tour de force" (17). "By the story's end everything that might possibly happen has," says Klinkowitz (18), broadly hinting at a favorite Coover strategy: alternating segments of a series of divergent fantasies based on some core situation. "The Hat Act," the final fiction in Pricksongs, is discussed in Hansen (13) and reprinted in Elements of Literature (505-517). Like many of Coover's other pieces, it is written in the present tense, employing a device which goes against the past tense grain of narrative. By "describing very 'realistically' an 'impossible' event" (Elements, 436), Coover--as he does so

often--arouses powerful, primary emotions which generate an unusual tension as they collide with his self-conscious techniques. In "Metafiction" Scholes diagnoses Coover's power as stemming from his exploitation of myth--not parodic exploitation but exploitation of the genuine, fundamental force of myth. "For Coover reality is mythic," says Scholes. "Magic is real. The fairy tales are true" (114-115). According to Scholes, the principal ingredient is sex: "Sex itself is the door that connects fictional form and mythic idea" (113). The underlying power of sex is indeed evident in Pricksongs (which is not surprising in view of the title); it need only be added that fear, terror, and revulsion (witness the bloody grotesqueries in the three stories cited) also function extremely potently in Coover's reflexive brew.

Coover's Pricksongs is an important contribution to contemporary reflexive short fiction, but the contributions of Donald Barthelme are perhaps more widely known. By the force of his many short pieces, which appeared in the 1960's and 1970's, Barthelme became "the most imitated author of our time" (McKenzie, 87). Much of what was said in the last chapter about Barthelme's novel Snow White is applicable to his short fiction; self-consciousness, virtuosity, delight in words, and fondness for the contemporary trash phenomenon distinguish Barthelme. Rather than discuss these qualities in Barthelme's diverse works, we might better concentrate on a single representative fiction. Reprinted in Bellamy (213-220) and McKenzie (504-509), "Sentence" would

seem a logical choice.

"Sentence" is, as McKenzie explains (79), an extended monologue, a direct address to the reader. In structure it is one run-on sentence, a monstrous collage, beginning in the middle and ending without a period--a portion of some infinite entity (McKenzie, 83). The plot of "Sentence" is the making of a sentence (83); its stage is that of the mind (85)--it is a record of the thinking, creating process. Character is reduced, as in Beckett and Barth, to first-person narrator as mere voice (81/89). Though the structure of "Sentence" may suggest boundlessness, its references suggest quite the contrary--self-containedness. The words which compose it look back on themselves. "Sentence," says McKenzie, "is not only a comment on fiction-making but an entity in itself without any outside experiential meaning. The words are meant to be enjoyed for their own peculiar evoking of the way ideas and emotions, events and people come tumbling into our brains, and for their own sake simply as words" (86). She goes on to say that when Barthelme and other experimentalists use words they "tend to minimize their symbolic value and to use words as self-contained entities that refer inward to the nonaction of the story rather than outward to a physical reality" (92). Klinkowitz says much the same thing: "The key to Barthelme's new aesthetic for fiction is that the work may stand for itself, that it need not yield to complete explication of something else in the world but may exist as an individual object,

something beautiful and surprising and deep" (80). This is not to suggest that "Sentence" avoids history, that it is atypical of Barthelme, master observer of contemporary life. The story contains numerous examples of "trash"--which McKenzie discusses (86)--and references which make "a comment on a pattern of contemporary urban life" (81). Barthelme is still, as Klinkowitz calls him, "the contextualist," a writer close to "our actual society and its dreck" (80). Even so, as McKenzie puts it, the story "has modern life as its referent but fiction-making as its subject" (83). In fact, this theme of fiction-making--"the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones"--is recapitulated by "Sentence" itself at its close.

It is easy to see from the Barth and Barthelme sections above that McKenzie has recognized the self-conscious trend in contemporary short fiction and that she has gone beyond other textbook writers--who have certainly been bolstering their selections from Nabokov, Borges, Barth, and other recognized self-conscious authors--to an intelligent discussion in depth of the reflexive phenomenon. In addition to the Barth and Barthelme pieces, Fiction's Journey includes fictions by Borges ("Theme of the Traitor and the Hero"), Brautigan, Cortazar (Borges' Latin American compatriot), and Charles Nicol. The short Nicol piece, "I Am Donald Barthelme," is a delightful parody of Barthelme and his

forebearers like Cervantes and Borges, as McKenzie points out (87); its higher-order self-consciousness--reflexively treating reflexivists--is particularly appealing.

Elements of Literature, like the McKenzie text, is doubly valuable; it provides a healthy sampling of reflexive short fiction and some analysis of reflexivity. Among the samples of reflexive fictions or "metafictions," which are not restricted to contemporary American examples; two fictions by Borges ("Theme of the Traitor and the Hero"--with a commentary--and "The Lottery in Babylon"); a wild, difficult piece by Barthelme ("The Indian Uprising"); Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," science fiction which patently invites reader participation in its creation; Henry James' "The Real Thing;" "A Consolatory Tale," a frame-tale by Isak Dinesen; Cortazar's "Blow-up," transformed into a popular and controversial film; and two now-familiar pieces--Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" and Coover's "The Hat Act." In addition to its wide selection of meta-fictions, Elements has the merit of recognizing and explaining that fiction is not based on a simple, clearly-defined polarity of realism and anti-realism (as may have been suggested at times for convenience of discussion in this dissertation) but resembles instead a spectrum (to use the textbook's term). A segment on "The Spectrum of Fiction" (103-105) presents a useful, rough scale for fiction--a scale which runs from the pure reality of history at one end through realism and romance to pure fantasy at the other

extreme. Such a scale helps us to visualize how realism may be pulled on one side toward history in, for example, the roman à clef or shifted toward the irreality of fantasy on the other. More importantly, it reinforces the contention made throughout this dissertation that the analysis of fiction is a matter of dimensions and degrees, not simple dichotomies.

To complement the textbooks like Fiction's Journey and Elements of Literature, there are, as we have seen, the contemporary anthologies of short fiction; these collections too have increased the recognition of the reflexive trend. Obviously, Bellamy's SuperFiction, used in our examinations of Barth, Coover, and Barthelme, is a good example of such a collection, though there are other fine anthologies to choose from.³⁰ In addition to the fictions of the three contemporary American reflexivists just mentioned, SuperFiction contains pieces by all of the other authors treated as novelists in our previous chapter: Vonnegut, Pynchon, Updike, Sorrentino, and Sukenick. Again we are made conscious of the proximity of reflexive short fiction to the self-conscious novel. The Sorrentino and Sukenick fictions in the "Metafiction" section of the book exhibit characteristics of their authors and of metafiction generally. Sorrentino's "The Moon in Its Flight" gives us the love theme under self-conscious scrutiny and ends with the rather melancholy appraisal--which the great nineteenth-century realists would decry--that "Art cannot rescue anybody from

anything" (233). "What's Your Story," as we might expect, finds Sukenick using his favorite writer-at-his-desk routine. Beside these familiar names we might put that of Ishmael Reed. Reed, an author favored by Klinkowitz, creates a fanciful, parodic Western entitled "The Loop Garoo Kid" (Loop Garoo, from the French, loup-garou, meaning "werewolf") in which children attempt to "create their own fiction."

Throughout this chapter we have seen artists, from Borges and Barth to Bellamy's contributors, who create their own short fictions and, in their idiosyncratic ways, admit that they have created them. We see that in number and quality reflexive short fiction has begun to attain a status comparable to that of the reflexive novel. The following, final chapter will summarize the observations already made on the self-consciousness found in both novel and short fiction and will propose further directions which the investigation of reflexivity might take.

Notes

¹ Barbara McKenzie, Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 6, 76.

² SuperFiction, or The American Story Transformed: An Anthology, ed. Joe David Bellamy (New York: Vintage, 1975). See especially "Introduction," pp. 3-17.

³ Oates in an interview with Joe David Bellamy, "Joyce Carol Oates," in The New Fiction, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 27.

⁴ Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 195.

⁵ Gardner in an interview with Joe David Bellamy and Pat Ensworth, "John Gardner," in The New Fiction, p. 171.

⁶ Beyond the Wasteland: The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), p. 21.

⁷ Earl Rovit was making the same point in the early sixties concerning the "parody-novels" of Barth, Nabokov, and Durrell in "The Novel as Parody: John Barth," Critique, 6 (Fall 1963), 79-80.

⁸ Iowa Review, 1, No. 4 (Fall 1970), p. 107.

⁹ Robert Scholes, Carl H. Klaus, and Michael Silverman, eds., Elements of Literature (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

¹⁰ "Borges and Hawthorne," Tri-Quarterly 25: Prose for Borges (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1972), p. 334.

¹¹ Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 33.

¹² Richard Burgin, Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1969), p. xv.

¹³ In an interview with Joe David Bellamy, "Susan Sontag," in The New Fiction, p. 115.

¹⁴ John O. Stark, The Literature of Exhaustion (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), p. 11.

¹⁵ Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), p. 227.

- 16 Ficciones, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove, 1962), p. 75.
- 17 Ronald J. Christ, The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969), p. 212.
- 18 The Mythmaker: A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1969), p. 54.
- 19 Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964).
- 20 "Borges/Unamuno," Tri-Quarterly 25, p. 302.
- 21 Richard Poirier, "The Politics of Self-Parody," Partisan Review, 35 (Summer 1968), 350.
- 22 The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 347.
- 23 Max F. Schulz, "Characters (Contra Characterization) in the Contemporary Novel," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press 1974), p. 148. Schulz says much the same thing on p. 151. See also Gerhard Joseph, John Barth, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 91 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 41, for further comments on the resemblances of the two authors.
- 24 Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1968).
- 25 David Morrell, John Barth: An Introduction (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 131 (note). The author of this dissertation was likewise introduced to the intrigue and bafflement of reflexive fiction by Barth's collection of stories.
- 26 "Self-Mimesis in the Fiction of John Barth," Dissertation Abstracts International, 35 (1975), 7293-A (Pennsylvania State).
- 27 The Norton Anthology of Literature, ed. Ronald Gottesman et al. (New York: Norton, 1979), II, pp. 2162-2173.
- 28 "The Celebration of Solipsism: A New Trend in American Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies, 19 (Spring 1973) 8, 15.
- 29 Pricksongs and Descants (New York: Dutton, 1969).

³⁰ Philip Stevick's Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction (New York: The Free Press, 1971) and Raymond Federman's Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow (Chicago: Swallow, 1974) might be suggested.

CONCLUSION

We have heard from one critic the cry that "Art has no right to exist if, content to reproduce reality, it uselessly duplicates it"¹ and from another that "the best fiction, or the fiction that is most consciously itself, is the fiction that acknowledges as completely as it can be made to do its own parodic nature."² And, as we have found, this call for the anti-mimetic, for the anti-realistic, for the parodic, in sum, for a highly self-conscious literature, has been answered by many authors in the post-modern, post-war period, particularly in the United States of the 1960's and 1970's. (We must always maintain a sense of proportion and keep in mind that all of the contemporary self-conscious works produced by these "many authors" have never displaced or superseded more than a small portion of the non-reflexive serious fiction during these decades.) At the same time, we have encountered some of the difficulties and dangers of this literary reflexivity, problems summed up, more or less, by Tony Tanner's remark that "reflection does not necessarily help you to live."³ This final chapter will attempt to review briefly the premises of this dissertation, to recapitulate some major aspects of its complex and controversial subject, to outline some of the further steps which

criticism might take in this area, and to suggest where literary reflexivity is today and where it may be in the future.

It should be evident by this time that the approach taken in this study has been a pluralistic and incorporative rather than a reductive one. The study has attempted to codify to some extent the predictable features in self-conscious literature and in its attendant criticism. While it has incorporated a good deal of the previous criticism on its subject, it has generally eschewed the theoretical heights of "metacommentary"--the examination of the foundations of criticism--in order to avoid a regress of criticism of the criticism of a literature which criticizes literature and to get on with the examination, however theoretically simplistic, of a very sophisticated body of literature.⁴ It has also generally eschewed the argumentative in favor of the expository, exploring possibilities rather than propounding final explanations. Essentially it is the work of a teacher rather than an innovator, of a teacher who, rather like the weaver, is less interested in spinning his strands of wool and more interested in weaving fine patterns.

Woven into the fabric of this study have been several definitions and certain fundamental critical conceptions. From a superabundance of relevant critical terms, "self-conscious" and "reflexive" were selected as most appropriate for the object of inquiry--the literary self-consciousness which results when a work of fiction draws attention to its

status as fiction. This reflexivity of fiction has been identified as one part of the many reflexive aspects of our world; it has been found applicable to a sprawling but ultimately unified body of literature, a literature with a long history and one which has enjoyed prominence and considerable critical attention in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain during the last two decades; the various dimensions of this reflexive phenomenon--psychological, sociological, archetypal, formal--have been tentatively explored.

In Section One we examined the critical dimensions of this self-consciousness, starting with the reader and the process of reading. We found that literary art is based on a complex set of conventions and expectations and that self-conscious literature inevitably disrupts its belief-inducing illusions in some manner. The dissociation of reader from text which is a common consequence of this disruption of illusion may, as we saw, lead to an increased appreciation of artistic illusion but may just as well lead to negative responses--perhaps to feelings that the reflexive work is overly intellectual or boring. In contrast to the process of identification, of believing, which is essential to modes like the realistic, the process of dissociation is the basis for the many connections which we discovered between highly reflexive literature and comedy, irony, and parody and for the anti-illusionistic qualities of self-conscious fiction.

In the second chapter of this section we looked at the relationship of the author to his fiction. We touched on the reflexive complications of the problem of autobiography, of the difficulties arising from the presences of historic and implied authors in literary works. We considered the reflexive potentials of various types of narrators and points of view. We also considered the psychological profiles critics had drawn of the authors of self-conscious fictions: the positive view that reflexivity affords order and control; the negative view that self-consciousness entails narcissism solipsism, and impotence; and the neutral view that literary self-consciousness embodies epistemological inquiry.

Chapter Three began with a look at the formal components of fiction and the features typical of reflexive fiction: flat characters, over- or under-plotting, stories-within-stories, fantastic settings, disturbances of the prose surface, parody. The second portion of the chapter was devoted to a discussion of the interconnections of genres and modes: reflexive fiction and its relationship to poetry, its connections with the modes of comedy and irony, and, finally, its persistently anti-mimetic nature. We concluded the Critical Dimensions section with a chapter which placed self-conscious fiction in a context of contemporary literature and media, amid a welter of reflexive activity in television, films, and the theater, and related it to various philosophical, psychological, and sociological movements

in a relativistic, skeptical, game-playing age.

Section Two dealt with the historical dimension of reflexivity, offering an abbreviated history of the reflexive mode--including discussion of the frame tale, of the self-conscious theater from Shakespeare to Stoppard, and of the self-conscious novel from Cervantes and Sterne to Gide and Huxley--in an attempt to establish the sometimes illustrious lineage of the reflexive literature of the post-modern period.

The second portion of the dissertation shifted from the past and the theoretical toward particular literary artists of the present era. Contemporary novelists were the subject of Section Three. In the first chapter we elucidated in some detail the techniques and concerns of Vladimir Nabokov, the greatest of contemporary reflexive novelists. Chapter Two focused on the rather diminutive British branch of self-conscious novelists--on Beckett, Durrell, Fowles, and Murdoch. Our third and final chapter scrutinized the vigorously reflexive Americans, beginning with John Barth's *Literature of Exhaustion* and proceeding through the conspiracies of Pynchon and the popular science-fiction of Vonnegut to the younger generation of Barthelme, Sukenick, and Sorrentino. We concluded this chapter and section with a look at the New Journalism and the self-conscious effects visible in the works of an older artist like John Updike.

In Section Four we considered the generally neglected area of reflexive short fiction. We began with a short

history of the short story and with some possible explanations for why self-conscious short fiction blossomed in America in the sixties. We then looked at the ficciones of Borges, the seminal figure in contemporary self-conscious short fiction. Two collections of such fiction--Lost in the Funhouse by the prolific John Barth and Pricksongs and Descants by Robert Coover--were our next concern. The chapter ended with a review of some of the anthologies and textbooks which have discovered, promoted, and analyzed today's "Superfiction."

The foregoing summary may give the erroneous impression that the investigation of self-conscious fiction is complete and that the field is exhausted. To the extent that this dissertation appears to be a definitive study it is in trouble, for, as Thomas C. Schelling has said, "the inevitable lot of a definitive survey is to serve as a definitive target."⁵ In truth, however, it is by no means definitive, and there are numerous omissions and deficiencies to be pointed out. First of all, many individual artists have been insufficiently discussed or perhaps omitted altogether--writers ranging from Fielding to William Burroughs and William H. Gass.⁶ Moreover, several deficiencies might be found in the area of theory, where more rigorous definitions and more thorough explanations of the causes of the reflexive response are required.

There may be lingering uncertainty surrounding the term "reflexive," which has been used rather indiscriminately to

designate, in a broad sense, any operation or device which provokes self-consciousness by puncturing some convention and, in a narrower sense, any work which employs such operations extensively. There also may be some residual confusion as to the range of literary works against which reflexive works may be broadly aligned. The repeated use of the term "realism" may have suggested a target for reflexive disruptions which, for all its merits as such a target, is too restricted. While highly self-conscious works often undermine the conventions of mimetic and particularly realistic and naturalistic literature, reflexive should be regarded as a broad, flexible, relative term for illusion-questioning literature--literature which interferes with the imaginative assent of its audience--in contradistinction to illusion-inducing literature. Thus tragic literature, romantic literature, and naturalistic literature may all be classified as illusion-inducing. Works in the comic mode will generally be more self-conscious than those tragic, romantic, and naturalistic works--and ironic works will be even more reflexive. Yet comic and ironic works may be subject in their turn to even further scrutiny or self-scrutiny. The concept of reflexivity must be seen as a flexible one but not one so vague as to be meaningless.⁷

Such a concept enables us to analyze and appreciate the work of other critics who have considered self-conscious literature. When, for example, we find Robert Scholes analyzing fiction into four categories (the fiction of ideas,

the fiction of forms, the fiction of existence, and the fiction of essence) and defining the "fiction of existence" in terms of the behavioristic realism of the novel form, we may perceive that Scholes' fiction of existence corresponds quite well to our realistic literature and that his other categories (involving romance, myth, and allegory) embrace literature of variously reflexive natures.⁸ Of especial interest in his subdivision of the fiction of forms--that is, fiction which imitates other fiction--into romance and anti-romance. For Scholes, anti-romance exhibits an awareness of the problem of imitation either by elaboration or by parody. Elaboration exposes form and artifice and anti-realism is often a consequence of such exposure; parody, of course, is one of the most familiar techniques of reflexive literature. When Scholes mentions Sterne and Joyce and the "self-conscious work which shows its awareness of fictional form by elaboration or parody" in the same breath (105), we can be confident that the contrast of Scholes' anti-romance and his fiction of existence is analogous to that between highly reflexive works and their opposites--realistic works.

But while our concept of reflexivity may be immediately useful in assessing criticism like that of Scholes, it may be less easily applied to a major concept like symbolism. Within a single issue of Tri-Quarterly, for instance, we can find two articles which deal unmistakably with reflexivity and reflexive artists yet which speak in apparently contradictory terms regarding symbolism. John Wright sees Borges

and Hawthorne as working in a self-referring and anti-mimetic mode, working in "a broadly symbolist tradition of literary invention: a literature of ambiguity, irony, and paradox strongly inclined to allegory and parable--to introverted and labyrinthine designs."⁹ Robert Alter, on the other hand, predicates his discussion of Borges and other reflexivists of the contemporary period on concepts of "an anti-symbolist movement," an "antithesis to symbolism," and a "reaction against symbolism."¹⁰

How is it possible that reflexivity be both symbolic and anti-symbolic? Perhaps the answer will be forthcoming if we accept the relative nature of reflexivity. To the extent that symbolism tends toward the anti-realistic (as with Kafka's giant insect) it will involve some degree of self-consciousness; at the same time, to the extent that the symbolic work compels imaginative assent (in the way, for example, in which dreams induce belief) it will align itself with belief-inducing rather than belief-frustrating modes. When the symbol points toward something other than art, one reflexive dimension of the symbolic work will be reduced; when art or an aspect of art is symbolized, that dimension of reflexivity will be correspondingly more pronounced. Thus it is by recognizing several reflexive continua that we can dispose of our apparent critical impasse: while the symbolic work is in some ways more self-conscious than the typical work of realism, it too may be more or less self-conscious, turn more or less on itself, have its conventions

more or less punctured.

Such recognition will be a useful first step toward a fuller exploitation of the concepts of self-consciousness, but numerous other concepts remain undeveloped. For example, the definition of the components of reflexivity presented in this dissertation have been "soft." "Our definitions," says John O. Stark, "lack the exactness needed to clarify completely this kind of literature."¹¹ He points to a particular need for a term to designate "the element of fiction to which the Chinese box technique belongs." Without converting literary criticism into mathematics, it should be possible to reduce some of the indefiniteness attending this subject. In addition to refining our definitions to make our concepts more specifiable, we might also quantify them more effectively. Checklists and diagrams might prove useful tools in pinpointing the reflexive qualities of a given work. We can envision reflexivity rating scales or reflexive feature matrices (similar to the matrices grammarians have developed for studying the syntactic features of language). We might attempt to specify the dimensions of point of view, using Wayne Booth's work as a basis. Does a work have a first-person narrator? Does that narrator comment on his writing tasks? Does he do so frequently? Are the parallels between author and narrator close and explicit? If the narrator is omniscient, are there intrusions or manipulations of the narrative which deliberately expose this narrative convention? Similar and even more narrowly

focused questions might be asked regarding each of the formal components of a given work--in other words, the theory of reflexivity still needs to be worked out in detail and applied to and corrected against further specific works.

Even without the benefits of such detailed criticism--or perhaps to speed their coming--instructors of English at various levels of instruction might present self-conscious literature more systematically, making use of some of the textbooks and anthologies already mentioned. Integrating the current critical recognition of reflexivity and present curricula would of course take many forms, possibly including graduate or advanced undergraduate offerings in Reflexive Literature. A course in reflexive literature might, in an ambitious semester, deal with the following: some short fiction from an anthology like SuperFiction and from Barth's Lost in the Funhouse; plays such as The Tempest, Six Characters in Search of an Author, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead; novels including Don Quixote, Tristram Shandy, Ulysses, Point Counter Point, Lolita (or Pale Fire), Malone Dies, Chimera, Slaughterhouse-Five (or The French Lieutenant's Woman), and, to bring us up to date, the newest novel by Gilbert Sorrentino, whatever it might be.

Such a course could reach into or even begin with the reflexivity in popular culture. It might make pedagogical sense to start a discussion of self-conscious literature with an easily approachable burlesque like Bored of the Rings,¹² a take-off on the tremendously popular Lord of the

Rings trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien. Bored of the Rings riotously overflows with relevantly absurd names, phony reviews, comedy, allusion, parody, self-conscious intrusions, and literary criticism--with many of the familiar qualities of self-conscious literature. We find, for example, a nice simile for artificiality--and an indirect reference to the book's own contrivances--when "the sky, though cloudless, thundered like a thousand stagehands striking a thousand metal sheets" (146). We get explicit reference to the fact of the book when two characters set out "along the rising gorge that led to the next chapter" (97). We even encounter the authorial voice directly: "Observing this near impossible escape from certain death, Frito wondered how much longer the authors were going to get away with such tripe. He wasn't the only one" (63). If nothing else, such a work would illustrate the lack of class consciousness in self-conscious literature and remind us that reflexive techniques thrive at many levels and in many environments.

Inside the classroom or out, we face a continuing accumulation of evidence to support Joe David Bellamy's assertion that "systematic criticism always lags behind the ground-breaking efforts of live practitioners."¹³ This dissertation, for instance, too gap-filled to be considered thoroughly systematic, has barely skimmed the surface of reflexive works written a decade ago. It seemed to have an innate delaying mechanism and, even as it progressed, it fell further behind the most recently arrived self-conscious

stories and novels. It could neither keep up nor catch up. So the question is ever with us: "Where is artistic reflexivity today?" Self-consciousness is proceeding energetically in the popular medium of television with the likes of Saturday Night Live and Soap in the United States and Monty Python in both Britain and America. In the film world we find comedian Albert Brooks directing the ironically titled Real Life, a parody of documentaries, in which he plays himself. In fiction, involution is still in fashion: John Barth brings together characters from his previous fictions in the hyper-reflexive epistolary novel Letters,¹⁴ and the fashion appears--more sedately to be sure--in the novel-about-the-novelist The Pardoner's Tale by Britain's John Wain.¹⁵ The examples keep coming.

But perhaps as important as how far behind we might fall in efforts to keep pace with current self-conscious works is the question--fraught with all the dangers of speculation--of where artistic reflexivity, particularly literary reflexivity, is headed. Have the conditions which have encouraged the proliferation of extremely self-conscious efforts in recent decades given way to new ones? Is reflexivity faddish and will reflexive fiction diminish to become a permanent but minor rivulet of fiction? Or is the surge of self-conscious fiction in the sixties but a precursor of an endless wave of similar literature?

Without making a final determination as to the validity of the three major theories of the growth of intensely

reflexive fiction--that is, (1) that such growth is the result of sociological and attendant psychological conditions (that the surge of reflexivity reflects contemporary chaos), (2) that such growth is the result of purely internal literary developments (a natural reaction to realism), and (3) that it is the timeless product of inherent capabilities of the human mind--we must take account of the interrelationships of fictional self-consciousness and the so-called Death of the Novel. At least since the beginning of the post-modern period, since 1948 when Lionel Trilling introduced the concept of the death of the novel, various ideas associated with reflexivity, such as experimentalism and parody, have been viewed as signs of decadence and implicated in the demise of the novel form.¹⁶ The characteristics of reflexivity associated with sophistication and intellectual elitism have been thought to threaten the novel; if the novel rejects its middle-class, middle-brow, realistic roots in favor of the elitism of, say, a Barth, it risks losing its audience (or what there is left of an audience after the attrition caused by films and television); if it refuses to grow from those roots, it risks the loss of its artists.

Yet no massive swing to the extremes of parasitic reflexivity has occurred, and the death of the novel--"so often announced,"¹⁷ as Frank Kermode puts it--has been indefinitely postponed, while "the dreary cry lamenting the novel's decline is now seldom heard."¹⁸ Critic Susan Sontag,

arguing that the reflexivity of parody is "a dead-end response, a decadent response," predicts that the "auto-destructive mechanism in the arts will come to an end, at least for a while" and that the arts cannot "go on indefinitely raping themselves, eating up styles, getting more self-conscious." She sees hope in movement toward "science fiction" which alternates between fantasy and so-called reality.¹⁹ Klinkowitz, calling the ironic, parodic work of Barth and Pynchon "funereal," proclaims the "re-creative" energies of the younger (though still reflexive) generation (1). Robert Alter takes issue with Robert Coover's contention that the contemporary novelist is being replaced by the fabulist but nonetheless holds that Nabokov's interminglings of fantasy and reality "seem more and more to offer a striking paradigm of where the novel may be going in the second half of our century."²⁰ This movement toward a moderated incorporation of self-consciousness is also diagnosed in The Norton Anthology, which sees the passing of one sort of reflexivity--"the jokier, loudly 'far-out' or 'trip' novels of the late 1960s"--and the arrival in the 1970's of "more substantial blends of fantasy and reality" (1865).

The central thrust of such comments--conclusions corroborated by some sketchy observations of current fiction--seems to be that, while in general the extremes of parodic, parasitic, and purely fabulous self-consciousness may be relics of the late sixties and early seventies, a transformed self-consciousness is likely to permeate a portion of

British and American fiction for some time to come. Those who interpret the rise and fall of intensely reflexive fiction in relation to social conditions, notably the increase and diminishment of social upheaval in the last two decades in the United States, may view the supposed passing of Barth, Pynchon, and Barthelme from the forefront of the literary scene as confirmation that the era of tumultuous dislocations is past and that, as comparative social calm has returned, comparative literary calm has settled in as a result.

Those critics who downplay social and psychological considerations and seek explanation in the independent, internal developments in the arts will also find support for their positions in the patterns of literary reflexivity which seem to be emerging. The evolutionists may interpret the eddy of involution represented by Barth, its apparent cul-de-sac for literature, and the subsequent merging of reflexive and realistic modes as evidence of the adaptability and survivability of fiction. Though certain forms may die out, the species continues to modify itself and evolve--sometimes, contrary to the workings of biological evolution, by looking to the past and reviving past forms. To use a less Darwinian analogy, the contemporary self-examination in fiction may be a stage of growth, an adolescence (albeit a late one) preceding a new maturity in fiction--an adulthood of balancing the tensions of fiction's potential movements from most documentary to most imaginative, from seeking outward to probing inward.

For those who see in the workings of the human mind an everpresent potential, even a need, for self-consciousness, the last few years will simply be viewed as a period which was very conducive to self-examination; for them the future of reflexive fiction, though not its intensity, is a certainty. Though the late enthusiasm may pass and reflexivity become mellowed or submerged, the mind's search for awareness will always include the possibility of self-awareness, and artists will never cease to reflect this self-awareness in their art so long as there are minds to search and hands to record that search.

And we must continue our critical awareness of this self-consciousness with the optimism which Jacques Maritain, in a slightly different context, expresses so eloquently when he admits that "errors can occur in the coming to consciousness of poetry, as in every human achievement of consciousness," but continues as follows: "To imagine, however, that coming to consciousness in itself, or progress in reflexivity, is a bad thing, a thing which by its nature tends to deform, would be to fall into a sort of Manichaeian pessimism, which is, moreover, as false as possible, if it is true that reflexivity is . . . a typical property of the spirit. In the very errors of coming to consciousness there are always coexistent discoveries." He concludes by declaring, "All in all, other things being equal, it is better, however dangerous it be, and to whatever sanctions one expose oneself, to know what one is doing. . . for that

matter, we do not have the choice. When the naive ages are past, they are quite past. The only resource left to us is a better and purer self-consciousness."²¹

Notes

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, "Doomed to Irony," in The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture, by José Ortega y Gasset, trans. Willard A. Trask (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 45.

² Dabney Stuart, "Laughter in the Dark: Dimensions of Parody," in Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations, and Tributes, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., and Charles Newman (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), p. 73.

³ The Fabulators (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 251.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary," PMLA, 86 (1971), 9-18.

⁵ The Strategy of Conflict (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), p. vi.

⁶ Gass is an especially interesting case. In addition to successfully ignoring his creative and critical works, this dissertation might appear to owe its title to him. In fact, his article "Mirror, Mirror"--a review of Nabokov's work which appeared in the New York Review of Books, 6 June 1968, pp. 3-5--did not come to my attention until this study was well under way. I have ignored all murmurings about great minds running in similar channels.

⁷ To gain further insight into the breadth of the concept of reflexivity, see how it applies to the metatheater/tragedy dichotomy summarized by Lionel Abel in Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 113. See also the dissertation of Gary Michael Boyd--"The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique," Dissertation Abstracts International, 37 (1976), 293-A (University of Wisconsin-Madison)--which supplements the present work by applying the realism/reflexivity contrast to the works of the earlier Modernists like Conrad, Faulkner, and Woolf who have been slighted here.

⁸ "Metafiction," Iowa Review, 1, No. 4 (Fall 1970), 100-15. Especially valuable are pp. 102-05.

⁹ "Borges and Hawthorne," in Tri-Quarterly 25: Prose for Borges (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1972), p. 334.

¹⁰ "Borges and Stevens: A Note on Post-Symbolist Writing," in Tri-Quarterly 25, pp. 223, 225.

¹¹ The Literature of Exhaustion (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), p. 177.

¹² Henry N. Beard and Douglas C. Kenney, Bored of the Rings (New York: Signet, 1969).

¹³ "Preface," The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. xii.

¹⁴ Letters (New York: Putnam's, 1979). Even more recently Barth has supplemented his "Literature of Exhaustion" with "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction," The Atlantic, Jan. 1980, pp. 65-71. Barth appears to lament the "self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism" which post-modern fiction continues and to worry that it is "more and more about itself and its processes" (p. 68). He calls for a fiction which can "rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism" (p. 70), a call which we will hear echoed shortly.

¹⁵ The Pardoner's Tale (New York: Viking, 1979).

¹⁶ "Art and Fortune," from The Liberal Imagination (New York: Viking, 1948), rpt. in The American Novel since World War II, ed. Marcus Klein (New York: Fawcett, 1969), pp. 81-102. See also Leslie Fiedler's "The End of the Novel," from Waiting for the End (New York: Stein and Day, 1964), rpt. in Perspectives on Fiction, ed. James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 190-96, or any of the pieces cited by Jerome Klinkowitz in Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 2, n. 4, for further illustrations of death-of-the-novel criticism.

¹⁷ "Novel and Narrative," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 155.

¹⁸ The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Ronald Gottesman et al. (New York: Norton, 1979), II, p. 1864.

¹⁹ In an interview with Joe David Bellamy, "Susan Sontag," in The New Fiction, pp. 127-28.

²⁰ Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), pp. 230, 179.

²¹ "Concerning Poetic Knowledge," The Situation of Poetry, trans. Marshall Suther (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1955), rpt. in Modern Continental Literary Criticism, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr., (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), pp. 342-43.

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