FUNCTIONS OF THE STORY WITHIN A STORY IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of
The Ohio State University

By

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1983

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Morris Beja, for all he has taught me about twentieth-century literature, and for his valuable assistance on this dissertation.

I am grateful for the assistance of the other two members of my committee, Robert Jones, who introduced me to the Renaissance play within a play and asked the right questions, and James Phelan, who helped me to define my topic and kept me on the right track. I am also grateful to Professor Altick for teaching me how to do dissertation research, and to the librarians in the English section of the OSU Library for their thoughtful and knowledgeable aid. Tina Hanlon helped enormously by typing most of the first revision and by being a friend in need.

Finally, I especially want to thank my husband Ron and son Patrick for their love, encouragement, and belief in me.
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INTRODUCTION

This study examines several works of twentieth-century literature in which an inner story is contained by an outer one, in order to show how the story within a story device functions in these works. The use of the story within a story in the novel goes back to the tales of the Arabian Nights, and flourished in Renaissance and Jacobean drama, as several excellent studies have demonstrated. In this century playwrights and novelists of the stature of Luigi Pirandello, John Barth, and Vladimir Nabokov, to name only a few, have revived what I refer to as the Russian doll device. They have found in it a form that serves them as well in this century as it did their predecessors, though in different ways.

The three plays and eight novels discussed at length in the chapters that follow have been included not because they are necessarily representative of the great number of works that employ the Russian doll technique in this century, but because they demonstrate the extraordinary possibilities of the technique. The Golden Notebook and If on a winter's night a traveler, for example, achieve their effects because they so skillfully exploit the doubleness of narration that the Russian doll technique affords.

A Russian doll novel or play should not be confused with other similarly constructed works. A work which uses the Russian doll
device must contain two (or more) substantial and distinct narratives. The fact that both narratives must be substantial eliminates works such as *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the governess's narrative is preceded by an account of the acquisition of her manuscript. John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* uses the same sort of frame to introduce the main story. Such a frame is often incomplete, beginning but not ending the story, and readers tend to forget the frame when they become absorbed in the longer narrative that follows. In a Russian doll novel or play, however, what interests us in either story depends largely on its interaction with the other. Each of the stories in a Russian doll work must be read as integral to the meaning of the novel or play as a whole: neither can be considered relatively unimportant. The interaction between narratives is the key to understanding the literary work they comprise. Almost always the author moves back and forth between the stories rather than using one to introduce the other, "main" story, as is the case with framed stories. A frame is a fragment, its characters not developed fully, its "plot," such as it is, interrupted and overwhelmed by the main story.

The second requirement, that the narratives be distinct, two separate stories, is more difficult to explain. In a Russian doll work, each story should deal with a different set of characters and a separate plot. In *October Light*, for example, Sally Page's trashy novel (the inner story) concerns a band of drug smugglers, but her own life as the widow of a New England dentist (the outer story) could not be more different from theirs. When she reads, Sally
enters an entirely different world. The Golden Notebook presents a trickler case, however. The reader assumes until very near the end that the Anna of the notebooks and the Anna of Free Women are the very same woman because the characters have the same names. But Lessing surprises us late in the novel with the revelation that Free Women is Anna's novel, not Lessing's story of Anna's life, and thus Free Women's Anna is a fictional character. The Tommy of the notebooks is a conscientious objector who marries a socialist, whereas the Tommy of Free Women, set in London in 1957, after Tommy has married in the notebooks, is a single man who blinds himself and takes up with his father's second wife. The "plot" of the blue and golden notebooks ends differently from the plot of Free Women. Because of these differences, and because Lessing uses the Russian doll device to show how autobiographical data are transmuted into fiction, I have included The Golden Notebook in this study.

John Fowles's The Magus is similar to Russian doll novels, but because it is told from a single perspective, the story of Nicholas' young life and the "masque" orchestrated by Conchis cannot be considered two separate stories. The exclusion of The Magus from the Russian doll category is instructive, I believe, because of what it reveals about the importance of perspective to a definition of the Russian doll technique. Conchis' masque consists of a series of tableaux; stories about Conchis' past and present told by two young women he employs and by Conchis himself; and theatrical scenes acted out not on stage but at various sites on Phraxesos, the island where Conchis has his estate. Nicholas is drawn into these scenes which
resemble con games in their execution but not in their intention. The scenes in which Conchis involves Nicholas do not add up to a coherent, complete inner story in large part because, as a series of challenges to Nicholas' professed beliefs, Conchis' masque is not intended to be one story but rather a series of metaphors for various aspects of Nicholas' existence. But a more important feature that disqualifies The Magus as a Russian doll novel is the reader's perspective on the masque: it is entirely Nicholas', and that poses a problem for a reader which true Russian doll fictions avoid.

As readers we know nothing about the plan or script that dictates the playing out of the masque until Nicholas does, and we are thus confined to Nicholas' perspective on events. That is not to say that we are meant to draw the same conclusions about Nicholas' behavior as he does, but that the fictions Conchis creates are never narrated directly; we get instead only Nicholas' report of them. Therefore, we have in The Magus a story of Nicholas' belated coming of age that includes the wise instruction of a benign deceiver, but not the deceiver's creation standing on its own. In contrast, Pale Fire presents a poem which we read on our own as well as Kinbote's "Interpretation," and The White Hotel includes Lisa Erdman's hallucinatory poem as well as various attempts to explain it. All the other Russian doll narratives follow the same procedure: no one reads the inner poems, plays, or novels to us. In a Russian doll work, both outer and inner stories must be directly accessible to the audience or readers. This demarcation of the inner story from the
outer is smoother in the theater than in a book. *The Real Inspector Hound* introduces us to Moon and Birdboot as they talk before the beginning of the terrible play they will review. Then they stop talking and watch that inner play along with the rest of the audience. We are free to watch the inner play for ourselves. In a novel the change of perspective cannot be signalled by a lighting change; often the shift from one narrative to another is accomplished by beginning a new chapter, or by using a label, as the student narrator does in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: "Further extract from my Manuscript, descriptive," for example.4

It is important that the boundaries of the inner story be distinguished by some means (even if they will later be blurred), and that the inner story be told as directly as the outer. Readers or audience must experience a Russian doll novel or play as two narratives in order for the interplay of the stories to be effectively exploited. Whenever two different objects are put together, one's automatic tendency is to try to understand what their juxtaposition could mean. It is the juxtaposition of distinct narratives of more or less equal importance that sets the Russian doll form apart other kinds of storytelling devices. The novelists and playwrights in the chapters that follow make the most of that unique property of the Russian doll work of literature, complicating the connections between their narratives, using each story to enrich the other, making of them a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The first chapter explains how John Barth and Doris Lessing employ the Russian doll device to explore the problem of capturing
life in literary art. They put art and life in separate narratives, then find a way of unifying life and art that the technique itself affords. The four writers discussed in the second chapter—Italo Calvino, D. M. Thomas, John Gardner, and Vladimir Nabokov—use the Russian doll device to explore the nature of reading. The third chapter, devoted to two plays by Tom Stoppard and one by Luigi Pirandello, shows how these playwrights use the Russian doll device to isolate the dramatic element of character in order to reveal the truth embodied in theatrical fictions and to expose the power that illusion can exercise over an audience. They are concerned, in other words, with the paradoxical nature of the theater. The final chapter discusses the ways in which Flann O'Brien and Gilbert Sorrentino use the Russian doll device to forestall suspension of disbelief and insist that fiction is only artifice.

All the works discussed in this dissertation are in varying degrees metafictions, fictions about the process of making up stories and reading or watching them. For instance, we read the ten inner novels, or rather the first chapters of ten inner novels, in If on a Winter's Night a Traveler along with the Reader who is a character in Calvino's outer story. Before we begin each of them, the outer story tells us that they are novels, and that reminder is likely to resonate in our reading of Calvino's outer story as well. Russian doll novels are self-conscious in the sense that they almost always are concerned with the literary conventions of writing and reading or the relation in fiction of reality and illusion, or both. Because of their essential doubleness, Russian doll works can hold
one mirror up to nature and a second mirror up to the first mirror's art. But not all of them do: although October Light contains a character who frequently mutters that he feels as if he is in a novel, the novel in which he appears is for the most part an unself-conscious treatment of reading as a moral enterprise. The Russian doll device lends itself to metafiction and self-consciousness, but they are not inevitable features of the genre.

Another type of literature which intersects the Russian doll novel (but not the play) has been labelled the "self-begetting novel" by Steven G. Kellman. Such a novel "is an account, usually first-person, of the development of a character to the point at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just finished reading. Like an infinite recesson of Chinese boxes, the self-begetting novel begins again where it ends." The two novels examined in my first chapter, Lost in the Funhouse and The Golden Notebook, appear on Kellman's list of self-begetting novels, as do other Russian doll novels such as Pale Fire, Don Quixote, and At Swim-Two-Birds. But the self-begetting novel need not contain two distinct narratives: A la recherche du temps perdu, which does not use the Russian doll device, is Kellman's prime example of a self-begetting novel. The Russian doll format can accommodate the self-begetting novel as well as the self-conscious novel or play, but it is not identical to either.

The Russian doll device is not a modern invention. Although many playwrights and novelists have chosen to employ it in their works, it
is by no means the dominant dramatic or fictional mode of this century. Even so, it is used quite often by twentieth-century authors, as it was by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. I believe that writers such as Nabokov, Pirandello, and Lessing turn to the Russian doll device because 1) it accommodates literary self-examination, 2) it provides a medium for exploring connections between reality and illusion, and 3) it can encompass the modern sense of fragmentation and incoherence.

The great age of realism seems to have passed, leaving authors, and their readers, wondering what new directions the play and the novel will take. To paraphrase Barth, no one could write War and Peace now, unless he or she were to do it self-consciously. The Russian doll form gives writers the opportunity to create an inner fiction that can be scrutinized from the standpoint of the outer. This use of the doubled narrative is most obvious in Barth's own Lost in the Funhouse. In the outer story Ambrose agonizes continuously about the difficulties of writing post-realist fiction that would remain true to human experience. The outer story prepares us for the inner story's experiments in fiction that presumably satisfy Ambrose and his author as well. Of course, he could employ self-conscious literature to comment on realism's conventions and problems, but in Ambrose's case, self-consciousness leads to paralysis: he cannot just tell a story because he is preoccupied with watching himself compose. In the title essay of The Novelist at the Crossroads, David Lodge states that when modern novelists raised on realistic novels find themselves at the modern crossroads, one road leading to the
non-fiction novel, the other to fabulation, "both these side roads will seem to lead all to easily into desert or bog—self-defeating banality or self-indulgent excess. Yet . . . there are formidable discouragements to continuing serenely along the road of fictional realism." A thoughtful novelist will hesitate at the crossroads, "and the solution many novelists have chosen in their dilemma is to build their hesitation into the novel itself." The Russian doll novel can contain in the outer story that hesitation Lodge speaks of, and in the inner story the novel the fictional author conceives when he or she no longer hesitates. The Russian doll device can contain both an account of the author's difficulties and the novel that represents a resolution or at least a coming to terms with those difficulties, the work the writer creates when he (Ambrose) or she (Anna Wulf) blazes a new trail. Because the Russian doll technique allows the writer to divide the narrative into problem and solution, it provides a useful way of constructing a novel in a time of transition when thoughtful and ambitious authors feel the need to re-invent the novel to keep it alive.

Shakespeare and other Renaissance and Jacobean playwrights used the play within a play to recreate on the stage a version of the situation in the theater. Their work, like that of Tom Stoppard in The Real Inspector Hound, for example, presents, to use the terminology of Harry Berger, Jr., a second world, the world of the outer play, and a "green world," the world of the Inner play, which differs from the second world in its greater clarity and simplicity. It is a distillation of the second world, narrower
and more specific, but not necessarily happier or more beautiful. Playwrights who employ the play within a play can thus let the outer play represent reality and present the inner play as artifice in order to explore the connections and distinctions between the two. (Russian doll novels use outer and inner stories in much the same way.) But in spite of these similarities between Renaissance and Jacobean plays and twentieth-century plays, works like The Real Inspector Hound do not constitute a revival of the earlier kind of drama. The difference lies in the kind of distinction Shakespeare maintains between the second world and the green world. Shakespeare and his audience were always certain of the differences between reality and illusion. The modern playwrights, however, may deliberately confuse the audience, as Stoppard does when Moon and Birdboot really die onstage in a make-believe world. Moreover, Stoppard and Pirandello experiment with detached characters, personages from a fictional realm who are cut off from the plays for which they are intended. Playwrights such as Shakespeare, Beaumont and Kyd present characters like Malvolio who are deceived or who react inappropriately to illusions, as Theseus does, but they do not confuse their real-life audiences by first distinguishing second world from green world and then blurring the lines between them. The border between reality and illusion does not seem so clear as it once did, a shift in attitude reflected in the modern use of the Russian doll device in plays and in fiction as well: Doris Lessing surprises us near us near the end of The Golden Notebook by revealing
that *Free Women* corresponds to the green world, not, as we have been
led to believe, the second world.

Finally, the Russian doll device fits the twentieth-century quest
for meaningful form encompassing fragments of everyday experience.
Doris Lessing's *Anna Wulf* descends to madness because, like many of
Lessing's modern readers, she has no ready-made system of belief to
give order to her existence. She is not religious, and communism and
psychoanalysis fail to make her existence coherent. To represent
this fragmentation, Lessing uses the device of dividing *Anna's selves*
among the notebooks and the *Inner novel*, and by turning the novel
inside out at the end, Lessing achieves a resolution of *Anna's*
problem. The Russian doll form encompasses and connects *Anna's*
whites without imposing a false unity and thus reflects both the
presence of disorder and the movement to genuine unity prompted by
the modern need for coherence and meaning. D. M. Thomas employs the
Russian doll technique somewhat differently in *The White Hotel*, but
for the same purpose as Lessing. The multiple perspectives of the
Russian doll technique are brought to bear on the odd erotic poem
written by Lisa Erdman. What we are given in each subsequent section
of the novel is another aspect of *Lisa's personality*, another way of
Interpreting the poem and through it *Lisa herself*. Thomas fragments
his narrative to show us these several *Lisas*, as Lessing shows us
several *Annas*. None of the perspectives is false, but each is
incomplete by itself. Thomas has found in the Russian doll device a
form that embodies the fragmented and limited nature of our knowledge
of any human being, but the interpretive narratives, like pieces of a
jigsaw puzzle, fit together finally to make a picture of Lisa as a whole person.

Flann O'Brien and Gilbert Sorrentino fragment their narratives and then show us the pieces one by one for our amusement. Neither of them makes an effort to achieve any sort of unity. They mean only to insist on the artificiality of fictional elements; their novels are not concerned with wholeness of personality or meaning. O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds and Sorrentino's Mulligan Stew exhibit disorder and lack of coherence in twentieth-century culture. Regardless of whether they attempt to combat fragmentation or revel in it, modern authors find the Russian doll technique a useful means of representing it.
Footnotes

1 Another early instance of the tale within a tale sequence also originated in the Middle East. See Tales within Tales, adapted from the Fables of Pilpal, trans. Sir Arthur N. Wollaston (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1909). The story within a story appears in one of the earliest novels, Don Quixote. See Robert Alter, Partial Magic (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 1-29 for an examination of the self-conscious techniques of Don Quixote, including its stories within stories.


5 In Partial Magic, Robert Alter’s discussion of Pale Fire as a self-conscious novel includes but is not limited to its use of the story within a story.


9 Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* brings a member of the audience (actually an actor) into the inner play being performed onstage. This device allows the playwright to contrast the behavior of the young apprentice, who comes to seem oddly suited to the role he assumes in the inner play, to that of his companions, who cannot adjust to theatrical conventions. Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* comments on communication, and the more prevalent lack of it, between audience and playwrights through the medium of theatrical performance when Hieronymo puts on a play that his audience does not comprehend.
1: RUSSIAN DOLLS, MOEBIUS STRIPS, AND THE FUTURE OF FICTION

Writers of novels in which the protagonist is himself or herself a writer find the story within a story technique very useful in presenting the writer’s two worlds and the connections between them. Nowadays such books appear often: The World According to Garp, for instance, recounts both the "X-rated soap opera" that is T.S. Garp's life and either complete texts of or excerpts from many of the works of T.S. Garp. In Mario Vargas Llosa's Aunt Jutta and the Scriptwriter we meet the scriptwriter of the title and read the scripts he frantically churns out for daily radio soap operas. In these books the Russian doll device allows an author to show how life provides the material for art, to let curious readers look over a writer's shoulder as she or he solves the problems that confront authors at work. Moreover, in a novel like Thomas Williams's The Hair of Harold Roux,¹ we meet an author shuttling between his daily life with its loose threads and nagging responsibilities, and the well-made world he creates, controls, and endows with meaning. Williams uses the contrast between these realms and the hero's difficulty in sorting out allegiances to each to raise questions about the kinds of human losses a writer suffers and inflicts in order to continue to write, and what he and his readers gain from the trade-offs he makes. Aaron Benham, the author in The Hair of Harold
Roux, discovers that he must remain detached from other people in order to write, a necessity he does not regret as much as a more loving person would, but he writes better because of his detachment. The realization that he has used everyone who loves him, that he is emotionally stunted, occurs in the inner story, the one he writes about a younger version of himself. Aaron Benham and his alter ego Allard Benson live (and love) like resident aliens in the real world, unable to experience anything spontaneously because they cannot help but recast their experience even as they live it. Aaron fears his power over those who love him and those who enter the fictional worlds he creates, but he needs that power over them, even though it leaves him all alone.

Thus the Russian doll device in a "writer writing" story can give a reader insight into fiction as a process as well as a product, and it offers a unique perspective on the writer's terms of existence, personal and artistic. But it can do much more, and in John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse and Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, it does. As Russian doll treatments of writing as process and product, these two novels are not typical. They are more ambitious than most novels of the type; they exploit the possibilities of the Russian doll technique more thoroughly and more skillfully than novels like The World According to Garp and The Hair of Harold Roux. In the novels by Barth and Lessing, the inner and outer stories give us writers and their stories in such a way that inner and outer are at the same time distinct entities and unified wholes. These two authors manage to pose and solve the esthetic problem of how one
continues to write fiction in this century without repeating what has been done so often and so well that to continue to write conventionally would lead to an artistic dead end. As Barth said in a 1964 interview, between the publication of *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Lost in the Funhouse*, "If someone built the Chartres cathedral now, it would be an embarrassing piece of real estate, wouldn't it? Unless he did it ironically." In *Lost in the Funhouse* Barth finds a way to continue to tell stories, a way that is both old and new and does not rely upon irony or parody. Lessing's perception of her difficulty is somewhat different, but her solution is quite similar to Barth's. Lessing's writer-heroine considers her one published novel a false, sentimental failure; she seeks a way to be truthful to her own experience of the twentieth century. This author struggles in a political and social arena as well as an esthetic one like Barth's. Lessing's heroine finds a way to write without sinking into parody or cynicism, a solution similar to Barth's hero's escape from arch and claustrophobic self-consciousness. In each case, the solution involves structural unification of life and art, a feat made possible by the use of the Russian doll device.

At first glance, *Funhouse* seems not to be unified in any way: it looks like a collection of short stories ("Night-Sea Journey," for example) and shorter fragments ("Glossolalia," "Two Meditations"), but the parts are integrated in the work as a whole, and they do arrange themselves into an outer "writer writing" story and an inner one made up of that author's "selected works." The outer story, a

Given the common stylistic qualities--archness, wordplay, fondness for ironic grandiloquence--and the experimentation with form, as well as the increasing self-consciousness of the chapters that constitute Ambrose's life story, we seem to be dealing with a single narrator. That narrator may be Ambrose himself, as Barth hints by his inclusion of "Autobiography," ostensibly narrated by "Ambrose's autobiography stepping out proleptically [sic] and beginning to tell itself."³ The chapter is the autobiography of the autobiography of the fiction--Lost in the Funhouse--itself, but its inclusion may also be a way of telling us that the other chapters that tell of Ambrose's young life are autobiography, not biography, in spite of their being written mostly in the third person, and in spite of the fact that Ambrose could only imagine and not remember himself as a sperm. The "Autobiography" himself (or itself, I suppose) "has no proper name. The one I bear's misleading, if not false. I didn't choose it either."⁴ This statement echoes (and follows) the conclusion of "Ambrose His Mark," where Ambrose wonders at the strangeness of the name he has finally been given, long after children are usually christened. And like the voice of the autobiography it is also quite self-conscious--without
self-consciousness there could be no "Autobiography"—and uneasy about its identity, as is Ambrose in "Water-Message" and "Lost in the Funhouse" before he accepts the vocation of art.

By making Ambrose the author, Barth tells us from the beginning, in "Night-Sea Journey," that this autobiography is a work of imagination, a fictional reconstruction. An author may well use the experiences of youth to write his apprentice work; this is especially true of American writers. Ambrose as narrator complains of the difficulties of writing more and more frequently as he moves further into his autobiography. After the fairly straightforward narrative of "Ambrose His Mark" and "Water-Message," "Lost in the Funhouse" is full of authorial asides, italicized phrases, observations on the art of writing, even a diagram of Freitag's triangle. The self-consciousness of the narrative finds a counterpart in the painful self-consciousness and detachment of the main character of that chapter, who, to cite one example, recalls a moment of childish sex play in this way: "Strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: This is what they call passion. I am experiencing it" (p. 81). In "Title," self-consciousness has made it impossible for the author to write about anything but the impossibility of continuing to write. He is losing his grip on the meaningfulness of words (see "Glossolalia"), substituting names of grammatical and syntactical units for words and phrases. Like the voice in "Autobiography," the narrator of this chapter ends in mid-sentence. "Life-Story" employs Russian dolls desperately and unsuccessfully—Ambrose has so lost a grip on his
Identity that he wonders if he is a character in someone else's fiction. If the author of the chapters about the author is Ambrose himself, then we are given an outer story and an inner story written by the same person. We come to understand the book as process and product, and to look at the rest of the chapters as Ambrose's way of working out of his difficulties as a writer.

But suppose Barth, or a fictional narrator created by Barth, or a series of such narrators, has written the outer story. The point is, of course, that he has indeed written all of this book. Do we see Ambrose as a completely imaginary character, bearing no relationship to Barth at all? We do not. The narrator, Ambrose, and John Barth the person have too much in common for us to ignore their similarities. For example, both Barth and Ambrose are writers, both write fiction, both grew up on Maryland's Eastern Shore, and both are middle-aged at the time of writing given in the footnotes to "Life-Story." Barth reminds us, then, that Ambrose is a fictional character, as he himself is not. Barth strongly hints that Ambrose is the narrator but never resolves the question of the narrator's identity with the certainty with which Lessing tells us the identity of the narrator in The Golden Notebook. By refusing to settle the question Barth remains a presence in the novel even though he strongly suggests that Ambrose stands in for him.

Moreover, by keeping the identity of the author of the life-story chapters ambiguous, Barth reminds us that we are reading a fiction after all, that fiction is not a mere record of actual events, and thus indirectly, that he himself is looking for a new way of writing,
one that does not rely on what he considers the played-out conventions of realism. He can no longer write a conventional Künstlerroman, except self-consciously. He employs irony and parody, but he wants to move past them to find a form he can use straightforwardly and without self-consciousness. As Barth/Ambrose declares at the end of "Title," "Oh God comma how I abhor self-consciousness. I despise what we have come to; I loathe our loathsome loathing, our place our time our situation, our loathsome art, this ditto necessary story" (p. 110). The emphasis on filling in the blank—of identity by becoming a writer, of literature by continuing his existential struggle to continue writing without despairing that such a life's-work is without value—leads Barth and Ambrose to seek and eventually to find a new form that makes the writing of fiction possible for them. We find this new kind of fiction in "Menelaiad" and "Anonymiad."

Ambrose has two problems to solve, both of which manifest themselves as divisions. The first is a split between love and art, a personal problem that affects his writing; the second results from his need to invent a kind of fiction that deals with the sort of things fiction has always dealt with, without being false to those things: "people still lead lives, . . . people still fall in love, and out, yes, . . . and they please each other, and hurt each other, isn't that the truth, and they do these things in more or less conventionally dramatic fashion, unfashionable or not . . . . and what goes on between them is still not only the most interesting but the most important thing in the . . . world" (p. 109). Writers
cannot abandon this subject matter even if it has been done to death; they "have got to find ways to write about" (p. 109) the same sorts of things with which writers have always concerned themselves. On the other hand, Ambrose is not Charles Dickens, or Chaucer, so he must invent a new way, his own way, of writing about such things, because he is self-conscious to the point of paralysis at the prospect of telling a story the way it has already been told. He would rather be Scheherazade, spinning tales in the infancy of fiction, than an author in the twentieth century, when "Everything's finished" (p. 104). In the stories he writes, Ambrose first shows us the two problems, and then solves them both in a way that heals the divisions within life and literature and the split between the two realms, making it possible to write truly about old truths in new ways.

The first outer autobiographical story, "Night-Sea Journey," introduces us to the sperm that will join the egg that will become the Ambrose who loses himself in the funhouse of fiction. Even at this early, one might say embryonic, stage of his development, it is apparent that Ambrose will have trouble with the opposite sex. The merger with the egg that is imminent at the end of the story fills the lonely sperm with terror. From the beginning, Ambrose is a compulsive storyteller, one who believes that to reach "Her," the Shore at the end of his swim, is to be devoured, to have his tenuous identity obliterated. He is drawn toward Her against his will, hoping that his story may be expressed by someone who can "terminate
this aimless, brutal business! . . . Hate love!" (p. 12). But it is
She who has the last word, and that word is "Love."

The sperm hates love and the egg because he holds them
responsible for the death of all the others who have begun the
journey and perished along the way. The truth of existence is not
love, he believes, but loneliness and death. Love is a lie, the
truth of that observation drowned out by her siren song. No wonder
Ambrose—who writes this piece later, when the fertilized ovum has
developed to the point at which Ambrose, the sperm’s "unimaginable
embodiment of myself" (p. 12) can write this story—has problems with
women.

The first post-natal adventure, "Ambrose His Mark," presents
Ambrose’s mother, Andrea, a formidable, and formidable sexual, young
woman. One can imagine her eggs intimidating anyone’s sperm.
Ambrose’s father, apparently intimidated by Andrea’s love, has been
taken off to an asylum. Andrea is by turns lavish and stingy with
her affection and her milk, a demonstration of her power over
Ambrose. Those who care for him when Andres is not in the mood, Aunt
Rosa and Uncle Konrad, are cowed by her. A further manifestation of
her power over Ambrose is her refusal to name him at birth, putting
it off until the events that transpire in the story provide the
impetus. But even then "years were to pass before anyone troubled to
have me christened or to correct my birth certificate, whereon my
surname was preceded by a blank" (p. 32), symbolically leaving
Ambrose without a secure identity, and prompting his observation that
"I and my sign are neither one nor quite two" (p. 32). He must make
his own identity, somehow name himself. Andrea contributes to Ambrose's feelings of unease in the world, echoing the way her egg inspired fear in the sperm. Except for Ambrose's grandfather, a kind of deity in the story, Andrea intimidates all the other characters, and it is her casually flaunted sexuality that gives her her power.

In "Water-Message," Ambrose needs to see himself as nobler and more refined than everyone else, including his older brother Peter. He is more sensitive, more finely tuned than the other boys, but his withdrawal from the boys in Peter's club is defensive, not a choice he wants to make: they exclude him because he is younger and naive about sex; the phrase "facts of life" makes his mother and his uncle smile in a way Ambrose does not understand, though he pretends to. Ambrose respects the importance of secrets; somewhat masochistically, he takes care to impress on Peter the need for "secret handshakes, secret passwords, secret initiations" (p. 44) in the club that bars Ambrose from its meetings. Ambrose insists on mysteries that intensify the importance of initiation into the adult world, which, when it comes for him, will confirm his feeling that he is marked out as a special person.

Ambrose's fantasies sometimes co-star Peggy Robbins, a student nurse whose life he imagines saving, to be rewarded with a chaste kiss. But the real Peggy Robbins is discovered in the clubhouse with a young man, both of them dishevelled and a little embarrassed. Ambrose's failure fully to understand what they have been doing together precipitates the boys' ridicule when Ambrose suggests "We ought to put a sign up! Private Property: No Smooching" (p. 47).
Barred from the club again, Ambrose tries to console himself with a fantasy in which true love redeems Peggy Robbins.

The incident which follows immediately allows Ambrose to reaffirm his special status and to find a secret knowledge that sets him above his brother and the young man in the hut with Miss Robbins, in fact above everyone whose knowledge of sex is superior to his own. When he discovers the bottle with the note inside, Ambrose takes it as a sign meant for him alone. He renounces everything he has known for a "greater vision, vague and splendid, whereof the sea-wrenched bottle was an emblem"; he thinks of the bottle as "this messenger" (p. 52) from unimaginably exotic places.

The message to Ambrose is an invitation to fill in the blank between the salutation and the end. The "new and subtle burdens" (p. 53) imposed by the blank in the message seem to Ambrose to change his place in the world completely, specifically concerning his knowledge of sex: "he would find out from Peter just what they had discovered in the Den, . . . : the things he'd learn would not surprise now nor distress him, for though he was innocent of that knowledge, he had the feel of it in his heart, and of other truth" (p. 53). Ambrose believes his initiation to have occurred with the retrieval of the bottle. Of course, nobody grows up that fast, and the older Ambrose of "Lost in the Funhouse" is as awkward and naive as he is in "Water-Message." The important point of this incident is that Ambrose consoles himself with art, with his vocation, when love and sex become too hard to deal with. Like the sperm who fears the
Shore, Ambrose turns away from love, which creates a basic division in his idea of himself, and art becomes a refuge.

In taking refuge in his created world, Ambrose means to avoid the storms of adolescence, a "night-sea journey" as lonely and painful for him as the sperm's was. The part of his personality which he wishes to suppress is represented by the voraciously crude and lustful Siamese twin whose brother writes to the King of Siam, appropriately enough, for assistance in "Petition." As Robert Kiernan remarks, "the unsigned letter of 'Petition' recalls the unsigned letter that Ambrose finds in a bottle and which, we understand, he is to sign himself." Kiernan believes that "Ambrose is the ultimate author of 'Petition,'" whose narrator, like Ambrose, is sexually awkward and involved in a rivalry with his cruder, more knowledgeable brother.5

The two brothers in "Petition" are Siamese twins, a circumstance which suggests that this inner story by Ambrose gives fictional from to his divided self as well as to his rivalry with Peter. The doubleness of each writer and his brother corresponds to the letter-writer's growing conviction that the contortionist Thalla, loved by both twins, is really two people herself, one of whom is a sweet girl trapped by her cruder other half as the author (and his author) is by his. In Ambrose's first fiction, we see an imaginative rendering of his adolescent schizophrenia. Half of him fears and denies sexuality; the other, a writer-half, tries to hold itself aloof from sex by means of writing. His personality is
disintegrating; he cannot continue this way, he tells the King, because his brother is planning to kill him.

The writer twin petitions for a surgical division of his brother and himself: "To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither is insufferable" (p. 68). The author of this story and the Ambrose of "Lost In the Funhouse" want to cut themselves off from the difficulties of love by renouncing sex entirely, but the twin holds out the hope that a soul-mate may join him, as Ambrose hopes that Peggy Robbins might see his true heroic worth, that Magda might come to value his pure ardor over Peter's more physical variety, that a girl might discover him as he wanders in the funhouse and ease his loneliness. The Siamese twin who writes to the King of Siam wants to be joined to "a Thalia within a Thalia, like the dolls-within-dolls" (p. 66) made in Siam. This Thalia is a fit companion for the spiritual Ambrose obscured by his awkward, uncontrollably sexual physical self. And this story within the story of Ambrose's autobiography gives us the truth of Ambrose's emotional state, the way he sees himself, a truth contained in fiction.

"Petition" distills from Ambrose's life story the problem he must solve in regard to love and art: he must come to terms with the division in his life that will come to impair his writing. He must find a way to unite these Siamese twins without destroying one or the other, or both, a union that does not imply for him destruction, as the account of the union of egg and sperm does in "Night-Sea Journey." He must find a way to integrate art and life so that each enhances, rather than threatens, the other.
The increasingly self-conscious, desperate narrator of "Lost in the Funhouse," "Title," and "Life-Story" is unable to solve his problem by writing autobiography. It would seem that one could unite life and art by making one's life a work of art, which is what one can do in autobiography. But Ambrose is unable to bring it off because his identity is so seriously fragmented that he cannot forget himself to tell his story, the tale of how Ambrose got lost in the funhouse and did or did not find his way out. The character Ambrose's awkwardness is mirrored in the author Ambrose's inability to pull the story together. And of course, that is the point. In the story, the narrator tries out alternative phrasing, just as Ambrose tries on different personalities. For example, Ambrose imagines hiding in the funhouse and grabbing a girl like Magda "without ever getting caught, even if her boyfriend was right with her. She'd think he did it! It would be better to be the boyfriend, and act outraged, and tear the funhouse apart." Then Ambrose formulates his problem succinctly: "Not act; be" (p. 79). Ambrose imagines other identities because he feels his own to be inauthentic.

Ambrose surrenders his name-coin, an obvious symbol of his identity, for admission to the funhouse, drops it again as the couples roll around at the entrance, and "finds a name-coin someone else had lost or discarded" (p. 90) with his name on it in the funhouse. These events suggest that Ambrose finds a new identity, a new Ambrose, in the funhouse, as indeed he announces that he has at the story's end, when he decides that "he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator--though he would rather be
among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed" (p. 94). Ambrose has chosen to control the funhouse of fiction, and to control the lovers who enter; although he sets himself in the middle of a place of which physical love is the whole point, Ambrose as the operator and not a lover renounces love for an artist's control. But there is more to this decision than the statement of his choice indicates.

Though he imagines himself to be the creator and operator of funhouses, the author's inability to conclude this story (and "Life-Story" and "Title"), to give us one definitive ending rather than several possible ones, suggests that Ambrose the character will not necessarily control the funhouses he constructs. The narrator Ambrose is not in control—he is lost in the funhouse of his own fiction. The authorial asides and the interpolated passages on the craft of story-telling make us aware of the artificiality of the story. The self-conscious style performs the same function here that the inner story "Petition" did: we see Ambrose as a character and as the author of the story we are reading, making a work of art out of his life. A single definitive conclusion would dilute our sense that fiction is open to imagined possibilities as life is not. The actual Ambrose got out of the actual funhouse. But the created Ambrose of the story remains in the metaphorical funhouse, hiding from his inadequacy and telling stories to himself. Ambrose the writer certainly has reason to be anxious about an impending writer's block, but he, and his author Barth, masterfully present the author's dilemma in the structure and style of the story itself. Ambrose
still needs to solve his problem, and to do it in his fiction, not to escape from it there.

"Title" gives us an author in a crisis: he cannot avoid self-consciousness, but he feels it to be symptomatic of the drying up of his own creative power and of the crisis in modern fiction generally. "Everything's finished," he declares, adding specifically, "Story, novel, literature, art, humanism, humanity, the self itself" (p. 104). He immediately reconsiders and deletes "story" from the list. But how to continue to tell stories when fiction seems nearly played out, when he thinks "Historicity and self-awareness" have enervated the "innocence and spontaneity" (p. 106) story-telling needs to stay vigorous? He fears he is out of words. He casts about for an alternative future for fiction, something to rescue it from imminent "Silence. General anesthesia. Self-extinction" (p. 106).

Barth announces in the fifth of his "Seven Additional Author's Notes" that "Title" is a debate, "after all a monologue interieur" (p. xi) to which the live author, "Mr. Interlocutor" (p. xi) "supplies such self-interrupting and self-censoring passages as 'Title' and 'fill in the blank'" (p. xi). He also tells us that the piece deals with "the 'Author's' difficulties with his companion," which are "analogous" (p. x) to his problems with Lost in the Funhouse. This companion is female. She taunts him throughout "Title"; she asks impatient questions and makes sarcastic remarks, for instance, "How sophisticated we are today" (103). This companion sounds very much like a muse. Her presence in "Title" indicates that
the solution to the author's problem must involve an integration of love of women with art. He wants to write of a rather old-fashioned couple, the man "vigorous, confident, bold, resourceful," the woman "spirited, spacious of heart, loyal, gentle," but he cannot find them. "So?" the muse asks. "Why aren't the couple in this story that man and that woman, so easy to imagine?" (p. 107) he replies. Ambrose must find a way to make the couple in his story that man and woman, but he needs a new form to contain their story, one as true to their lives as were the old stories. Now he cannot write without clever irony and self-consciousness because all he has are the old inadequate forms. The companion/muse, representative of the female whom Ambrose has decided to renounce when he chooses his role in the funhouse, cannot be denied. Unless he can find a way to write about love, his writing will dry up. His muse is there to remind him that he cannot separate love and art.

"Life-Story," the last autobiographical chapter, uses the story within a story, the regressus ad infinitum that Barth mentions in "The Literature of Exhaustion,"⁶ to explore the suspicion of each of twenty-six authors (each author referred to by a letter of the alphabet, authors A through Z) that "his own life might be a fiction, in which he was the leading or an accessory character" (p. 113). Their suspicions are well founded, since A invents B, who in turn invents C, and so on. Ambrose's problems with his identity--A is for Ambrose--are involved here, recalling the delay in naming him and the split in his personality revealed in the earlier chapters. An identity crisis is also a hazard of the autobiographer, who makes
himself a character in his own life story (or "Life-Story"). The author of the whole piece, who may be Ambrose or D, Interrupts on the second page (p. 114) to review his work with disapproval, damning his writing as "self-conscious, vertiginously arch, fashionably solipsistic, unoriginal .... Another story about a writer writing a story!" (p. 114). "Life-Story" evinces mounting self-disgust as the alphabetical authors declare as one that they do not want to write such a story, would rather be Scheherazade or even John Updike than the authors who are inventing them and placing them in fictions they despise. The experiment ends when the author's wife interrupts him and all his fictional authors to kiss him and wish him "Happy birthday" (p. 126).

This attempt is a qualified failure, because it is not the sort of fiction A-Z want to write, and the author of it all cannot conclude it by himself any more satisfactorily than he could finish "Title." But Barth and his fictional author will succeed in the following chapters, and when they do they will employ techniques and solve problems encountered in "Title" and "Life-Story." These chapters contain a great deal of analysis of the problem Ambrose must solve. In fact, in both chapters Ambrose and Barth list alternative ways to write themselves out of the corner where they perceive themselves and contemporary fiction to be stranded. In "Title," Barth offers four possibilities for the future of the novel: number one "is rejuvenation: having become an exhausted parody of itself, perhaps a form ... may rise neoprimitively from its own ashes," which the narrator or his companion calls "A tiresome prospect" (p.
105). The second possibility is that though the novel and shorter fictional forms may die, something "vigorou" may succeed it. The third possibility, "a temporary expedient to be sure," would be "To turn ultimate against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the Impossibility of making something new," an idea the narrator's companion calls "a nauseating notion" (p. 106). The fourth, which I mentioned above, is to give up: "Silence. General anesthesia, self-extinction. Silence" (p. 106). Despite the companion's criticism, the idea of turning the problem into a solution recurs in the narrator's comment further on that writers must "Not only turn contradiction into paradox, but employ it, to go on living and working" (p. 108).

In "Life-Story," the possibilities for the future of fiction are three: "1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric Invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question or deny its relevance or 3) establish some other, acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader" (p. 125). The narrator has been doing the first, only to see his fiction sink under the weight of its own self-consciousness, as it does here and in "Title," as it has in "Lost in the Funhouse" as well. He cannot relinquish his belief that fiction can be important, relevant, so number two is not really a possibility for him. But he does not know how to accomplish number three in the story he is writing, so he allows his real wife and imaginary mistresses to interrupt and thereby end the story for him, employing a bit of facile reasoning to dismiss his fear that he has no real existence outside fiction: "no fictional character had
become convinced as had he that he was character in a work of fiction" (p. 125). The joke, of course, is that he is a character in a work of fiction, and he has indeed become convinced of just that possibility.

It is love that interrupts him, that calls him to the things of this world. The muse/companion of "Title" and the wife and mistresses of "Life-Story" remind Ambrose that his solution must not only turn ultimacy against itself and find a new relation between teller, tale, and told, but give love its due as well. His fiction cannot be only about itself; to be valid it must also deal with the fact that "people still fall in love, ... and they please each other, and hurt each other, ... and what goes on between them is still ... the most important thing in the bloody murderous world" (p. 109). Besides the other tasks that writers must take on, they must deal in their fiction with people's lives and loves. Only writing that meets these criteria can give fiction a future. This kind of new fiction will lead Ambrose out of the funhouse; he will no longer encounter himself in its mirrors, Narcissus-like, trapped and frustrated, but return to the world and find a way to continue to tell his stories.

The "Menelalad" begins with the disappearance of the narrator: "this isn't the voice of Menelaus; that voice is Menelaus, all theirs of him." Self-consciousness, any authorial intrusion, has been rendered impossible because "When I'm switched on I tell my tale, ... but I don't know it" (p. 127). Here Ambrose does what he has prescribed in "Title": "turn ultimacy, exhaustion, paralyzing
self-consciousness . . . against [themselves] to make something new and valid" (p. 106). Instead of wrestling with self-consciousness, wondering who he is as narrator and whether he can write, Menelaus merges with his story, loses himself in order to give voice to his story. The story is about himself, but he is not paralyzed by that fact as are Ambrose in "Lost in the Funhouse" and the voice of the "Autobiography." Paradoxically, the work of telling the tale gives him not only an identity but immortality, something Ambrose has wished for but despaired of attaining. What Menelaus represents is the possibility that a storyteller can "Not only turn contradiction into paradox, but employ it, to go on living and working" (p. 108), as Ambrose remarks in "Title."

A second way in which Ambrose and Barth here turn ultimacy against itself involves the setting of the story. These are old materials, the stuff of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Those stories have been told. Ambrose returns to those materials in spite of their being so well known, in defiance of the fact that he is not Homer. But his story is new: the characters of the Greek myths become new for us in this story because they are treated as characters in a new fiction, re-imagined by Ambrose. Here Menelaus and Helen are middle-aged and sagging, not young and heroic. Paradoxically, the use of these characters and this setting shows us that fiction can renew itself by returning to its origins.

Another difference between Homer's tales and Ambrose's is that Ambrose's Menelaus is a storyteller himself, not a hero: "My problem was, I'd too much imagination to be a hero" (p. 138). In "Title,"
Ambrose remarks that "The only way to get out of a mirror-maze is to close your eyes and hold out your hands" (p. 108). Menelaus, as he tells his story, sinks into a mirror-maze in which he begins to tell a story to one person and soon finds himself telling a story within that story and another within that, etc., moving back and forth from frame to frame within his stories, but without ever getting lost. He manages the difficulties of this regressus ad infinitum, as the narrator in "Life-Story" does not, by means of an attitude of faith that gives him tenacity and courage. He closes his eyes to Helen's infidelity and holds out his hands to her. It matters most that he finish the story, because for him loving Helen and telling his story become intertwined. His faith allows him to deal with self-doubt. He learns not to question his mission, though that does not come easy for him. His regressus ad infinitum, lived and recounted an additional time, to Nestor's son and Telemachus, is not navel-gazing, as it has been so far for Ambrose. He has a story to tell about "the absurd, unending possibility of love" (p. 162) that takes him out of himself in a way the infinite regression of "Life-Story" cannot.

Menelaus's willingness to open himself to love manifests itself in his hard-won credulity at Helen's story: "Your wife was never in Troy. Out of love for you I left you when you left, but before Paris could up-end me, Hermes whisked me on Father's orders to Egyptian Proteus and made a Helen out of clouds to take my place" (p. 158). It was this "Cloud-Helen" who seemed to cuckold him, Helen says, but she has been faithful to him because he loves her. There is plenty of evidence that she has been and continues to be unfaithful to him,
Including her repeated announcements to their handsome young visitors of the location of her bedroom, the wine trick, and her reluctance, once Menelaus and she have been reunited, to return to the conjugal bed. At first he refuses to believe the story she has told him, which is not surprising, and he realizes now that is because he cannot imagine why she has chosen him: "he could imagine anyone loved, no accounting for tastes, but his cipher self" (p. 151). In fact, it is his feeling of unworthiness that pushes Paris and Helen together in the first place, leaving them alone together in the palace while he goes off to consult the oracle with his question about how he can possibly be the right man for her, and the rest is history. But he has come to believe her story, or to suspend disbelief, because of Proteus's words to him: "Helen chose you without reason because she loves you without cause; embrace her without question" (p. 156), words he finally comes to accept in spite of the unlikeliness of her tale. He deliberately chooses, closing his eyes and holding out his hands, the non-sense of love over doubting reason, telling her he has given up "Curiosity, Common Sense" (p. 156) because he loves her. He is not foolish, not fooled by Helen, but he has chosen to believe in her love for him: "I was taken in, it's a gift, a gift-horse, I shut my eyes" (p. 161). Because of the "doggedness with which he clung to the dream of embracing above all Helen" (p. 148) he finds his way into and out of the mirror-maze that his story has become. The extremely complicated structure of the story-within-a-story, regressus very nearly ad infinitum, does not defeat him. At the middle of it is Helen's
absurd declaration of love for him; because he loves her, he hangs on
to his tale as he hangs on to Proteus on the beach. Menelaus does
not divorce love from his art; each enhances the other.

Like the Ambrose of "Water-Message" and "Lost in the Funhouse,"
Menelaus is not particularly attractive to women. But unlike
Ambrose, who commits himself to fiction in both stories as an
alternative to love, Menelaus grapples with love rather than trying
to deny it. When Helen advises him, "Espouse me without more carp.
The senseless answer to our riddle woo, mad history's secret,
base-fact and footer to the fiction crazy-house [or funhouse] our
life: imp [of doubt]-slayer love, terrific as the sun! Love!" (p.
159), he takes her advice and loses himself for love, fiction or
fact. Love is the point of his story, an old point, to be sure, but
the form his fiction takes is strikingly new in its treatment of
several levels of narration, all of which he manages to juggle
without letting any of them drop.

Menelaus differs not only from the Ambrose of the two growing-up
stories but from the pre-Ambrose sperm of "Night-Sea Journey." 
Helen's cry, "Love!", is the same as that of the egg--the Shore,
She--but the sperm hates love, calls it a lie, resists it as long as
he can. The mythically beautiful, irresistible Helen is another
version of that She. Menelaus achieves the immortality the sperm
wants and paradoxically also achieves by uniting with the egg. If
acceptance of a fiction is necessary for love, he will embrace love,
fiction or not.
Menelaus becomes immortal because he "was lost on the beach at Pharos" (p. 161) when the shape-shifter Proteus "became Menelaus holding the Old Man of the Sea" (p. 161), at which point the voice, his or Proteus' or both, and the tale are all that remain. But the disappearance of Menelaus the person does not matter to him. The possibility of love and the tale of Menelaus's surrender to it are immortal. Ambrose as author has effaced himself for his narrator, just as his narrator has effaced himself for love, in order to bring loving and storytelling together and to give fiction new life, which is what Ambrose has said in "Title" that "writers have got to find ways to write about" (p. 109). The "Menelaion" is one of those ways. Here and in the next chapter, "Anonymiad," Ambrose solves his problems.

The last narrator, like Menelaus, dates from the era of the Trojan War. He observes the affair between Aegisthus and Clytemnestra in the absence of Menelaus's brother, Agamemnon, who is off fighting the Trojan War. Like Menelaus's story, his begins in the present, the time of the story's telling, then flashes back and moves forward again to where it started. And like Menelaus and their common author Ambrose, he needs to heal divisions within his life and his art and between love and art.

The unnamed minstrel discovers his talent for art early, as Ambrose does, and feels himself marked out for greatness: "I sang my vow to make a name for myself in the world at large" (p. 167). Unlike Ambrose and Menelaus, he is loved early and ardently by Merope, a rustic like himself; her love reassures him "that the gods
had marked me for no common fate" (p. 168). However, when attention from Queen Clytemnestra brings him success in Mycenae, he changes for the worse. As he says, "It's an old story" (p. 172) he has to tell about fame bringing corruption, but Ambrose's solution to the problems of current fiction demands that he make something new from old materials. To remind us that this is indeed a story about how to write fiction, the minstrel launches into an explanation of the proposed structure of the story he has been telling and interleaves telling about this story with telling it. At any rate, Merope grows restive because she misses their simple life together, and his songs, "he fears, are growing in some instances merely tricksy, in other crankish and obscure" (p. 173). Like the narrators in "Title" and "Life-Story," the minstrel feels himself going stale, being driven after a time to "contrive a precarious integrity by satirizing his own dilemma" (p. 173), the kind of temporary answer that leaves him and his Merope dissatisfied.

Recounting his decline, the minstrel comes more and more to speak of himself as a character in a fiction, an autobiographical one; italicized sections give us excerpts from the work he has meant to write. This double perspective on the minstrel as author and character corresponds to the double-ness of Ambrose, who has invented the minstrel. As in the other chapters, Barth makes process and product, fiction and metafiction, inseparable.

The bargain with Agamemnon makes it impossible for the minstrel to continue to write at all innocently. He is undone by another storyteller, Aegisthus, who deceives him (with Merope's consent) by
holding out the promise of adventure and knowledge of the world. Crafty Aegisthus even tells the minstrel he might be deceiving him. In spite of the warning, the minstrel leaves on the voyage because he has lost Merope and is in danger in Mycenae, and because he does indeed want adventure. Of course, Aegisthus betrays him, but in a sense he also frees the minstrel to write, when he leaves him stranded.

Writing consoles the minstrel for the loss of Merope: "I had imagination for realm and mistress, and her dower language!" (p. 185). Still, the minstrel has not made the simple choice Ambrose has made in the funhouse, to withdraw defeated from life and love in favor of his lonely art. As Joseph Oshins explains in his dissertation, picking up on a remark in "Life-Story" that fiction must "establish some other acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader" (p. 125), in that new relation "Storytelling becomes an act of love with the reader, and the story itself is the place of an means by which that act is performed." Writing and loving become the same. Thus the minstrel sees "his relationship with the muses as both an artistic and sexual one," in which his sources of writing paper, the goats, are given muses' names, and he uses the amphorae to make ink, relieve him sexually, and carry his literary creations on the ocean. Since he no longer has his lyre to accompany him nor court to hear him, the minstrel invents writing and fiction. He describes his exile thus: "For eight jugsworth thereafter [after inventing written speech, that is], ... I gloried in my isolation and seeded the waters with its get, what I came to
call fiction" (p. 186). But at this point the anonymous minstrel resembles Ambrose in one unfortunate particular: he is so excited by fiction that he prefers his isolation to a life with a real-life lover. That changes when an amphora arrives at his island with an indecipherable message inside, but like the message Ambrose receives in "Water-Message," its existence is more important than its contents. It is his link to life, a possible audience; to this audience (and to Merope) he addresses "a continuing, strange love letter" (p. 193) with which he has filled his amphorae. Addressing Merope, he says, "If some night your voice recalls me, by a new name, I'll commit myself to it, paddling and resting, drifting like my amphorae, to attain you or to drown" (p. 193).

The anonymous minstrel's talk of having learned to swim, of attaining Merope or drowning, of having "seeded the water" (p. 186) with his creations echoes the first chapter. The anonymous minstrel whom Ambrose has invented is reincarnated as a sperm who gives life to a real author. The minstrel casts his fiction upon the water for love, yearning after that which Ambros's precursor the sperm resists. We are brought full circle, or rather, we are made aware of the function of another geometrical metaphor in the structure of Lost in the Funhouse, a model of which serves as the "Frame Tale" in the beginning of the book, a Moebius strip with instructions for its assembly.

The fascinating feature of a Moebius strip is that, unlike a single loop, its inside and outside are continuous. The strip shows us something important about the structure of the inner and outer
stories, the life and the fiction of Ambrose, in this book: In *Lost In the Funhouse*, created fiction and the author's life are unified and continuous. Like the stories in this book, the strip is at once linear—Ambrose's biography is told in chronological order—and circular, since his created story "Anonymiad" flows into and predates the fictionalized because imagined biographical story told in "Night-Sea Journey." The minstrel's first seven amphorae contain works "that roughly correspond to what we know as the history of fiction," according to Joseph Oshins. Amphora number seven contains the sorts of fiction Barth had written before *Lost In the Funhouse*. But "*Lost In the Funhouse* itself," Oshins continues, "seems to have comprised its eighth." Barth opens up the possibility that the anonymous minstrel is the author of *Lost In the Funhouse*, in the context of the story. The point is that inner and outer stories should become confused, as should old and new: Ambrose receives a message in a bottle—from whom? Fiction and life are not confused in the pejorative sense, but fused, each energizing the other. Menelaus, for example, chooses not to pursue the facts about Helen's fidelity but to believe her because fact or fiction, his decision about her account of her faithfulness makes their life together possible, and it provides the impetus for him to tell his story. As the anonymous minstrel comments when he considers his invention, fiction, "I found out that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not, and that people existed who didn't, I could achieve a lovely truth which actuality obscures" (p. 186). Life without fictions would be unpalatable, incomprehensible; fiction
without "the fact . . . that people still lead lives . . . , and people have characters and motives, . . . people still fall in love" (p. 109) would be a dried-up, moribund affair. Barth and Ambrose find a way not to sacrifice either to the other.

The Moeblus strip serves other esthetic functions. Its very shape as a metaphor for storytelling contradicts the metaphor of a corner or dead end in which middle-aged Ambrose feels himself to be trapped. The strip has no end or beginning--fiction, Proteus-like, changes its form but does not die. Barth's use of mythic materials in "Water-Message," "Echo," to a lesser extent "Ambrose His Mark" (his father is named Hector), and to a much greater extent in the last two stories of the book underlines the continuity of past and present from story to story and within stories, especially the one told by Menelaus. The fact that the message of the strip is "once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time" points up the metafictional concerns of Lost in the Funhouse. The "story" of the strip is that "there was a story"; it does not tell a story itself. By showing us the process of writing Lost in the Funhouse in the finished product, Barth emphasizes his concern with any writer's problem: how to continue filling in the blank. At the same time the "once upon a time" reminds us that fiction cannot abandon telling stories. Providing a model for the structure of the book, the Moeblus strip is an emblem of continuity and wholeness, of integration of outer and inner stories, art and life, and in its endlessness, of immortality.
Barth's answer to an interviewer's question, "To what extent do you worry about the structure of your novels?", was this: "I worry myself sick. I take the structure pretty seriously." In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth quotes Marshall McLuhan on media when he says of Borges's work, "the medium is the message," a remark that applies to *Lost In the Funhouse* as well. His Moebius strip is the key to Ambrose's ability to write himself out of the funhouse. *The Golden Notebook* also employs the Moebius-strip pattern, and with the same result: Inner and outer stories are unified, life and art integrated to such an extent that they cannot be disentangled. Barth's comment on Borges, that his "artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work," describes not only what Barth himself does in *Lost In the Funhouse* but what Doris Lessing accomplishes in *The Golden Notebook*.

In her straightforward way, Lessing announces in her "Introduction" to the paperback edition of *The Golden Notebook* the structure of her novel: "There is a skeleton, or frame called *Free Women,*" which "is divided into five sections and separated by stages of the four Notebooks, Black, Red, Yellow and Blue." Anna Wulf keeps four separate notebooks "to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness--of breakdown." The outer story, whose center of consciousness is Anna but whose author we presume as we read it to be Lessing herself (but who is later identified as Anna), is *Free Women*; the inner story, as in *Lost In*
the Funhouse, is not one story but several, dispersed among the various notebooks.14

Although Anna compartmentalizes her life in an attempt to impose order on it through her notebooks, the final notebook, the golden one, contains "the triumph of [Lessing's] second theme, which is that of unity" (p. vii). As in Barth's scheme, the final section offers a way of dealing with the problem the fictional author has defined and struggled with in the preceding sections of the book. What happens in the last section releases the fictional author, and by implication the actual author Lessing, from the difficulties that have dictated the fragmentation of narrative in The Golden Notebook, and the self-consciousness of the autobiographical chapters of Lost In the Funhouse.

Each notebook deals with a role Anna plays, an aspect of her problem, a time in her life. The black one tells about a time further in the past than the other three, the time when Anna lived in Africa. The red is about her membership in and break with the Communist Party in Britain. The yellow notebook contains a story within a story, a work in progress Anna calls The Shadow of the Third. Excerpts from this novel are accompanied by Anna's comments on the actual affair fictionalized in this novel and by her notes on the novel's themes and Anna's difficulty writing it. The last notebook, the blue, is an account of Anna's personal life that provides background for the other notebooks and leads into the golden notebook.
The four notebooks are written for a variety of reasons. Anna is so disgusted by the dishonesty of her novel *Frontiers of War* that she knows she will not write another one until she can be truthful to her experience when she fictionalizes it. To do so, she attempts both to recapture and to objectify that experience: in the black notebook and to a greater degree in the yellow, Anna changes the names of important characters and fabricates details of their lives, but recreates personalities, relationships, and many events essentially as she knew them. In the red and black notebooks she discovers and analyzes the pervasive mood that has defied the idealism and enthusiasm of Communists in Africa and in England. That mood is expressed as cynicism, romanticization of death in war-time, self-mockery, joy in spite. Anna comes to devote much of these two notebooks, and later the blue one as well, to her attempt to understand a "dark, impersonal destructive force that worked at the roots of life and that expressed itself in war and cruelty and violence" (p. 188). This force which Anna identifies as her enemy, a destructive principle, also threatens her personal life. In *The Shadow of the Third*, Anna analyzes the workings of this force in a love affair. In the blue notebook Anna explicitly extends her analysis to encompass relationships between men and women in general as she chronicles a series of unhappy affairs.

The principle of the Russian doll is at work in the four notebooks in that each is a separate narrative held within the outer story, *Free Women*. It is as if the outer doll holds four smaller dolls inside rather like a woman pregnant with quadruplets. Each
notebook is meant to contain a discrete portion of Anna's life, but reading them in groups as we do, we come to see connections between them: Anna's growing awareness and fear of the destructive principle is the main one. Her embrace of and subsequent disillusionment with Communism recurs in the red, black, and blue notebooks. This development is related to the destructive principle: Anna joins the African socialists because they believe in and work for a better world, but she discovers that intelligent Communists like herself and Molly are expected to lie to each other and to themselves. This requirement leads to cynicism, a sign of the destructive principle at work, and the cause of her break with the Party. The third motif, which runs through all but the red notebook, is the love affair; it connects these notebooks to each other, and because love cannot thrive when men and women lie to each other and when men like Michael end love affairs out of distrust of all women, the love-denying principle of destruction appears in all the notebooks in which Anna becomes involved with men.

The Anna who writes these notebooks is trying to isolate aspects of her experience in order to understand them. The fragmented form also expresses her feeling that "everything's cracking up" (p. 3). When she must give up the Party and begins to despair of ever having a relationship with a man that does not leave her feeling split and cynical, Anna knows she is going mad. She feels that words are losing their meaning, she is afraid to be alone when her daughter leaves for boarding school, and she withdraws from men. Then Anna meets Saul, who is also seriously split, worse than anyone she has
known. He is capable of marvelously sympathetic insight into Molly and herself at one moment, Anna discovers, but at the next, and without being conscious himself of the change, Saul becomes hostile, defensive, angry. At one point as Saul stands in an obviously macho pose, lecturing her quite seriously about conformity, Anna thinks, "There were two different languages being spoken to me at the same time" (p. 533).

Together they go mad. They give vent to both sides of their personalities; at the same time, their identities merge: "I could no longer separate myself from Saul" (p. 587). In the course of their time together, Anna has a revelation, or Saul in Anna reveals to her, the visceral truth of violence: "I knew . . . that the great armouries of the world have their inner force, and that my terror . . . was part of the force . . . the cruelty and the spite and the I, I, I of Saul and Anna were part of the logic of war" (p. 589). At the same time, Anna knows that there is no way to put that revelation into words. The other thing that happens to Anna is that she and Saul play out the roles men and women take with each other, exploring possibilities of "every man-woman role imaginable" (p. 604). Anna does not want to pull back from the brink of Insanity, although she believes she could do it for Janet's sake; she needs to see this experiment through because "Something has to be played out, some pattern has to be worked through . . ." (p. 583).

The blue notebook ends with the acquisition of the final inner book, the golden one. Saul claims it, and when he finally leaves for good, she gives it to him, but contrary to what Joseph Hynes claims
In his article on the structure of *The Golden Notebook*, I do not believe that "Anna and Saul both write the golden book,"¹⁵ unless he means by that (it's hard to be sure) that Anna absorbs Saul's anxieties and other emotions, with the result that he is part of the Anna who writes that final notebook.

In the golden notebook, Anna dreams continuously. Her dreams are of a film which reviews the events she has recorded in the various notebooks. The point of such dreams is that she must review the past because "I had still to work on it" and to make "order out of the chaos my life had become" (p. 619), but this time to do it truly. The projectionist, Saul, is "a sort of inner conscience or critic" (p. 621).

Anna is healed by her experience with Saul, and he gives her a metaphor that Paul has used with Ella to signify professional failure, but for Saul it is a prediction of "a kind of success,"¹⁶ as Joseph Hynes puts it, to tell Anna "I'm going to be a boulder-pusher" (p. 627). As Sisyphus learns, the boulder always rolls down again. But Saul believes that when the boulder rolls down, it comes to rest at a position a little higher than where it was originally. Anna and Saul, as soul-mates, do not give up: "Bad luck for both of us, we are both boulder-pushers" (p. 628).

As Hynes astutely observes, "The Golden Notebook embraces without pretending to reconcile all of Annas."¹⁷ Anna does not manage to unify all her selves, or to unify ineffable experience and imprecise words. But she does manage to write a new book, to begin a novel with the words Saul gives her before he leaves; he also pulls himself
together sufficiently to write again, using Anna's gift of a first line to begin his novel. In his novel, significantly, enemies choose to talk to each other like bothers instead of being turned against each other. In this case their expression of brotherhood is not sardonic, cynical, as is the case with the executioner shot by his former victim in Anna's dream. In Saul's book, "The Algerian soldier and the French student were shot together, on the hillside, with the rising sun in their faces, side by side, the next morning" (p. 643). They die courageously, just as their author chooses to live courageously.

Anna's novel is Free Women. When we read that first sentence that Saul gives her and remember that it is the first line of the outer story, or what has seemed to be the outer story, The Golden Notebook turns inside out. Lessing surprises us by reversing inner and outer, frame and framed. Because of its initial position in The Golden Notebook and the fact that writing in the notebooks is Anna's occupation in Free Women, we have been led to believe that what appears to be an omniscient, third-person story is Lessing's work, and that a character within that work writes all the notebooks. The twist is that apparently Anna is the author of Free Women as well as the notebooks. Free Women is Anna's invention rather than that of the woman who invents Anna. I can best answer the question of why Lessing attributes Free Women to Anna by examining the implications of making Anna the author of Free Women and of concealing that fact from her readers until almost the end of The Golden Notebook.
If Anna has written *Free Women*, she has chosen to commit herself to writing fiction, as the final notebook tells us she would. But as Hynes points out, in that case Anna has written all of *The Golden Notebook*, and arranged the parts of the novel and the parts of the notebooks the way an editor would do. She has shaped her experience into literature even though, as she has said, "Literature is analysis after the event" (p. 228). She has accepted Saul's evaluation of her as a boulder-pusher and written a novel that seems conventional almost to the point of parody, as the descriptive chapter headings suggest. In *Free Women* people are still split, still unhappy, still violent in political and personal situations. But by incorporating the notebooks and fragmenting the narrative, Anna has achieved an unconventional structure that reinforces her theme of fragmentation in every fact of life. Words cannot be absolutely true to experience as it unfolds, but paradoxically, Anna conveys these failures successfully by writing *The Golden Notebook*. Boulder-pushers, those "who haven't given in, who'll go on fighting" (p. 642) accept the inevitability of failure while insisting that even so, the boulder does not roll all the way down once they have begun to push it.

The Anna who writes *The Golden Notebook* is a different person from the Anna who wrote the four notebooks. The notebook-writing Anna divided her experience into four notebooks because she perceived her personality and her experience as fragments, pieces of a puzzle with no pattern. But the Anna who puts *The Golden Notebook* together has discovered the patterns in her life, the recurrent motifs. She puts the notebook excerpts together in their own sections so we can
see the connections too. Upon rereading, we see the notebooks from two perspectives: they record Anna’s chaotic state of mind as she declines into madness, but at the same time they uncover the unifying elements in her existence; the principle of arrangement is synthetic. The change in Anna resulting from the experiences of the golden notebook is reflected not only in her ability to write one novel, *Free Women*, but also in her ability to place that novel in the context of the process from which it issued. The Russian doll form allows editor-Anna to hold all of this in suspension in one book, *The Golden Notebook*.

Following the revelation that Anna is the creator of *Free Women* with the final portion of that novel underscores the way the Russian doll structure allows us to see Anna from two perspectives. In the last section of *Free Women*, Anna gives a different version of the events of the last blue notebook section and the golden one. Here Saul is Milt, and he does her the favor of stripping the newspaper clippings off the walls and "pulling me out--of what I was in" (p. 663), as she puts it. Then Anna imagines an alternative future for herself, not writing: "I’m going to join the Labour Party and teach . . . delinquent kids" (p. 665). She also decides to take a job as a marriage counselor. In a way, whether Anna decides to write a novel or do welfare work, the point is the same: like Saul and unlike Tommy, she will choose life over death despite its difficulty. *Free Women* shows us Anna exploring possibilities, trying to be true to her identity as a free woman, a humanist, and an artist in this century.
Anna's effort to pull herself together, to integrate the experiences of the four notebooks into one story, is an autobiographical enterprise. Although Anna is a fictional character, the problems she encounters as she writes about herself are the same as those of real-life autobiographers. Those problems result from the need to resolve tensions between such opposites as past and present, adherence to facts and imaginative shaping of one's life, and subjectivity and objectivity. The editor-Anna who exploits the Russian doll device to work out these problems displays for us autobiography as a process and a product in the notebooks and Free Women, respectively.

In the black notebook, Anna attempts to recreate her past in Africa in order to recover the truth about that time which she sentimentalized in Frontiers of War. Remembering one's past and integrating it with one's present is the autobiographer's project, but it is by no means an easy one. As Barrett J. Mandel observes, "memories of the past are nothing but themselves—not useful as insights into experiences." The Anna who lives in London in the 1950's must put her past in Africa into a context of a whole life for the past to have meaning, because "autobiography is a shaping of the past. It imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story," according to Roy Pascal. All the theorists of autobiography agree with Pascal on this point. The autobiographer who writes in the present cannot become again the person she was when she experienced the excursions to the Mshopi Hotel in the past. But because in Frontiers of War she has lied about the meaning of that
time in her life, Anne Wulf fears that she cannot now be true to that experience. She believes that the nostalgia she remembers as an attitude of the African socialists pervades her writing in the black notebook now: the "Anna of that time is like an enemy, or like an old friend one has known too well and doesn't want to see" (p. 153).

But Anna who writes in the notebooks must abandon the goal of "discovering the past 'in itself,'" as George Gusdorf tells us historians have done. Anna continues to write of her African experiences even after she expresses dissatisfaction with the falseness of the first entry. The last entry of the black notebook contains Anna's dream of a film being made of the weekends at the Mashopi Hotel. When she accuses the director of having distorted her story, she realizes "that what I 'remembered' was probably untrue" (p. 525). She has no confidence in her ability truthfully to recover her past, but in the context of the other notebooks, the black notebook contributes to the development of recurrent themes of cynicism, loss of belief, and emotional sterility that unite the notebooks. However, because Anna has not yet reached the point at the end of the golden notebook when she can save herself from disintegration, the Anna who writes the black notebook is not ready to accept and connect all the selves--political, artistic, female, past and present--who express themselves in the notebooks. But even read by itself, Anna's attempt to tell the truth demonstrates the aptness of Pascal's characterization of autobiography "not as factual truth but as wrestling with truth." The present Anna who writes the black notebook wrestles with truth when she demands an
Impossibly high standard of veracity in recounting her past. That very effort tells us a great deal about the sort of person she is by how she views her autobiographical project, or as John Morris puts it, the autobiographer's "manner has to do not only with how he tells his truth; it is itself that truth."\textsuperscript{23} In the doubled self of the black notebook the process of autobiography entails an attempt to work out the tension between past and present, an attempt that is unsuccessful in itself but will become successful in the context of \textit{The Golden Notebook} as a whole.

The blue notebook represents an attempt of another sort to find the meaning of one's life. Anna asks herself at the beginning of the blue notebook, "Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? Why don't I keep a diary?" (p. 229). One motive for writing a diary is her need to preserve "the raw unfinished quality in my life" (p. 237) that she values in part because of her belief that art distorts experience. She begins the diary with her sessions with Mrs. Marks, and after Michael's criticism, "you make up stories about life and tell them to yourself, and you don't know what is true and what isn't" (p. 331), Anna resolves to record everything that happens in one day as a way of getting the facts down quickly, spontaneously, before she can distort them. Stephen Shapiro describes this as one technique available to the autobiographer: "Years may be reduced to the formula of a typical day."\textsuperscript{24} But by itself that technique must fail too, because it rejects the necessity of providing a context, analyzing experience after the fact, the very quality for which Anna has criticized literature.
Although some theorists of autobiography include journals and diaries in the genre, Pascal distinguishes between autobiography and diary by observing that a diary is confined to moments which are not synthesized: "we expect from a diary ... uncertainties, false starts, momentariness."\textsuperscript{25} The diary Anna writes of every moment of September 17, 1954 represents an evasion of her responsibility to interpret her experiences. She wants to avoid self-consciousness, but ironically, she realizes that when she writes about the beginning of her menstrual period that day, "as soon as I write the word 'blood,' it will be giving a wrong emphasis, and even to me when I come to read what I've written" (p. 340). More generally, "I am worrying about this business of being conscious of everything so as to write it down" (p. 340). Instead of escaping from her tendency to turn her life into stories, Anna realizes that the very act of thinking about an event as it will appear written down makes spontaneous experience possible. As E. Stuart Bates has remarked, "When words define, they tend to overdefine; when they state, to overstate; when they suggest, to transpose."\textsuperscript{26} Anna follows the experiment with a one-paragraph version of that day which seems to be a repudiation of her moment-by-moment account. The next excerpt from the blue notebook continues the terse entries for several months, but then Anna gives up on her plan: "So all that is a failure too. The blue notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them" (p. 468).
In spite of the limitations inherent in the diary format, and in spite of Anna's insistence that her experiment has failed, I believe the second excerpt from the blue notebook has a great deal of significance when evaluated in the light of her overall effort to understand herself. This greater understanding is revealed by a couple of phrases in her one-paragraph version of September 17: "decided to leave the Party" and "I realized that Michael had finally decided to break it off" (p. 368). Because she has focused her attention on that day and rendered it in words, Anna has faced two difficult truths about her life that she had been able to evade by not thinking about them. September 17 is a turning point in her life in part because she has turned her attention to herself so minutely on that day. Shapiro remarks that autobiographers make us of "the structural metaphor of the 'turning point,'" although real turning points in one's life "do not appear so carefully marked or so readily detachable from the web of daily experience."27 Ironically, Anna's attempt to escape the shaping of experience after the fact has led her to define and in the context of The Golden Notebook as a whole, to compress experience by use of a "structural metaphor."

Anna's attempt at a recreation of her African past and her detailed account of September 17, 1954 become meaningful in an autobiographical sense only when juxtaposed with each other and the contents of the other parts of The Golden Notebook. The editor-Anna who puts the parts together composes a picture of Anna that allows us to see her from her several perspectives on herself, past and present. The use of these several narratives side by side in the
notebooks reproduces Anna's identity in a kind of hologram rather than the two-dimensional portrait that one of the Russian dolls alone could reveal. In that sense she is right about the failure of the black and blue notebooks: alone, neither of them tells enough truth about her to satisfy a reader. But seen as experiments in autobiography, part of her attempt to overcome the fragmentation and cynicism that threaten the integrity of her personality; and taken together with the other Annas of other notebooks and the fiction she writes, the blue and black notebooks become part of a quest for integration of her personality. We can see Anna struggling with the same sorts of problems in every section, engaging the world in the same intelligent and fundamentally honest way in every part of Lessing's novel. It is that unity of purpose that unifies Anna's identities.

In the Russian doll structure that expresses Anna's autobiographical quest, the novel of the outer story, the one Anna writes in the yellow notebook, invites comparison with the inner novel, Free Women. Such a comparison can yield insight into the process of Anna's development as a person and a writer, and also help us to understand why the novel Free Women, written by the Anna of the notebooks (thus an inner story), appears due to the arrangement of The Golden Notebook to contain what is actually the outer story.

The yellow notebook represents an attempt to deal with the autobiographer's problem of subjectivity and objectivity—how can a subject treat her experiences objectively?—by means of the expedient of turning oneself into a character in a fiction. Such a technique
should afford detachment, Anna seems to believe, and make it possible for her to understand her affair with Michael. Another reason Anna chooses fiction has to do with her Marxist discomfort at the thought of wallowing in personal concerns, the feeling that makes her problems seem insignificant whenever she reads a newspaper. In a novel, as Stephen Spender remarks, "the autobiographical is transformed. It is no longer the writer's own experience: it becomes everyone's. He is no longer writing about himself: he is writing about life." Considering her political orientation and her difficulty telling the absolute truth about herself, Anna's embrace of an overtly fictional form is not surprising.

The yellow notebook does not satisfy Anna any more than the blue or black ones do. At the end of the first excerpt, she rebels against its form for the same reason she rejects the story in the black notebook: "As soon as one has lived through something, it falls into a pattern." Knowing how the affair between "Ella" and "Paul" will end, Anna realizes she has distorted its meaning for the lovers as they began the affair: "While living through something one doesn't think like that at all" (pp. 227, 228). Knowing how the affair will end, Anna sees no way fictionally to render the experience as she lived it: "Literature is analysis after the event" (p. 228). She has the autobiographer's problem of allowing the present to overwhelm the past. Ella's story ends with Ella's failure—which is Anna's—to find a way to tell a story in which a man and a woman go through madness together to find "a new kind of
strength" (p. 467). But Anna and Ella end this novel with no way to tell that story.

*Free Women*, her other novel, is seen through to a qualified happy ending, however. Why does Anna abandon her autobiographical novel in the yellow notebook but finish *Free Women*? The difference lies in the change in Anna recounted in the golden notebook. There she experiences what Ella anticipates: together Anna and Saul go mad, and when they have gone beyond madness, they both have the strength to write. *Free Women* begins in 1957, after everything that has happened during the time of the notebooks. The Anna who writes that novel has learned a great deal about herself, mostly in her dreams. The dreams take the form of films of her past that she watches. When she sees what she has invented about her past, she declares it to be false. Later she sees the scenes from her notebooks in a new way: "the film was now beyond my experience, beyond Ella’s, beyond the notebooks, because there was a fusion; and instead of seeing separate scenes, people, faces, movements, glances, they were all together" (p. 635). She is ready to see her life whole and to accept the limitations of her medium for communicating it. A real experience remains ineffable finally, and those who have been through disintegration, faced chaos in themselves, accept its presence: "It's a question of bowing to it, so to speak, with a kind of courtesy, as to an ancient enemy: All right, I know you are there, but we have to preserve the forms, don't we? And perhaps the condition of your existing at all is precisely that we preserve the forms, create the patterns" (p. 634). The other important change in
Anna is that she acquires a sane and creative detachment: It is the same quality she admires in Tom Mathlong, an African political leader. His detachment allows him to play the roles his position requires and to continue to struggle against the white government's oppression of his people "while he preserved an ironic doubt about the results of his actions." Anna believes his detachment is "something we needed very badly at this time" (p. 597). This kind of attitude should not be confused with the numbness of De Silva or the "cool" Saul affects. Anna wants a detachment that is creative, like the source of energy Mrs. Marks urges her to tap. Like "the game," it makes it possible for Anna to stand inside and outside her experience at the same time, able to live and to make fictions out of the materials of her life. Once she has achieved this detachment, she can play her roles and write her fiction without falling into cynicism when absolute truth eludes her.

*Free Women* represents the culmination of an autobiographical quest. The Anna who is the heroine of the novel is no happier than the Anna of the first four notebooks, and like her author the Anna heroine slides toward madness. But the author of *Free Women* has gained an attitude toward her life that allows her to transform her past without sentimentalizing it. She confidently uses the novelist’s prerogative of reinventing life, aware that she is writing a conventional novel, but not paralyzed by that fact. Her treatment of the character of Tommy is to me the most interesting feature of *Free Women*. The Tommy of the blue notebook is a conscientious objector and willfully naive socialist whose girlfriend, whom he
later marries, shares his causes. That Tommy is called Tony in Free Women. Anna's Invented Tony blinds himself in a suicide attempt after reading her notebooks, and the plot of the novel concerns the adults' efforts to deal with his choice of self-destruction. Tommy cannot be both a single blind person and a married conscientious objector. Anna as author of Free Women is able to imagine an alternative to the "boulder-pushing" she has already chosen, and to project that destructive, chaotic principle she has discovered in herself onto a character. Commenting on Charlotte Bronte's portrayal of a love affair in her fiction that was in her life unrequited, Pascal asserts that authors who can express what might have happened in their lives as fiction "make their heroes and their novels more generally true, more relevant to everyone." An autobiographer must stick to the facts of her life, but a novelist has the freedom to invent other characters and events that never really happened in order to tell a truth about life in general. Anna believes herself to be representative of a new kind of woman, a person who keeps herself open to new experiences, who stretches herself to her limits, and risks cracking up. She tells Saul, "I am the position of women in our time" (p. 579). If, as Pascal says, autobiographical novels "move away from the particular to the representative," Free Women's third-person point of view and invented situations and characters signal a change of focus from understanding of oneself to understanding of the world. Free Women is the culmination of Anna's movement toward sanity and integration, through autobiography toward representation of "the position of women in our time."
Thus Lessing shows us the process of autobiography as an inward movement that results in an embrace of the world as it is. The Russian doll device allows her to present Anna's versions of herself as she seeks both the truth about herself and an objectivity that does not deny the significance of her own experience. *The Golden Notebook* is comprised of the result of that quest, *Free Women*, and the search itself, the notebooks. The Russian doll format allows Lessing to give us an Anna whose final product, the edited and arranged materials that make up *The Golden Notebook*, encompasses all her selves—past and present, mother, lover, Communist, madwoman, writer—without repudiating any of them. Anna has written one book, but she has not so much unified all her disparate selves as found a way to render the sum of those selves, a form to contain them. According to Hynes, "as a diverse record of failures [*The Golden Notebook*] manifests wholeness and oneness comparable to that of a seamless garment." 31 This is evidence of Anna's decision to accept Saul's description of herself as a boulder pusher, one of those "who haven't given in, who'll go on fighting" (p. 642). In isolation, each segment, with the exception of the golden notebook, represents a failure, but as a whole the novel is able "to talk through the way it was shaped" (p. xlv). Its shape speaks of success, the success of an editor—Anna who can pull her life together and accept the limitation of the words she must use.

As with so many Russian doll works, this notebook/novel double narrative reminds us that the inner author Anna, whatever portions of the work Lessing chooses to attribute to her, is herself invented.
Life furnishes material for fiction, and is in turn shaped and given significance by the revelations, in this case self-revelations, that fiction affords. It is no coincidence, given the reiteration of the same themes of naivete, cynicism, the principle joy in spite, and the fragmentation of consciousness in each notebook and in Free Women, that a reader of The Golden Notebook has trouble remembering whether Saul, Paul (African or lover in the yellow notebook?), Michael (lover or son?), or Milt said a particular thing to Anna, Ella, Molly, or Marlon. By deliberately jumbling chronology, names, and authorship in The Golden Notebook, Lessing makes a whole of her book—what is lived and what is invented become the same. The record of Anna's real life in the notebooks becomes imbued with her imagination as she writes it down; conversely, her fictions tell her what is real. It is appropriate that near the end of the book we are returned to the beginning, and that the events of the golden notebook and of the final chapter of Free Women should converge to tell the same story. For Lessing, whose biography is the basis for Anna's life story, life and art, love and politics, the past and the future come together. A Moebius strip is as appropriate an emblem for the relation between inner and outer stories in The Golden Notebook as in Lost in the Funhouse, providing Barth and Lessing with a metaphor for the efficacy of fiction in life and life in fiction.

Thus Barth and Lessing find in the Moebius strip and the fragmented narrative a way to overcome obstacles to the writing of fiction in a time when fiction might seem inefficacious or irrelevant or washed up. The form of their novels makes the term "novel"
perhaps an imprecise name for these fictions, and the authors themselves seem to be aware that conventional novels are insufficient vessels for their purposes. They are trying to find a future for the novel, so one might consider the form of these two works a development in the novel and not a departure. The Russian doll technique that both employ is an old fictional device that links their work to the history of fiction; at the same time it makes new effects possible that allow Anna and Ambrose to continue. Thanks to the Russian doll technique and the model of the Möbius strip, these novels achieve their own kind of unity and affirm the value of fiction in the twentieth century.
Footnotes


5 Kiernan, p. 375.


8 Oshins, p. 185.

9 Oshins, p. 171.


11 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," p. 32.


When at the end of the golden notebook we discover that Anna is the author of *Free Women*, and that the novel grew out of her writing of the notebooks, *The Golden Notebook* turns inside out and *Free Women* is revealed as the inner story and the notebooks as the outer.


Hynes, p. 111.

Hynes, p. 105.

Barth's book contains autobiographical sections and autobiographical fictions, but my discussion of the way the Russian doll technique accommodates autobiographical fiction is confined to Lessing's novel because it demonstrates the workings of autobiography as a process as well as a product in a clearer and more comprehensive manner than does *Lost in the Funhouse*. After the early chapters on Ambrose's childhood, *Funhouse* is almost completely concerned with problems of literary form rather than the quest for identity that characterizes *The Golden Notebook* right up to the end. Once Ambrose discovers in the funhouse that he will be an artist, he concerns himself with how to rejuvenate fiction, to the almost complete exclusion of everything else. The problem of love is worked out in the fictions featuring heroes other than Ambrose, but in the autobiographical chapters like "Title" and "Life-Story" we learn very
little about the adult Ambrose and how he came to the breakthrough that the two last fictions represent. So although Barth makes use of the autobiographical form, it is not as evident as it is in Lessing's novel. The other difference between their use of autobiography is that Ambrose's mannered and experimental style often, though not always, lacks the rough edges, the raw, unfinished feeling of an autobiography in process that Lessing renders so well.


22Pascal, p. 75.


25Pascal, p. 5.


27Shapiro, pp. 438, 439.

29 Pascal, p. 168.
30 Pascal, p. 173.
31 Hynes, p. 105.
II: FOUR READERS READING

The preceding chapter dealt with the inner story from the writer's point of view. But writing is not the only process examined in Russian doll fiction; the four books to be discussed in this chapter consist of an outer story in which a reader reads the inner story. They lie along a kind of continuum: Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is concerned with the sensual, immediate experience of reading. John Gardner's *October Light* gives us a woman's emotional reactions to the trashy novel she reads; Sally Page finds parallels in the story to her own experience which lead her to a limited but important increase in self-knowledge. Sally does not read as a critic, unlike Sigmund Freud in D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, who interprets his patient's poem and journal according to his psychoanalytic theories. The other critic at this end of the intellectual continuum is Charles Kinbote of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, who is quite conventional in providing footnotes, alternative versions of several lines, and other features of an annotated text. At the same time he is the craziest and in some ways the worst reader of the four in these novels. At one end of the continuum, then, is the reader for whom reading is a visceral, almost physical experience, the reader who devours books like food, and at the other end is the professional critic who is expected to digest a work
thoroughly and think it through carefully as he or she interprets and evaluates it. I arrange the books this way in this chapter not to imply that one end of the spectrum is superior to the other, but to emphasize that different ways of reading must be taken into account in any study of the nature of reading, which is one concern of all these books, whatever other themes they consider.

Besides their contribution to our understanding of the experience of reading, there is another reason to consider the "reader reading" category of Russian doll fictions: since we read in the inner story exactly what the reader in the outer story does, we discover in those fictional readers our own fictional counterparts to whom we have a connection unlike that we have with any other fictional character. When we read the inner story, we duplicate in our own real-life experience, and in a sense simultaneously, the experience of the fictional reader. Thus these novels establish a relationship that is not limited to the fictional reader's world or to ours but stands within and above both of them. In the "writer writing" texts of the previous chapter, we are aware of the real-life author whose fictional stand-in claims to be writing his or her book, but in these "reader reading" texts it is ourselves we are aware of, reading along with the readers in the outer stories. Of the four books, Calvino's exploits this phenomenon explicitly, but it is implicit in the other three as well.

The mysterious nature of reading, with its peculiar combination of absorption and aloofness, is the subject of Julio Cortazar's very short story, "Continuity of Parks." In it a man sits reading in
a green velvet chair a story in which a married woman and her lover plot the murder of her husband. The lover comes to kill the husband, stealthily approaching the house where his victim sits reading in a green velvet chair. John Barth, commenting on a story by Borges which is "turned back on itself," says of such stories that "they disturb us metaphysically,"^{2} reminding us that our own existence may be a kind of fiction. They also attest to the compelling reality fictional worlds seem to have. The dissolution of the border between the reader in the Inner fiction and the reader in the outer one of Cortazar's story demonstrates through exaggeration how completely one can enter a fictional world. These four "readers reading" Russian doll fictions use the relation between the reader in their outer story and the text of the Inner story to explore the nature of the relation between all readers and all fictions, even as they remind us that we are reading fictions.

Of the four books, Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* stays closest to the sentence-by-sentence experience of reading. The outer story depicts reading as an adventure in which an unnamed Reader, motivated by the desire to finish any of the ten books he is reading, seeks out the remaining chapters in some exotic places, finally achieving satisfaction at the novel's conclusion. *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a metanovel, its primary theme the nature of the experience of reading.

The structure of this novel is based on dualities: the female protagonist Ludmilla, who loves reading, has a sister named Lotaria who mistrusts books and avoids reading; an organization created by a
shadowy translator, Ermes Marana, has split into the Wing of Shadow and the Wing of Light. There is also the obvious division of the novel into the outer and inner stories. But the division of reader and text into two entities each is Calvino's most subtle and effective split, which he uses to correspond to the double state of mind reading requires.

Calvino's first chapter seems to address his reader directly: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's If on a winter's night a traveler. Relax. Concentrate."\(^3\) We seem to be reading a kind of preface, a charming description of the joy of anticipation when we begin reading a new book: "Try to foresee now everything that might make you interrupt your reading. Cigarettes within reach, if you smoke, and the ashtray. Anything else? Do you have to pee? All right, you know best" (p. 4). As the chapter continues, Calvino describes "you" riding the bus, sneaking peeks at the book in the office, finally settling down in the evening at home to read.

By the second numbered chapter, it has become clear that Calvino intends to treat "you" as a character in his outer story. Calvino's "you" is not reading the same book I read: he returns his copy because it is defective in a way mine is not. The "you" who is very much like me at the beginning has become a "he," the Reader.\(^4\) And yet Calvino retains his use of "you" throughout the outer story, long after it has become clear that "you" has become particularized. Calvino retains "you" to make us aware as readers of the way we imaginatively enter the world of the story we read, our sensation of being in the book, like a character. By giving his Inner reader the
same pronoun ("you") and the same function ("Reader") as ours, Calvino makes us aware of our peculiar double identity as readers. We are at once the actual readers, real people in the real world whom Calvino seems to be addressing on the first pages, and imaginative participants in the book who tend to identify with the protagonist, in this case the Reader.

Peter Rabinowitz's terms in his study of audiences help to clarify our double identity as readers. Calvino's opening pages seem to be a direct address to his "authorial audience," those for whom an author writes, the sort of people who can understand and appreciate a novel by Calvino. "Narrative audience" is Rabinowitz's term for the audience we become as we suspend disbelief in the world of the novel, accept characters as people we know and the plot as a kind of history. Calvino's "you" embraces our roles as both "authorial audience" and "narrative audience." Calvino's "you" remains ambiguous throughout the novel because our relation to the novel, our identity as readers, is itself ambiguous.

The inner stories contain a similar doubling within a single character. The ten stories that the Reader begins are narrated from the first-person point of view. However, with the exception of Leaning from the steep slope, each story departs at some points from simple first-person narration to adopt a metafictional stance, part summary, part discussion of the problems the narrator must solve. For example, in Outside the town of Malbork, after a first sentence about the odor of carbonized onions simmering in oil, the second sentence is "Rape oil, the text specifies; everything here is very
precise, things with their nomenclature and the sensation that things transmit," etc. Further down the page occurs the phrase "or at least the impression given to you, Reader" (p. 34). Such description turns every first-person narrator into the voice of the author as well. One has the curious sensation of being addressed not by either of these but by the text itself. This voice that comes from the interior of the story itself, but is at the same time commenting on that story from a position outside it, is aware that it speaks from out of a novel, is self-aware, or "text-aware," in a way the usual first-person narrator is not. Calvino uses this voice to show that in every novel there is an intelligence at work making choices and creating form. It is as if the voice of Wayne Booth's implied author speaks to us directly.7

The double "I" serves a function similar to that of the double "you" in the outer story. Whereas the "you" acknowledges the reader's participation, the "I" acknowledges the author's. This is not to suggest that Calvino is claiming by using this technique that fiction is only thinly-disguised autobiography which he here unmasks, but that the author is always present in his work. He is an "I" who has created the "I" who is a character in the book. But the book does not exist independently of its creator any more than it does of its reader. When Silas Flannery thinks about his own presence in the books he writes, he says, "I would like to vanish, to leave behind for that expectation lurking in their [his readers'] eyes the page stuck in the typewriter, or at most, my fingers striking the keys" (p. 171). He wishes that what is unsaid could write itself, so that
a reader could say of a book, "I read, therefore it writes" (p. 176). But as his meditation continues, Flannery seems to accept the limitations subjectivity and language impose on his writing: "It is only through the confining act of writing that the immensity of the nonwritten becomes legible. . . . . Otherwise what is outside of us should not insist on communicating through the word spoken or written: let it send its messages by other paths" (p. 183). Within the inner stories the presence of the author and of the main character are combined in one "I" because the author speaks through his book and through his characters. The same duality of identification and detachment at work in the reader's consciousness applies to the book's creator, who is at once speaking as his characters while he constructs patterns that contain and are external to them.

Both the author and the reader of a novel are two people at the same time, each maintaining residences within and outside of the novel as it unfolds. What makes reading magical is the meeting on enchanted ground of the author's "I" and the reader's "you." The reader enters the fiction and remains apart from it as the "you" who is not a character. The ambiguity of "you" and "I" in the outer and inner stories keeps this duality constantly before a reader's eyes as the novel proceeds. If on a winter's night a traveler is a treatise on reading in the form of a novel. In the inner novels Calvino can evoke the enchanted meeting-ground because of his skill as a storyteller at creating suspense. In the inner stories Calvino has it both ways: we are aware of the ambiguity of the "I" of the
stories, and we are swept up by the power of the narrative. In the outer story, however, the reader's self-consciousness dominates. The outer story is witty and pleasant enough, but by no means compelling as a story; here we have Calvino as theorist of fiction: story becomes subordinate to theorizing.

The Reader and Ludmilla read for the joy of it, becoming absorbed in the world of the book they read. Calvino contrasts their sensual pleasure in books to the approaches of Ludmilla's sister Lotaria and Ermes Marana, a sinister figure who leaves a trail through the books the two Readers pursue. By means of this contrast Calvino further develops the Readers' attitude to reading, something pure: "putting behind you pages lacerated by intellectual analyses, you dream of rediscovering a condition of natural reading, innocent, primitive" (p. 92). In the inner novels, we share the Readers' joy in that sort of reading, but the outer novel, If not "lacerated by intellectual analyses" exactly, since it is rendered with a light touch, hardly qualifies as the sort of writing that encourages primitive, innocent reading. But we need not think of ourselves as Lotarias or Maranas just because we are interested in intellectual analysis of reading. Calvino's novel as a whole offers us both kinds of writing, allowing us to read like the Readers as well as Intellectuals.

Lotaria never surrenders herself to a book; she distrusts fiction, fights it by interposing her political and social doctrines between the text and herself. When she reads, "Lotaria wants to know the author's position with regard to Trends of Contemporary Thought and Problems That Demand a Solution" (p. 44). She leads a discussion
group "where books are analyzed according to all Codes, Conscious and Unconscious, and in which all Taboos are eliminated, the ones imposed by the dominant Sex, Class, and Culture" (p. 45). When Ludmilla and the Reader find themselves in this group, they are disappointed that the reading of a novel breaks off after one chapter. Lotarla does not mind: "there's enough material here to discuss for a month. Aren't you satisfied?" she asks the Reader, who replies, "I didn't mean to discuss; I wanted to read" (p. 91), an attitude Lotarla and her friends cannot understand.

Lotarla appears much later in the outer story, at Silas Flannery's mountain retreat. Flannery remarks in his diary, "I see that my work serves her perfectly to demonstrate her theories, and this is certainly a positive fact--for the novels or for the theories, I do not know which" (p. 185). As it turns out, Lotarla does not even read; instead she uses a computer programmed to "record the list of all the words contained in the text, in order of frequency" (p. 186). Lotarla also resists the mystery of reading, rejects suspense, feels threatened by novels that, in Ludmilla's words, "create an illusion of transparency around a knot of human relationships as obscure, cruel, and perverse as possible" (p. 192), or that "make you feel uneasy from the very first page" (p. 126). Ludmilla opens herself to the magic spell of reading, but Lotarla shuts herself off.

Ermes Marana is the other bad reader in the outer story. Whereas people like Flannery attempt to create false realities that are true to human experience, Marana is a literary nihilist, taking perverse
delight in what he believes to be the absolute falsity of fiction. He represents himself as an agent of the Organization for the Electronic Production of Homogenized Literary Works, a Japanese group that turns out phony "translations" of works by well-known authors. These are actually new works that copy an author's style so closely as to be indistinguishable from books actually composed by real authors, such as Silas Flannery. Marana also takes part in a project that requires hooking a woman up to a machine as she reads to find out if "the product is viable and can be launched on the market" (p. 128). Like Lotarla, Marana treats the production of books as an essentially mechanical act. Ludmilla, on the other hand, chooses not to visit the publishing house with the Reader on principle, preferring to remain on her side of the line that divides the producers of books from readers, fearing that to cross the line would mean that "the unsullied pleasure of reading ends, or at least is transformed into something else" (p. 93). Ludmilla also makes it a practice not to meet writers in person, preferring to know them only through their novels.

Like Silas Flannery, Ermes Marana is obsessed with Ludmilla's absorption in reading. Flannery responds by trying to write the book he sees her reading; he wants to become the Ideal writer for this Ideal reader. Marana responds by trying to come between Ludmilla and the text, by inserting mistrust into the relationship of novel and reader. Marana is jealous of Ludmilla's devotion to books. As the Reader peruses Marana's letters to a publisher, "Ermes Marana appears to you as a serpent who injects his malice into the paradise of
reading" (p. 125). Whereas the two Readers believe that they can get at the truth through fiction, Ludmilla says, according to her friend Irnerio, "that whatever [Marana] touches, if it isn't false already, becomes false" (p. 152). When she knew him, she stopped reading, but she has found an antidote to his poisonous attitude in reading and in finally meeting Flannery, to whom she turns "when Marana convinces her that the difference between the true and the false is only a prejudice of ours" (p. 152).

Thus Marana wants to render meaningless the relationship between reader and writer established in the text, by mystification and by mass-production of convincing fakes, in order to show Ludmilla "that behind the written page is the void; the world exists only as artifice, pretense, misunderstanding, falsehood" (p. 239). He envisions "a literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attributions, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches." He wants to destroy her joy in reading by undermining Ludmilla's trust in what she reads, and if he can, "perhaps externally the edifice of literature would not have changed at all, but beneath, in the foundations, where the relationship between reader and text is established, something would have changed forever" (p. 159) and he will have Ludmilla for himself alone. What frustrates Marana most is how "her always curious, always insatiable reading . . . managed to uncover truths hidden in the most barefaced fake, and falsity with no attenuating circumstances in words claiming to be the most truthful" (p. 239). Some of the books she begins with the Reader may be Marana's fakes, but it does not matter because she is a good enough
reader to uncover truths and lies in her reading, and truth in lies. Marana finally admits defeat: "In reading, something happens over which I have no control" (p. 240).

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler gives us other types of misreaders. The members of a group organized and then abandoned by Marana, the Organization of Apocryphal Power, have split into two quasi-terrorist factions, the Wing of Shadow and the Wing of Light. Each goes to great lengths, including hijacking an airplane, to obtain Flannery's newest manuscript from Ermes Marana, a manuscript detailing Flannery's spiritual crisis. The Wing of Shadow "had convinced themselves that his next novel would mark the switch from cheap and relative bad faith to essential and absolute bad faith, the masterpiece of falsity as knowledge," which they exist to celebrate and perpetuate. On the other hand, or wing, their rivals, the Wing of Light, "thought that from the crisis of such a professional in falsehood only a cataclysm of truth could be born" (p. 129). The Wing of Light are looking for the few books "that bear a truth perhaps extrahuman or extraterrestrial," while the Wing of Shadow "believe that only counterfeiting, mystification, intentional falsehood can represent absolute value in a book, a truth not contaminated by the dominant pseudo truths" (p. 129). These two factions seek absolutes, think of literature in almost religious terms. They cannot or will not deal with the human element in a novel and so have wrong-headed expectations of what they read. Readers must be able to deal with the complexity of illusion and reality in novels (like this one), and delight in the play of their
imagination and the author's, not expect confirmation of absolutes in novels like the ones Flannery writes.

Some other peculiar readers resemble but do not belong to the Wing of Light. Like the two factions of Marana's organization, this group is to be found in the mountains near Flannery's home. Flannery discovers them, "a party of boys who looked like scouts," engaged in "arranging some pieces of canvas on a meadow to form geometric patterns" (p. 183) that will attract UFO's. They have heard about the local writer's crisis and believe that it is the result of extraterrestrial influence: the extraterrestrials want him to "be drained of terrestrial conditiongs and become receptive" to their message. Like Lotario, they have not read Flannery's books, being interested only in the one he will produce when he emerges from his crisis. Flannery will be the unconscious instrument of the aliens, which leads him to muse later, "What if ... while I believe I am writing in fun, what I write were really dictated by extraterrestrials?" The question Flannery puts to the boys that they cannot answer is this: "and would you succeed in decoding the message?" (p. 184). The question uncovers the source of their mistaken approach to reading. They insist that the only book worth reading must be peculiarly pure, unhuman. It is the complex, emotional, messy terrestrial concerns of novels written by human beings that they reject when they refuse to read Flannery's novels. Their approach is essentially the same as that of religious fundamentalists reading the Bible--God wrote it. They also exhibit a need for salvation through words.
Calvino shows us that these people are misguided by making them ridiculous. They are easy to ridicule because they take themselves too seriously. Unlike the Readers, they refuse to surrender to reading—they resist it. Lotaria manages not to read at all. They intimidate Flannery: he recollects from providing grist for Lotaria's word-mill, and the religious sensibilities of the Wings and the "scouts" would require him to become a sort of priest if he tried to satisfy them, a role which would be uncomfortable for him. Writers like Flannery and Calvino himself see their work as a way of establishing human connection; Flannery wants to write for the reader down the mountain, person to person. Calvino's conception of reading is conveyed by his comparison of reading not to salvation but to seduction.8

Calvino merges the pursuit of the lost chapters of each book by the Reader with his pursuit of the enchanting Ludmilla, who can be very nearly as elusive as the remainders of the novels the Reader begins; this linking of courtship and reading and makes of that activity not a retreat from life but an integral part of it:

This is how you have changed since yesterday, you who insisted you preferred a book, something solid, which lies before you, easily defined, enjoyed without risks, to a real-life experience, always elusive, discontinuous, debated. Does this mean that the book has become an Instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous? This does not mean its reading will grip you less: on the contrary, something has been added to its power. (p. 32)

Now that he has met Ludmilla, "the novel to be read is superimposed by a possible novel with her, ... the beginning of a possible story" (p. 32).
Ludmilla is a kind of muse, inspiring Flannery to write the book he sees her reading on a terrace down the mountain from him, inspiring Marana to try to destroy her pleasure in reading by undermining her trust in authors, and most importantly, inspiring the Reader to respond to books and to life itself—with the same sensual, passionate joy with which she reads. By dovetailing the Reader's desire for literary satisfaction with the desire for Ludmilla, Calvino echoes Roland Barthes The Pleasure of the Text, where he speaks of reading in erotic terms, of the pleasure and bliss of reading in a sexual sense. Ludmilla affirms the importance of reading as a pleasure, and she teaches the Reader the same attitude.

If for the two Readers reading partakes of desire, sex resembles reading. In a fond and amusing passage, Calvino describes for us the Reader's exploration of Ludmilla's body. It is experienced by means of "all codes, all the poor alphabets by which one human being believes at certain moments that he is reading another human being." As for the Other Reader, in the meantime she skims him, then "dwell[s] on negligible details, perhaps tiny stylistic faults [which] she exploits . . . to establish a margin of detachment, critical reserve, or joking intimacy" (p. 155). The Other Reader's kitchen has just been "read" by the Reader much as one might "read" a person by her medicine cabinet. He concludes that Ludmilla has no need for "symbolic substitutes for the natural drives that lead you [Ludmilla] to be concerned with others, to take part in their stories, in life, in books" (p. 145). Life for her is physical, her relationship with
objects "with the physicality of the thing, not an intellectual or affective idea that takes the place of seeing them and touching them" (p. 143). Ludmilla experiences everything directly, without the need to separate living and reading. As a result, she reads like someone possessed by passion and makes love like a reader.

Thus the outer story proposes an ideal kind of reading, and the adventures of the Reader arise from his desire for sexual and literary satisfaction: he wants Ludmilla and he wants to finish the story he is reading as well. The Reader is greedy for story, for imagined experience, for the satisfactions of his desire to know how a story comes out. His feelings about Ludmilla and the novels he reads are very similar. Calvino contrives to have the Reader finish the Inner if on a winter's night a traveler in bed with Lotaria: two consummations in one night.

The ten beginnings of novels interleaved with the outer story of the Readers make up the inner story, or rather ten of them. Despite their diversity of setting, these novels, while not constituting a unified story, do resemble one another in some ways and as a whole parallel and clarify themes in the outer story, another instance of the story to be lived being superimposed on the story to be read. Calvino keeps beginning stories because he likes to tell stories, and this book celebrates the telling of stories. Each story opens up new possibilities, a new world. He breaks them off at a moment of great suspense because he wants us to understand the Reader's frustration. The stories could be shuffled and dealt out in another order in the novel without altering their effect on Calvino's actual readers. He
wants to shower us with stories, but gives us just enough of each story to make us want more, in order to secure our participation, if only passively, in the reader's quest. Most of all, Calvino wants us to enjoy the stories we are told.

The stories that constitute the inner half of this novel are also linked by the fact that each is incomplete—we begin each the way Flannery describes: "I feel the thrill of a beginning that can be followed by multiple developments, inexhaustibly" (p. 177). This expectation is a problem for a writer, Flannery thinks, but as a reader he knows the seductiveness of the entrance into a created world. Still, he believes, "The romantic fascination produced in the pure state by the first sentences of the first chapter of many novels is soon lost in the continuation of the story: it is the promise of a time of reading that extends before us and can comprise all possible developments" (p. 177). He says he would like to write a book that is all beginning, and in a way that is what Calvino's inner story is. Calvino himself has said of his intentions in If on a winter's night a traveler, "I would like people to feel that beyond the written word is the multiplicity and unforeseeable aspect of life," and "By having so many literary models, I was trying to say that the world is so rich and inexhaustible that writings can never keep up with it."10 But the Reader comes to realize that he wants not just promises but satisfaction, not just the pursuit of novel experience with a new lover, but marriage. The Reader's wild and funny adventure exhibits his courage and devotion in his quest for Ludmilla and the novels whose reading is interrupted. Early in
the novel the Reader realizes that his developing relationship with Ludmilla has changed his attitude toward the uses of fiction. Because the Reader accepts the complexity of living a life that demands a greater degree of commitment than did his solitary existence, he wants more than mere novelty from his reading. He wants to see things through, so he accepts the dangers and risks such a life entails, including interruptions, and is rewarded at the end by marriage and the privilege of finishing *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

Once he has made his commitment to Ludmilla, the Reader becomes a very different man from the protagonists of the ten stories. All are male, and all are quite alone. The majority of the stories involve an oppressive sense of loss. The protagonist of *Outside the town of Malbork*, a young boy, is being taken away from his family to live with another that is conducting a feud with yet another family. His family lets him go in spite of the danger as the novel breaks off. The most bizarre sort of loss occurs in *What Story Down There Awaits Its End*? The protagonist of that one causes everything around him to disappear, finally annihilating an entire city and almost all its inhabitants, realizing only after it is too late that he cannot make everything reappear.

The other common denominator in these inner stories is betrayal. In *Without Fear of Wind or Vertigo*, a man discovers that his best friend's wallet contains a document sentencing him to death for, of all things, treason. The protagonists are sometimes accused of betrayal themselves, as in *In a Network of Lines That Enlace*, when a
man finally comes to the rescue of a kidnap victim, having taken a long time debating the extent of his responsibility to her, to be greeted with "You're a bastard" (p. 139) when he arrives. In On a carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon, a student who has been planning to leave his teacher, Mr. Okeda, finds himself bound to the teacher by Okeda's knowledge that he has had sex with Mrs. Okeda. Like most of the protagonists in these interrupted novels, the hero here finds himself trapped.

The entrapment of the hero comments on how the Reader is entrapped by the books that he begins to read, compelled to pursue the rest of each book. The "I" of If on a winter's night a traveler (the inner story, not the whole novel), who tells us "I am caught in a trap" (p. 11), explains the method and purpose of his narrative, adding: "Watch out: It is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it—a trap" (p. 12). Like the Reader, we are drawn into the stories we read, but we do not pursue them to the ends of the earth as he does. And because we quickly catch on to Calvino's method, we learn to except frustration at the end of each inner chapter and not to be too much affected by it. We come to enjoy each beginning in itself, for the pleasure of beginning. The Reader's "entrapment," linked as it is with the pursuit of Ludmilla, also brings pleasure, paradoxically freeing him, leading him out of himself into a story he lives with Ludmilla. Neither Calvino's Readers nor his actual readers can be trapped in a fiction as the characters are. We choose to participate in an imaginative construct, but we do not really become
We may come to care about the fate of an unfortunate fictional character, to "identify" with him, but we will not die with him—our lives will go on. Calvino allows us to distinguish between the sort of trap a character can be caught in and the sort of trap a fiction represents for a Reader; we can always choose to close the book and forget about the characters' misfortunes.

Calvino uses the male protagonists' relationships with women in the inner stories to counterpoint the love story of the two Readers in the outer story. The hero's attraction to the mysterious Madame Marne in the first story anticipates the Reader's meeting with Ludmilla in the chapter that immediately follows. Later, the Reader discovers that Ermes Marana has tried to win Ludmilla by confusing her about truth and falsehood. In a network of lines that Intersect features the Marana-like figure who hides himself in an elaborate maze of shadow Identities: "I want to conceal, in the midst of so many illusory ghosts of myself, the true me, who makes them move" (p. 163). Marana, the "translator" of many of these works, may here be providing us with a self-portrait. The tycoon is betrayed by the women in his life, having not so much hidden as lost himself in his mirror maze. The elaborate system of disguises also links this story with the Lotaria figure of the "country where everything that can be falsified has been falsified" (p. 212), one which Marana might have invented. But whereas the hero of In a network of lines that Intersect and the inhabitants of that country in which the Reader becomes trapped live in fear of others and lose touch with the world,
the Reader's love for Ludmilla and for truth in fiction leads him to a happy ending. The Reader's passion for fiction and for Ludmilla are entwined, and the mirroring of inner and outer stories underlines the unity of reading and loving that is Calvino's major theme.

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* uses doubling of all sorts, including the Russian doll device, to celebrate reading in itself, not just interpretation. The double structure of the novel as a whole offers us both kinds of reading: the outer story is theoretical, self-conscious, critical, playful. It requires a reader who tries to understand the author's intentions and structure; in short, it requires the reader to be an interpreter. But the inner novels, the ten beginnings, invite the kind of reading which Ludmilla and the Reader seek.

Unlike the voracious readers in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Sally Page Abbot, the reader in the outer story of *October Light*, is not usually much of a reader, although she remembers enjoying having her husband read to her. A widow now, Sally finds herself locked in her bedroom with only a cheap paperback novel for company, an adventure story called *The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock*. Many of the novel's pages are missing, perhaps as a result of its having been thrown to the pigs her brother keeps. James has chased her up to the room after shooting her television set. Because she is as obstinate as he is, their family's and friends' efforts to get them to compromise meet with little success. Their quarrel escalates until they plot violence against each other. Sally's novel is, as
she tells herself, "common drugstore trash,"12 but out of boredom at first, and then with genuine interest in spite of her frequent annoyance with it, she returns to the book again and again, finishing it before she leaves her room. She is drawn into the book by her delight in its very trashiness; it is not the sort of book of which James would approve, so Sally revels in her independence and nurses her grudge against James by indulging in something that would annoy him in the same way her television has.

Trash it may be, but as Sally reads the novel it superimposes its pattern on her memories and affects her attitude toward her present situation, both the short-term difficulty with James that has made her a prisoner in his house and her long-term need to learn to forgive and love him. The inner book's moral bankruptcy forces her to ponder her own behavior without providing her a nobler code of conduct by which to live out her life. John Gardner's combination of inner and outer stories considers the way a novel can insinuate itself into a reader's consciousness, imposing patterns on her experience, giving her another world to compare to her own, a new perspective from which to observe her own life. Sally thinks to herself, remembering that her nephew Richard, a suicide, had been a reader, "Books have no effect at all, no value whatsoever" (p. 37). But even so unpromising a specimen as The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock affects her in profound ways, influencing her decision to reconcile with her miserable (in both senses) both James. In the interplay of inner and outer stories, Gardner shows how literature becomes integrated into a reader's experience. This is a process
students of literature acknowledge but do not ordinarily explore; such an exploration reveals the effects and the value of literature in the lives of more or less ordinary readers like Sally, and by implication, in the lives of all readers.

Sally Page Abbot has almost ideal conditions for sustained reading. Perhaps the quality of the novel leaves something to be desired, but Sally is in the mood for something wicked, not profound. Most important, she has solitude, not by choice at first, but then she refuses to leave the room even when James unlocks her door. She has food--apples in the attic--and in a passage that reminds us of Calvino's question to his Reader, she works out the bathroom arrangements; her diet and the lack of plumbing make for unpleasant distractions after a day or so, but she is comfortable enough at the beginning. Sally uses this time-out in her life to do two things: she reads and she remembers. The book summons up her past and seems to her to comment on it, especially on the tragic pair of deaths, that of her husband and James' son Richard, which in their way unite her brother and herself in grief. By prompting and encouraging her to evaluate her life, the book proves an unexpectedly influential companion in her retreat.

John Gardner has remarked that as a child he admired Disney and Dickens because they "created wonderful cartoon resonance"; that he liked operas in part because "the stage is nothing if not a grand cartoon"; 13 and that Melville and Milton appealed to him as cartoonists. In The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock, Gardner, who wrote this inner story in collaboration with his wife, gives free
rein to the cartoonist in himself. Most of the characters are barely two-dimensional, and their frenzied orgies and bloodbaths keep them in constant motion, like the characters in a Roadrunner cartoon. The Inner novel fits Gardner’s description of “cartoon vision, [which] tends to go again and again for the same gestural gimmicks, a consistent pattern of caricature”; moreover, the middle section of the Inner novel contains what Gardner characterizes as his tendency to let his characters “babble philosophically, not really because they’re saying things I want to get said but because earnest babbling is one of the ways I habitually give vitality to my short-legged, overweight, twitching cartoon creations.”

Gardner’s remarks on the cartoon quality of his work do not constitute a repudiation of those works or of cartooning itself, which he admires in the works of Milton and Dostoevsky. The difference between his, Milton’s, and Dostoevsky’s cartoons and the cartoon that is The Smugglers of Lost Souls’ Rock is that the latter contains all the faults of that kind of vision without the virtues to be found in those other works; it is all “stylized gestures” and ultimately empty action: “covering, all covering, mere bright paint over rotting barn walls” (pp. 38–39), Sally realizes.

Even though Sally is often dissatisfied with the book, especially after her initial elation at her own naughtiness wears off, the book is capable of casting over her the spell fiction can cast, merely because it offers an alternative to her everyday existence:

quite imperceptibly the real world lost weight and the print on the page gave way to images, an alternative reality more charged than real life, more ghostly yet nearer, suffused with a curious importance and
manageability. She began to fall in with the book's snappy rhythms, becoming herself more wry, more waryly disgusted with the world . . . . Life became larger, in vibration to such words [as "universe"] and she, the observer and container of this universe, became necessarily more vast than its space, became indeed . . . godlike (p. 20).

Even The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock is capable of leading Sally Page Abbott to judgments, perhaps even revelations, in spite of its fallings as a novel.

On the simplest level, Sally is moved to draw analogies by what she sees as similarities between the characters in the book and her relatives. For example, strange Mr. Nit, who keeps eels and considers himself a scientist, Sally identifies with her niece's husband Lewis. The tyrannical, half-mad Captain Fist is James, holding her prisoner in her room just as Fist forces young Jane to remain with his crew when she tries to escape. The most important and immediate connection she makes, however, is between her nephew Richard, James's son who hanged himself, and the protagonist of her novel, Peter Wagner, who literally falls in with the smugglers when he jumps from a bridge in a suicide attempt, only to be rescued by them instead. It is Sally's near-obsession with Richard's death that draws her back to the novel, in spite of her mounting impatience with its decadence. That third identification is prompted by and in turn stimulates her memories of the tangle of relationships central to her life, and is responsible, in a subtle way, for Sally's decision finally to come out of her room.

Sally is completely wrong about Lewis Hicks, whom she thinks of as "shiftless and dull-witted" (p. 58). She is allowing her latent
snobbery—she was inordinately proud of her social standing as a
dentist's wife—to cloud her judgment. Virginia, Lewis's wife, knows
better: she refers to him as a "living saint" (p. 293). The
description may be exaggerated—Lewis would be disqualified by his
atheism—but the events of the outer story bear out Virginia's
praise, not Sally's dismissal of him. Although Ginny and her father
often provoke him, Lewis never raises his voice. In contrast to
James's fierce cruelty to his son, Lewis is a kind and patient father
to his adopted son Dickey, Richard's namesake. Moreover, Lewis
shares James's worthwhile opinions about displaying his temper and
rigidity; in fact, James admires his workmanship when he prepares a
door for repainting. And like James, who never lies, Lewis values
the truth when he hears it: "Lewis was sorry to see the truth choked
off as it so often was in this miserable world, it seemed to him" (p.
148). Lewis understands better than Sally and James that "nothing
was simple" (p. 148), including the issue of Sally's rights in
James's home. He is more like Horace, Sally's late husband, than
crazy Mr. Nit. As a moral touchstone in the book, Lewis's respect
for James undermines Sally's self-pity and shows us that Sally can be
wrong in her judgments, taken in by appearances, leading Gardner's
readers to wish for reconciliation without taking sides, just as her
friends and Lewis do.

Thus we question Sally's fairness in identifying Captain Fist
with James. She is being held prisoner by him, as Fist imprisons
Jane, but when James unlocks the door for her, she spites him by
remaining in her room in a show of stubborn independence. We also
resist Sally's facile equation because James is a genuinely pitiful old man, too proud to whine the way Sally does, but miserable just the same. He is as likely to turn his destructiveness on himself as on those who want to love him, as his accident illustrates. The cruelty toward his son is unforgivable, but he is as bewildered by it as are the women in his family, unable to understand why it is easy to show his love for Glady and so hard to show it for his son. Richard's suicide and the death of James's wife, both of which Sally blames on him, have torn him apart inside: after Richard's death, "At night, when he slept and fell off guard, he would wake up crying" (p. 354). He has been too proud and stubborn to seek comfort. Sally's angry refusal to acknowledge her brother's pain, and his love for her that he cannot articulate, reveal the need for human community in spite of political and temperamental differences that is Gardner's primary theme in October Light.

The third analogy Sally sees, between Peter Wagner and Richard, is based on her opinion that "both of them were victims, and tragically weak" (p. 186). Peter Wagner displays physical courage repeatedly in Smugglers, but he wants to escape the demands life makes on him, his responsibilities to other people and to himself, because he has no moral courage. He joins the violent, cut-throat outlaws because it does not matter much to him what he does. He is surprised to find that he wants to live after having failed at suicide, because he knows he has nothing to live for. Passivity is the most prominent feature of Wagner's personality, leading him to the conviction that nothing he feels or does is genuine:
Again he felt he was something not alive—not himself, that is: a character in some book. It was as if his life had been somewhere meticulously plotted from start to finish... and even if the end were happy he would find it poisoned when he reached it: Intolerable because brutally preordained (p. 164).

An important difference between Richard and Peter Wagner, which Gardner's reader notices even if Sally does not, is that whereas Richard is a genuine victim, Peter Wagner is not. More important, Richard's death was mourned by people who were capable of loving him, a family and friends who also love Sally. Peter Wagner lives in a loveless world, a society of drug smugglers whose facile philosophizing never quite substitutes for commitment and community. In other words, the world of the novel, which panders to Sally's anger and very nearly seduces her, is the sort of world Richard felt himself to be living in and was defeated by, finally finding himself, as Sally imagines it, "utterly alone in the only lighted room... on the mountain" (p. 188). In her room, up all night in the only lighted room in James's house, Sally has a choice of visions of the world and ways to live in it. On the one hand is the world of the cheap novel, one in which the smuggler Santisillia declares that "nobody's responsible for anything" (p. 326), and in which easy sex and plentiful marijuana fill the smugglers' days; on the other is the world she rejects by retreating to her room, one where difficult people have to be dealt with and one is responsible for one's own actions. Nothing is easy there, but nothing is cheap, either.

Ironically, two statements in the inner novel give Gardner's readers the reasons to reject the values of The Smugglers of Lost
**Souls' Rock.** The first is Peter Wagner's, as he reflects on his situation on the Indomitable: "So he too, Peter Wagner, was committed to trash drama, if he intended to survive. Like all the world, Peter Wagner thought. One meets no King Lear in the ordinary world, no Ophelias" (p. 175). But is that entirely true? James Page is in many ways a Lear, and others of Gardner's characters in the outer story have managed to live according to standards several cuts above those that obtain in trash fiction. Horace Abbott and Estelle Parks come immediately to mind. The second statement of the sort of values by which Wagner has chosen to live is also a comment on literature like that he inhabits. Wagner says there are two kinds of books, those that "desperately struggle to prove there's some holy, miraculous meaning to it all and desperately deny that everything in the world's mere belts and gears . . . and there are books that say the opposite" (p. 317). I agree with Samuel Coale that October Light fits the former category, The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock the latter.16 The inner story exists in order to underscore the irresponsibility of Sally's retreat from the real world by exaggerating—in Wagner and Dr. Alkahest, especially—the consequences of such an attitude as Sally often seems inclined to adopt. As Robert Morace puts it, "The reader reads Sally reading and as a result learns the difference between fiction that is 'moral' and fiction that is not, and learns, too, what influence fiction can exert and what effects it can have."17

Thus the value of Smugglers for us as readers is the same as its value for Sally; by rejecting its immoral vision we learn two things:
fiction must be taken seriously because it is powerful, and bad fiction, that written in a spirit of cynicism, must be rejected. This is the reason John Gardner uses the Russian doll device. It takes a morally better fiction, the outer story of October Light, to demonstrate for us the debased morality of the inner novel when they are juxtaposed in one book. Of the four novels in this chapter, October Light exhibits the least technical complexity in its use of the story within a story: one reader encounters one text. This is also the least self-conscious or overtly metafictional of the works discussed in my entire study. Gardner keeps his structure simple because he has a single, clear-cut reason for doubling his narrative: he wants to convince us that some books are morally bad.

If Wagner and Alkahest represent the negative values of the inner novel, Lewis Hicks and Estelle Parks represent the difficult but life-affirming values of the outer one. Like Sally, Estelle is very old. Unlike Sally, Estelle has gained wisdom with age, and she knows that her friends Sally and James are both wrong in this quarrel. After hearing Sally's attempt to give her revolt a larger political significance, Estelle thinks, "Whatever the truth might be about James and the United States, or Sally and radicalized armies (or whatever), the truth here and in this house was that Sally must be coaxed out of her room before things got worse" (p. 252). To coax her out, Estelle throws a party, which does not bring Sally out but does give her a good idea of what she is missing by staying put.

Estelle is no Pollyanna. She has lost her youth and the man she loved, Ferris Parks, with whom "she'd discovered that the world was
radiant and holy and above all—if they could be true to one another—safe" (p. 275). He died when they had had only eight years together, but Estelle has not given in to bitterness at the blows life has dealt her. She has the strength of a survivor, the strength Sally needs and Richard lacked. She finds that strength in a community of friends, a gift Sally is too stubborn to accept from them. After Lane Walker's witty sermon asserts the unity of male and female, Sally responds piously, "May all these terrible prejudices be driven from the earth!" (p. 289), but still she clings to her resentment of James and refuses the necessary act of reconciliation with her brother. Estelle knows she is wrong to continue to cut herself off from him: "One moment we're happy and wonderfully healthy, and our children are all well, . . . and the next some horrible accident has happened, and suddenly we see how things really are and we cling to each other for dear life" (p. 273). The desperate clinging of the orgy on Lost Souls' Rock cannot offer real solace because the smugglers are incapable of the wise and forgiving love of people like Estelle and Ruth and Ed Thomas. The young musician Terence meditates on music much later in the story, arriving at a vision of "life's monstrosity and beauty" (p. 426) that strongly resembles Estelle's. Recognition of the monstrosity of life without the wisdom to acknowledge its capacity for beauty afflicts James and too often Sally as well, aligning them with the lost souls of the inner novel, especially Peter Wagner.

The inner story arouses Sally's anger as she realizes what she has missed in her life that Jane takes for granted: "The lives she
might have lived . . . she's missed them all for all eternity, and no use regretting it" (p. 370), though she does regret it bitterly. The story reminds her that she has lived a long time without sex; it awakens desire: "For that she could thank her trashy novel, and, by heaven, she did think it" (p. 370). Believing that James means to do her violence, Sally's desperate plan puts her in league with a character in the book, her plan having "come out of nowhere, like the plan Peter Wagner had had about knocking off his enemies with eels, in her novel. Not that she wasn't sorry—as Peter Wagner had been—to have to do it. But the world was full of violence these days, nobody even thought twice about it" (p. 373). She has succumbed to the books' vision, speaking to herself as one of the characters would do in a similar situation.

James escalates the war between them, allowing his bestiality to overcome his tenderness, thus unwittingly allying himself with the lost souls in Sally's book. He is motivated by the revelations of his friends in the bar that Sally has been deceiving him, taking advantage of his hospitality. His violent threats lead to Sally's rigging a bucket of apples to fall on him when he opens her door, which leads in turn to Virginia accidentally receiving the blow meant for James. Their war inflicts another casualty: Ed Thomas, who is very ill to begin with, suffers a heart attack when James breaks up the party brandishing a gun. James does not intend to really kill Sally, nor, despite her anger and fear, does Sally want her bother dead. And of course James is ashamed that he has brought pain to his old friend Ed. Dickey feels guilty for his mother's injury,
obscurely blaming himself for the chain of events set in motion by Sally and James's fight: "It's because of that book" (p. 414), he tells his father. He left the book (the one Sally has been reading, unbeknownst to anyone) in the room. In a way he is right, but it is still an accident. Sally herself has caught Virginia in her applecrate trap, but that is inadvertent too, an accident. The story is full of accidents, the worst of which took Horace's life. Richard, dressed in a frightening Halloween costume, literally scared his uncle to death. It is his guilt that drives Richard to suicide.

These are accidents of a particular kind, not purely the workings of fate, but of human carelessness, anger, or misdirected malice. Richard has died because of his unwillingness to accept a world where such things can happen, where people who love each other inflict such pain. That is the core of his cowardice. Like his father, Richard has refused to be comforted; Dickey's father, by contrast, offers his son absolution because he knows about the pervasiveness of accident in the world, as does Estelle. Estelle and Lewis accept, without being overwhelmed by, their own bestiality, neatly summarized by a couple of lines Ruth Thomas recites at the party: "And so Man hangs between Truths he must fear/ And the murderous animal under his hide" (p. 304). The difficult trick is to acknowledge one's responsibility to other people and one's complicity in causing suffering without giving into self-disgust, as Richard has done: thus the ambiguous causes of Ginny's accident in the outer story.

The characters in Sally's book, Peter Wagner in particular, try to run from responsibility and indulge their bestiality without
taking responsibility for their actions. Wagner's feeling that his life has been pre-ordained is echoed by Sally when she laments her ill-treatment at James's hands to Estelle in Peter Wagner's words: "I sometimes think we're all characters in some book. It's as if our whole lives are plotted from start to finish, so that even if the end should be happy it's poisoned when we get to it." Gardner is being slyly ironic here. They are characters, of course, but that does not mean that Gardner believes the human beings they represent are helpless. Estelle, who is more sensible than the people in the book who have influenced Sally, is having none of her fatalism: "Why, that's the silliest thing I ever heard!" (p. 252).

Peter Wagner persists in his irresponsibility; he looks to suicide, drugs, mechanical sex, and, in the end, the flying saucer to help him evade the hard "Truths he must fear," the kinds of truths James faces when he understands what he did to Richard. At the cartoonish conclusion of Smugglers--"Save us! . . . We're innocent! Beam us up:"--Sally says wearily to Horace: "that's the kind of thing this world's come to" (p. 462). Sally's statement implies that the world is as violent and hopeless as the novel says it is, but that she rejects the way the characters deal with that difficulty. The rejection brings her back to her family and friends. She may indeed have been for a time what Morace calls "the slave of her novel," but her increasing weariness of the book, of her alienation from everyone, and of her own attempt to escape responsibility in her prison of a bedroom indicate that Sally has
flirted with the immoral vision of Smugglers without having embraced it.

Lewis is right about nothing being simple, including Sally's relationship with the book. Gardner's account of Sally reading includes the idiosyncratic, unforeseen effects a book can have on an individual reader. Sally begins to solve a mystery about Horace's death, involving Richard's part in it, when she reads about Pearl and the Intruder in Dr. Alkahest's apartment. She knows there was an intruder on the night of Horace's death. This musing on Horace's death leads her to ask James, when at a conciliatory word from him she finally leaves the room, the question that will solve the mystery for both of them, explaining the cause of Horace's death and Richard's suicide. By accident Smugglers has given Sally this clue, so her experience of reading has not been completely useless. The book has also provided a caricature of the values to which she has been drawn, by the television and her own unhappiness, that ends by disgusting and not satisfying her. Gardner insists on the power of books to influence our vision of the world. "They'll drive you to suicide in the end, books" (p. 318), Peter says. If they are false to the human spirit, they will at least lure a reader into a false attitude toward his or her own experience, the sort of attitude Wagner displays. But a trashy book like Smugglers can by its falsity, exposed by juxtaposition with the outer novel, push a wise enough reader away from its facile and cynical way of looking at life. Sally comes away from her reading of Smugglers a little wiser than she was before she rejected it, and the reader of Gardner's book
learns something about the power of literature in shaping a reader's perspective.

The readers of *October Light* have an advantage over Sally. She reads one trashy book, but we also read the novel in which Sally is a character and not the "observer and container" of a world. As the moral opposite of *Smugglers*, *October Light* offers a world that is realer than that of *Smugglers*: first, Sally knows *Smugglers* is a fiction, but not that her own existence is for us a fiction too—*October Light* is a realistic novel. The world of *October Light* is more substantial, more believable, more worthwhile. James Page's meditation on the meaning of the words "up" and "down" provides a metaphor for this difference: "It was bone and meat that the world pulled downward, and the spirit, the fire of life that pushed upward, soared . . . sin, slavery, despair . . . hung heavy [but] freedom . . . climbed on eagle's wings to cliffs transcendent, not common rock," Lost Souls' Rock, for instance. "And all things foul gave support not to gravity . . . but to the illusion of freedom and ascent. The Devil's visions were all dazzle and no lift, mere counterfeit escape," into drugs like those the smugglers deal in, for instance, "the lightness of a fart, a tale without substance, escape from the world of hard troubles and grief in a spaceship" (p. 11). These words describe the trashy novel perfectly, down to the reference to the spaceship that hovers over the doomed smugglers at the end of the story. The book itself is light, having been soaked in mud and lost some pages, then dried out before Sally begins to read. The *Light* of the title refers to the difference between the
"dazzle and no lift" of Sally's book and "the fire of life that pushed upward, soared" in the outer novel of hardship and reconciliation that frames and contrasts with Smugglers.

The other metaphor which, with up and down, runs through the outer novel, is "locking time," which begins in October in Vermont. This expression for the onset of winter, with its associations of secrecy, obstinacy, and imprisonment, refers both to the time of year in the outer novel and to the quarrel between James and Sally. Sally's heart is unlocked by sympathy for Ruth Thomas and for Virginia. Sympathy and tenderness signal the unlocking of James's heart. When he notices that Lewis has scraped Sally's door for painting, he thinks, "They deserved no kindness, Sally and he, though he was grateful" (p. 399). Looking at Virginia and her small family asleep downstairs, "his heart ached" (p. 404) for them. His conversation with Sally about the open door in the room where Horace died brings him to an understanding of his son, and "Tears streamed down the old man's face" (p. 493). He remembers how, when courting his wife, his heart unlocked, and how, when she was dying, she forgave him. The locking of October is offset by the unlocking of Sally's door and the hearts of herself and her brother. Ed Thomas speaks to James eloquently of Vermont's seasons and what he will miss about each of them when he is dead: But I'll tell you what I'll miss more than ah the rest, and that's 'unlocking'" (p. 477). Unlocking can occur even in October, in spite of nature, just as "the fire of life" pushes upward against gravity. This is a point a cowardly fatalist like Wagner cannot understand.
This novel by the author of *On Moral Fiction* is itself a moral fiction which contains an immoral one for purposes of contrast. Sally Page Abbott is affected by what she reads, as Gardner insists we all are. Moved by another's pain, repelled by the ugliness of the novel she has read, touched by James's attempt at an apology, Sally repudiates the isolation and the anger that draw her down and lock her away from James and humanity. Gardner insists in this book that, as Sally thinks to herself, "when something [in a novel] went false it seemed not merely silly but . . . a kind of cheat, a broken confidence" (p. 199). In the combination of the two stories, Gardner shows how a novel can keep faith with its readers.

Calvino's Reader and Gardner's Sally Page Abbott read imaginative literature because they enjoy it; for them reading novels is an avocation. There are others for whom reading is at the center of their work; for them, reading imaginative literature is their profession. Charles Kinbote acts as a professional literary scholar in *Pale Fire*, whereas Freud in *The White Hotel* interprets the writing of his patient for other professional purposes. In D.M. Thomas's multi-layered work, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis of Lisa Erdman is based on his interpretation of his patient's creative output, the stories contained in her poem ("Don Giovanni"), the prose piece that seems to be an expanded version of the poem, and her accounts of her dreams. The remainder of the novel tests the accuracy of Freud's reading of Lisa's writing and thereby of Lisa's life.
As is the case with Russian doll works generally, the structure and content of the novel are inextricable. In *The White Hotel* each new section seems to clarify and expand on the preceding one. The hallucinatory quality of "Don Giovanni" becomes somewhat more coherent as characters are identified and events preceding the stay at the hotel are detailed in "The Gastein Journal." This second section provides a context for the first text, the poem. Still, questions remain, and the surreal quality of the poem carries into the prose version: the "breast flying through the yew trees" and the heroine's generosity in providing breast milk with dinner still need explaining.

The third section, Freud's case history of "Frau Anna G.," expands our perspective by supplying facts about the author of the first two parts and the circumstances of their composition. The "analysis" of psychoanalysis is here largely a matter of literary interpretation. Not until she gives him the complete text of a dream does he begin to make real progress, despite the wealth of information he elicits about her childhood. Only when she returns from Gastein does Freud ask her to "try to write down her impressions" (p. 131), to which request she responds with the poem written between the lines of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. To his further request for "her own analysis of the material she had produced" (p. 133) she answers with the prose journal. When he reads the two, he "began to glimpse the meaning behind the garish mask" (p. 133). Her literary work is therefore crucial to his analysis, as Freud himself acknowledges: "It might teach us everything, if we were only in a
position to make everything out" (p. 134). Her memories and the
dreams are illuminated for Freud by the poem and the journal. Anna
G's unacknowledged homosexual desires, her mother's affair with her
uncle, and her mother's death in a hotel fire, all come out in
analysis, prompted by the Imagery of the poem and journal. Finally,
Freud ends their sessions: "I told her I thought she was cured of
everything but life, so to speak. This acceptance of the unalterable
past owed much to the serenity of Gastlein and the subsequent writing
of her 'journal': an interesting example of the unconscious
preparing the psyche for the eventual release of repressed Ideas into
consciousness" (p. 165).

Freud seems to have made sense of her literary productions. The
symbolism of the unconscious—as Freud says, "the repressed idea
creates its own apt symbol" (p. 115)—has been read and interpreted by
the original Freudian critic with great skill. Anna is reluctant to
accept his conviction of her latent homosexuality, but that is not an
easy fact for many people to accept, considering the stigma attached
to homosexuality, even now. Freud's interpretation of the two texts
which make up D.M. Thomas's Inner Story provides a second context, a
rational one, that explains and thereby subsumes the journal which
has itself provided a context for the poem. This is a Russian doll
novel in which each section nestles inside the next, which itself
nestles inside the next. Freud appears, however, to have written the
last word on those texts of Anna's; anything that follows we would
expect to be a postscript, showing us Anna's return to a normal life.
As it happens, Freud's case history ends slightly past the halfway point in the book. The section that follows the case history reveals Anna's true identity and recounts the events of her middle age. Her psychoanalysis is seen in this section not as the most important fact of her life but as a phase, a stage during which she has learned about herself, but through which she has passed. Freud's interpretation is subsumed, to a certain extent, by Lisa Erdman's biography. There appears to be much more to discover about Lisa as the book continues.

Freud's interpretation of Lisa's writing, which has led to his diagnosis and treatment of what he sees as her hysterical symptoms, does not account for all his data on her. Furthermore, it discounts an alternative explanation without giving it its due. Of course, as every critic knows, texts often have loose ends that cannot be tied up as neatly as one would like. Still, an interpretation need not necessarily be exhaustive to be valid and therefore of use to other readers. Freud addresses this fact of life for all interpreters: "No analysis is ever complete; the hysterias have more roots than a tree" (p. 164). One detail Freud cannot account for is the specificity of Anna's pains, mysteriously confined to her left breast and ovary: "The hysterics will tend to describe his pain indefinitely, and will tend to respond to stimulation of the painful part rather with an expression of pleasure than pain" (p. 104). He guesses later that "the left-sidedness arose from a memory that was never brought to the surface" (p. 164), but he cannot satisfactorily explain the reasons her symptoms do not follow the usual pattern.
Freud also mentions his inability to explain her short-lived mirror phobia—another loose end.

Lisa Erdman demonstrates to Freud her gift of "second sight," both during her analysis and later in her letters, but Freud never considers the possible link between this gift and the meaning of her writings and dreams. She sees her dream about the father who receives a telegram announcing his daughter's death as a prophecy of the death of Freud's daughter. A letter Freud receives from Lisa informs him that, being "cursed with what is called second sight," she "was half convinced that the man who received the telegram was you" (p. 129). However, Freud interprets it as a dream about news of her own death reaching her father. Freud admits later to a belief in telepathy, but never takes seriously her ability to predict his future or her own. He explains away the possibility that she really foresaw his daughter's death in her dream: "It seems plausible that the patient's sensitive mind discerned in me anxieties, much below the level of consciousness, over [my] daughter" (p. 129). In short, telepathy yes, prophecy no.

Freud therefore refuses to consider the poem and journal as prophecies. Anna's fear of motherhood is based on the belief that something terrible will happen if she has children. Freud takes her fear of motherhood as a symptom, and he analyzes her texts as well as her memories and dreams in order to discover its underlying cause not in the future but in her past.

Following the pattern of every new section subsuming the one before it, the story of Lisa's middle age, ending with her move to
Russia and marriage to Victor Berenstein, gives us a new perspective on Lisa Erdman. Freud changes her name in his case history to protect her privacy, but the name change has other significance in the larger context of Thomas's novel, the sum of all these parts, in which we see Freud as a character as well as a reader and writer. The revelation of her real name in "The Health Resort" points to the fact that in Freud's case history we get a version of Lisa Erdman, a Lisa seen from Freud's psychoanalytical perspective. Freud's Lisa is Anna G., but there is more to her than Freud shows us in his account. In "The Health Resort" we see Lisa from another perspective, one not influenced by Freud's point of view. Some readers have remarked that the Lisa of "The Health Resort" is so different from the Lisa of "Frau Anna G." as not to be a consistent character. I agree that the difference exists, though I do not believe it to be a radical one, and that Thomas uses it to emphasize that Freud's reading is an interpretation of Lisa, not Lisa herself. One difference between a professional interpreter of texts and an amateur is that the former is a writer as well as a reader. And in creating his own text in response to hers, Freud is shaping our responses to Lisa's writing. His selection of detail, his choice of one explanation over another, and above all his commitment to the principles of psychoanalysis make Lisa to some degree a literary creation of his. He never claims to be writing biography; he is solving a problem, healing a sick woman. Anything irrelevant to that purpose he omits from his essay.

If we get Lisa according to Freud in "Frau Anna G.," through whose eyes do we see Lisa's life in "The Health Resort"? I think
they are Lisa's own. The story is told from a third-person point of view of the most limited kind; it is an account of Lisa Erdman's travels, thoughts and feelings that she might write in a diary that would sound very much like this. The style is very simple, even naive; we get no sense of an author's or narrator's presence in the story external to Lisa, commenting on her from the outside, as it were. A sentence like "Her two Russian companions vied with each other in expressing enthusiasm for their city" (p. 179), or to take another example, "Understandably the girl had been reserved and a little resentful; but she was passionately fond of music, and found the afternoons in Lisa's suite ... so interesting and instructive that she had shed her unfriendliness" (p. 195)—these flat, lifeless, unsophisticated sentences render Lisa's thoughts as she would think them, artlessly.

Lisa's idea of herself is different from Freud's; in its naivete and simplicity it may seem truer of Lisa now. Here we have her restored to normal functioning, an ordinary enough woman in middle age. Freud's parting assessment that she has been "cured of everything but life" seems an apt summary of Lisa's situation. The analysis is over, she feels better, and with marriage and a stepson to assuage her loneliness, we expect that she will live a happy life.

However, "The Health Resort" is more than a clumsy postscript to Freud's more carefully crafted case history. The task of reading and interpretation here passes to readers of Thomas's readers; Freud's reading begins to be subsumed in ours. Apart from the three letters from him, one of which is only summarized, Freud is no longer present
to interpret her life as it progresses—he does not "read" her anymore. But as readers of Thomas's book, we continue to formulate hypotheses about the significance of the events of Lisa's life as it continues. Now we gather data and analyze it, try to diagnose her continuing pains and find a coherent pattern that rationalizes her life. In the course of our reading of "The Health Resort," the material in Freud's case study and his letters become sources of data for us, part of the text we are reading, his text subsumed in our continuing work of interpreting Thomas's book. We then evaluate Freud's interpretation in the light of what we know that he does not, become revisionists, or at the very least metacritics.

In "The Health Resort," new information about Lisa's life comes to light that bears on our reading of the two original texts that constitute the Inner story analyzed by Freud in his case study. The section begins with a journey by train to a new life that resembles in some particulars the journey to the White Hotel. In both Lisa speaks with a young man who is smoking. She is surprised that the train makes a stop "at a tiny Tyrolean village" (p. 172) that resembles the "small, quiet station in the middle of the great plain" (p. 38) in her journal; at the station she is also surprised by the number of people who get on the train in "The Health Resort" and off the train in her journal. In both cases she thinks of pregnancy: In the Gastein journal she tells the young man he may open a window, but she does not want to become pregnant. In the later story she notices that people who board the train all wear so much clothing that they appear pregnant.
The parallels here—the first of many between this section and the earlier journal—establish the journey by train as a motif that links Lisa's "art" to her life. We begin to wonder why D.M. Thomas repeats the train journey. The novel contains Freud at this point by making him another of its characters; the train motif exists as part of a literary creation controlled and understood not by Sigmund Freud but by the creator of this fictionalized Freud.\textsuperscript{21} There are other patterns of which we become aware in this section: the emphasis on Lisa's Jewish heritage is missing in the earlier sections. Lisa shares previously witheld information on the incident in her youth which involved, according to her original account, being frightened by some young sailors who seemed to resent her social status, but which we now find was actually much worse: some sailors who worked for her father "reviled me for being Jewish" (p. 220). To show her how they felt about Jews, the sailors "spat on me, threatened to burn my breasts with their cigarettes, used vile language [and] forced me to commit acts of oral sex with them," with the result that "from that time I haven't found it easy to admit to my Jewish blood" (p. 221). This omission distorts Freud's manuscript to some degree, since Lisa attributes her asthma to self-disgust at the oral sex she was subjected to, and since her difficulties with her father have to do with blaming him for making her a Jew (her mother is not Jewish). Freud chooses not to revise his case history, replying to her letter containing this information that "a postscript in which your later reservations are presented and discussed" (p. 230) could be appended to his text, but he does not follow through.
To him her Jewish background is evidently not very important. As George Levine remarks, Freud's analysis "is clever, if not brilliant, but its function in the narrative is precisely not to be adequate."22

Another revelation in that same letter also concerns Lisa's Jewish identity. She has mentioned to Freud that her husband's family did not like Jews, but their anti-Semitism was worse than what she has led Freud to believe. She reveals in the letter that she had to lie to him about her Jewish background, which "upset me dreadfully"; more important, it affected her sexual relations with her husband and her reaction to her memory of her mother's affair with her uncle, two elements of her history that are crucial to Freud's interpretation. If she is not her father's child, a possibility raised by the summer-house incident, "I wasn't Jewish and I could live with my husband, and get pregnant, with a clear conscience!" (p. 224). Thus Lisa leads us to an alternative explanation of her fear of childbirth that has nothing to do with homosexuality, though it does relate to her mother. She re-interprets her experience herself, declaring that Freud "made me become fascinated by my mother's sin, and I am forever grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to delve into it," but she rejects it as the key to her pains in breast and ovary: "It made me unhappy, but not ill" (p. 226), she tells Freud.

Thomas's structure requires that each document we have already read be re-introduced in the following section and evaluated in its new context. Lisa gives Freud an opportunity to revise his case
study before publishing it, but as we know from having read it, he
does not append to it her reservations or revise it. The reason he
gives for keeping the manuscript intact, "I shall feel compelled to
make the point that the physician has to trust his patient" (p. 230),
hints that he trusts her first account, not her revision, believing
perhaps that in her extreme suffering she was more likely to have
told the truth than she is at this later, healthier time. But as
readers we have no reason to discount her version, and we have no
particular reason to reject her prophetic gift and her Jewishness at
her valuation instead of his.

Lisa's pains have not stopped with the end of her analysis: they
recur with greatest intensity at the prospect of marrying Victor and
becoming a stepmother. She hallucinates; "Her pains were back in
full force; she could hardly breathe" (p. 241). Victor is Jewish,
"The political news everywhere was terrible, and it looked as if
worse was to come" (p. 241), and we know what is in store for
European Jews as Freud and Lisa cannot. When in the penultimate
section, "The Sleeping Carriage," Lisa's poem and journal revealed
themselves as symbolic prophecies, we understand that in her twenties
she has been suffering pains that have yet to be inflicted, that the
imagery of mass death by falling (into the mass grave) and by burial
in a landslide (under the bodies of the other victims at Babi Yar),
the black cat (her friend's pet) eluded satisfactory analysis by
Freud because he read her writing as a manifestation of unconscious
fears and desires rather than as prophecy. In a sense, the
misreading is a result of confusion over genre—a dream story must be
analyzed by different means than a symbolic prophecy. The misreading also results from Freud's perspective as an analyst of the individual psyche, not an interpreter of world political trends. His Jewishness does not seem very important to him as he analyzes her, just as her Jewishness does not seem at the time to matter to Lisa. But it does matter.

At the end of "The Sleeping Carriage," we find ourselves at a point similar to the one we occupied at the end of Freud's case study: now we understand Lisa's texts. Now we know how Thomas has used the train motif, we know why he emphasizes Lisa's Jewish heritage, and how sex and death come together horribly at the end of a bayonet. This "Interpretation" has the authority of fact, the only real test of a prophecy. This time we can be sure, it would seem, that we know the real meaning of Lisa's stay at the White Hotel.

Yet the question of a final reading of the inner story, Lisa's texts, is not to be settled by merely replacing Freud's interpretation with "The Sleeping Carriage." The pattern of one section providing a new context that explains and supersedes the preceding context complements another pattern in this novel which binds the narrative sections into a single novel. Each section repeats the same motifs, so we are reminded by a theme or incident in, say, "The Health Resort," of something similar in "The Gasteln Journal." These are not always part of the ongoing work of interpreting Lisa's illness, do not necessarily explain the previous imagery, but establish a metaphor of the human psyche as a gem with numerous facets.
The train journey motif already mentioned is an example: Lisa begins "The Gastein Journal" with a seduction on a train, tells Freud she took a train from Odessa to St. Petersburg to begin her career, travels to Milan from Vienna on a train in "The Health Resort," and goes to the station in Klev hoping she will be taken to Palestine. Another theme appearing in each section in addition to the journey to a new life is that of the relations between parents, including surrogate parents, and their children: Lisa and her Russian friend, Lisa and her aunt, Lisa and Madame Cottin, Lisa and her understudy, Freud and his daughter, Lisa and Kolya, and finally Dina Pronicheva and Motya. Some of these relationships, like some of these train trips, occur in Lisa's texts, but others happen in her life, created not by Lisa but by Thomas. These themes unify the sections into a single novel made up of all these parts as the reader compares them, considering them all together simultaneously, not just one after the other. In other words, of the several perspectives from which we see Lisa, that of her own unconscious, of her analyst, of herself, of her killers, no one of them negates any of the others: they all contain part of the truth about her. Each section provides another context for what has gone before, enlarges our sense of the possibilities in interpreting Lisa's texts. In fact, we begin by trying to interpret the poem, then the journal, then the conditions of her past and present that have led her to write the first two, then Freud's Interpretation in the light of her revised account of her childhood. Finally, we interpret her life in terms of the manner of her death. At the same time, we are interpreting Thomas's novel: what is its
vision of the human soul, of twentieth-century history, of love and death? That interpretation takes into account both the pattern in which each section forces a re-evaluation of the last and the pattern in which each section provides an equally valid perspective on Lisa's life.

At the end of "The Sleeping Carriage" the most important feature of Lisa's identity is her Jewishness. Her place in the history of Europe seems to give us the meaning of her poems and define the significance of Thomas's novel; in this view, The White Hotel is a Holocaust novel. But according to the second pattern outlined above, there is no one way of looking at Lisa that is valid all by itself. This is confirmed in the final section, in a place that is a combination of heaven and Palestine, where Lisa reconciles with her mother, the one person whom Freud has helped her to understand, the key to his analysis. In this final section Lisa's identity as a Jew (in Palestine) is co-equal with her identity as her mother's daughter.23

Thomas's multiple perspectives provide an answer to the question of Lisa's identity. Lisa, Thomas tells us, is but one of "A quarter of a million white hotels in Babi Yar" (p. 295). We read her now as a woman formed by a variety of influences, both personal and political. She cannot be accurately understood if any of the perspectives is excluded. Therefore, her texts must be read as keys to her psyche and as a prophecy of the destiny of European Jews. Freud's psychoanalytical interpretation does not take into account her background as a Jew. The section in which her texts are
fulfilled as historical prophecies does not highlight the aspects of Lisa's individual history that loom so large for Freud. Freud's interpretation of Lisa's imagined stay at the White Hotel is subsumed in a larger context not because it is wrong but because it is incomplete. But the literal fulfillment of her prophecy is also incomplete. In that last section so many readers of the novel dislike, the location of heaven in Palestine and the presence of Vaska the cat keep before us the fact that Lisa Erdman is dead because her stepson is Jewish. The meeting with her mother reminds us of Freud's role in helping Lisa to understand her mother's importance in her life.

Freud writes in his last letter to Lisa, quoting Heraclitus, "The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored." Freud adds, "It is not altogether true, I think, but success must depend on a fair harbour opening in the cliffs" (p. 231). Her texts provide the fair harbor; Freud sails in, reading them shrewdly and effectively. We read Freud's interpretation and Lisa's fate; we come away with an understanding of those texts that comprehends the psychoanalytical, biographical, and historical perspectives, all of which must be taken into account in producing a satisfactorily exhaustive analysis of Lisa's texts and Thomas's novel. Thus the dignity of the human soul, the triumph of love over death that is Thomas's theme in The White Hotel.

The White Hotel also conveys the importance of reading as interpretation. We continue Freud's work of interpretation of texts as we read the sections of the novel and analyze them as the sum of
those parts. The document Freud produces is a text in its own right with Lisa as a character at its center. It is a fiction that tells the truth, as do Lisa's texts, as does The White Hotel itself. Reading imaginative literature as a way of understanding the truth of the past and the future, personal and political, is presented here as a valid and truth-loving enterprise.

Charles Knibote is the most famous reader in modern literature because of his hilariously idiosyncratic misreading of John Shade's poem "Pale Fire." To Knibote's intense disappointment, the poem does not include the adventures of the deposed King of Zembla, as Knibote has expected, but never mind; Knibote can use his commentary to tell that story himself, finding references to Zembla in the unlikeliest of Shade's poetic nooks and crannies. Nabokov's readers laugh at Knibote's wild commentary, of course, and at the parody of critical reading and writing manifested in that commentary. But as Robert Alter remarks, "Pale Fire is of course both a satire and a parody, but to see it only as that is drastically to reduce its real scope."24

As in The White Hotel, inner and outer stories in Pale Fire are arranged consecutively; Nabokov's readers encounter Shade's poem, then Knibote's commentary. Readers first experience the poem with only the frame of Knibote's "Forward," forming their own opinions, then read Knibote's interpretation.25 Freud's interpretation of Lisa's texts is acute and convincing, but we begin to wonder if Nabokov's interpreter is some sort of lunatic before we finish even
the first page of his commentary, which mentions a Zemblan bird and refers to King Charles and his would-be assassin. As a reader, Kinbote suffers by comparison with Freud. If we cannot take Kinbote's reading as seriously as he would like, what are we to make of it? A great deal, in my opinion. The Russian doll form allows Nabokov to lead his readers to consider the nature of Kinbote's relation to Shade's text, the contrasts and similarities between writer and reader, and thus, ultimately, the relation of Imagination to art and reality. Demented as he is, Kinbote's presence is essential to the meaning of Nabokov's novel. To understand Pale Fire, we must interpret the function of the internal interpreter of "Pale Fire," Charles Kinbote.

Kinbote's reputation as a misreader overlooks his contributions as a critic, albeit a very unprofessional one. We need not share his conclusions about the poem to benefit from the background information Kinbote gives us. Like Thomas's Freud, who tells us about the writer of the poem and the journal in The White Hotel, Kinbote has written notes that are helpful when they yield biographical information that provides a context for some of the poet's themes. We learn more about Shade's agnosticism, we get details of his daughter's short life, we watch him as he composes the poem itself, hear him refer to the toy associated with his childhood trances as "memento mori" preserved in his basement. Kinbote also proves helpful in defining some of those obscure words of which Nabokov is so fond, including butterfly genera, "Iridule" in line 109, and "lemniscate" in line 137. Moreover, Kinbote's linguistic facility qualifies him to
translate French puns in lines 501 and 502. Finally, Kinbote facilitates a fuller appreciation of the text by noting details of technique, such as "the nice response to line 312" (p. 218) in line 475; Shade's use of a poem by Goethe, down to the duplication of the rhythm, in lines 653-64; "the 'system' and 'stem' interplay" (p. 253) in lines 704-07; and the "contrapuntal pyrotechnics" (p. 254) of Shade's diction in lines 734-35. Kinbote may be a crackpot, but there are too many examples of lucid observation to justify a charge of absolute critical ineptitude.

On the other hand, Kinbote's peculiar form of dementia is evident in his propensity for "reading In." Although he tells us near the end how disappointed he was on first reading "Pale Fire" to discover that it was not what he had expected, he will not admit defeat: "My commentary on this poem . . . represents an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me" (p. 297). So he insists on finding such hints in the poem, clues only he understands that Shade's poem is in some way a response to Kinbote's urging him to tell Zembla's story. He attributes the faintness of Zembla's traces to the influence of Sybil Shade, not to her husband's indifference.

Kinbote's notes make it clear that he is not to be relied on as a commentator. In themselves they do not violate or spoil the poem; we soon learn to distinguish the Zemblan information from the useful backgrounds he provides despite his skewed vision. Nabokov forces us to read Kinbote mistrustfully in order to allow us to see the difference between a poet and a madman. Kinbote is unable to draw a
reader into his vision of the world to the degree Shade can because
we are always on guard against his untrustworthy account of things.
What is more irritating about Kinbote's commentary is his
temperament, which has more of an influence on a reader's judgment of
the critical acumen than does the Zembla material he inserts, which
seems at worst irrelevant and at best quite diverting. Kinbote's
personality produces comments that reveal his basic misreading of
Shade's feelings. John Shade loves his wife and daughter; seeing
them through his eyes, sharing his tenderness and pain, we appreciate
the depth of feeling among the members of that family. Kinbote's
attitude toward mother and daughter is insensitive and unfair. One
resents Kinbote's distaste for the necessity of recounting the
biographical details of Hazel Shade's life: "a commentator's
obligations cannot be shirked, however dull the information he must
collect and convey" (p. 164). As for Sybil, he treats her as a rival
for Shade's affection and attention, accuses her of trying to purge
Shade's final poem of references to Zembla, and wishes Shade had
omitted the "embarrassing intimacies" (p. 174) that follow line 275.
These lines celebrate the joys of middle aged conjugal affection, the
sorts of love that requires mutual acceptance of human imperfections.
Kinbote's preference for sterile relationships with young boys
renders him incapable of understanding Shade's emotions. Kinbote
dislikes most people, who heartily reciprocate, but Shade gets along
with everyone, even his difficult voyeur of a neighbor. Kinbote's
insensitivity to Shade's feelings make his readers dislike and
distrust him as a reader of Shade's poem.
After his habit of "reading in" and his emotional limitations, Kinbote's third critical fault is his lack of objectivity in regard to the poem and to himself. His peculiar blindness allows for Nabokov's comic effects at Kinbote's expense. Kinbote is an object of ridicule in large part because he never understands how ridiculous he looks to others. Kinbote, unlike Shade, cannot distinguish between what he wants to be true—about himself, about Shade, about "Pale Fire"—and what is objectively true. This failing accounts for the lack of consistent control over his tendency to read into any mention of royalty and "Tanagra dust" vague references to his Zemblan saga. Because of the lunacy apparent in his self-absorbed solipsism, Kinbote unwittingly "lets the reader perceive his insanity, egocentrism, self-deception, homosexuality, and complete lack of control." A good critic helps a reader to see what exists in the poem, not what he wishes were there. Because of his delusions of grandeur, Kinbote's comments, if we took them seriously, would distort rather than enhance Shade's creation. But as Sprowles points out, Nabokov sees to it that we discount Kinbote's conspiracy theories and evaluate his Zemblan saga as the fantasy it is.

This work is more than the poem plus commentary it purports to be: it is a Russian doll novel, containing two autonomous imaginative creations. Once we comprehend Kinbote's perspective on Shade's poem, we read the story of the reign of Charles the Beloved as a story in its own right. Kinbote the reader is also Kinbote the writer. Kinbote's commentary contains his reflections, and Shade's, on the relation of art to life that comments, however inadvertently
on Kinbote's part, on literary creations in general. This aspect of Kinbote's notes mitigates his failings as a critic. Nabokov has juxtaposed these two writers' texts in order to highlight the similarities and differences of their approaches to art and life; each text serves as a commentary on the other. Julian Moynahan's assessment of Kinbote as Shade's "ideal editor, a fellow artist," is an acknowledgement that Kinbote's peculiar misreading ironically helps us as readers to interpret Shade's poem: "there is a sense, only half absurd, in which Kinbote's is a great scholarly commentary." Page Stegner agrees: "Kinbote, crazy as he may be, has actually understood Shade's poem." That is an overstatement, but Kinbote does manage to produce a useful commentary in spite of his delusions, and in a more important sense because of them: they give us a story that comments on the same themes handled in Shade's poem, using many of the same images, with mirrors prominent among them, appropriately enough.

Shade's poem, from its famous first line to its last (or next to last), "I am the shadow of the waxwing slain," is a meditation on death: the death of his daughter, the memory of youthful epiphanies that felt like death but did not obliterate consciousness, and his own experience of dying and being revived are all considered here. One detail of his short stay on the other side, a vision of a fountain, seems to have been shared by a woman who came back from death. But he discovers that it was a mountain she saw, not a fountain: "Life Everlasting--based on a misprint!" (line 803, p.
Thinking about the misprint, he comes to a conclusion that expresses his attitude toward death, art, and immortality:

But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture: not the dream
But topsy-turvy coincidence
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of llink-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found

Death itself may mean merely annihilation, Shade knows, but coincidences like the one he has just discovered indicate that patterns of meaning may indeed exist in the universe. The patterns are immortal, even if he is not; as an artist, Shade understands that he is like the ones who create the universe. "It did not matter who they were" (1. 816, p. 63), he says of these mysterious world-makers, but only that he has glimpsed them "Making ornaments/ Of accidents and possibilities" (1. 829, p. 63). Like Kinbote, who in his role as critic is charged with seeing the patterns in a work of art, Shade can find patterns in the universe by examining seeming coincidences. Thus he returns from visiting his fellow traveler to the hereafter "convinced that I can grope/ My way to some--to some--'Yes, dear?' [Sybil says as he comes in] Faint hope" (1. 834, p.63). It is for him a faint hope, not a certainty.

Kinbote's belief in God admits of no such uncertainty; he is sure the universe is meaningful and that the soul is Immortal. As an artist, Shade creates patterns, but he knows that artistic patterns are not necessarily reflections of a "web of sense" in the world.
The waxing in the first line of his poem is slain because it mistakes a reflected sky for the real thing. Inside, looking out, Shade sees the room in which he sits duplicated in the glass and hung above the scene outside. But he knows the difference between reflection and reality as Kinbote does not. Kinbote's certainty that there are patterns in life as well as art comes from the same impulse that leads to his insistence that the poem contains oblique references to Zembla. Kinbote cannot tell the difference between fantasy and reality when his desires come into play. It is crucial that we as readers be able to distance ourselves from Kinbote, as we have been doing as we read his commentary: we can distinguish reality from fantasy as he cannot.

Kinbote's belief in literary patterns in which his readers do not believe serves as a comment on Shade's search for patterns and the skepticism that he never completely abandons. Even his last comment on meaning and immortality ends this way: "I'm reasonably sure that we survive/ And that my darling somewhere is alive" (11. 978-79, p. 69). He is "reasonably" sure, not certain, and Nabokov emphasizes the limits of such knowledge by having Shade compare this degree of certainty about immortality to his degree of certainty that he will wake the next morning, but as Kinbote tells us, he does not.

Shade understands the universal patterns through art: "if my private universe scans right,/ So does the verse of galaxies divine/ Which I suspect is an iambic line" (11. 874-76, p. 65). The subjectivity of this view, turning the rhythms of the stars into poetic scansion, demonstrates why art is so important in a discussion
of meaning, but reminds us that perhaps we believe in a hereafter because we need to, and therefore create it. But Shade's art does live on: his poem is born, delivered into the world only moments before he dies. Moynahan observes that "The poet vanishes into eternity by way of vanishing into his poem." Kinkbote urges the Zembla story on Shade because he wants it to live on: "Once transmuted by you into poetry," Kinkbote tells Shade, "the stuff will be true, and the people will come alive" (p. 214). When Shade fails to tell the story, Kinkbote produces an edition of the poem in order himself to give life to his Zembla. Both Kinkbote and Shade concern themselves with immortality, and both achieve some measure of it in art. In contrast to Shade's poem, Kinkbote's commentary contributes to our understanding of art and immortality in spite of its author's lack of awareness of the effect his work produces in an audience. We credit Shade's concern with immortality in a way we cannot credit Kinkbote's. In the novel Shade dies, but as Julia Bader remarks, "The artwork is not mortal."31

The manner of Shade's death seems to confirm his skepticism about the presence of an ordained "web of sense" in the universe. Kinkbote has argued that "once we deny a Higher Intelligence . . . we are bound to accept the unspeakably dreadful notion of Chance reaching into eternity" (p. 225). Reading between the lines of Kinkbote's account of Shade's murder, we discover that it is a senseless, accidental death, the killer having mistaken Shade for the judge who sent him to prison. To Kinkbote the killing makes a kind of sense: the killer is Gradus, come to shoot the King of Zembla. But Nabokov
undercuts both our vision of Shade's death as an accident and Kinbote's vision of it as the culmination of a plan. Shade takes his killer for a gardener with a wheelbarrow, the image of the toy associated with his childhood epiphany. Moynahan is right to say that Kinbote "delivers Shade to a death the elderly poet is fully and hungrily prepared for." So in the context of Nabokov's book, Shade's death seems to be evidence of the web of sense he seeks. On the other hand, the killing does not exactly fit Kinbote's delusion; "Gradus" shoots the wrong man, and as we know, the killer is himself insane. Shade happens to be in the line of fire as the result of chance, not a conspiracy. Both madmen, Kinbote and the killer, are mistaken. In the interplay of artistic reality and delusion we encounter two interdependent versions of Shade's death. Because of our intimacy with Kinbote's point of view, we get a fuller sense of the meaning and lack of meaning of Shade's death that comments on Shade's speculations in his poem. Kinbote's commentary deepens our awareness of the complicated connections between chance and ordained acts.

Kinbote reports an incident at a party that addresses the connection between illusion and delusion, art and madness. Shade says that a man "who thought he was God and began redirecting the trains was technically" not crazy but "a fellow poet." Kinbote adds, "We are all, in a sense, poets" (p. 238). A woman repeats Shade's words to Kinbote, while Shade himself remains silent. Was he joking, making witty party conversation, or does he think there is a meaningful affinity between the two? Kinbote hears the remark
second-hand and might get it wrong even if he heard it when Shade said it. Kinbote's commentary contains a fantasy that we can enjoy as a fiction, as his reply suggests he is capable of doing, but the conversation at the party brings up a question about madness and delusion as they relate to art, a question addressed by both writers in the novel.

Kinbote may be an artist, but if he is, he is a very different sort of artist from Shade because of his delusions. In its usual inadvertent and perverse way, Kinbote's commentary offers a perspective on Shade's poem that enriches our reading of it and shows us how, as in a hall of mirrors, Shade's poem comments on Kinbote's commentary.

One important difference between a poet like Shade and a madman like Kinbote concerns their degree of control over their stories. In the window of the first stanza of Canto One Shade sees himself reflected in the windowpane superimposed on the landscape seen through the window. Shade's vision transforms details and observations from reality into art but never forgets which is which. Kinbote's vision is limited by his Zemblan delusions. He cannot see himself or his world clearly, so he misreads Shade's behavior and his poem. Instead of transforming reality to show its truth in art, Kinbote distorts reality to reveal his own delusion. He cannot make us see things his way, as Shade can. We are always standing back, being reminded that Kinbote is a lunatic. Shade's poem means pretty much what he wants it to mean; he is the god of his poem. But Kinbote, a king without a country in his own fantasy, is out of
control in his "art" as well. We read Kinkbote's work the way Freud reads Lisa Erdman's poem, for what it reveals about the writer's obsessions and unconscious needs, assuming the creator of such documents has no more conscious, deliberate say in the shape of the story than does a dreamer over his or her dream. Page Stegner distinguishes "between the person who is in control of his escape from vulgarity, ignorance, and suffering, and the person who is not," the former "finding [his or her] immortal soul through artistic creation." Nabokov himself "possesses an artistic obsession, and is not possessed by it." Shade constructs an artifice to reveal the truth of his existence, whereas Kinkbote's artificial construct is a means of escape from inconvenient truths about his existence. Trying to run from reality, Kinkbote invents or adopts for himself an identity and a past that he confuses with reality. Ironically, by trying to disappear into this artifice, he reveals himself as he really is instead. His remark to Shade that his Zemblan story needs Shade's artistry to be true is an acknowledgement of this difference between the two.

The most striking image of Kinkbote's need to escape into art is the theater at the end of the secret passage King Charles discovers when he is imprisoned in the castle. Charles escapes from what is in the context of Kinkbote's fantasy the difficulties of his real life into a shrine to make-believe, the Royal Theater. At the end of the passage he encounters "a heavy black drapery" in his way, and as he looks for an opening, he is "physically reminded by his own movement of the comical, at first controlled, then frantic undulations of a
theatrical curtain through which a nervous actor tries vainly to pass" (p. 133). Indeed he finds a friend in the theater to aid him in his escape from the revolutionaries, the scheme involving play-acting and disguise. King Charles escapes from Zembla, but Charles Kinbote escapes into it, making it possible for him to avoid the sad and ugly facts of his actual life as an aging homosexual no longer attractive to young men, friendless, ridiculous, reduced to voyeurism, testing the patience of the only man who tolerates him, Shade.

For Kinbote, art is a realm completely apart from the mundane, the ordinary. Thus his alter ego must be a king, his consort forever beautiful, resisting the ravages of age. Shade's portrait of Sybil in lines 261-67, according to Kinbote, fits Queen Dlsa. The portrait "was idealized and stylized only in regard to the older woman; in regard to Queen Dlsa, as she was that afternoon on the blue terrace, it represented a plain unretouched likeness" (p. 207). I think that what he dislikes most about Sybil is that she has grown old in a way that he cannot admit Dlsa, idealized in his fantasy, ever will. Additional evidence of Kinbote's preference for art removed from life is his disapproval of the "weird form of trickery" practiced by the Zemblan trompe l'oeil painter Eystein: "among his decorations of wood or wool, gold or velvet, he would insert one which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint." To Kinbote, the technique has "something ignoble about it," because "reality" is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own
special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye" (p. 130).

In contrast, Shade's art is not a thing apart from reality. Painful as it is to remember his daughter's death, he does not use his art to escape from it but to come to terms with its significance. Shade's Sybil is not perfect by any means, but unlike Kinbote, Shade can love and celebrate in art the woman she is without having to idealize or distort her. Shade loves the things of this world so much that he would "turn down eternity" (l. 525) should it turn out not to encompass such ordinary and familiar things as "your gesture of dismay/ On running out of cigarettes" (ll. 529-30) and "the trail of silver slime/ Snails leave on flagstones" (ll. 531-32, p. 53). I do not mean to portray John Shade as a journalist or his poem as factual autobiography; it is an imaginative transmutation of reality of which Kinbote knows him to be capable. Shade selects, compresses, makes metaphors, employs images of duplication, of winter, of ornithology. His quest and ours as readers is for a truth behind or beyond the ordinary and mundane to be found in the magic of poetry or fiction.

In the contrast between Kinbote's disdain for daily life and Shade's tender embrace of it, readers' understanding and appreciation of Shade's skill is deepened. As is the case with the theme of immortality, Kinbote's commentary really does enhance the poem. But Nabokov does not contrast the two as artists to force us to take Shade's side against Kinbote. The interplay of text and commentary works to complicate our comprehension of the artistic impulse. As
Robert Alter remarks, Kinbote's Zemblan tale "has a kind of authority, and does not allow us to dismiss it as a 'mere' fiction." That is to say, the power of a fiction does not depend on grounding in historical or biographical fact. We know that Kinbote is a lunatic when it comes to Zembla, but we cannot help but find his story fascinating. We know that Nabokov created both writers and their works, but our awareness that he is neither a Frost nor a deranged voyeur does not lead us to reject his novel. The problem with Kinbote's story is not that it is "unreal" but that he is not sufficiently in control of his material to render it as a coherent work of art whose patterns tell a truth.

The presence of Kinbote in Pale Fire points up not only the poet in the madman but the madman in the poet. Zembla is for Kinbote a nearly ideal realm ruled by a nearly ideal king, under whose leadership "Harmony, indeed, was the reign's password" (p. 75). Still, what with the revolution, Zembla is no longer perfect. Shade himself, for all his talk about refusing a heaven because it might not be imperfect enough for him, has a passion for an ideal state, a timeless place, first discovered in his childhood trances and revived, so to speak, in his temporary death. Shade wants death, a realm more distant, fantastic, and exotic than Zembla. Moynahan observes that from his first line, Shade "casts his poem as a retrospection from the realm of death." It is not mad Kinbote who imagines dying from his confusion of illusion and reality but Shade who succumbs to "the false azure in the windowpane" (l. 2, p. 33), the "feligned remoteness in the windowpane" (l. 132, p. 37). In
the poem he imagines himself living on, flying "In the reflected sky" (l. 4, p. 33). This resemblance between the desires of Shade and Kinbote brings up an aspect of an artist's personality that sets him apart from the rest of us: he lives in this world but his imagination draws him to other realms. Shade wants to believe the patterns of art correspond to the patterns of reality because of his artist's "combinational delight" (l. 974, p. 69). He needs to believe in order, in beauty, in truth, just as Kinbote needs to believe in Zembla. The fact that Shade is sane does not prevent him from appreciating the charm of imagined worlds.

Robert Alter believes that this novel "tends to polarize the inherent tension between fiction and reality, then to make our perception shuttle between the poles," a quality he finds in self-conscious literature generally, a quality of much Russian doll fiction as well. Here Nabokov uses this shuttling between our reading of Shade's poem and our reading of Kinbote's commentary to demonstrate that an artist's life and work partake of both mundane and ideal realms, combining and thus deepening our awareness of both.

We encounter the mixing up of reality and fiction in Nabokov's ambiguous treatment of Zembla. We do not know how real Zembla is in the (fictional) context of the novel. Zembla is mentioned once in the 937th line of Shade's poem, the text of which I take to be his without emendation by Kinbote (who confines his mostly spurious "variants" to his notes). Kinbote reports a conversation among the faculty about his resemblance to the Zemblan king. Has he invented the entire conversation? We do not think it strange that there is no
such American state as Utopia, but whose creation is Zembla, Kinbote's or Nabokov's? Like the mention of hurricane Lolita in "Pale Fire," for which Kinbote can find no evidence in weather reports, this particular question of who created what in Pale Fire serves to remind us that the work itself, all of it, is a figment of Nabokov's imagination. The Russian doll form encourages a reader to believe one of the stories is real and the other more obviously an artifice. Nabokov intrudes on this illusion to point out that reading fiction means accepting lies as facts for the time being. In the critic Kinbote we have a narrator in the habit of lying to us, in the pejorative sense of the word. Nabokov makes us aware of ourselves as readers by giving us a detail whose degree of fictionality in the context of the novel cannot be pinned down. As we read, our assessment of the reality of Zembla for the characters of Pale Fire is necessarily provisional, but further references to the place never satisfactorily or consistently explain whether Charles XII is the imaginary king of Kinbote's imaginary country or the imaginary king of a country Nabokov imagines and makes real for all the people in his novel, the way Lichtenstein is real for me. The result of this deliberate confusion of the reader is to make us understand that the artists in the novel have the same relations to their creations as Nabokov to his.

Because of the similarities between Shade and Kinbote, and because of the way their works fit together, some critics have tried to identify one or the other of the authors in the novel as the fictional author of both works. Julia Bader and Andrew Field are two
who hold that Shade must have created Kinbote and the commentary as well as the poem. Field takes Page Stegner to task for asserting that Kinbote is the fictional author of the entire work. Grabes makes the case for each position, then concludes "that the relationship of the fictitious authors to one another cannot be ascertained with any amount of certainty and that there is room for differing interpretations." Grabes's conclusion is especially persuasive when one compares the evidence Field and Stegner offer for their opposite opinions. Field believes that "an insane man who invents a perfectly sane character is also an artist, but ipso facto no longer insane in the way that Kinbote is." But as Stegner points out, "If Kinbote is able to dream up an Arabian Nights tale of his royal life in Onhava and populate that capital city with several dozen fantastic, though imaginary, personalities, he is certainly able to dream up John and Sybil and their daughter Hazel, and create a fictitious poem as well." And how can we be sure that his madness would not allow him to imagine a sane person?

Peter Rabinowitz ends his provocative classification of audiences with an exploration of the "who wrote Pale Fire" question. He claims that the difficulty arises from our inability to sort out which of the narratives is to be believed: "as soon as we try to examine Shade and Kinbote in any detail, we are confronted by those plaguing problems of 'fact' which characterize the Pale Fire controversy." According to Rabinowitz, the "narrative audience" accepts a novel for what it claims to be, in this case a poem accompanied by a complete critical apparatus. But when the narrative audience tries to
answer questions of fact—especially "Does Zembla exist in the world of the novel?"—it cannot decide what to believe, and that leads to insoluble problems of interpretation, for when it comes to such facts, "The narrative audience cannot be undecided on these questions." Rabinowitz makes helpful distinctions between audiences, but he is wrong to insist that Nabokov settle the question of Zembla's reality in the novel. Nabokov's ambiguity is intentional: he means to confuse the "narrative audience." When critics attempt to prove that Zembla is or is not real to the characters in both stories, or that either Shade or Kinbote invented the other, they are responding to that confusion. The confusion is meant to remind us that the only author of Zembla's history and of the poem and commentary is Vladimir Nabokov himself. Thus I agree with Alden Sprowles: "the necessity for having a 'master thumbprint' beyond Nabokov is unproved." Indeed our awareness of Nabokov's presence in the novel as the god of this fiction grows out of the Russian doll form and the emphasis on reading and misreading, illusion and delusion it makes possible. The patterns unite the narratives and thus the narrators in spite of their differences because Nabokov means to show us the complexity of artistic creation. Our response to the patterns we find is to realize that these patterns are created not by Kinbote's God or Shade's "them" but by an artist who resembles both. Reading the parts of the book, connecting them, as we do with all four books discussed in this chapter, we see the novel whole, and when we do we encounter the author, creator of the whole. In accordance with the
ambiguities of reality and illusion explored in the book, we discover that Nabokov's position entails its own ambiguity. The patterns he creates out of coincidence or conspiracy are features of his character's reality, which corresponds to his readers' reality. But he can command only a fictional world, not the real one that Nabokov the person shares with his readers. Gradus comes for him too, he tells us at the end. So we are left with no final answer to the question of whether the order and sense we crave exist objectively apart from what we create or are merely necessary and lovely delusions, like Zembla. Although Nabokov cannot settle this question for us, he can and does define the roles of artists and raise the questions of life and death they illuminate. The Russian doll technique here and in the other three novels provides a double perspective that makes us aware of ourselves as readers and of Kinbote's paradoxical effectiveness as an editor. The necessity to interpret an interpretation makes Pale Fire and The White Hotel richer and more complex works than they would be if they contained the texts to be read without a record of the reading.
Footnotes


4 Mary McCarthy's review of the book indicates that she distinguished Calvino's "you" from herself and other actual readers from the outset, whereas Russell Davies appears to have believed Calvino's "you" did indeed refer to himself and Calvino's other readers until somewhere in chapter two. See Mary McCarthy, "Acts of Love," rev. of If on a winter's night a traveler, New York Review of Books, 25 June 1981, pp. 3-4, 6; and Russell Davies, "The Writer Versus the Reader," rev. of If on a winter's night a traveler, TLS, 10 July 1981, pp. 773-74.


6 I am not counting the fragment of a story told to the Reader on pp. 257-58 as part of the inner story.

For a detailed discussion of the ways in which Calvino parallels reading and sex in this novel, see McCarthy, p. 6.


In Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*, discussed in the next chapter, the critics Moon and Birdboot step onstage and are mistaken for characters; they do get trapped in a fiction.


Gardner, "Learning from Disney and Dickens," p. 22.

Gardner, "Learning from Disney and Dickens," p. 22.


Morace, p. 140.

20 Of course Anna G.'s literary productions are not poetry or fiction of the usual sort, that is, carefully constructed and consciously controlled by an author. Be that as it may, my focus is on Freud as a reader, not on Anna G. as a writer. Freud seeks out patterns, coherent ideas, unifying themes; he explains the symbolism and accounts for the imagery of her work. In short, he interprets these works by much the same process and according to similar consistent critical principles as a professional reader, a critic.

21 See Kendall Walton, "How Remote Are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37 (1978), 11-23 for an exploration of the difference between a real person's status in a historical or fact-based piece of journalism and in a work of fiction.


23 It is impossible to identify the perspective from which this final section is narrated. Whose story is this? Having traced the use of fantasies through the novel, Levine describes the final section as "another, final, fantasy, but this time it is the novel's, not Elisabeth's alone"; this one is "steeped in reality" because "historical suffering remains" (p. 23). But what does it mean to say that the final section is "the novel's"? Does Thomas expect us to believe in an afterlife, or has he seriously misjudged our ability to
join what Rabinowitz calls the "narrative audience"? The final part of the novel seems a necessary part of Thomas's scheme of subsumption, but it raises questions that cannot be satisfactorily answered. The reader finishes the novel in puzzlement and some frustration, even if he or she acknowledges that the conclusion is Thomas's way of affirming the greater power of Eros over Thanatos.


25 In *Fictitious Biographies: Vladimir Nabokov's English Novels*, Studies in American Literature, Vol. 25 (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), H. Grubes offers a detailed analysis of the possible sequences in which the parts of *Pale Fire* may be read. He believes that our attitude toward Shade's and Kinbote's skill, and our decision as to which narrative should predominate, are affected by the sequence we choose. It seems to me, however, that whatever order we choose, Kinbote will reveal himself as a lunatic, and his reading will serve as exhibit A. As for the issue of whether "the commentary . . . has much more difficulty in asserting itself against the poem" (pp. 58-59) if we do not read the former before the poem and straight through, I do not think that matters. Because the commentary is inadequate as an aid to understanding the poem, we will begin to think of them as separate narratives as soon as we understand the commentary's shortcomings. Then the issue of one "asserting itself" against the other will give way to an attempt to understand why Nabokov has placed the poem and the story of Zembla In the same book,
an attempt not affected by the sequence in which the narratives are read.


30 Moynahan, p. 44.


32 Moynahan, p. 43.

33 Stegner, p. 133.

34 Alter, p. 193.

35 Moynahan, p. 44.

36 Alter, p. 193.


38 Grubes, p. 63.

39 Field, p. 317.
40 Stegner, p. 129.
41 Rabinowitz, p. 137.
42 Rabinowitz, p. 139.
43 Sprowles, p. 226.
III: DETACHED CHARACTERS IN THREE MODERN DRAMAS

When we watch a play, we assume that the characters will precipitate and sustain the action of the play; the shape of the play will depend on them. This is not just true of major characters: *Hamlet* needs the presence of minor characters, even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to carry the action of the play. But in some modern dramas the audience finds characters who stand in a very different relation to the plot of the plays onstage. Three such dramas are Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search of an Author* and two by Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *The Real Inspector Hound*. In these plays the six characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Moon and Birdboot, respectively, have a different status from that of characters in other plays and from other characters in their own plays. They are not integrated into the action—it goes on without their involvement or, in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, without their ever feeling anything but confused by and excluded from the plot going forward all around them. These outside characters in the three plays intrude on, or try to become part of, or want to affect the action of the plays in which they find themselves, but they do not belong in the plays in the same way as do characters who are contained by and integrated into the
action of the play. They share a detachment from the drama; to put it another way, these characters are presented to us as characters.

In each of the three dramas, the play-within-a-play device is used to establish these characters' exclusion from the action of the other characters. Each drama contains two plays, one consisting of the actions of the detached or excluded characters who stand outside the other play, be it the one the author never wrote for the six characters, *Hamlet*, or the bad murder mystery Moon and Burdboot have come to review. The other characters are enveloped by the context of the play in which they appear. Unlike the detached characters, these more traditionally conceived characters are always part of the play in which they appear, limited to it, unable to move back and forth between the realms of the two plays as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do, albeit great bewilderment.

Pirandello's six characters are aware of their status as characters without a play. The Father tells the Manager that "one is born to life in many forms," in his case as "a character in a play," but a play never written because "the author who created us alive no longer wished, or was no longer able, materially to put us into a work of art." When the six intrude on the rehearsal, they are mistaken for real people. But their existence is incomplete—note their "names," Son, Father, and Child—and abstract, nonetheless. Having sprung fully formed from the mind of this author, or as fully formed as they will ever be, they have knowledge of a past and of their present situation, but their existence cannot be fulfilled
until it is given shape in a drama. It is entirely appropriate that they appear onstage during a rehearsal: unlike actors and audiences, they can "live" only in a play in a theater. Their status as characters is underscored for us by the fact that as yet they inhabit no play. They have come to the theater in order to find a play in which they can fulfill their destinies. The Manager and actors attempt to oblige them.

The characters are distinguished from the actual people represented on the stage—the actors and Manager—by their lack of control over their "lives" and by their singular relation to time. The characters have been imagined by the author with certain characteristics which define them, whether they like it or not. The incident between the Father and the Step-Daughter at Madame Pace's establishment fills him with shame. He is dismayed that this action defines him in the play he is meant for. As Roger W. Oliver observes, "what he cannot accept... is having his entire identity represented by this one act, that he must always wear the mask of sensualist."² The Mother is doomed to suffer, the son to endure the company of the rest of the family. They are not free, as actual persons are, to change the conditions of their lives or the incidents of the play they carry within them. Furthermore, the six characters exist in an eternal present, forever re-enacting moments of their lives that torment them. As the Mother says, "It's taking place now. It happens all the time... I live and feel every minute of my torture," and the Father adds, "The eternal moment!" (p. 579). The drama they carry inside themselves can only be endlessly repeated.
The plight of the Son, of whom the Step-Daughter says, "he can't go away!" (p. 584) is the plight of them all. They cannot escape. The Boy and the Child will die over and over again, unable, like the other characters, to change or grow. The Father and Step-Daughter are caught in a shameful moment or recognition, but they cannot change their lines or their fates.

The characters' story is in many ways melodramatic, "a soap opera with the most expansive emotional assumptions," as Maurice Charnie describes it. And yet "we move gradually from disbelief to an awareness of their plight." Pirandello achieves this change of attitude in the audience on the stage—with the exception of the Manager—and in the theater by making it clear that melodramatic as it seems, the characters' story is serious and extremely painful to them. The detached characters suffer because they cannot be understood, because they are trapped, because they have no control over their destiny. They experience their suffering as genuine, and their two audiences—again with the exception of the Manager—come to empathize with them. They achieve an emotional reality for us in spite of their fictitious nature, just as integrated characters do. But in *Six Characters*, Pirandello can show us in the same play their artifice as detached Characters in the outer play and their compelling reality as "possible people" in the inner play that they carry inside them.

Pirandello's characters repeatedly point out that theatrical characters have a quality of truth unrelated to their artificuality: "Literature Indeed! This is life, this is passion!" (p. 565), the
Father insists to the Manager as he and the Step-Daughter recall the painful moment they have shared at the shop of Madame Pace. The actors and actresses, the Father urges, must bring the truth of the characters to life: "the actress who acts [Madame Pace] will be less true than this woman here, who is herself in person" (p. 573). Much as the characters need to be part of a play, they are dissatisfied with the distortion that a play involves. The theater distorts the reality of the characters' existence by changing their passion to something that can be contained on a stage.

The Manager "refuses to believe in their reality," as Roger Oliver points out. Oliver believes the central conflict of the play is between the Father and the Manager, who seems threatened by the characters, in particular the Father, the character who articulates their need for the play they want written to be true to their situation as they feel it. Oliver observes that the characters seek not so much a playwright, which the Manager is eager to be, but "a producer, someone who will provide them with the occasion and the proper setting to present their own drama." The Manager anticipates being in control of the inner play, so he rejects "the unfamiliar role of audience member [and] denies the authenticity of the performance he is forced to witness." The Russian doll structure of the play allows us to see that the Father and the Manager are both right and both wrong.

The Manager is right to insist that the characters leave acting to the actors. The characters are unfamiliar with the conventions of the theater. When the scene between the Step-Daughter and Madame
Pace begins, Pirandello's stage direction tells us "It has begun quietly, naturally, in a manner impossible for the stage." Because the actors, the on-stage audience, cannot understand what Madame Pace is saying, "their interest begins to wane" (p. 573). What we see in a play is not life but an artistic rendering of life. An audience knows that without thinking about it, but because they are not actors (or play-goers, apparently), the six characters do not understand that the distortions that artistic transformation entails are necessary in order to embody truth on a stage. As Frederick Lumley asserts, Six Characters shows us that "Perfect art can never be perfect reality; rather the more perfect the illusion the more removed it is from reality." The Father protests that the Characters' story as performed by the actors becomes "Something that is . . . that is theirs--and no longer ours" (p. 577), but the Manager is also correct when he tells the Father, "on the stage, you as yourself, cannot exist. The actor here acts you, and that's an end to it!" (p. 572).

The Father is wrong, then, to insist that the characters play themselves or that the actors portray their story exactly as they remember it. But the Manager is wrong to deny the emotional reality of the characters just because they do not inhabit the actual flesh-and-blood plane of existence where he and his actors exist. The terms of Lumley's statement above, "perfect art" and "perfect reality," declare that in a way the Manager refuses to acknowledge, the characters can become real for an audience. The actors and the
audience in the theater attest to that by their attention to the inner play.

Thus the play is a kind of debate about the nature of the theater. Oliver observes that "the theater's combination of the spontaneity of life with the formal restrictions of art suggests their interpenetration rather than their existence as dialectical opposites." This interpenetration is given dramatic form at the end of the play when the Boy shoots himself. The actors who have run to the spot where the Boy was hidden return with conflicting reports: "He's dead! dead!" some of them say, but others tell the Manager, "No, no, it's only make believe, it's only pretense!" (p. 586). An audience leaving a theater knows that what they have seen is both "real" because it is true to life, that is, compelling and convincing, and at the same time "only make believe."

Pirandello uses the outer play to show us that a play is an illusion produced by actors under "the formal restrictions of art" and the inner play to show us that a play also partakes of "the spontaneity of life." The characters have a legitimate claim on the attention of these theater professionals, the actors and the Manager, because actors portray characters. If their performances ring false, it is not the fault of theatrical convention but of the actors' lack of sensitivity to the actions and feelings of individuals like the characters. The central idea of Pirandello's play as a whole is that to be able to tell the truth, a play must include and integrate both the characters' requirement that it be faithful to life as it feels to them and that it transform life into art that generalizes,
clarifies, and finds order in experience. The characters and the
theatrical company need each other; the Russian doll device in the
play allows us to see that. Like Barth and Lessing, Pirandello
breaks his work into two parts in order to show how they go together.

Whereas the six characters' play has yet to be written, Tom
Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are detached from *Hamlet,*
probably the best known play in English. Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern do not share the six characters' awareness that they are
meant to be characters in a play, but of course the audience knows
their origin. As C. W. E. Bigsby has noted,9 Stoppard has
Guildenstern make oblique reference to the identity of their creator
in the course of his speculations on the workings of chance: "The
law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, has something to do
with the proposition that if six monkeys . . . If six monkeys were .
. ."10 But he has lost the thread before remembering that given time
and typewriters enough, the monkeys could create the complete works
of Shakespeare, including *Hamlet.* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
not without a play, but their ignorance of characters, events, and
motives in that play keep them outside it, detached in spite of their
continuing efforts to understand what it all means. As Guildenstern
puts it, "What a fine persecution—to be kept intrigued without ever
quite being enlightened" (p. 41), and later, "We act on scraps of
information . . . sitting half-remembered directions that we can
hardly separate from instinct" (p. 102). Whenever they are engaged
in conversation by Claudius, Hamlet, or other major
characters from Hamlet, they speak the lines Shakespeare wrote for them, in common with the Tragedians, who speak the words that were written for them. Then they try to puzzle out their parts in this play on the basis of the words they hear, but it is no use.

Every attempt to discover what they are doing in Hamlet—or more precisely, on the fringes of Hamlet—only renews their sense of their helpless, severely circumscribed, and marginal position. The few facts they can recall amount to precious little. When Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz to "remember the first thing that happened today," his friend summons up this scene: "pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters . . . . But then he called our names . . . . We were sent for . . . . a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons," which they obey quickly, "Fearful lest we come too late!!" (p. 19). But too late for what? They do not know, never really find out. They know Claudius wants them to pump Hamlet for information about the Prince's state of mind, they believe that they are supposed to be Hamlet's friends, and they are on a boat near the end. They have been given money by Claudius, but they seem not to know, until they read the letter they are to deliver to the English king, that they are to deliver Hamlet to his death. Typically for them in this play, Hamlet switches letters without their knowing, sealing their fates. They fear they are doomed—"Do you think death could possibly be a boat?" (p. 108), Rosencrantz asks—but cannot discover enough details of their situation to know why. Like it or not, and they do not, they cannot enter into Hamlet where the other characters belong.
It is as if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inhabit a world parallel to *Hamlet*, even overlapping, but not congruent with it. The two are trapped in this world of theirs, metaphorically represented in their conversation by a coffin, literally represented by the ship carrying them with Hamlet to England. The boat is comfortable for them because it gives them an excuse not to test the boundaries of their existence. As Guildenstern says, "I like the way they're--contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all--the question doesn't arise, because you're on a boat, aren't you? Boats are safe areas in the game of tag . . ." (p. 100).

Another feature of the realm they inhabit has to do with the laws of chance. Guildenstern grows uneasy when every coin they toss at the beginning comes up heads. Guildenstern's characteristically logical attempt to account for that collapses, as does every attempt he makes to depict their situation as explicable. Other attempts to predict or control their circumstances are equally unsuccessful: "As soon as we make a move they'll come pouring in from every side, shouting obscure instructions, confusing us with ridiculous remarks, messing us about from here to breakfast and getting our names wrong" (p. 85), Guildenstern complains. When the Player attempts to explain the goings-on at Elsinore, and Rosencrantz says hopefully, "It's beginning to make sense," Guildenstern tries to assert their control over events by ordering the player who has been moving off, not to leave: "From now on reason will prevail," he insists, and gives permission for the player to go: "pass!" But when Rosencrantz shouts into the wings "Next!" the stage direction tells us "no one
comes" (p. 69). In an interview, Stoppard summed up their situation, that "of these two guys who in Shakespeare's context don't really know what they're doing. The little they are told is mainly lies, and there's no reason to suppose that they ever find out why they are killed."  

Like the six characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist in relation to time in a different way from that of the other characters in Hamlet. They cannot recall their pasts, seem to have no memory of having become Hamlet's friends,¹² and aside from a sense of foreboding, cannot say what will happen to them. They hope the letter Claudius has given them for the English king will give a clue about what will happen to them when they reach England. One possibility Guildenstern considers as he tries to explain why so many coins have come up heads is that "time has stopped dead" (p. 16), but he dismisses that possibility. If that is not exactly true, it is clear that their movement forward in time has been affected, slowed down, Insolated. Their games are time-killers, but they seem to have a great deal more of it to kill than they had expected.

Critics such as William Babula, Normand Berlin, and Josef de Vos have remarked on the similarities between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Waiting for Godot.¹³ Like Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear, in de Vos's phrase, "to be lost in a senseless wheel-work in which they happen to be thrown." But as de Vos points out, the events going on around the two young men "are absurd to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are ignorant of their context, but not to the spectator." ¹⁴ The Russian
doll technique allows the theater audience to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's plight as it seems to them, but also to understand the meaning of the events in the inner play, Hamlet, as they cannot. That second perspective makes this play fundamentally different from Waiting for Godot, and not really an absurdist drama for the audience: we witness the confusion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about the goings-on at Elsinore, but we ourselves are not confused.

On the other hand, we may very well be confused about the relation of the outer play to the Inner. As Babula points out, Hamlet "abounds with references to acting, plays within plays, advice to actors, and reminders to the audience (as when Hamlet teases the 'old mole' in the 'cellarage') that they are watching a play."15 Hamlet has the role of avenger thrust upon him, and he finds Elsinore an inhospitable and sometimes confusing place to be; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have their roles thrust upon them, and they are always baffled by what they see and hear at Elsinore. Babula believes that Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern "struggle against the roles they must play," but Hamlet "manages to achieve some dignity within the limits of his role." The "three characters agree not to change the plot," even though there are moments when they could have escaped death.16

The problem with such comparisons of the characters in Stoppard's Inner and outer plays is that Hamlet's understanding of his situation is much greater than that of Stoppard's two minor characters. Hamlet's questions concern the veracity of the ghost, the motives of his uncle, his mother, Ophelia and Polonius. It seems to me that he
knows who he is in relation to these people--his is a quest for truth, not for identity. But Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know almost nothing about their situation, and they are so confused about their identity that they get their names wrong. Any comparison of Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must take these differences into account. The most important difference is that unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is able, within certain limits, to take charge of his situation. The most striking example is his use of the company of actors: he gives them extra lines, he offers advice on acting, and he presents the play in order to "catch the conscience" of his uncle. When he pretends to be mad, Hamlet takes on the role of deceiver, and as such he is able to manipulate others. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never achieve any control over their situation.

William E. Gruber sees the main difference between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their attitude toward responsibility. Whereas Hamlet "acknowledges human limitations" and "accepts an ambiguous world while yet believing in the need for human exertion at critical times," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern choose "to avoid human responsibility."\(^\text{17}\) He blames them particularly for their cowardice in not tearing up Claudius's letter, whose contents they discover on the voyage: "Given suddenly ample room and time to define their selves, the courtiers cannot swell to fit their new roles."\(^\text{18}\) Thus the play asserts the importance of personal responsibility by juxtaposing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's cowardice with Hamlet's heroism, according to Gruber.
Gruber's argument would be more convincing were it not for the fact that Hamlet is in a better position to understand, take charge of, and behave heroically in his play than are the two young men who find themselves on its fringes. This does not completely excuse Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from responsibility to behave decently once they discover the contents of the letter. (As it turns out, it is their own lives they sacrifice by their cowardice.) But Gruber chooses to minimize the difference between their situation and Hamlet's: because their world is absurd, it is very difficult for them to know how to behave. The absurdity lies not only in their ignorance of the significance of the action of Hamlet but in their lack of memory and the odds-defying behavior of the coins they toss. Nothing in their world makes any sense to them; disoriented as they are, I think it is unfair of Gruber to expect them to behave as if that letter from Claudius could make all the difference.

Stoppard juxtaposes Shakespeare's play world in Hamlet and the play world he himself creates for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in order to show us two kinds of confusion. Hamlet's situation is extremely difficult for him, but he knows his name, remembers his past, and seems to understand the significance of what is said and done in his presence (with the exception, perhaps, of an interval of genuine madness); Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never understand their situation. By means of that doubling of perspective that invites comparison between the protagonists of inner and outer plays, Stoppard has given us what Berlin calls "theater of criticism," but not exactly in his sense of the term. He thinks we act as critics
while the play is going on because "we are forced to contemplate the frozen state, the status quo, of the characters who carry their Shakespearean fates with them." I use the term to mean that Stoppard's inclusion of Hamlet allows us to compare Hamlet's difficulties to those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and thus to understand the world-view of each in terms of the other. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may be dressed like Elizabethan courtiers, but theirs is a modern situation, an existential dilemma. Finding themselves in an absurd and unfriendly universe, they seek meaning for their lives but find none. The choice they are given on the voyage—to betray Hamlet or destroy the letter—does matter, but to expect them to make it according to the assumptions operating in Hamlet's world is inappropriate. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stand outside a world where things make sense, the world of Hamlet. It is a world of the past, but they live in a version of the modern world like that of Beckett's Godot, where one must wait for answers that never come. The status of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the fringes of Hamlet emphasizes their detachment from the assumptions and certainties of that world. They can become caught up in Hamlet, and so, Stoppard's play tells us, can we in the audience. But they remain outside it. They die at the end, still unable to comprehend their fate.

Stoppard achieves another effect by means of the Russian doll device in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead: by emphasizing, as Pirandello does, the efforts of his detached characters to become part of a play, he shows us how we respond to art. When in Six
Characters the Father declares that he and the other five are "less real perhaps, but truer!" (p. 599) than flesh and blood people, he is telling the audience that the illusion of a play shows us truth which remains obscure in everyday life. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern want to become part of Hamlet because a play transforms the materials of ordinary, jumbled, complicated, often incomplete and incomprehensible experience. If they belonged to Hamlet, they would still die, but they would not feel lost and confused. Art is not life, as Guildenstern suggests in protesting the way the Tragedians specialize in stimulated death: "Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't death!" The player insists that a death of the sort they do is "the only kind they do believe" (p. 83). He goes on to report that an actor whose actual hanging was written into a performance "just wasn't convincing! It was impossible to suspend one's disbelief" because "he did nothing but cry all the time—right out of character—just stood there and cried . . . . Never again" (p. 84). A play looks like life, but it, like our characters, exists on another plane, and the playwrights draw our attention to the artifice that makes the difference between actors and persons. Why are we there, after all, sitting together in the dark, sorting out reality and illusion as we watch these plays? Perhaps because we need order and imaginative transformations of our own absurd, incomplete, confusing experience just like the characters we are watching.

In The Real Inspector Hound, Stoppard gives us for an inner play a hilariously inept murder mystery. The outer play focuses on two
critics, Moon and Birdboot, critics who are not on the stage, who pretend to be part of the audience in the theater, but are actually the only characters in the outer play. The two eat candy, form their judgments, and muse aloud, each more or less to himself, about personal concerns. Moon is a second-string critic who only reviews plays when the regular critic, Higgs, cannot attend, and Birdboot has been having affairs with actresses, one of whom is in the play they watch.

Stoppard flaunts the artifice of the inner play, the murder mystery, in two ways: first by showing us two members of "our" audience commenting on it, and also by exposing its creaky and hilariously clumsy machinery at every point. Exposition is handled as awkwardly as possible: the maid answers the phone, "Hello, the drawing-room of lady Muldoon's country residence one morning in early spring?"20 She turns on the radio just in time to hear an update on the murderer-on-the-moors story. The dialogue is hackneyed, the plot silly, the characters pure cardboard. We distinguish the inner play from the outer in degree of plausibility. Moon and Birdboot are silly and pretentious, to be sure, but very human in their thwarted desires and gassy pronouncements. When the phone rings onstage and Moon finally goes over the footlights to answer it,21 we understand the impulse and the embarrassment that results from giving in to it.

The situation of the two critics would seem to have little in common with that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the six characters. The critics are not characters without a play: they
know who they are and why they are there, just as we in the audience do. But all that changes when they step onto the stage. The telephone call, as Moon informs Birdboot, is from Myrtle Birdboot; she wants to speak to her husband. Before Birdboot can exit the stage and resume his status as audience member, an actress with whom he has become infatuated enters and involves him in the play. Presently Moon joins him on the stage, and in a few terrible moments they are both dead.

Of course this involvement in the play, this movement from spectator to character, comes as a shock. But Stoppard has constructed the two parts of his play along parallel lines, as he did in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The two women in the mystery play, Cynthia and Felicity, are wooed by Simon Gascoyne, who first loves Felicity and then loses his heart to Cynthia. Birdboot has been dallying with the actress who plays Felicity but switches his affections to the young woman playing Cynthia. The off-stage alliances between real people are echoed onstage in the relationships between actors in character. The mystery concerns the fate of Lord Muldoon, who may have been murdered when he disappeared years ago, and the intentions of Simon Gascoyne, who may be the murderer. Thoughts of murder are not far from Moon's mind, as it happens: he tells Birdboot, who is not listening, that he "must be waiting for Higgs to die" (p. 18) and admits, "Sometimes I dream that I've killed him" (p. 30). He wonders if the third-stringer Puckeridge feels the same about him.
The connections between the characters and the critics are reinforced when Simon Gascoyne and Birdboot react the same way to Cynthia Muldoon's first entrance, and when Simon on the phone and Birdboot responding to a comment of Moon's ask, "Who?" simultaneously. Jealousy motivates Moon to want Higgs dead and Felicity to threaten Simon's life.

It is the interweaving of the two plots that keeps Birdboot on the stage when Felicity speaks to him the same lines she has said to Simon. (Like Birdboot, Simon also answered the phone—Mrs. Birdboot asking for her husband—before his scene with Felicity began.) Birdboot assumes she refers to their relationship when the actress repeats the lines she spoke to Simon earlier. She behaves as a character here, though, not as an actress, calling Birdboot Simon, and after a time Birdboot does not correct her but accepts the role. He becomes a character in the inner play. Stoppard has said that the play is "about the dangers of wish-fulfillment." 22

Illusion becomes real for Moon, who has been trying to talk Birdboot off the stage, when Birdboot discovers that the man who has been found lying dead face-down on stage, and whose murder Inspector Hound has been investigating, is none other than Higgs. This discovery and a shot that kills Birdboot are enough to bring Moon onto the stage, where he takes the role of Hound and finds himself accusing Birdboot of the crime, only to have the other characters turn on him and accuse him of both murders. In a few moments he too is dead, killed by Puckeridge, who declares himself the long-lost Lord Muldoon and the Real Inspector Hound.
Moon and Birdboot have left their safe enough front-row seats in the audience to enter the stage and a play into which eerily, they fit easily, if not at all comfortably. This third-rate mystery play makes their dreams and nightmares real, but as characters, they have no control over its workings. They do not speak the words written for their characters--Simon and Hound--but they assume roles which determine that the words they do say are all too appropriate to the play they have entered.

Moon and Birdboot are not characters in search of a play that will make their lives coherent, but they are drawn into a play that mirrors their situation, and more than that, one that contains real people from their real lives. Reality and illusion have merged. When they realize how they are implicated in the incidents of the play, it is too late to escape. They have accepted the roles, become the characters they were mistaken for. They cannot escape. Brian M. Crossley observes that the two critics, as would-be interpreters of the play, "become fatally involved in the action they . . . have been called on to unravel."23

Magnus, aka Hound, aka Albert Muldoon, aka Puckeridge, the third-stringer, is in control. As a matter of fact, Moon had decided that he was the murderer as they watched the early part of the play. Like the characters from Hamlet whose entrances Rosencrantz tries unsuccessfully to predict, Magnus in his wheelchair rolls onstage from the opposite direction Birdboot has expected, knocking him over. When Moon decides to take the part of the inspector, he believes he is in control, but like Rosencrantz and Gildenstern he does not know
enough to advance a plausible hypothesis to explain what has happened. He is not the director or author, but Magnus/Puckeridge seems to be both. When Magnus rightly accuses Moon of "masquerading as--Police Inspector Hound!" (p. 58), the others go along with his theory. Puckeridge describes Moon's sorry situation and his own part in creating it when he says of Moon, "he walked into the trap!" (p. 58).

Stoppard begins the stage directions for the play, "The first thing is that the audience appear to be confronted by their own reflection in a huge mirror" (p. 7). The audience has a part in this play: we are represented by Moon and Birdboot, who are also members of the audience, and if the stage direction could be carried out ("impossible" [p. 7], Stoppard concedes) we would in a sense be constantly onstage. We know that the two critics are not members of the "actual audience," in the terminology of Peter J. Rabinowitz, but we do not know their relation to the characters on the stage. The "mirror on the stage" reflects us when, as the "narrative audience," we discover that we do not know as much as we thought we did, and that Moon and Birdboot, from whom we had separated ourselves--we are audience, they are not--have something in common with us--they and we are surprised by Puckeridge.

The fate of Moon and Birdboot also demonstrates how members of an "actual audience"--who as critics function also as "narrative audience" and flaunt their intellectual qualifications to be members of the "authorial audience" of the mystery play--can abandon those three roles to become so fully the naive "Ideal narrative audience"
that they literally enter the play. The Real Inspector Hound makes explicit the distinctions between Rabinowitz's audiences. It involves Stoppard's actual audiences in a self-conscious examination of audience participation in the creation of theatrical illusion. The Real Inspector Hound is a play about audiences watching plays and what happens to them when they do. It is concerned with the power of a fiction, even a third-rate play like the Muldoon mystery.

As Stoppard's play progresses, the events at Muldoon Manor get sillier and sillier, and so do Moon and Birdboot. When Moon compliments Birdboot on having his "entire review [of another play] reproduced in neon!" (p. 14), Birdboot whips out "a few colour transparencies" (p. 15), and Moon waxes rhapsodic as he reviews Birdboot's review: "It has scale, it has colour, it is, in the best sense of the word, electric" (p. 15). They become ever more ridiculous as they sink deeper into fantasies of revenge (Moon) and extramarital bliss (Birdboot). Moon imagines a full-scale revolt by the second rank in which "troupes of actors [are] slaughtered by their understudies" and "eternal bridesmaids turn and rape the bridegrooms over the sausage rolls" (p. 10). This fantasy of murder is similar to and no less absurd than the play the two critics are watching. Meanwhile Birdboot tries to persuade Moon to give a good word in his review to the actress playing Felicity. Then he loses his heart and his head at the sight of Cynthia Muldoon: "She's beautiful--a vision of eternal grace, a poem . . ." (p. 24). His speculations on whether she is actually kissing Simon with her mouth open are not at all academic. By the end of the second act Birdboot
and Moon have confused the events of the play they watch with their own fantasies. Simon's unsolved murder leads Moon to muse: "getting away with murder must be quite easy provided that one's motive is sufficiently inscrutable," but "I'd still have Puckeridge behind me. . ." (p. 41). Birdboot hypocritically approves Simon's death in the play: "Fickle young pup! He was deceiving her right, left and centre," concluding that Cynthia "needs someone steadier, more mature . . ." (p. 41), and immediately begins planning an affair. But with whom? With the character Cynthia, whom he has confused with the actress portraying her. In switching his affections from Felicity, whom he knows as a real person, to Cynthia, who is a character in a play, Birdboot has crossed the line into illusion that makes his actual participation in the inner play so easy.

Once Birdboot is on the stage, Stoppard's stage directions tell us that he first "looks around [at the audience] and smiles weakly, exulting himself" (p. 43), but he seems to forget the rest of us when Cynthia joins him onstage. Moon, his last link with "reality" (the outer play), cannot convince Birdboot to leave the stage. With Cynthia, he answers to the name Simon and takes his part in the play. Moon stays offstage longer than Birdboot, but he has preceded his colleague there, having come onto the stage to answer a ringing telephone. Even in the middle of his efforts to talk Birdboot back to his seat, Moon cannot help wishing it were Higgs, not Birdboot, ruining his career. When Moon discovers that Higgs is indeed dead and Birdboot is shot, Moon is drawn onto the stage too. Birdboot has died just as Simon did—Birdboot forgot Simon's fate when he took
Simon's place—and Moon as Inspector Hound dies too, a victim of his guilty fantasies and the working out of Puckeridge's own fantasy.

Illusion and reality have become hopelessly tangled. Not only have the two critics confused the inner play with their lives, despite the absurd and clumsily apparent artificiality of the inner play, but they have become victims of a trap laid by Puckeridge, who has his own illusions and ambitions.

It is easy to feel distant from Moon and Birdboot as they slip deeper into wishful fantasy and then pass into the play they have been watching. But Stoppard challenges that superior stance we have taken—the mirror would have reflected us on the stage too—by showing us he can surprise us.

We can feel superior to the two critics because they are bad at criticism and do not know it, and because their petty wishful fantasies reveal them in all their resplendent mediocrity as human beings as well. We have taken their measure and found them wanting. That is knowledge we share with Stoppard, who knows we will find them funny, much of the humor arising from the gap between their pretensions and the actual quality of their characters that they unwittingly let us see, or rather that Stoppard lets us see. When they step over the footlights, we laugh at their embarrassment and pleasure—apparently Cynthia does kiss with her mouth open.

But then we find out that the body on the stage is Higgs, and quickly after that revelation Birdboot is shot. When that happens we know no more how to explain these disturbing Incidents than poor bewildered Moon does. In a clever dovetailing of the mystery genre
or whodunit with the issues of reality and fiction raised by the use of two plays at once, Stoppard wraps up both by having the murderer reveal his multiple identity as playwright of the inner play, Inspector Hound, and Albert Muldoon. "I wanted it somehow to resolve itself in a breathtakingly neat, complex but utterly comprehensible way," Stoppard has said of this play.26

Puckeridge has surprised us, which is to say that Stoppard has surprised us. Hamlet-like, Puckeridge has used the play to trap the other critics, whom he seems as having obstructed his path to the top, or in the case of Birdboot, to Cynthia. Unbeknownst to Moon and Birdboot, and to the other members of the audience at The Real Inspector Hound, Puckeridge has been manipulating all of us. With this surrogate, Stoppard reminds us of the power of a creator of fictions over those who watch them. Fictions can be so much like life, if we choose to believe in them, that we forget reality and enter them physically, in the case of the theatre, and metaphorically, in all cases. But should we be inclined to separate ourselves from Moon and Birdboot, to deny that we can be manipulated by a playwright, Stoppard shows us who is in charge, and how much more he knows about the world he has created than we do. He can make us laugh, and he can bewilder us. We have been contrasting the stage world of the mystery play with the "real" world of the two hopelessly inept critics. When Moon answers Myrtle Birdboot's telephone call, we laugh because Stoppard has mixed the real world in which the Birdboots are married with the obviously, indeed outrageously, fictive world of the play Moon and Birdboot (and we) are watching.
But why shouldn't he? Both are artificial, so he can do anything he wants in both. The world of the outer play can collapse into the inner play because they are finally on the same plane of unreality, created by Stoppard who, like Puckridge, knows how to bait his trap.

Puckridge is part of the inside play, part of the action. He has been in control all along, but we did not know that. Puckridge, the creator/manipulator figure who literally draws two members of the audience into the inner play, is like Stoppard, the creator/manipulator of inner and outer plays which make up The Real Inspector Hound. Stoppard characterized his play as "tragic and hilarious and very, very carefully constructed." He manages to engage us and surprise us even as he displays the artifice of his creation. On these terms, we cannot feel superior to Moon and Birdboot quite so confidently.

Six Characters in Search of an Author and Stoppard's two plays exploit the potential of the double perspective afforded by the Russian doll structure to explore the interaction between illusion and reality, actors and audience, that occurs in a play. They make us aware of an important paradox: theatrical illusion is artifice that can reveal the truth reality obscures.
Footnotes


4 Oliver, p. 59.

5 Oliver, p. 63.

6 Oliver, p. 59.


8 Oliver, p. 48.


De Vos, pp. 153, 158.

Babula, p. 279.

Babula, p. 280.


Gruber, p. 306.

Berlin, p. 271.


Ronald Hayman reports in Tom Stoppard, Contemporary Playwrights Series (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1977) that Robert Benchley may have been the first member of an actual audience to answer a telephone ringing in a play. Benchley announced to the audience that the call was for him.

Hudson et al., p. 8.


25 For an explanation of the distinction between audience and characters in a play that holds even when a member of the audience steps onto the stage, see Kendall Walton, "How Remote Are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37 (1978), 11-23.

26 Hudson *et al.*, p. 8.

IV: THE RUSSIAN DOLL DEVICE AND THE ARTIFICE OF FICTION

Tom Stoppard and Luigi Pirandello use detached characters and double their narratives in order to explore the conventions governing transactions between playwright and reader in the medium of an imaginary world. The doubled narrative afforded by the Russian doll device allows them to point up the paradoxical nature of our participation in fictions: we know that what we see on the stage is an illusion, but we would be mistaken to underestimate the power of that illusion and of the playwright who creates it. Flann O'Brien and Gilbert Sorrentino double their narratives and detach their characters in somewhat different ways and to rather different ends. Like the playwrights, they insist on the artificiality of fiction, and point out our tendency to suspend disbelief. But they do more than reveal to us the paradoxical nature of our response to any fictional creation; Sorrentino's Mulligan Stew and O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds are written in such a way that our attempts to connect them to real life are not only revealed to us but frustrated at every turn.

O'Brien and Sorrentino use several techniques, prominent among them the story within a story, to experiment with an alternative to realism that redirects our attention to the surface, the technique, the performance, and the language of fiction, drawing us away from
expectations inculcated by years of reading conventional fiction. In
this sense their novels are metafictions, that is, fictions about
fiction, but not in the same way The Golden Notebook and October
Light, for instance, are metafictions. Those novels are concerned
with the esthetics and morality of reading and writing; they are
about fictional readers and writers whose experience applies to that
of real ones. They represent real life in fictional form. At
Swim-Two-Birds and Mulligan Stew are only superficially concerned
with esthetic, political, moral, or psychological issues. If these
novels have a real subject, it would probably best be described as
the subversion of formal realism. Flann O'Brien and Gilbert
Sorrentino do not intend to bring the reader to some new way of
seeing the real world, to revelation or a heightened emotional state,
as realistic fiction can do. They want the reader to focus instead
on the elements of literature—plot, character, setting—as far as
possible in themselves and not in the service of representation of
believable characters, emotionally affecting actions, or persuasive
arguments about the world beyond the text.

Ortega y Gasset provides a useful metaphor in a description of
the difference between looking at a garden through a window and
looking at the window itself:

Now the majority of people are unable to adjust their
attention to the glass and the transparency which is
the work of art; instead they penetrate through it to
passionately wallow in the human reality which the work
of art refers to. If they are invited to let loose
their prey and fix their attention upon the work of art
itself, they will say they see nothing in it, because,
indeed, they see no human realities there, but only
artistic transparencies, pure essences.
Flann O'Brien and Gilbert Sorrentino want to show us the glass.

Language being as stubbornly referential as readers are stubbornly prone to identification with characters, O'Brien and Sorrentino cannot show us pure essences—pure language, pure technique. No one would read gibberish, nor do O'Brien and Sorrentino expect their readers to do without plot or characters in a novel. What the two writers do instead is to use the conventions of realistic fiction against their usual ends, those ends including, for example, an emotional response to characters. O'Brien and Sorrentino cheerfully explode such conventions and invite us to share their delight in this species of literary terrorism. To turn realistic fiction upside down and keep their readers off balance, they create fictional worlds that are as purely literary as possible; by "literary" I mean here self-enclosed, not resembling or making reference to the real world.

To give the two authors their due, I must examine their use of the Russian doll device to achieve their similar but not identical purposes in separate sections of this chapter. But since the Russian doll device works in concert with other devices to undermine conventional reading, I want first to discuss briefly those other methods, demonstrating how they operate to effect the authors' purposes.
Parody

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien's ear for cliché and Joycean delight in mimicking styles of discourse produces a wealth of parodies. O'Brien imitates and mocks cowboy novels, medieval Irish poetry, newspaper birth announcements, and legal cross-examination, among several other forms. Among the forms Sorrentino parodies are detective fiction, pornographic poetry and prose, the "Nighttown" section of *Ulysses*, and fatuous literary interviews.

The parodies are funny more often than not. They display their authors' cleverness and stylistic facility, and they render tribute to those authors' literary predecessors, especially Joyce, and in Sorrentino's case, O'Brien himself. They also focus a reader's attention on the style of the books that contain the parodies and not on their substance, because of the nature of parody. A satisfying parody, whether of a type of writing or a particular author, must be faithful to the style of the original, getting the stylistic details down precisely but making the distinctive features of that style stand out, so that we appreciate the idiosyncrasies of the original. We must have the feeling as we read a parody that the work parodied is one "we seem somehow to have read before,"\(^3\) as Hugh Kenner remarks of the parodies in *Mulligan Stew*.

Parody is a kind of literary criticism; its aim is not the creation of a convincing illusion. We recognize in parody not life but a distinctive way of rendering life in literature. The subject matter of a parody never matters as much as the style; in fact, the
subject matter is often chosen to contrast with the style in order to highlight the latter. For example, we may not notice how repetitive and simple-minded Hemingway's dialogue can be until it is wrenched free of Hemingway's typical situations and characters. On that principle, O'Brien sets a story of cattle rustling in Dublin and throws Flinn MacCool into a dialogue with twentieth-century Irishmen. Parody frustrates conventional reading, closing us out of the world a novel creates by not taking that world seriously. Parody interferes with our view of the garden by etching patterns on the glass.

**Aestho-autogamy and Interchangeable Characters**

Perhaps the most striking and unusual aspect of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Mulligan Stew* is their working out of the theories of character in fiction articulated early in the outer story of *At Swim-Two-Birds* by the student in conversation with his friend Brinsley. The student believes that "a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity" and not an occasion for exercise of despotic control over a reader. Like the reader, the author's characters ought to be allowed a greater degree of freedom from authorial control: "Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living" (p. 33). In short, he prefers an independent existence for literary characters, rejecting the metaphor of slavery for that of employment. Authors, the student believes, should take one another's characters as needed, obviating the necessity of
creating new characters for every new work: "Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another" (p. 33).

To some extent, the "manifesto" is a joke, as the student's snobbish conclusion to it and Brinsley's response, "That is all my bum" (p. 33), indicate. It is hard to say whether O'Brien's student takes it seriously himself; at any rate, he is writing a book that illustrates these principles. He uses Finn MacCool in his book, taking him from Irish legend, and the Inner author, Dermot Trellis, borrows characters from popular Western novels written by William Tracy. Gilbert Sorrentino borrows exuberantly from Dashiell Hammett (Ned Beaumont), James Joyce (Martin Halpin), and F. Scott Fitzgerald (Daisy and Tom Buchanan), to name just three. As part of his homage to O'Brien, he also uses Sheila and Antony Lamont from *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In O'Brien's book, characters plot against Trellis as he sleeps because of the humiliations he subjects them to when awake. Sorrentino's Lamont similarly abuses his characters, and they too get time off when Lamont is not writing. Unlike the detached characters of Stoppard and Pirandello, all these characters know exactly who employs them, and they all want out.

In his newspaper column, O'Brien delighted in examining clichés in a literal way, proposing, as Stephen Jones tells us, "a gauge that measures the snows of yesteryear" and "extra lofty garages [for] housing high dudgeons." It is in the same spirit of literalism that O'Brien's narrator issues his declaration of independence for fictional characters, demanding for them "a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living" (p. 33),
Introducing what Rudiger Imhof calls "A most intriguing device for cutting across the widely held illusion of the 'realness' of the events and characters in a novel"; by taking them literally, O'Brien "achieve[s] a reductio ad absurdum." Just as one gives little thought to the absurdity of going off in high dudgeon until O'Brien builds garages for such vehicles, in the same way readers are apt to invest a character with a certain solidity and actuality unless O'Brien reminds them that characters are not real by treating them as if they were. E.M. Forster's description of his characters is but one example of the way writers and readers are accustomed to think of imaginary people:

The characters arrive when evoked but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They "run away," they "get out of hand"; . . . If they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay.

Writers often speak of characters taking on a life of their own, but O'Brien takes that metaphor, which has become a cliche, literally and thereby produces a novel within his novel in which the characters literally will not cooperate. Of course Forster is speaking metaphorically, but suspension of disbelief requires that a reader take characters for people and respond to them accordingly. O'Brien insists that we not respond to the student's characters as people and works very hard to prevent our taking statements like Forster's seriously. Fictitious personages do not assume a life of their own
In any meaningful way; if they could, they would not be fictitious characters but actual people. In O'Brien's novel the author Treliss and his characters live in a hotel together in the student's novel, and the characters drug their author to keep him from waking and tyrannizing them with his plots. Of course fictional characters cannot do that to actual authors. By having them do so in his inner fiction, O'Brien keeps their fictitious status before us paradoxically by seeming to deny it. The denial of their limitations as fictional characters leads to absurd consequences; our awareness of that absurdity prevents suspension of disbelief.

The student's proposal that characters be interchangeable from book to book is also worked out in the inner novel of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Whereas authors often claim that their characters are life-like or take on a life of their own, they do not confess to borrowing characters from other authors. It is not the ethics of such borrowing that concern O'Brien; it may well be that every author genuinely believes all his or her characters to be originals. Rather O'Brien's intention is to propose that originality of characters is beside the point. If authors did people their books by drawing from a common pool of characters already in literary "existence," they and we would have less reason to pretend that the characters were in any meaningful way the same as real people. O'Brien's Finn MacCool and his cowboys come from literature, not from life. When Sorrentino names a character Daisy Buchanan, one thinks of *The Great Gatsby* as her "home," not of any real place. Thus the borrowing of interchangeable characters, like the use of parody, is a means of
distancing us emotionally and intellectually from the created world of a novel, of reminding us that literature is not to be confused with life, again showing us the glass, not the garden. Literary characters come from another domain and remain within it; any attempt to cross the border in a literal way produces, in O'Brien and Sorrentino's novels, hilariously absurd results that only point up the contrast between them and us.

The concept of aestho-autogamy is O'Brien's most extreme method for illustrating the absurdity of confusing the realms of fiction and reality. As the student explains it, aestho-autogamy is necessary when no character can be found in preexisting literature to fit exactly the requirements of a story in the process of creation. Forster refers to characters as "creations inside a creation." O'Brien treats such acts of creation as births, albeit peculiar ones, "producing a living mammal from an operation involving neither fertilization nor conception" (p. 55). Dermot Trellis's achievement, according to the press account of John Furriskey's birth, lies in his "reduction of [Furriskey's maternity] to the same mysterious abstraction as that of the paternal factor" (p. 55). This is an improvement over the results achieved by the author William Tracy, whose wife gave birth to "a middle-aged Spaniard who lived for only six weeks" (p. 56). The newspaper birth announcement furnishes a format for treating the birth of a literary character literally, and thus humorously. "Stated to be doing 'very nicely,' the new arrival is about five feet eight inches in height, well-built, dark, and clean-shaven" (p. 54), according to the newspaper. The disparity
between the measurements of this "baby," born full-grown, and those of the usual, human sort, provides another illustration that life and art are very different propositions. The reader is prevented from "believing in" Furriskey by the absurdity of the literalness with which O'Brien describes his birth. Aestho-autogamy is etching on the window through which we see Furriskey, one more way of insuring that the book will be for the reader a "self-evident sham."

Readers can be very obstinate about a book like *At Swim-Two-Birds*. They may try to force it into familiar fictional categories, insist on reading it in the same way one would read a conventional novel. O'Brien defies and frustrates that kind of reading which would interpret the world of this book as a mirror of the actual world. As Miles Orvell observes, O'Brien believes that "art is not an imitation of reality but an independent form." Furthermore, the world of *At Swim-Two-Birds* "is a world of fiction, a . . . generic world, its laws the laws of reading." Incessant parody, characters borrowed or created in a burlesque of human procreation, and the absurdity of the idea that characters have a life of their own, which O'Brien tests by taking the notion literally--these devices he uses as weapons against conventional reading. But without a means to destroy a reader's expectation of a coherent plot, he might well have had to concede defeat. O'Brien denies us the delight we are accustomed to find in a well-told tale not by refusing to tell one, but by telling several, and frustrating our attempts to engage with any of them. In fact,
the very proliferation of stories, all jostling for attention, jostling each other for space in the novel, effectively interferes with the power of the most basic of the elements of fiction--plot--to enthrall and transport us. As with his creation of characters, O'Brien uses the element of plot against itself: if readers want plot, readers will have plot. But as with the tales in which a genie grants three wishes, O'Brien's readers do not get exactly what they expect.

On the outermost level of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is the first-person narrative by the unnamed Dublin student who characterizes his story as "biographical reminiscences." The young man attends classes, drinks, talks with his friends and his uncle and his uncle's friends, sleeps several hours a day, and writes. His manuscript is the story of a writer named Dermot Trellis, another lover of sleep, and the sort of despot who "compel[s] characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich" (p. 33). We never read Trellis's manuscript, but instead the student tells the story of the rebellion of Trellis's characters. They include the cowboys Paul Shanahan and Tony Lamont, taken from William Tracy's cowboy books; Furriskey, a product of aesthio-autogamy; a servant girl named Peggy; Sheila Lamont, Tony's sister; and Finn MacCool, the legendary Irish hero. Trellis impregnates Sheila Lamont, who gives birth to Orlick, another writer. Orlick and the cowboys write a tale of torture for Trellis, in which their author suffers at the hands of the Pooka. That story, then, is the third of the Russian dolls, nestling inside the student's manuscript of the story about Trellis and his characters. Also on
that third level are three other literary creations, the cowboy story
Shanahan tells, Finn MacCool's story of King Sweeny, and two poems by
Jem Casey, "Poet of the Pick" (p. 105). However, the inner two
levels tend to overlap as the book progresses. We are told that
Trellis forces all his characters to live with him at the Red Swan
Hotel, but the Pooka Fergus MacPhillimey, listed in the student's
first synopsis as a character created by Trellis, is never mentioned
as a resident of the hotel. In addition, the Pooka's wife (who may
be a kangaroo) and the Good Fairy appear in the same part of the
story as do the cowboys and Trellis's other characters, but they are
creations of the student, not of Trellis. The Pooka, who figures in
the story of Orlick's birth on the second level, is also a character
of Orlick's story of Trellis's torture, a third-level creation.
Sweeny appears in the second-level story of the Pooka's journey to be
present at Orlick's birth and in the third-level story told by Finn
in verse. Indeed, Finn himself seems at the beginning to be part of
a separate manuscript introduced as "Extract from my typescript
descriptive of Finn MacCool and his people, being humorous or
quasi-humorous Incursion into ancient mythology" (p. 16). In this
section Finn may be tedious, but he is a legendary hero and
storyteller, not the sad misunderstood creature sitting in the
shadows muttering to himself at the Red Swan that he becomes when
enlisted as a character in Trellis' book. The three beginnings
listed by the student, the first of which introduces the Pooka, the
second John Furriskey, and the third Finn MacCool, give us a
horizontal rather than the vertical arrangement of stories that we get
when all three become characters of Trellis later on. What we have
finally is a profusion of shifting and overlapping narratives which
may at one point feature someone like Finn as a narrator and at
another contain him as a character in someone else's narrative. Even
Trellis becomes a character in the story concocted by characters he
created. This inherent instability frustrates conventional,
sequential reading, which is just as O'Brien wants it in his
"self-evident sham" of a novel. The jumbling of narration draws
attention to the fact that the created world of the student or of
O'Brien need not follow the same rules as reportage or "biographical
reminiscence." When, in The Real Inspector Hound, Moon leaves the
audience to answer the telephone on the stage, only to discover that
Mrs. Birdboot is calling her husband, Stoppard is mixing his fictive
levels. O'Brien does the same thing, and for the same reason: to
remind us that fictions are not to be mistaken for life, nor
characters for persons.

The stories within and alongside other stories in At Swim
multiply in order to interrupt one another. Miles Orvell discusses
this feature of the novel, linking its use to the lack of
transitional signals between sections as devices to "distance us from
the 'content' of the story, to make us attend to the telling of
it."12 Again, O'Brien turns an element of conventional fiction
against itself by pushing its use to extremes. Taking characters'
'lives' literally pushes realism too far, into absurdity; in much the
same way, providing such a profusion of stories that they bump into
each other in vying for the attention of auditors within the book as
well as that of readers, makes us aware primarily of the telling of
the story, the window of Ortega y Gasset's passage, and not of the
story as a single autonomous, convincing creation that can, if told
without interruption, draw us into its world.

The Interruptions are Incessant, beginning on the second page,
where a grandiloquent description of Finn MacCool's physique is
abruptly broken off by the student's announcement that he has hurt a
tooth on a crust. When a story is given free rein for several pages,
as is the early excerpt in which Finn speaks in response to
questions, O'Brien relies on parody to distance us from Finn and his
Incessant "relating." Even so, none of the stories goes on for many
pages without interruption of some kind. The Ringsend roundup
narrated by Paul Shanahan, for example, is rather a long story, but
it is broken up in the telling by being recounted in excerpts from
newspaper stories, the first William Tracy's obituary, the second
written in police report style, and the third a sort of "places to
see in Dublin" travel article. These excerpts of doubtful relevance
to Shanahan's tale are amusing because of the contrast between their
style and Shanahan's Zane Grey manner. As usual, O'Brien directs our
attention to style, not content.

In the same passage O'Brien uses another of his favorite devices
for fragmenting a narrative, the parenthetical comments of Shanahan's
auditors as he talks. These Interruptions are mostly of the sort
listeners murmur to assure a storyteller that they are paying
attention: "That was very nice certainly" (p. 75), for instance, and
"By God you were travelling all right" (p. 77), and "You were in the
right, of course. What was the upshot?" (p. 78). They are quite unnecessary to the telling of Shanahan's story, but essential to interrupting it and thereby preventing our engagement with the story. Thus O'Brien sees to it that narratives interrupt one another and are interrupted within themselves. Mercilessly he diverts our attention from the garden to the glass, first by making it a very peculiarly parodic one, then by breaking our concentration as we read. He will not leave his readers alone. We realize when we read the student's "synopses," which he tells us are "for the benefit of new readers" (pp. 85-86, 214-15), that the student's manuscript and what we have read are not at all the same, because digressions and various other interruptions have left little room for the story of how Trellis writes a book.

Two other devices for drawing our attention to the telling and not the story should be noted: the separation of description from narration, and the constant reminders that a book is an object, a stack of papers. The first device appears in the biographical reminiscences. Early in the novel, the student and his uncle talk as the uncle eats. The student reports their conversation, but sets off from it "Description of my uncle: Red-faced, bead-eyed, ball-bellied," etc. A few lines down, the student again interrupts with the label "Quality of rash in use in household" (p. 11), to describe his uncle's breakfast. The student also describes facial expressions and figures of speech, lists and specifies the nature of all sorts of things in short passages set apart from the narrative. Every reminiscence contains such isolated descriptive phrases or
whole paragraphs; by separating descriptive passages from the flow of a narrative, O'Brien dismantles that narrative, isolating the elements of fiction, resisting unity within a story just as he fragments the novel's plot by providing a multitude of stories from a number of sources but never unifies them. As Miles Orvell observes, the book has no traditional unity, but exhibits great attention to design. The three openings do come together, after a fashion, as every character is involved in the journey to Orlick Trellis's birthplace. There is in the book "a web of associations, cross-references, and parallels." The design, complex and carefully worked out as it is, does not unify the work in ways one would expect. O'Brien frustrates the efforts of readers who try to find in the book a unified vision of life by studying recurring motifs; he tantalizes but ultimately disappoints them. O'Brien wants to take apart the elements of fiction rather than make a whole by integrating them.

The second device, reminding us that a book is an object, and an artificial rather than a natural one at that, functions throughout the book, but nowhere as strikingly as at the end of the torture of Trellis. Trellis is the victim of his literary creations, who take their revenge for the humiliations he has written for them by writing a story in which he suffers for his sins against them. The writing has proceeded with the usual interruptions from its readers, but Orlick and the others manage to make him suffer exquisitely in their manuscript. Then they subject him to a travesty of a trial, but before they finish him off, the authors leave the book and go off for
the night. By mistake Trellis's servant burns Trellis's manuscript, "the pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends" (p. 313), thus releasing Trellis, who reports to the maid that he has been having nightmares. The servant ends at once the characters' existence and their power to trouble Trellis's thoughts.

This incident underlines that aspect of fictional creations which readers of realistic fiction are encouraged to set aside while they read: characters are imaginative constructs with no literal existence.14 Trellis suffers only nightmares, the fictions of the subconscious, not actual torture. Throughout, the student narrator refers often to his manuscript or typescript, O'Brien's way of nudging us into awareness that we must not be taken in by the illusion that any created world literally exists apart from the confines of a stack of paper. The student frequently shows his manuscript to friends, who discuss it with him. At one point he tells us that "the omission of several pages at this stage does not materially disturb the continuity of the story" (p. 207). Similarly, Flinn MacCool occasionally edits the poem he recites: "Thereafter they had colloquy and talked loudly together until they had achieved a plurality of staves" (p. 126), only the last four of which are recited in the story.

Treating stories as documents, objects made of paper and therefore subject to destruction by fire, is a species of literalism. However, whereas O'Brien's literal presentation of characters in books is meant to show us that they have no literal existence, his
references to books as things is not absurd because books do have a literal existence. His purpose in pointing that out is to insist that a novel is real and solid only in the sense that it is an object; the story of the book, the world it creates—that is illusion. Taking the illusion literally is, as he has demonstrated, absurd.

David Lodge believes that "the novelist is constantly divided between two imperatives—to create and invent freely, and to observe a degree of realistic decorum." Novels display "this dynamic tension." O'Brien has set out to expose the conventions of "realistic decorum," which he delights in violating at every turn. And yet, the student narrator remains a realistic character, outside the story he creates and unaffected by it. His characters do not rebel against him, not as far as we know. The student's memories and theories belong on a different level from the stories he creates. He is a realistic character: his life as he presents it to us is not exposed as a "self-evident sham" even though O'Brien has created the student as surely as the student claims to have created his characters. This realistic frame around the inner fictions that O'Brien carefully labels as illusions violates O'Brien's principle in the rest of the book that the reader is not to be allowed to suspend disbelief.

O'Brien violates that principle because he needs a means of refuting the student's claim that characters "should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living" (p. 33). Trellis may have lost control of his characters and allowed
them to assert their independence by mixing him up in their fictions, but O'Brien must have another author whose characters have no literal existence in his life in order to show that the student is wrong. O'Brien's purpose in giving the characters a literal existence in the student's fiction is to demonstrate that their existence is not literal at all outside the confines of fiction, in which characters may be said to think or do anything the author wishes. In other words, real authors, represented by the student, do not exist in the same way their characters do. In the context of the novel, the student exists literally but the characters only metaphorically, contrary to what the student says to Brinsley. We are meant to contrast the actual student author with Trelills, and to see that At Swim-Two-Birds refutes the student's theory that fictional characters have an autonomous existence. Even Trelills escapes real harm at the hands of his characters: he tells the servant he has had nightmares, and none of his bones is broken. The characters' tortures were only Imaginary, as are the characters themselves. O'Brien gives us an inner fiction in which characters are self-conscious persons in relation to their author to show how absurd the idea is, not to endorse it.

It is likely that O'Brien knows that characters can become real for readers, and that that aspect of fictional character has nothing to do with whether they are literal persons. In fact, by working so hard to make us see their artifice, O'Brien backhandedly acknowledges that aspect of character. O'Brien has chosen to emphasize the status of characters as fictional constructs in order to have fun with the
conventions of fiction by reminding us as we read that he made it all up. Ironically, it is the presence of a realistic character, the student narrator, that helps him to show us the artifice of the inner story. On the one hand, O'Brien can create a fairly conventional character in the outer story, but on the other hand, he can give us characters in the inner story in whom he will not allow us to believe on account of their blatant artificiality. O'Brien seems to know that he employs both aspects of character, that characters can be believable, but he chooses to be deliberately perverse about it. The characters in the students' fiction are not presented in a way that we can take seriously. After in a sense setting us up to respond conventionally to the student's life in the outer story, O'Brien undermines our expectations in the novel that student writes. The outer story of the Russian doll novel gives us the sort of character we are familiar with from realistic fiction, but the inner story shocks us by treating characters as mere letters on paper whose existence ends with the burning of a manuscript. Thus the student's presentation as a realistic character is a point of departure for O'Brien's insistence on the artifice of character in the inner story.

Hugh Kenner describes Mulligan Stew as "a send-up of the avant-garde" that points out the "moral catatonia" of New York publishing. It is true that Sorrentino has had bitter words for the publishing industry. Tony Lamont, the author/protagonist of Mulligan Stew, represents what Kenner calls "the Schlock avant-garde"; he is a hilariously untalented
writer given to lamenting his mistreatment by mainstream publishers. Tony Lamont is an untalented version of his creator; he writes bad prose that he thinks is good, which allows Sorrentino to have fun at his expense. But Lamont's difficulties with academics, critics, and other writers, some but not all of them the product of a progressive paranoia, also allow Sorrentino to settle some old scores. In fact, with the blue pages preceding the title page, Sorrentino takes deadly aim at his favorite target by "reproducing" letters to his agent and himself rejecting the manuscript of *Mulligan Stew*. The letters reflect what Sorrentino sees as the moral and esthetic bankruptcy of modern publishing. They are also great fun to read. The same holds true of many of the parodies that follow, especially the erotic poetry of Lorna Flambeaux: "I long to be your socks" is one of her more memorable lines.

In *Mulligan Stew* fun seems a lot more to the point than analysis of the state of American publishing. Sorrentino's attitude has been expressed in a remark of Robert Frost on writing poetry: "what do I want to communicate but what a hell of a good time I had writing it? The whole thing is prowess and performance and feats of association." The book is about publishing, and about Mexican pornographers and mathematics and baseball and murder, but the content is never as important as the style. Like Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien's real name), to whose memory the book is dedicated, Gilbert Sorrentino has written a novel whose subject is the unreality of literature, a subject which delights Sorrentino with its possibilities. As one reviewer observes, "The only thing in the
novel that is ultimately 'real' is Sorrentino's own comic exuberance and excess. Sorrentino revels in the sheer number of genres and forms that a Russian doll novel can accommodate. Like O'Brien, he has his "Ithaca" parodies: one format repeated in the "Lamont's Scrapbook" sections is questions and answers, most of them silly and incoherent but often funny. "Is it true what they say about Dixie?" (p. 19), and "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" (p. 86), for example. And the long "Masque of Fungo" echoes the devices of Joyce's "Nighttown," but Sorrentino's version is peculiarly American. In his exuberance and love of excess, Sorrentino seems always to outdo O'Brien. The use of parody, borrowed characters, and literalism serve the same functions as they do in At Swim-Two-Birds. Sorrentino's book is much longer than O'Brien's, to begin with; it has a "cast of thousands," and takes its characters from more authors, particularly American ones. Whereas O'Brien's student borrows mostly from the fictional William Tracy, Sorrentino borrows freely from real authors such as Fitzgerald and Dashiel Hammett, and from O'Brien himself. Sorrentino told an interviewer that in Mulligan Stew "I can put in anything that I want to put in and somehow work it into the structure of the book as either a part of my writer's life or a part of his novel or a part of his character's lives when they're not being his characters. Plenty of room to do anything I want... this is a project in which anything goes." This sort of opportunity for excess does not seem to have interested O'Brien as it does Sorrentino, and in Sorrentino's "anything goes" attitude lies a distinction between these otherwise
very similar novels, a difference in emphasis. While O'Brien uses his Irish materials to insist on the separation between fiction and life, Sorrentino makes the further point that a "self-evident sham" of a fiction offers artistic possibilities that realistic fiction precludes.

Sorrentino's most outrageous self-indulgence is his use of lists. He has mentioned how much he likes Joyce's lists in *Finnegans Wake*. From the frequency and length that characterize his lists in *Mulligan Stew*, a reader must conclude that nobody has ever enjoyed or employed lists quite as much as Gilbert Sorrentino. For five pages he lists the books and periodicals found in the den of the fictional house where Halpin and Beaumont are confined; an excerpt from Lamont's story "O'Mara of No Fixed Abode" turns out to be nine pages of song titles rendered as punning sentences, and the novel ends with a seven-page list of gifts to characters from the writers who created them. These lists and the shorter ones in between are full of references to Sorrentino and his books, O'Brien and his, other authors and theirs, to popular culture and avant-garde literature, to list just a sample of his allusions. A reader may skim the lists or skip them: they never advance the plot, anyway. On the other hand, there is hardly any plot to advance. Sorrentino constructs his book as a bag of goodies, a mulligan stew, full of all sorts of tidbits, not a coherent representation of life. The items in the lists are like the sections of the book in microcosm: Sorrentino does not bother to connect or unify them. The book is intended for our pleasure, and the pleasure is almost exclusively
local. Like a comedian who knows a million jokes, Sorrentino does the literary equivalent of a stand-up routine. If we do not laugh at one joke, no matter—perhaps the next will elicit a guffaw. Sorrentino has seized on the fragmentation inherent in the Russian doll mode and made the most of it. He has said of his technique, "I like to take disparate parts and put them together and see what happens. I believe the old saw that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Of course, it may also be less. But it's the parts that interest me, it's not the whole."25 One finds this fragmentation in O'Brien, of course, but it is much more vivid in Sorrentino's book, perhaps because Sorrentino positively wallows in it.

_Mulligan Stew_ is a very strange novel, one that pushes against the boundaries that have heretofore defined the genre. In its burlesque of other genres—the masque, the literary interview, the avant-garde novel, the love letter, the mathematical treatise—_Mulligan Stew_ contains all these forms without being defined by any of them. _At Swim-Two-Birds_ and _Mulligan Stew_ may be said to belong to a genre I would call "the fiction of performance" or less kindly, "the show-off novel."26 What we are asked to respond to in such a novel is the author's skill as a stylist, his facility with words, not the verisimilitude of his fictional creation or the suspense generated by the plot or the "reality" of the characters.

Like O'Brien, Sorrentino takes care not to allow the reader to be distracted from his performance by the power of fiction to compel
suspension of disbelief. He uses O'Brien's technique of isolating the elements of fiction, in particular character and plot, from one another in order to expose them as techniques for creating an illusion of reality in a novel that is not to be mistaken for reality itself. Sorrentino subjects the element of setting to the literal treatment O'Brien gives character and plot. In their leisure time, Ned Beaumont and Martin Halpin explore the cabin where Martin, or somebody, has murdered Ned in the first chapter of what they agree is a thoroughly disagreeable book. Ned gives an account of the odd features of the place:

There is the living room and the den, but we have not been able to find any other rooms. It seems as if there are other rooms, but when we approach them, they are . . . simply not there! There is no kitchen, no porch, no bedrooms, no bath. At the side of the living room, a staircase leads "nowhere." Oh, I don't mean to say that it disappears into empty space, it simply leads to a kind of . . . haziness, in which one knows there is supposed to be a hallway and bedroom doors: but there is absolutely nothing. (p. 30)

The passage may remind a reader of theatrical stage sets. The reason the cabin tends to get hazy around the edges is that it exists as Beaumont and Halpin can themselves be said to exist—in Lamont's imagination. The convention of describing, in some sense "realizing," only those rooms in which a story takes place is so familiar that readers are able to imagine, if they are so inclined, the rest of a cabin when they are told about only one room in it. When Sorrentino makes that convention literal, we notice it and acknowledge that a novel's world is not real and solid as its readers' is; it is the same sort of acknowledgment O'Brien elicits
when he treats plot and character literally. Ned and Martin discover a whole other part of the cabin much later in the book, and puzzle over the meaning of objects that belong to what appears to be an entirely different set of characters. They speculate that Lamont stole the setting of his novel as well as its characters from another novel or novels.

Setting specifies the time as well as the place of a story, and Sorrentino plays with time in Martin Halpin's journal. The simplest instance Halpin reports is that it is always night when one looks out the windows of the cabin, but if he and Ned go outside (when Lamont is not writing) they find that time does not stand still outside the cabin: "It is an odd thing to come in from a rosy-pink morning, go directly to the window, and gaze out at a choppy, chilly, pitch-black lake!" (p. 30). Of course, this is what readers do when they read a Gothic novel while sunbathing, but only metaphorically. Presented literally, the idea is absurd. A further instance that distinguishes fiction from life involves the resurrection of Ned Beaumont, who lies dead (in various places around the living room, Lamont being forgetful) at the beginning of Lamont's novel, but "lives" in subsequent flashbacks. Actual people stay dead when they die, but Beaumont is no actual person. Halpin tells us in his journal that "Ned has convinced me that when Lamont places us in the flashbacks of which he is so fond, we are in the flashbacks, absolutely" (p. 150). Thus Sorrentino shows how fictional characters like Ned live in a way that human beings cannot by treating death of a character as a sometime thing.
Following the master's lead, Sorrentino uses a "documentary" approach to narrative to distance us from Lamont and his creation, inserting other documents such as Lorna Flambeaux's poems and "The Masque of Fungo" only after telling us how Lamont or Halpin came by the manuscripts. There is nothing equivalent to the student's autobiographical narrative in *Mulligan Stew*. Lamont never narrates his own life story—we glean it from his journal and letters, forced to look at his private papers in the absence of direct narration. Yet because Sorrentino needs a voice speaking directly to the reader from outside the inner fiction, just as O'Brien does, in order to contrast real life to art, he turns to Halpin, who is embedded in the work but aware of its author's existence, to contrast Lamont's fiction to what he knows real life should be like. Trelils and the student's other characters, who violently interact on the same fictional place, nevertheless are not aware of the existence of the student, their penultimate author. But Halpin and Beaumont know who employs them, and although they cannot account for his motives in writing the story as he does, they certainly know what they think of him: Antony Lamont is an idiot.

A crucial flaw in *Mulligan Stew* emerges when the reader realizes that Martin Halpin is a realistic character in a novel the writing of which Sorrentino believes to have been a way to "prove to myself that fiction is . . . total invention, that it is total prose"; as he told Barry Alpert, "I really want to make the reader, if you will, realize that he's reading fiction, that these people aren't real." O'Brien uses the realistic character of the student
narrator to demonstrate the absurdity of the idea that characters ought, like literal people, to be granted the freedom of an autonomous existence. As I have explained, the student narrator demonstrates this idea by making up a world—the outer story of his own novel—in which characters like Furriskey interact with their author, Trellis. However, O'Brien offers no evidence of the student's own characters interacting with the student himself. The student and O'Brien use the Russian doll technique to expose and emphasize the artifice of fiction, but that part of the student's philosophy of fiction which holds that characters "should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living" (p. 33) is exposed as absurd by O'Brien alone, by showing that characters in his outermost story (the one containing the student) and inner stories do not mingle.

Unfortunately, Sorrentino has swallowed the student's manifesto whole, without realizing that O'Brien rejects one part of it. By exposing the idea as an absurdity, O'Brien avoids a contradiction which renders Sorrentino's book incoherent: if characters are as real as their authors, how can he convince a reader "that these people aren't real"? Max Ellenberg seems to sense the problem, but he sees it only in terms of Martin Halpin's frustration with Lamont: "Moving between an insistence that fictional 'reality' is provisional and composed only of words, and yet that what is written may have an existence independent of its author, *Mulligan Stew* explores the potential of this opposition in a series of brilliantly managed dilemmas."29 But I submit that the dilemmas Sorrentino creates
whenever Halpin speaks as a realistic character cannot be "brilliantly managed." Donald J. Greiner understands that readers will be confused by *Mulligan Stew*, but he attributes their confusion not to Sorrentino's inconsistency about characters' status, but to readers' conventional expectations:

The reader, of course, already dazzled by Sorrentino's joyous disregard for the rules of fiction, finds it even more difficult to get his bearings because he has, mistakenly to be sure, too long associated 'Daisy Buchanan' with F. Scott Fitzgerald's princess or 'Claude Estee' with Nathanael West's skinny Hollywood hanger-on . . . . In other words, the reader confuses the linguistic configuration that designates a name with the picture that the configuration brings to mind because of another's using it in another novel. Why readers make this mistake is not Sorrentino's concern, but to show them that they do make it is an ingredient of *Mulligan Stew*. ³⁰

The problem—and it is Sorrentino's, not the reader's, in spite of Greiner's chiding—is that by making Halpin a believable character, albeit one from an odd world, Sorrentino himself encourages the reader in his "mistake." By using Halpin to expose the artifice of Lamont's novel, Sorrentino undermines his own purpose in a way O'Brien does not. It will not do for Greiner to hold the reader responsible for Sorrentino's confusion.

Experimental novels teach their readers new ways to read. Reading *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Mulligan Stew*, one is pressured to abandon the delights of conventional realistic fiction, and one can begin to feel rather grumpy about it. *Mulligan Stew* is especially difficult to finish because one must endure over four hundred pages of disconnected parodies, lists, and jokes. A reader may begin to crave something by George Elliot or Henry James. And yet, at their
best, Sorrentino and O'Brien can offer a different kind of reward to the reader who persists. "It seems a country-headed thing to say: that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words," writes William Gass. "Still, we cannot be too simple at the start, since the obvious is often the unobserved. Occasionally we should allow the trite to tease us into thought,"29 and that, I believe, is the value of the two books. One need not wish all books to be like *Swim-Two-Birds* and *Mulligan Stew* to appreciate their ability to make us think about the processes of writing and reading fiction by exposing the machinery of fiction and demonstrating for us the liberating possibilities opened up by the realization that fiction can delight in its own artifice.
Footnotes


2 The ambitions of O'Brien and Sorrentino for their novels bring to mind the famous but impossible goal expressed by Flaubert in a letter to Louise Colet in 1852: "What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, ... a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible." Selected Letters, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1954), pp. 127-28, quoted in The Modern Tradition, eds. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 126. O'Brien and Sorrentino attempt this feat by obscuring the subject, focusing our attention on the style. They provide a subject but distract our attention from it.


8 Forster, p. 102.

9 See, for example, Anne Clissman's lapse, in a generally astute analysis of the novel, into a historical/sociological analysis of the Circle N Ranch episode narrated by Shanahan. In Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His Works (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), Clissman asserts that references to the black maids imported from American scullery maids at the ranch are "part of a criticism of the false assumptions of civilized society" (p. 137). She believes that in Shanahan's story O'Brien uses the capture of these women in concert with "the disparity between realistic and imaginative detail, the total confusion of elements in the description of the house [at the ranch] and the events of the tale, to make a number of social comments. Through the medium of fantasy and parody he points out that civilization and 'custom' are at times close to barbarism and that the romance of lawlessness" suffers in an urban setting, where people rely on the forces of law and order for stability (p. 138). This analysis takes O'Brien's parody in the story much too seriously. The black American maids appear in Shanahan's story for the same reason the Indians do: they are incongruous in Dublin. O'Brien means to poke fun at cowboy romances, not to take them to task for being incompatible in their values with the necessities of urban life. O'Brien delights in the incongruity, and he
Invites his reader to share his delight in the mixture of Irish idiom and cowboy cliche, not to shake our heads over the inhumanity of American slavery.


11 According to Miles Orvell, the "question of control is central to the author-reader relationship in the book" (p. 96), as it is to the relationship between Dermot Treliss and his characters and to the relationship between the Pooka and the Good Fairy in the student narrator's manuscript. O'Brien means to manipulate readers by disappointing their expectations.

12 Orvell, p. 96.

13 Orvell, p. 95. See Imhof's footnote on p. 88 for a fairly comprehensive list of correspondences and repeated motifs. Clissman discusses the same sorts of parallels in the pattern of the book: "The Interconnections and cross-references make it as difficult and as complex as an illustration in the Book of Kells" (p. 90). But for all that, she concludes that "the plot is largely, though not completely, irrelevant" (p. 87).

14 William Gass, in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, makes the same point by focusing on how incompletely many characters in fiction are described: "I have known many who have passed through their stories without noses, or heads to hold them; other have lacked bodies altogether, exercised no natural functions, possessed some thoughts, a few emotions, but no psychologies, and apparently made love without the necessary organs" (p. 45).

16 Kenner, p. 89.

17 For a diatribe against publishers, see the interview of Sorrentino by Dennis Barone in Partisan Review, 48 (1971), 246-62.

18 Kenner, p. 89.

19 The book was rejected by twenty-five publishers, according to Sorrentino, who adds that the rejection letters in the book "are pretty close to the ones I received, although I added a few touches of my own." David W. McCullough, People, Books & Book People (New York: Harmony Books, 1981), p. 166.


Subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.


24 Alpert, p. 29.

25 Alpert, p. 11.
26 See the title chapter in Richard Poliier's *The Performing Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) for a discussion of the writer as performer and the questions of control attendant on that role.


CONCLUSION

The doubleness of the Russian doll device invites comparison, contrast, and exploration of the connections and disjunctions between narratives. The interplay of narratives distinguishes the Russian doll play or novel from other kinds of literature and accommodates a variety of effects: metafiction and metadrama; literary works considered as process and product; the isolation of fictional elements and conventions, especially character; examination of the nature of reading as a moral, emotional, and intellectual enterprise; and the interplay of mimesis and artifice that reveals fictional truth.

The Russian doll device can serve such diverse ends because of its doubleness of perspective. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, *The Golden Notebook*, *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Mulligan Stew* there are more than two narratives, but essentially only two narrative planes: Ambrose's account of his life and artistic creations; Anna's life and art; the student's "biographical reminiscences" and his fiction, in which Trellis and his characters all live together on the same plane in the same hotel; Antony Lamont's life as reflected in his letters and journal, and his novel, which contains Halpin, whose journal is not on another narrative plane from Lamont's novel because it serves as a sort of companion piece or corrective to it. In each case one plane
Is, in the context of the novel, more like life than the one it contains: the outer fiction seems more real than the inner. In terms of the Russian doll device, the main difference between the novels of Barth and Lessing on the one hand and of O'Brien and Sorrentino on the other lies in the purpose for which the doubleness of the Russian doll device is employed. Barth and Lessing's narratives converge, become continuous; Sorrentino and O'Brien's narratives resist unity, keep art and life separate, reject coherence. The Russian doll device can accommodate these completely disparate aims because its inherent doubleness lends itself easily to comparisons of two worlds, in this case life and art.

A similar sort of distinction holds in comparing the use of the Russian doll device discussed in the chapter on the plays by Stoppard and Pirandello and its use in these novels by O'Brien and Sorrentino. The two playwrights employ the two levels of outer and inner play in order to show us that a play can be a self-evident sham that nevertheless draws us into an overwhelming emotional experience at least as compelling as actual life. Pirandello and Stoppard use their double plots and detached characters to tell us that drama has a double nature, so they never deny that artifice is as important as the suspension of disbelief in truthfully portraying the nature of theater. But Sorrentino and O'Brien expose the artifice without giving equal time to the power of the illusion. They are not interested in demonstrating what the playwrights see as the paradox of story-telling.
Three of the four books on readers and their texts discussed in chapter two also exhibit two narrative planes, even when they tell more than two stories. October Light gives us on one level Sally and James's withdrawal from and re-entry into the difficult but nurturing web of relationships that sustain them; on the other are the lost souls of Sally's cheap novel. Pale Fire's first story is the adventures of Charles Kinbote, exiled King of Zembla; on its second level we discover the world of John Shade's poem, a seemingly very different account of marriage and the search for Immortality that Nabokov connects to Kinbote's life. Calvino's Readers inhabit the first level of If on a winter's night a traveler; frightened figures haunt the sterile landscapes of the second level, the novels which begin and break off abruptly. But D.M. Thomas uses the Russian doll device to produce a work containing more than two fictional planes: I count three, perhaps four. The poem and journal, Lisa Erdman's literary creations, occupy one level; Freud's case history, a work of interpretation, occupies a second; the story of Lisa's life, told from a point of view very much like her own, then as a third-person account of the slaughter of Babi Yar, occupies a third. Whether the coda in Palestine continues Lisa's story beyond her death, in which case it would be a part of the third-level story, or is a dying hallucination of Lisa's, in which case it would be a level-one creation, or is something else entirely, I cannot decide. At any rate, Thomas's work, with its structural pattern of subsumption rather than coordination, opens up further possibilities for the genre. I have seen painted wooden Russian dolls that contain up to
ten smaller dolls nesting one inside the other. Perhaps other authors will follow Thomas's lead and produce Russian doll novels and plays with as many fictional levels. The doubleness of the Russian doll technique lets writers create another world and in the same work provide a perspective on that first world from a vantage point within a second created world. Each story resonates in the other. The Russian doll technique may go into another decline like the one it suffered during the dominance of nineteenth-century realism, but it will always be available for rediscovery by authors, like those in this century, who are excited by the double nature of the story within a story. The Russian doll device will make it possible for them to share with readers their ageless fascination with the ability of the interplay of reality with illusion and illusion with further illusion magically to reveal the truth.
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