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A rhetoric of metafiction

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The Ohio State University, 1987

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A RHETORIC OF METAFIGION

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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* * * * *

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To My Parents,
Edward and Bernadette Boehm
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: A RHETORIC OF METAFICTION

Current literary jargon indicates that post-modern anti-realists write metafiction or anti-novels; these texts seem to resist the usual categories of criticism with their metalinguistic concerns, and their self-reflexive, self-conscious literary structures have, as a current literary handbook puts it, "a puzzled self at the center." Perhaps this preponderance of prefixes indicates that the reader is the self puzzled by the otherness of texts as diverse in style, form, and substance as those from authors like Barth, Gass, Barthelme, Coover, Borges, Calvino, Fowles, and even pre-post-modern writers like Cervantes, Fielding, and Sterne. Critics and readers alike often respond negatively to metafictional texts, usually arguing that the reader must "dig too hard" to make sense of the works. Typical of the critics of metafiction is Cynthia Ozick, who in "Innovation and Redemption: What Literature Means," suggests that this type of "'experimental' writing is unreadable. It fails because it is neither intelligent nor interesting. Without seriousness it cannot be interesting and without mastery it will never be intelligent." At the
heart of Ozick's complaint, however, is the assumption that fiction should be about "life," that it should enable us to "enter a land, a society, a people, and to penetrate into the whole lives of human beings." Taking the high moral road, Ozick suggests that experimental writers have abandoned their responsibility to readers by not anchoring their fiction in the "art of the didactic"; suggesting that fiction should "educate its readers in its views of what it means to be a human being," Ozick asks "to which black-humorist or parodist would you entrust the whole lives of human beings?"

Ozick's response illustrates the problem many readers influenced by the Jamesian view of fiction have with metafiction--a term concisely defined by Patricia Waugh as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." The mimetic tradition has created the expectation that fiction be about "life" and that it teach truths about the reality it depicts. Readers steeped in this tradition want to be involved emotionally and morally in a character's situation; they expect, as Ozick says, "a corona of moral purpose" in their fiction. But as Peter Rabinowitz has suggested in "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," the more an author "increases our awareness of the novel as art," the more he diminishes
our "direct emotional involvement" in his work. 4 An author who constantly exposes the structures and language which make up his fictions--one who reminds us within the fictional construct that "literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes" 5--does indeed make it difficult for readers to become emotionally involved in a world constructed from "mere" words. And by performing his own first critical analysis within the text itself, the writer of metafiction makes it difficult for the critic-reader to respond in familiar ways. The most satisfying mimetic fiction, most readers would agree, also defies the reader's expectations and demands a new response, but it does so by respecting, at least in some ways, narrative conventions. Readers agree to enter the world of the narrative, and for the duration of the reading we temporarily consent to the illusion that the text is about "real" people and "real" events; we can--and do--of course step out of that world whenever we wish to make intellectual and aesthetic observations about those structures, but even an arresting metaphor or a well-turned phrase does not so much remove us from the world of the narrative by reminding us of the text as linguistic construct as much as it makes us see something within the narrative world more clearly. In other words, though we
might admire the author's verbal virtuosity, we see that virtuosity as a means of sustaining or intensifying the realistic illusion of the work, not as an invitation to foreground his role as constructor of a fictional world.

The experience of reading metafiction is different from the experience of reading mimetic fiction, in part because we are never allowed to forget that the text before us is a fictional construct, but also because our roles as readers and our attitudes toward literature are redefined by these texts. Instead of viewing the text as a mirror of the "real" world—a product—we must concentrate on the processes involved in constructing and reading that text. Even in novels that retain strong ties to mimetic fiction, as for example does The French Lieutenant's Woman, our involvement is never only in the narrative world of the text, but always also in the process by which that text is constructed. Fowles' novel, for instance, is in many ways an imitation of a Victorian novel, which itself is generally an imitation of some non-fictional genre, such as autobiography or history; but because The French Lieutenant's Woman uses metafictional devices, the reader is never allowed to forget that the novel is a fiction, an orderly construct made by an artificer about characters who exist only as words. Texts that flaunt their use of artifice offer different satisfactions and demand different readerly responses from those that respect the mimetic tradition.
Readers who approach metafictional texts with the expectations they bring to traditional literature are thus likely to be unsatisfied, frustrated, even angry, but to follow such readers' impulses and condemn authors of metafiction as lacking seriousness, substance, and a didactic purpose is simply wrong-headed. John Gardner, after denouncing Barth's "artistic self-consciousness," claims that our "more fashionable writers feel, as Chekhov and Tolstoy did not, that their art is unimportant; and they're correct":

...the fact remains that our serious fiction is quite bad. The emphasis, among younger artists on surface and novelty of effect is merely symptomatic. The sickness goes deeper, to an almost total loss of faith in--or perhaps understanding of--how true art works. True art, by specific technical means now commonly forgotten, clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns....It designs visions worth trying to make fact.6

Many writers who employ metafictional techniques do indeed question, not the importance of literature, but its ultimate impact upon readers, suggesting as Barth does in Chimera that "the treasure of art...could not redeem the barbarities of history or spare us the horrors of living and dying."7 And by exposing the man-madeness of fictional constructs, these writers reject the metaphor that equates author and god, thus denying the author's role as a prophet who teaches absolute truths. Yet these assumptions do not
necessarily imply that metafictional writers believe their art is unimportant. Critics who condemn the self-consciousness of contemporary literary experiments generally do so by appealing to standards similar to those outlined by Gardner; they insist again and again that fiction should be about human beings, human action, and that it should make judgments about right and wrong directions. Writers of metafiction do, in a genuine sense, meet this standard. If fiction, in other words, matters as much as writers, readers, and especially critics like to believe, are not the processes of creating and reading and responding to fiction uniquely human actions and thus valid subjects of literature? Writers of metafiction recognize that we are readers as well as lovers, and if a text resists our emotional involvement by flaunting its construction, its man-madeness, then perhaps we must alter our approach to the text rather than condemning wholesale all metafictional works as "unimportant" and "unreadable." Metafictional texts seem "unreadable"--a term I take as both descriptive and value-laden--only because they defy expectations created by mimetic art; what we need is neither unexamined praise or condemnation of self-conscious techniques, but an understanding of how these techniques involve readers in the process of the narrative's construction. In other words, we need a rhetoric to enable us to understand how individual authors use metafictional
techniques in particular works both to delight their readers and to teach them about language, the conventions of literature, and their roles in the narrative transaction provided by the text. This dissertation is designed to develop that rhetoric.

Since John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" appeared twenty years ago, there have been a number of book length studies of metafiction. In one of the best known, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre, Robert Alter defines a self-conscious novel as one that "systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real seeming artifice and reality." Arguing that Don Quixote is both the first realistic novel and the first self-conscious novel, Alter suggests that a tradition characterized by playfulness in the text and skepticism about the status of fiction developed concurrently with the novel's realistic tradition, and he claims that the subject of novelists such as Cervantes, Stern, Diderot, Gide, and Nabokov is the "disparity between the structures of the imagination and things as they are." As this art/life dichotomy suggests, Alter is essentially concerned with ontological and existential questions. He begins his history by suggesting that the printing press created an "erosion of belief in the authority of the written word," which self-conscious writers saw as the "key to the
predicament of a whole culture"; he ends by suggesting that metafictional writers "tap the tension between the coherence of the artifice and the death and disorder implicit in real time outside the artifice."  Although Alter does not concern himself much with post-modern practitioners of the self-conscious novel (he devotes only twenty pages to writers after Nabokov), his book does provide the philosophical foundation for an extended study of post-modern texts.

Tony Tanner, in City of Words, takes as his subject American writers between 1950 and 1970, arguing that as a group they "evince a heightened awareness of the separateness of words and things." The American hero's struggle for freedom and identity against society's constraints, says Tanner, parallels the American writer's struggle for stylistic freedom against language and the existing forms of literature. Although Tanner includes several metafictional writers in his almost encyclopedic study of recent American fiction, he does not really make meaningful formal distinctions between a metafictional writer like John Barth and a more realistic writer like John Updike. While he is an excellent reader of texts, Tanner seems more interested in studying the impulse which makes writers seek new ways to use language to organize reality than in studying the effects this impulse enables writers to create.
In *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Robert Scholes does attempt to show the diversity of metafictional types. Using *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Pricksongs and Descants*, *City Life*, and *The Heart of the Heart of the Country*, Scholes suggests that there are four modes of metafiction, which are derived from the four types of traditional fiction he identifies: formal metafiction (derived from romance); structural metafiction (from myth); behavioral metafiction (from the novel); and philosophical metafiction (from allegory). But in his discussions of these four categories, Scholes concentrates not so much on the different effects of these forms, but on, once again, the philosophical assumptions of each form and each author, and concludes that "Barth and Barthelme are the chroniclers of our despair: despair over the exhausted forms of our thought and our existence," while "Coover and Gass are reaching through forms and behavior for some ultimate value, some truth."12

A more recent work, Charles Caramello's *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self & Postmodern American Fiction*, seeks to answer this question: "How do the problematics of the book and of the authorial self figure in postmodern American Fiction?"13 Caramello suggests that a complex and ambivalent relationship exists between the physical book as a regulated system of signs and the (American) self who organizes and makes coherent that book. He explores
questions of the authorial self as depicted by American critical theory and literary history and then suggests the ways these critical practices have influenced post-modern fiction. He concludes that "under the tutelage" of critical theory, this "fiction proclaims itself to have rejected the unities of the book and the authorial self; but...under the differing pressures of ...literary modernism and the native American tradition, it seeks to reclaim precisely those unities." Though Caramello suggests that this ambivalence is peculiarly American, his work does provide a theoretical basis for an assumption that has fueled the present study from its inception: that, as Fowles suggests, "not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely."15

These essentially ontological studies typify much of the work devoted to metafiction. "A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics," claimed Sartre in an essay on Faulkner; "the critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former." We have several important studies on the metaphysics of metafiction, and we now need to explore its rhetorical techniques. Linda Hutcheon's book, Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox, is an important beginning for the study of the role of the reader in post-contemporary fiction, but by relying heavily on the Iserian definition
of the reader as "co-creator" in her exploration of the art/life dichotomy provided by self-conscious techniques, Hutcheon's work is both more limited and encyclopedic than my study of the rhetorical nature of metafiction. And like another recent work that is concerned with the similarities between the construction of fictional texts and the construction of a sense of reality, Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, *Narcissitic Narrative* frequently fails to distinguish between different uses of similar metafictional devices. While I owe a considerable debt to both Waugh and Hutcheon, a debt which will be acknowledged throughout the text of this dissertation, my own work differs from theirs in several ways, most importantly, I believe, in my rhetorical approach to texts that on the surface seem anti-rhetorical, and in my attempt to distinguish between different uses of similar techniques. As a rhetoric, then, this work does not so much cover the same ground as Waugh's and Hutcheon's as much as it attempts to show the multiple effects possible when the theories they outline are practiced by different authors.

While the title of my study echoes Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, it actually shares more with the project of *A Rhetoric of Irony*. That is, the first two words describe my approach, the last two my subject. More broadly, I attempt to describe--and to evaluate--the kinds
of transactions that occur between authors and readers in the class of texts we label "metafiction". With Booth, then, I share a basic assumption that a text's internal signals--signals of form, of convention, of language--provide us with clues as to the type of readerly role into which the individual writer is casting us; that is, I am interested in the ways that metafictional techniques both unite and divide authors and readers. Of course, the explosion of reader-response criticism in the past twenty years is one of the most significant developments of modern criticism and has produced many ways of describing readers and their roles: in addition to Iser's co-creating implied reader, we have, to name just a few, Gibson's mock reader, Fish's informed reader, Culler's competent reader, and Ong's fictionalized reader. For the purposes of my rhetorical study, however, I have employed the terms developed by Peter Rabinowitz, who distinguishes between the narrative audience and the authorial audience of a text: in traditional narratives, the narrative audience pretends to read a narrative as though the events it describes actually happened, while the authorial audience is the audience for whom the writer fashions his rhetorical effects. In other words, the narrative audience most closely resembles the reader for whom the narrator writes, while the authorial audience is the reader for whom the author writes.
Although, as Rabinowitz acknowledges, both audiences are fictions and the reader's ability to enter these audiences does not constitute the final act of interpretation, writers generally imagine an authorial audience similar to "real" readers, while the narrative audience is clearly a created fiction:

...the author not only knows that the narrative audience is different from the actual and authorial audiences, but he rejoices in this fact and expects his actual audience to rejoice with him. For it is this difference which makes fiction fiction, and makes the double-leveled aesthetic experience possible. As we shall see, the author plays with this distinction and builds much of his effect on it.16

And successful readers naturally attempt to become the types of readers implied by the text. For example, the narrator of *Great Expectations* pretends to be writing his autobiography, so the reader enters the narrative audience by reading the text as a memoir which chronicles Pip's life; Dickens' authorial audience, however, is composed of Victorian novel readers who are well-versed in the social and literary conventions of their time, and Dickens fashions his novel not only to entertain his contemporaries but to persuade them to question some of their society's values. Of course, many of the lessons learned by the narrative audience are the same as those learned by the authorial audience, but it is the authorial audience who also experiences the aesthetic pleasures of Dickens'
fictional construct. Since Dickens' artistic choices, and thus the effects of those choices, are influenced by the hypothetical beliefs and knowledge he attributes to his Victorian audience, the modern reader must make an attempt to enter that audience.\textsuperscript{17} Works like Altick's \textit{Victorian People and Ideas} and footnotes which accompany most modern editions of \textit{Great Expectations} help readers bridge the gap, and, as Rabinowitz suggests, a liberal arts education helps provide "the relevant information so that we can join various authorial audiences."\textsuperscript{18} But while background information helps, the most fruitful way to discover our position as members of the authorial audience is to look at how the text, in its significant appeals and silences, both creates and assumes its audience. In other words, if all choices of form and language are viewed as rhetorical, all provide clues about the author's intended audience and its role in the transaction provided by the text.

Since self-conscious fiction is frequently denounced as both "unreadable" and "solipsistic," it might seem to seriously challenge the rhetorical approach I have just described. That is, metafiction calls its narrative audience's attention to its own artifice, to its own rhetoric, and thus seemingly usurps the authorial reader's role by foregrounding the intentions of the fiction; and critics who suggest that metafictional techniques are inherently solipsistic indicate that self-consciousness
"promotes an independent and wary intelligence in readers at the expense of a more satisfying confirmation of the specific narrator or artist." These charges of solipsism and unreadability suggest that author and reader never experience that "meeting of minds" whose intricacies and processes rhetorical criticism seeks to analyze, but as I suggest throughout, the foregrounding in the narrative text of the process by which that text was constructed does not necessarily make a text unreadable or solipsistic; instead, it requires the authorial reader to ask different questions about the literary transaction than does mimetic fiction. Just as the successful reader recognizes that Pip is not Dickens, the reader of metafiction must understand that the narrator of a self-conscious fiction is frequently quite distant from its author (surely, for example, Barth cannot be identified with the narrator in "Life-Story" who suggests that he can't even commit suicide without the help of the reader). But by calling our attention to the ways by which the author manipulates literary conventions, metafictional texts finally remind us that literature is unique in that it is both transactional and solitary, "both produced and consumed, or received, by individuals as individuals." Metafiction also raises intriguing questions about the nature of authorial audiences. Very few metafictional texts have been best-sellers, suggesting that few self-
conscious writers aspire to appeal to universal audiences. As Rabinowitz suggests, sometimes writers seem not to even attempt to write for "real" readers:

Some writers, such as the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, appear not to care about actual readers at all; others, such as John Barth, have intentions which are so subtle and complex that they can only write for an authorial audience which they know to be, at best, but a tiny portion of their actual audience.21

Many metafictional texts are indeed difficult to read, sometimes resisting even readers who are critically sophisticated, and thus their writers are frequently charged with elitism. Of course, it is possible to simply disregard this charge by suggesting that it corresponds to the pattern of literary history and that innovations in narrative form—and in artistic endeavors in general—have always been met with resistance. Eco, for instance, reminds us that "the great innovative moments" in the history of painting reveal the difficulty artists face whenever they attempt to radically alter artistic conventions:

Take the case of the Impressionists, whose addressees absolutely refused to 'recognize' the subjects represented and said that they 'did not understand,' that the painting 'did not mean anything,' that real life was not like that, etc. This refusal was due to the addressees' lack not only of a semantic model to which the mapped items might be referred, but also of a percept to guess at, since they had never perceived in this way.22
The more radical the innovations—the more the author attempts, in Eco’s words, to change codes—the more the reader must struggle to understand the text. I would also suggest that a rhetorical strategy of many metafictional texts is to make readers work hard and then to pay them well. That is, those who enter the authorial audience of a innovative text are made to feel they have accomplished something that not everyone can; one of the pleasures of reading difficult fiction, self-conscious or mimetic, then, is the intellectual satisfaction of entering an elite authorial audience. The question, finally, should be to what extent must readers share with metafictional writers—and plead guilty to—these charges of elitism?

Throughout the following chapters, I consider these charges of elitism and unreadability as I describe and evaluate the effects of metafictional techniques. Since this is a rhetorical study, I have loosely organized the chapters around the elements of the narrative transaction (teller, tale, told, and the medium) emphasized by different types of metafiction, though my own emphasis is always on the authorial audience implied by these techniques. The first chapter thus focuses on self-conscious fiction that stresses the author’s role as performer and teacher, fiction which draws the audience’s attention to the processes by which the author seeks to
alter our expectations about literary conventions and to teach us to read performance literature. The second, then, focuses primarily on metafiction that draws its reader's attention to the importance of the tale itself through the parody of traditional narratives, such as legends and fairy tales. Metafiction which takes language—its own medium—rather than the forms of fiction as its subject is the focus of the third chapter, and self-conscious fiction which actually dramatizes and makes a character of the reader is the subject of the fourth. Most authors of self-conscious literature draw our attention to more than one of these elements, but the division is useful nevertheless because most writers of metafiction finally concern themselves more with one of the elements than with the others. Within each chapter, I attempt to show the range of effects created by the emphasis on the particular element of the narrative transaction; in other words, one author may dramatize his reader and achieve quite different effects than another author who uses the same self-conscious technique, and I indicate these distinctions at the same time that I am concerned with the uses of similar techniques.

Speaking of the term irony, Booth suggests that "Once a term has been used to cover just about everything there is, it perhaps ought simply to be retired; if it can apply to everything, it can hardly be rescued for everyday
purposes." Before the term metafiction reaches such a condition, I should like to suggest that there is a difference between works that are radically metafictional and those that merely employ metafictional techniques; the use of irony in a text does not mean that the entire work is ironic, and the use of self-conscious techniques does not necessarily mean that the entire work is anti-realistic or anti-mimetic or even belongs exclusively in that class of texts we call "metafiction." In the chapter that explores the device of the dramatized reader, for instance, I discuss Gardner's *October Light* and Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, works which use a specific metafictional technique but, to different degrees, subordinate the metafictional elements to the mimetic. The final chapter of this study, then, is centered on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a text that employs several different metafictional techniques but essentially retains strong ties to conventional "realistic" fiction, in order to test the validity of my claims about the effects of these techniques. While the radical metafictional text like Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* may have seen its heyday in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, it is difficult to find a contemporary work of serious literature that does not, in at least some minor way, exhibit signs of authorial self-consciousness or acknowledge its own fictitiousness. Even readers who
deplore the experimental and the self-conscious should understand the effects an author attempts to create by calling our attention to the processes by which the text is constructed. For the most part, metafictional texts are finally anchored in the "art of the didactic." Just as writers like Woolf, Joyce, and Faulkner made readers conscious of our unconscious activity, writers of contemporary metafiction make us conscious of our activity as readers. What they have to teach us about how we read applies not only to metafiction but to mimetic fiction as well, and though we may not be able to come away from a radically metafictional text with a summary truth about the world outside of the fiction, we may come away as better readers--of both texts and world.
Notes


3 Ozick, p. 245.


9 Alter, p. 87.

10 Alter, p. 3, 235.


14 Caramello, p. 211.


16 Rabinowitz, p. 130.

17 Though it is quite possible for a writer to fashion his effects for an authorial audience which extends indefinitely into the future, Dickens, I would argue, writes for his own time.

18 Rabinowitz, p. 127.


21 Rabinowitz, p. 126.


CHAPTER II
DIDACTIC METAFICTION

Educating Readers: The Pleasures of the Text

In "The Literature of Exhaustion," which appeared in 1967, the year before Lost in the Funhouse, John Barth makes the distinction between ideas worth discussing and things worth doing and suggests that because anyone can talk about ideas, he prefers the type of art that not many people can do. Comparing the pop artists of the Sixties with the acrobats who delighted him as a child, Barth claims that he is "on the whole more impressed by the jugglers and acrobats at Baltimore's old Hippodrome... genuine virtuosi doing things that anyone can dream up and discuss but almost no one can do."¹

This preference for doing over talking, for the performance over the idea, for the process over the substance, is at the very heart of Lost in the Funhouse, but the consequences of Barth's preference have been denounced more than they have been applauded. Alter, for instance, objects to Barth's emphasis on the writer's virtuosity, calling it "a peculiarly elitist and miraculist notion of literary continuity and renewal."² Claiming that
the metafictional techniques employed in *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera* are gratuitous and indulgent,
Klinkowitz further suggests that Barth's performance results in very unsatisfying art: in these works, he claims, Barth "confuses the product of art with the conditions of its inception, a process which obviously fascinates Barth ... but which often results in simple bad writing." Shloss and Tololyan, on the other hand, applaud Barth's virtuosity, but they raise a serious question about the effect of performance literature on the relationship between the author and his reader: "To control, to parade with feckless, changing voice through a brilliantly patterned but hollow text, may be masterful, but it is also solipsistic; it promotes an independent and wary intelligence in readers at the expense of a more satisfying confirmation of the specific narrator or artist." The objection that Barth's performance alters the nature of the literary transaction so that it is less satisfying than that of more traditional narratives has ominous implications. Cynthia Ozick, for example, claims that experimental fiction which seeks to create "wholly different" expectations subverts "not only literature but the desire to have a literature." These objections deserve serious consideration, for like the charges of elitism and gratuitousness, they extend beyond *Lost in the Funhouse* to metafictional strategies in general. But in
order to evaluate the consequences of Barth's preference for the performance over the idea, it is first necessary to look more closely at the nature of *Lost in the Funhouse*.

The author's note to this collection is the first indication of his preference for doing over saying. Indicating the ideal methods of presentation for each of his fictions, he claims that the story called "Title," "makes somewhat separate but equally valid senses in several media; print, monophonic recorded authorial voice, stereophonic ditto in dialogue with itself, live authorial voice, live ditto in dialogue with monophonic ditto aforementioned, and live ditto interlocutory with stereophonic et cetera, my own preference; it's been 'done' in all six." Despite the obvious facetiousness of this note, many readers have taken his suggestions at face value, either claiming as one critic has, that many of the pieces in *Lost in the Funhouse* do indeed "lose much meaning in print and have to be imagined spoken" or suggesting, as another has, that Barth has capitulated to "the forces of an imperfectly understood Marshall MacLuhan." While Barth's note does not offer any helpful suggestions for ways of reading his collection (and after all, the printed version is in fact the only way it's been 'done'), it does indicate that he is an author intensely aware of his medium. But that awareness shines through his choices within his medium for talking about media: his use of
words like aforementioned and et cetera, and his repetition of ditto (which, of course, indicates repetition itself) work to undercut the literal content of his statement and to satirize—rather than capitulate to—the intermedia artist. The quotation above, for example, is difficult to process when heard, but when the referents to all those dittoes and aforementions are stabilized on the printed page, it is simply a matter of backtracking according to grammatical conventions to discover meaning. Barth's note on possible and preferred medium, then, leads back to an implicit claim for the distinctiveness of—and his virtuosity with—written language.

This preference for doing over saying creates an interesting rhetorical problem for the author of *Lost in the Funhouse*. Like all virtuosos, Barth needs an audience who can appreciate his considerable skills. Yet as Peter Rabinowitz suggests, Barth seems to belong to a group of writers who "have intentions which are so subtle and complex that they can only write for an authorial audience which they know to be, at best, but a tiny portion of their actual audience."9 Others have likewise suggested that "Barth wants to annoy his readers rather than engage them."10 The rhetorical strategies of *Lost in the Funhouse*, however, suggest a different intention and a different attitude toward the authorial audience. Barth seems to have believed, in 1968 anyway, that this audience
was unprepared to participate fully in the process of making meaning from the type of art he could do best. These readers know the conventions of realistic literature, and they generally expect fiction to reveal some truth about the world outside of the text; in other words, Barth writes for an audience steeped in the high modern aesthetic. His rhetorical difficulty, then, is that he must on the one hand make his readers self-conscious about their expectations of what literature should be and thus teach them the falseness of those expectations; and on the other hand, he must perform in ways that teach the reader to appreciate his virtuosity. He must be both pedant and acrobat, talker and doer.

In handbook fashion, the narrator of "Lost in the Funhouse" explains the traditional functions of the parts of a narrative: the beginning should "introduce the principal characters" and "establish their initial relationships," while the middle has the "double and contradictory function of delaying the climax while at the same time preparing the reader for it and fetching him to it" (73-74). Although Barth is hardly conventional, he nevertheless loosely follows this strategy in order to instruct and woo his reader. Thus the collection is roughly divided into three parts, with the first part introducing his fictional concerns through narratives that his audience will be able to enter with the conventions
they already understand. The metafictional middle of the book has the double function of making explicit statements about the nature of conventional narratives and of preparing the reader for his unconventional ones. The stories of the third part, then, reward Barth’s steady pupils and provide a type of climax—the author is finally allowed to escape his self-consciousness and to perform his type of art.

Let me begin by examining two stories from the first part of the collection, "Night-Sea Journey" and "Petition." On the narrative level, the first is about the journey of a sole surviving sperm, blindly pursuing the egg, and the second is the letter of an embittered Siamese twin petitioning for independence from his crude brother; but these stories actually introduce Barth’s theme of the writer’s solitary endeavor and begin to establish his notion of the uneasy relationship between writers and readers. Barth’s swimming "tale-bearer" (Shloss and Tololyan have already pointed out the pun—sperm bear tails while authors bear tales) posits many possible purposes for the journey, but he is unable to choose one that best explains his situation. The contemporary author faces a similar difficulty: though capable of creating many patterns that might explain or structure his experience, he ultimately cannot impose any single one on the world because "Truth" is not only relative but ultimately
indeterminate. Barth furthers the analogy between swimmer and writer by suggesting that the sperm cannot determine the meaning of the journey any more than "he could say what would happen after She and Hero, Shore and Swimmer, 'merged identities' to become something both and neither" (10). The writer's endeavor, like the sperm's, becomes meaningful only when received by another; but as Iser suggests, "reading removes the subject-object division that constitutes all perception," and though the text can be given life only by a reader, it becomes something that partakes of both reader and writer—and yet is neither. The petitioner's dependence upon his brother likewise mirrors the writer's upon the reader. The brother who writes the letter says he is solitary, articulate but mute, "an observer of life, a meditator, a taker of notes, a dreamer" (59); his twin, on the other hand, is "incoherent but vocal," ignorant, uncompromising, and uncooperative. They depend on each other for existence, yet fight each other for supremacy. The petitioning brother craves his independence—an identity not merged with another's: "Death itself I would embrace like a lover, if I might share the grave with no other company. To be one: paradise! To be two: bliss! But to be both and neither is unspeakable" (68). In "Petition," the fact of dependency is threatening, particularly to the writer, who can assert power only by pulling against his brother
(reader), spoiling his pleasure, and halving his force (61). But the Siamese twin, like Barth, realizes that he will always be dependent on another and imagines a new type of relationship, "something more congenial and sympathetic" (67).

While these stories from the beginning of Barth's collection introduce his fictional concerns, they are not metafictional. That these stories are implausible does not make them necessarily unconventional; they do, in a manner, offer "truths" about the conditions of their narrators. No intrusive narrator reminds us of the fictionality of these fictions or of the fact that a sperm could not tell his story, and it is possible to enter the narrative audience in the same way we make the leap of faith when Kafka's narrator tells us that Gregor Samsa awoke one morning to discover he had been metamorphized into a cockroach. Similarly, the analogy between sperm and writer is not explicit in the text; we discover it, from implicit clues in the text, using the same process we use to find analogies in traditional fiction. What is perhaps also implicit in Barth's bizarre choice of narrators is the belief of many postmodern writers that it is almost impossible to write anything new.

This postmodern concern forms the conflict at the heart of the collection's title story, which has two separate narratives competing for its audience's attention:
the first, a seemingly typical story of an adolescent's growing self-consciousness as he makes his way through a funhouse in Ocean City, is continually interrupted—and finally overtaken—by the story of the narrator's growing self-consciousness as a writer. This narrator knows that his authorial audience does not come fresh-eyed to his text, that his readers have a great deal of experience reading fiction, and that this experience has created expectations that the narrator simply cannot fulfill. The narrator similarly believes that his readers will not measure his story against their experience in the everyday world, but against their experience as participants in fictional worlds. By writing, for example, "When Ambrose and Peter's father was their age, the excursion was made by train, as mentioned in the novel The 42nd Parallel by John Dos Passos" (70), the narrator relies for support not upon the historical correctness of his observation, but upon the reader's recognition of a fictional precedent. Similarly, when he worries that a remark attributed to Ambrose might seem too sophisticated for a thirteen-year-old boy, he wonders not if some real teenager could think like that, but if he is violating the fictional principle of verisimilitude. And after writing that Ambrose and his brother were "stimulated by the briny spume," he recalls that "The Irish author James Joyce...uses the adjectives snot-green and scrotum-tightening to describe the sea."
Visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory" (71). The narrator recognizes that in comparison his own adjectives are trite and will fail to engage the reader's imagination.

Failure of imagination occurs at every level of "Lost in the Funhouse." On the narrative level, both Ambrose and the narrator are imaginatively paralyzed by their self-consciousness. The lonely adolescent, who feels "different" from everyone around him, recognizes that funhouses appeal to lovers and attempts to imagine one where it would be impossible to get lost: "He would be its operator: panel lights would show what was up in every cranny of its cunning of its multifarious vastness; a switch-flick would ease this fellow's way, complicate that's, to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened, all the operator had to do was" (93). Lost in the conventional form, Ambrose is unable to approach the problem freshly, so he is unable to imagine a better funhouse. Similarly, the narrator's awareness of his literary predecessors renders him incapable of completing even a simple metaphor, and the story is thus full of open-ended statements such as this: "The brown hair on Ambrose's mother's forearms gleamed in the sun like" (70). Unwilling to simply complete the fictional formulas he knows readers expect and unable to imagine new formulas, he leaves them blank.
But Ambrose and the narrator are not the only ones lacking imagination. Implicit in this story is a condemnation of the authorial audience's dependence upon pat fictional formulas. Barth's accomplishment in this story is that by beginning to make readers conscious of the falseness of their aesthetic expectations--by revealing the artifice of those techniques that make literature seem "real," he also makes them complicit in the writer's failure to fulfill their expectations to tell the Truth with artifice.

Barth moves from implicit suggestion in "Lost in the Funhouse" to explicit statement in "Title" and "Life-Story," narratives which seem to support Klinkowitz's contention that the author's obsession with the processes of composition results in "simple bad writing." These stories are not only uninteresting apart from what they have to tell us about fictionality, but they are purposely tedious--they are perfect illustrations of Barth's belief that it is far easier to talk technique than it is to make art. But each of these stories works in two ways to instruct the reader and alter his or her expectations of what literature should be. On the first level, the narrators clearly articulate problems all contemporary authors must face: the usedupness of old forms, the difficulty of impressing readers who are all too familiar with conventional techniques, and perhaps most important,
the fact that "the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed unless as a false analogy" (125). Barth's narrators, then, not only desire to abandon old forms, but to abandon likewise the mimetic notion that fiction can really tell us anything about how real people behave; in other words, Barth wants us to acknowledge "the fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity" (125) of even purportedly realistic fiction.

But in addition to articulating these concerns, Barth instructs his reader through the manipulation of technique. In "Title," for instance, the narrator is so overwhelmed by ennui at the prospect of writing another predictable story that he frequently writes like this: "In this dehuman, exhausted, ultimate adjective hour, when every humane value has become untenable, and not only love, decency, and beauty but even compassion and intelligibility are no more than one or two subjective complements to complete the sentence" (103-4). Unlike the narrator of "Lost in the Funhouse" who is unable to fill in the blanks because of his consciousness of the reader, this narrator substitutes grammatical terms for what should be content words in order to frustrate the reader's expectations that the author should fill in the blanks for her. In addition to making her aware of the writer's role as performer, this substitution of form for substance makes her more conscious of her activity as a reader. That is, even a "passive"
reader of traditional narratives anticipates certain means by which the author will complete things, even sentences. When, for example, a reader meets with this beginning, "The house on the hill was," she might anticipate some physical description, such as white or sprawling, and if the author fulfills that expectation, she processes the information without taking much notice of it. If, on the other hand, the author completes the sentence with a less familiar description—such as "haunted" or "in flames" for instance—the reader automatically recognizes that this minor departure from the anticipated is significant and forms new narrative expectations based on it; the reader, however, is surprised only by the content, not by the form, and she is able to process the information without consciously contemplating her activity. But when the author simply completes the sentence with "adjective," the reader is unable to process it passively, for instead of meeting the anticipated content word, she meets a term describing the function of the word she expected. Her reading thus disrupted, she is forced both to contemplate her own expectations and to attend more closely to the words that actually appear on the page.

And Barth rewards his authorial audience for this heightened self-consciousness through verbal play. The narrator of "Title," for instance, comments upon his metafictional techniques and suggests that "it’s self-
defeating to talk about it instead of up and doing it; but to acknowledge what I'm doing while I'm doing it is exactly the point. Self-defeat implies a victor, and who do you suppose it is, if not blank?" (107). The reader is invited to fill in that blank in two ways: the writer, of course, is victorious in that having talked about technique, he will now be able to perform; but the reader is likewise a winner, for having acknowledged the fictitiousness of conventional structures, he is able to participate in a different type of process.

At this point, Barth acknowledges the necessity of an audience to appreciate his virtuosity and makes explicit the dependent relationship developed in "Night-Sea Journey" and "Petition":

...your own author bless and damn you his life is in your hands! He writes and reads himself; don't you think he knows who gives his creatures their lives and deaths? Do they exist except as he or others read their words? Age except we turn their pages? And can he die until you have no more of him? (124)

Despite the necessity of readers, the narrator of "Life-Story" risks alienating them, or as one critic has put it, "John Barth heckles his literary coconspirators"12 with explicit insults:

The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what
discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where's your shame? (123)

Where indeed? The story itself has no plot, and the narrator's self-conscious sophistry is tedious and unafflicting. The reader who forbears and continues reading despite the narrator's pleading that he put an end to the miserable story by closing the book must be different from the narrative audience.

Linda Westervelt suggests that John Barth "gives the readers signals that his narrators are not to be identified with him in any simple fashion." Similarly, the authorial audience is not to be identified with the narrative audience that the writer in "Life-Story" addresses. Barth is, in part, distinguished from his cranky, bored narrator by his verbal virtuosity, his playfulness, and by his ability to imagine a more congenial relationship between author and reader. The reader who can survive the surface of the printed page is likewise distinguished from the reader who desires more traditional narratives by his willingness to delight in play. The insult is aimed at readers who must have their expectations for action and mimesis fulfilled; as the narrator of "Anonymiad" says, "if you must have dialogue and dashing about, better go to the theater" (172). (And the
implication here is that other mediums—film, television, theater—fulfill certain narrative functions, while the printed word offers different types of narrative and verbal satisfactions). The insult hurled at these "incompetent" readers, then, becomes a compliment to Barth's authorial audience, which is made up of a select community of print-oriented people who are willing to engage a difficult written text.

The more congenial relationship between author and reader, or teller and told, is the one implicit in "Menelaid" and "Anonymiad," the last stories in the collection. Although both are clearly meant for print, as Barth's experimenting with punctuation marks unique to written language indicates, the underlying relationship between writer and reader is that of the teller and auditor of the oral tale. As Ong suggests, the oral narrator's audience already knows the tale; the pleasure comes from the surprising manner in which it is told. The teller's performance likewise depends upon his audience; according to Ong, the more active and delighted the audience, the more involved the tale.14 In the oral narrative, then, both auditor and teller are more concerned with the performance than with the substance of the tale; the purpose of the narrative occasion is not only to instruct the audience by providing insights into the human condition (although these well-told tales do that as well), but also
to engage and entertain the audience. Thus for the final
tories in the collection, Barth chooses classic tales he
expects his authorial audience to have read, and he
playfully retells them. Fiction becomes the source of
more, original fiction, with the emphasis shifting from the
substance to the performance, a shift for which the
previous stories in the collection have prepared his
audience.

While the reader's awareness of literary precedents
paralyzes the narrators of the metafictions in the middle
of Lost in the Funhouse, Barth turns his audience's
literariness to his advantage in "Menelaiad." Here, the
audience's familiarity with the characters and events of
the Odyssey is a prerequisite for understanding and
appreciating Barth's imaginative revision of a small part
of Homer's epic. "Menelaiad" has more substance--more
"story"--than "Title" or "Life-Story," but the effects of
Barth's fiction depend upon its departures from, and
additions to, the classic tale. By employing the mythic
tale, Barth thus controls the conventions to which his
readers must appeal and leads them to those of the epic and
the oral tale.

Like Barth's post-modern narrators, Menelaus is
worried about his role as "story-teller." The "voice" of
"Menelaiad" recounts the story told to Telemachus
(Odysseus' son) and Peisistratus (Nestor's son) when they
came to Sparta for news of Odysseus. Within this recounting, however, are other "tellings" of the events leading to his marriage to Helen, the Trojan war, his ambush of Proteus, and his "reconquering" of Helen to several different audiences: Helen, Proteus, his daughter Eidothea, Telemachus and Peisistratus, and finally, the auditor of his current telling, the reader of Barth's book. Each telling envelops the previous telling, resulting in a convoluted attempt to distinguish between discourses: """"""Why?" I repeated," I repeated,' I repeated," I repeated,' I repeated," I repeat" (148). The action of telling takes on greater significance (and takes up more space) than the tale itself, and each occasion for the recounting alters and becomes part of that tale.

And like the previous narrators of *Lost in the Funhouse*, Menelaus is uncertain about his own existence; he is only a "voice," and his story--and his existence as a character in it--can only unfold through a narrative situation. The presence of auditors, then, is necessary for Menelaus to affirm his existence, but by participating in the narrative event, each auditor alters the tale, for every question, utterance, response is incorporated in the next telling. Menelaus, momentarily confused about the occasion of a particular telling, wonders to whom he's speaking: "Got your ear, have I? Like to know how it was, I suppose? Where in Hades are we? Where'd I go? Whom've
I got hold of? Proteus? Helen?" (128) His auditor's response indicates both the mythic nature of Menelaus' narrative and that the events of the tale are already well-known:

"'Telemachus Odysseus'-son,' the lad replied, 'come from goat-girt Ithaca for news of my father, but willing to have his cloak clutched and listen all night to the tale How You Lost Your Navigator, Wandered Seven Years, Came Ashore at Pharos, Waylaid Eidothea, Tackled Proteus, Learned to Reach Greece by Sailing up the Nile, and Made Love to Your Wife, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, After an Abstinence of Eighteen Years.'" (129)

The capitalized phrases act as chapter headings for the events in Menelaus' life and emphasize the story-like quality of that life. But Telemachus' interpolation regarding Helen's beauty arouses the teller's suspicions about his auditor's real reasons for coming to Sparta and gives him another reason to hold tight to Telemachus' cloak and entertain him all evening with his well-told tale.

What is a minor event in Homer's Odyssey, the purpose of which is very specific--Menelaus must tell about Proteus' news of Odysseus--assumes major importance in Barth's "Menelaiad," for the auditor's participation in the tale gives the teller another purpose: to figuratively hold Telemachus captive with his tale in order to keep him out of Helen's bed. And by creating these suspicions, Telemachus ensures that this narrative occasion will become the next episode in Menelaus' life-story, as well as the frame for the current telling.
Unlike the modern writer who cannot wrestle his readers to the ground, Menelaus physically compels his auditors to authenticate his existence. He holds tight to Proteus' tail as he exhausts his animal guises, just as he hangs on to Telemachus' shirt tail; even Helen, confronted in her Trojan bedroom, must hear their history rehearsed by a sword-wielding Menelaus. But eventually it is the version of reality that the tale provides that wins over Telemachus. Smitten by Helen (who is herself a clever fiction-maker), Odysseus' son is a gullible member of the narrative audience and anxious to believe her story--that Proteus "made a Helen out of clouds" to take her place in Troy, while she languished, "chaste and comfy," in Pharos, waiting for her true husband to return. Menelaus, despite his doubts about the truthfulness of her tale, chooses to incorporate his wife's fiction into his own, not because he wants to believe her faithful, but because her fiction proves that he is "loved," for in his version of the Cartesian dictum, to be loved is to be.

Wise Nestor's son is more like the "modern" reader who must be held only by the tale and is concerned with consistency of both fact and technique, but because he is an auditor of an oral tale, Peisistratus is able to interrupt Menelaus' narrative and ask questions of the principal characters. He skeptically asks, for instance, why it is that Proteus, who can see both past and future,
must depend upon Menelaus' tale in order to discover Eidothea's treachery. Peisistratus' rational questions thus cast doubt upon the "realism" of Menelaus' tale and increase the narrator's doubts about his own reality, despite his attempts to ignore his auditor. When, for example, Menelaus reaches the very center of his narrative, which unfolds the story of why Helen chose him to be her husband over her more heroic suitors, he switches to third-person, as if he cannot quite believe he is the hero of his life-story and as if the story, so often repeated to so many different auditors, no longer belongs exclusively to him. Just as Menelaus is about to repeat his climactic "why," Peisistratus begs leave to ask two questions, but Menelaus, responding as though his auditor is referring to the question so important to the narrative, impatiently corrects him:

"'One! One! "'"There the bedstead stood; as he swooning tipped her to it his throat croaked "Why?"'
"'"'"Why?" asked Eidothea.'
"'"'"Why why?' Proteus echoed.'"
"'My own questions,' Peisistratus insisted, 'had to do with mannered rhetoric and your shift of narrative viewpoint.'
"'"'Ignore that fool!' Proteus ordered from the beach.'"
"'How can Proteus--' 'Seer.' 'So.' 'The opinions echoed in these speeches aren't necessarily the speaker's. " (149-150)

Like Barth, who distances the insults aimed at incompetent readers through a series of narrators, Menelaus refrains
from insulting Peisistratus directly and from thus risking the loss of his most attentive, if least gullible, auditor by attributing his impatience to Proteus, whose ability to see future events clearly includes future narrations.

Although Peisistratus is a comic characterization of the modern reader who lacks imagination, he also possesses many traits of the authorial audience Barth attempts to create throughout Lost in the Funhouse: while he wants playfulness, Peisistratus is engaged, actively involved, and willing to work as hard as his narrator. His pragmatic questions frustrate and annoy Menelaus, but Peisistratus' attention to details would surely earn Barth's admiration (after all, it is through Peisistratus' observations that Barth exhibits his own ability to "read" closely). And while other auditors seek in the narrative support for their own versions of truth, Peisistratus approaches the narrative disinterestedly, as simply a story, though a story whose characters' actions and motives should be psychologically realistic.

It is likewise important to remember that while Menelaus suffers from the same insecurities as the narrators of "Lost in the Funhouse," "Life-Story," and "Title," Barth himself is liberated from the solipsism of those stories through his use of Menelaus' tale. Instead of worrying about writing for an audience incapable of appreciating his abilities, Barth writes for the reader
who, having made his way through the funhouse, has, at least temporarily, consented to Barth's type of fiction. While Menelaus must coerce and force his auditors to attend to his tale, Barth knows that his audience can be held only by the force of his words, and he writes with a confidence missing from the earlier stories in the collection. Unlike the narrator of "Title" who feels he must explain the paradox inherent in the term "self-defeat," the author of "Menelaid" writes for a reader whose consciousness of linguistic play has been raised by the previous stories in Lost in the Funhouse. Having replaced the reader's expectation for plot and mimesis with an expectation for verbal virtuosity, Barth grants the reader his or her freedom to discover and appreciate that play. Menelaus, for example, relates Helen's response to his story about the capture of Proteus, which he tells while holding her on the deck of his ship off Pharos: "'Hard tale to hold onto, this,' declared my pooped spouse'" (139). The author does not explain that tale is a homonym for tail and thus refers not only to the convoluted story, but also to the literal tail by which Menelaus holds Proteus and to the figurative one by which he holds Helen, nor does he explain that Helen is not only pooped by the attempt to follow the tale, but also literally "decked." He allows the reader to discover the reverberations and double entendres, and his clever use of sexual euphemisms, anachronisms, and American
idioms reveal not a weariness with writing, but rather a love affair with the printed word, a love he seeks to share with his reader.

Love is the overriding theme of this collection, from its inception and night-sea journeying sperm through its final anonymous narrator, who suggests that "The trouble with us minstrels is, when all's said and done we love our work more than our women. More, indeed, than we love ourselves" (177). Throughout Lost in the Funhouse it seems, as Linda Westervelt has suggested, that "Lover and designer are mutually exclusive roles....On the one hand, the narrator-agents of "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Life-Story" are envious of the 'lovers for whom funhouses are designed' and characters in 'rousing good yarns,' and they hope to interest those kinds of readers in their fiction; on the other hand, they realize the futility of that hope."15 But, as I suggested earlier, through the use of Menelaus and the anonymous minstrel, Barth distances himself from these narrative complaints and from this type of futile relationship with his readers. Through the medium of his fiction, he engages in a type of mutually satisfying love-making with his readers. The Genie who appears to Scheherazade in Barth's next work, Chimera, is a character not so distant from his author: like the flesh and blood Barth, the Genie is "a light-skinned fellow of forty or so, smooth-shaven and bald as a rock's egg," with
"queer lenses that he wore in frame over his eyes." A writer from the twentieth century, he laments that "the only readers of artful fiction were critics, other writers, and unwilling students who, left to themselves, preferred music and pictures to words" (17). And it is the Genie who most clearly articulates the relationship Barth seeks with his authorial audience: narrative, says the writer, is "a love-relation, not a rape: its success depended upon the reader's consent and cooperation, which she could withhold or at any moment withdraw; also upon her own combination of experience and talent for enterprise, and the author's ability to arouse, sustain, and satisfy her interest" (34). Instead of antagonizing his reader as does the narrator of "Life-Story" or resenting his dependency and his role as a solitary observer, a dreamer, a taker of notes as does the petitioning Siamese twin, Barth—in "Menelaid" and "Anonymiad," as in Chimera—grants his reader her independence and power at the same time that he seeks to share with her his love of language and his artistry.

If Barth's preference for doing over saying gives his book this type of rhetorical construction, a construction that necessitates his persuading the reader to consent to his performance, then how troubling are the various objections cited at the outset? Critics like Shloss and Tololyan find the analogy between reader and lover to be false, "incapable of closure and bound inevitably to
disappoint. A reader is not a surrogate lover. Nameless, faceless, uncommitted to the literary transaction except as it pleases or annoys him, he cannot validate a writer's self in the same way that men and women confirm each other's worth. On a certain level this complaint is valid, as Barth himself seems to suggest in "Menelaid," for Menelaus is clearly pitiable for his inability to accept Helen's love, for his need to find authenticity through narration, and for his need to force his auditors to comply—to "rape" his narratees. But what happens to the characters in the literary work (whether that work is Lost in the Funhouse or something more traditional, like Middlemarch) is not what happens to the flesh and blood reader or writer of that work; the transaction between reader and writer exists not in the text, but through the text, through the medium of the printed page. Throughout Lost in the Funhouse, Barth seeks to educate his reader in order that he or she can appreciate not the man John Barth, but his verbal performance; similarly, Barth writes not for an audience that seeks verification of its own truths in his work, but for one that consents to participate in that virtuosi performance. In other words, Barth uses the analogy between reader and lover not in the romantic sense that Shloss and Tololyan do—that lovers share a heartfelt emotional and moral bond—but in a sexual sense—that reader and writer luxuriate in each other's skillful performances.
For what Shloss and Tololyan simply ignore—or refuse to grant—is the metafictionalist's basic assumption that the false analogy is the romantic one that equates author and god and replaces religion with literature, and it is ultimately Barth's refusal to communicate a "vision" that frustrates and disappoints readers like them. By making the reader aware of the text as art, metafictional strategies deprive him or her of the emotional satisfaction of losing the self to the vision of the author. A heightened consciousness of the artifice in a literary work brings about more than just a "wary intelligence" and a freedom to discover and delight in the text's offerings; it also relinquishes to the reader a disconcerting responsibility for his own moral life. For Barth, literature is not sacred (as his willingness to "rewrite" Homer indicates), and to those of us who are critics, writers, and teachers of those "unwilling students," this is his biggest affront. By turning literature into a sexual experience—a fondly remembered one-night stand—Barth denies the possibility of true transcendence through art. As Chimera's Genie suggests, "the treasure of art...could not redeem the barbarities of history or spare us the horrors of living and dying" (25).

It is no wonder, then, that Robert Scholes suggests that Barth is a chronicler of our "despair over the exhausted forms of our thought and our existence."18 For
if the desire to have a literature is connected to man's desire to bring order to the chaotic facts of the world, the metafictionalist's exposing of the artificiality of that order would indeed seem to undermine that desire. Eagleton's objection to Roland Barthes' "hedonistic" critical approach likewise applies to performance literature:

Caught up in this exuberant dance of language, delighting in the textures of words themselves, the reader knows less the purposive pleasures of building a coherent system, binding textual elements masterfully together to shore up a unitary self, than the masochistic thrills of feeling that self shattered and dispersed through the tangled webs of the work itself....Far from returning the reader to himself, in some final recuperation of the selfhood which the act of reading has thrown into question, the modernist text explodes his or her secure cultural identity, in a *jouissance* which for Barthes is both readerly bliss and sexual orgasm.¹⁰

Metafiction is not an inherently asocial form (one need only look at Borges or Coover to discover strong political and cultural concerns), but like most writers of this genre, Barth does despair over literature's failure--and ultimately its inability--to redeem mankind through the construction of ordered systems representative of "reality". Yet Barth's metafictional strategies suggest that reading can offer sustenance of another kind: an intellectual and aesthetic repast, a pleasant, joyful exercise of mind that differs from, but nevertheless coexists with, other happy diversions like playing tennis,
watching acrobats or movies, and wandering through funhouses. Performance literature is thus a retreat from the prosaic and chaotic facts of everyday existence—the stuff of which realistic literature is constructed—and its linguistic play is a source of readerly bliss. And play for play's sake may indeed be a worthwhile cultural value, for the writer of metafiction, like this character in Tom Robbins’ *Jitterbug Perfume*, seems to be "convinced that play—more than piety, more than charity or vigilance—was what allowed human beings to transcend evil."20

In addition to the pleasure of play, however, performance literature offers a more enduring satisfaction. While it may not return the reader to a secure cultural identity, its self-referential language does return to the reader a certain power over linguistic structures by emphasizing the "man-madeness" of those structures. Language may not be able to corral the random facts of the world into a coherent order, but readers can actively create order from the words that appear on the page. The fact that language is contextual and meaning is slippery may be a source of anxiety for semanticists and truth-seekers, but for writers and readers of metafiction, it is a source of intellectual stimulation. Rather than despairing at the multiple meanings of words and the structures made from them, readers are encouraged to celebrate their ability to decipher and find meaning in these man-made structures.
The metafictional performance does, however, make the literary work only an "artful trinket" which, while having no redemptive power, "at least sustained, refreshed, expanded, ennobled, and enriched our spirits along the painful way" (Chimera, 25). The emphasis on the pleasure offered by the author’s performance, then, is paramount and perhaps lends credence to Alter’s and Klinkowitz’s charges of elitism and gratuitousness. Barth draws our attention to the suppleness of language and to its complete tractability in his hands, and some critics find the metafictionalist’s flaunting of his virtuosity gratuitous because his "artifical" structures never seem to point to anything outside of themselves. As many readers have suggested, Barth, like Ambrose, seems lost in a structure with no way out, but unlike Ambrose, Barth is lost in structures of his own making. By employing what he sees as worn out conventions and themes against themselves, by making them the subject of his writing, Barth attempts to educate his readers to the pleasures of performance literature, and far from being gratuitous, Barth’s "performance" is thus integral to his work. In fact, the performance is ultimately all there is, and this does put a particularly elitist--and perhaps egotistical--emphasis on Barth’s own ability as a performer. Alter, for instance, suggests that, "Barth seems to be saying, we have come to such a pass that it is virtually impossible to write
anything at all. Nevertheless, a few geniuses, having recognized that difficult task, will somehow manage to create."21 If the reader of Barth's fiction is made to feel elite, a member of a select community of print-oriented people, how much more elite is the author who is able to entertain this select group.

What distinguishes Barth from many other experimental writers is his attempt to initiate a broader audience to the pleasures of performance literature. Rather than writing for a tiny portion of his actual audience, as Rabinowitz has suggested that he does, in Lost in the Funhouse, Barth instructs his actual audience in order that he may include them in his authorial audience. Indeed, in "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth wrote that the post-modern writer should aspire to make his work more democratic:

He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Michener and Irving Wallace--not to mention the lobotomized mass-media illiterates. But he should hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the early Christians: professional devotees of high art.22

Barth attempts to reach an audience that extends beyond other writers, critics, and unwilling students, for his simple explanations of critical issues like structuralism and reception theory, and his deconstructionist musings about the disparity between sign and meaning are not
directed toward already knowledgeable critics, nor are they an attempt to flaunt his own knowledge. Rather, Barth's instructional comments are directed toward the reader steeped in the high modern aesthetic who may find questions raised by current literary theory terribly esoteric, and by educating this reader with his handbook, Barth seeks to count him or her among the "elite."

This didactic quality may make *Lost in the Funhouse* a work whose rhetorical strategies create their own obsolescence. Wayne Booth, for instance, asks "Why do some works of intricate narrative obliquity, like John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse,' seem thinner and thinner the longer one studies them?" I have already suggested that stories like "Life-Story" and "Title" are tedious apart from what they can teach us about fiction, and the failure of these stories to sustain our interest during subsequent readings has to do, in part, with their textbook quality: once a reader grasps the issues raised in these fictions and becomes skillful at deciphering the puzzles offered, these didactic stories, like an old McGuffey reader, are no longer necessary or satisfying. Although the second, third, and fourth readings of any work differ from each other, sometimes revealing new depths, sometimes answering old questions, and sometimes betraying serious flaws, subsequent readings of a metafictional text that seeks to teach its reader to read itself offer little remuneration for the effort.
But also responsible for the apparent "thinness" of these stories is the ephemeral nature of the transcendence offered by Barth's literary performance. By focusing on the activity of reading rather than the content offered by the text, Barth dissolves meaning into a free play of language--play which lasts only as long as the activity itself continues. Although he accepts the importance of the reader in the literary transaction and acknowledges her independence, the more congenial relationship Barth establishes is not that of the Iserian "co-creator." "The teller's role," Chimera's Genie suggests, "regardless of his actual gender, was essentially masculine, the listener's or reader's feminine, and the tale was the medium of their intercourse" (34). Although the Genie goes on to suggest that the "femininity" of readers was not "a docile or inferior condition" (34), the fact remains that it is the "masculine" author's role to arouse the feminine reader's interest by leaving blanks for her to fill and by creating puzzles for her to solve. This sexually defined relationship ultimately stresses the potency of the author, upon which the reader's bliss depends (and interestingly enough, the mythic heroes of the last two stories in Chimera are worried about impotency). But as she becomes increasingly conscious of her activity as a reader and increasingly familiar with the text's intricacies, the rarer are the delights offered by the text--and the thinner
that text seems. Because the pleasures offered by Barth's text are primarily intellectual (the satisfaction of deciphering and uncovering meanings which the author has made for the reader) and esoteric (the satisfaction of suddenly finding oneself a member of the select group of readers who are print-oriented rather than of the disdained group which needs dialogue and dashing about), they are not as intensely felt during the second or third reading; it is not that the structures—the puns and double entendres—are no longer clever or amusing, but rather, that the novelty of discovering them for oneself wears off when the text has seemingly exhausted itself.

These failures, however, testify to the overall success of Barth's rhetorical strategies in *Lost in the Funhouse*. The text itself may fail to bring enduring delights to the individual reader, but by initiating readers to the almost hedonistic delights offered by performance literature, Barth creates an audience of active, self-conscious readers capable of reexperiencing the pleasures of discovery whenever they are confronted with a new puzzle. While he may not share a vision, he does share his wonder at the joyful power of man-made structures to sustain and refresh us, and in the process, he creates an authorial audience that can appreciate his verbal acrobatics. Writers of metafiction may indeed attempt to create "wholly different expectations" and to
alter the relationship between the reader and the writer, but inherent in their strategies is the realization that the reader must consent to their performance and must willingly enter the authorial audience. Rather than attempting to destroy our desire to have a literature, writers of metafiction seek to make us more self-conscious readers of literature. Those who make it through the Barthian funhouse emerge, perhaps not as better people or better lovers in the "real" world, but as better readers and better lovers of the printed word.

Educating Readers: Beyond the Pleasures of the Text

"That a present-day book should derive from an ancient one is clearly honorable: especially since no one (as Johnson says) likes to be indebted to his contemporaries." Barth, of course, has acknowledged his admiration of—and his indebtedness to—the author of this quotation, Jorge Luis Borges. In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth claims that Borges' "artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work;" he is an artist who "doesn't merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it." Borges' appeal to the appropriateness of ancient works as a source of new literature, his obsession with labyrinths and mirrors (both elements in a funhouse), his steadfast refusal to write
realistic fiction, and his fascination with the structures man creates have indeed influenced writers like Barth; as John O. Stark suggests, Borges is "the archetypal writer of the Literature of Exhaustion." 26

If Borges is indeed a predecessor of "metafiction," why is he treated in this study as something of a postscript? Although many of his themes do correspond to those of writers considered here, Borges is more of a metaphysicist than a metafictionalistor; more of an epistemologist than a literary theorist. It is, for example, quite possible--and perhaps even appropriate--to interpret "the infinite game of chance" of "The Babylon Lottery" as a corollary to the infinite possibilities of literature, but the story itself does not do so, and "The Babylon Lottery" is clearly more of a fable about man's desire to explain the chaos of existence than a metafiction that flaunts its own processes of composition. Because Borges is frequently interested in general questions of the disparity between man's knowledge of the world and the reality of that world, rather than in specific questions about literary art, a great deal of his work--including a number of his best fables--is beyond the scope of this study.

Borges is, however, a writer, a reader, and a librarian, and books do sometimes find their way into his fictions. His exegeses of imaginary texts, for example,
are studied here because their rhetorical strategies defy
traditional readerly expectations and thus teach us as much
about the reading process as they do about the composing
process. To begin with, stories like "The Approach to Ai-
Mu'tasim," "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and "An
Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," are fictions
masquerading as book reviews; in addition to a scholarly
tone. Borges employs the critical apparatus, citing other
reviewers, including apparently pertinent information in
footnotes, and using diagrams to outline the works'
structures. Stark suggests that Borges' imitation of
nonfiction genres in these works "tricks the reader by
playing on his past reading experience," and these
exegeses do ask the narrative audience to read them as
though they were essays, and thus realistic and factual.
But the authorial audience certainly is not tricked by
Borges' choice of form; not only do these works appear in a
collection bearing the title Ficciones, but Borges provides
a context for his "essays" in the prologue, suggesting a
more positive version of Barth's notion that it is easier
to talk technique than to make art:

The composition of vast books is a
laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go
on for five hundred pages developing an idea
whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a
few minutes! A better course of procedure is to
pretend that these books already exist, and then
to offer a resume, a commentary. (15)
Given this context, members of the authorial audience recognize Borges' scholarly pose as a device, just as they recognize Nabokov's posing as John Ray, Jr. as a device to make the narrative audience accept the manuscript of *Lolita* as a "real" autobiographical work.

While not really an attempt to trick his readers, Borges' parody of nonfictional forms does play upon their past reading experience in order to make them more self-conscious readers. For like the protagonist of "The Circular Ruins" who seeks to dream a man and understands "with a certain bitterness that he could expect nothing from those pupils who accepted his doctrine passively, but that he could expect something from those who occasionally dared to oppose him" (58), Borges desires a reader who is active, thoughtful, and perhaps even wary. For this reason then, Borges, like Barth, sometimes taunts his reader by asking, for example, "You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?" (87), or by writing footnotes that muddle rather than clarify something in the text. By forcing the reader to question the "truths" offered by the text, he seeks to create an independent and cautious reader, but Borges is perhaps less susceptible to the type of criticism leveled at Barth because his work is finally less solipsistic. While Barth's primary purpose in *Lost in the Funhouse* is to create readers who can appreciate performance literature, a side effect of which is the
creation of better readers in general, Borges' didactic purpose is much further reaching. He seeks not merely to teach us to read a particular type of fiction, or even fiction in general, but he hopes to make us better interpreters of all verbal structures, and ultimately even of those cultural structures which are not explicitly verbal.

"An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain" is representative of Borges' rhetorical strategies and has the additional advantage for this study of a fictional author-subject who is in many ways like Borges himself. The fiction begins with a simple statement: Herbert Quain has recently died. The narrator suggests that the literary obituaries which have appeared in magazines like the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Spectator* have not done justice to Quain's work, so he intends to set the record straight by teaching us the correct way to interpret Quain's work. Borges uses many techniques to establish the reality of Quain and his fictions for the narrative audience: he quotes from a letter which Quain wrote, he refers frequently to better known writers like Flaubert and Henry James, and he even establishes the physicality of one of Quain's books by suggesting that he has lent it, "irretrievably," and must rely upon his forgetfulness, which both "impoverishes" and "purifies" his description of the book. By suggesting that his memory of the novel is
fuzzy, he not only instills in the reader the notion that the book exists outside of Borges' imagination (and could be consulted by the reader to check for the narrator's errors), but he also implies that books exist outside of their physical boundaries, in the reader's memory and imagination.

And in his explications of Quain's work, the narrator teaches his narrative audience—and Borges his authorial audience—to be careful and imaginative readers. One of Quain's novels, a detective story, ends with this phrase: "'Everyone thought that the encounter of the two chess players was accidental.'" Rather than allow this phrase to stand as a statement of fact—merely because "everyone" believes it—the narrator suggests that it "allows one to understand that the solution is erroneous. The unquiet reader rereads the pertinent chapters and discovers another solution, the true one. The reader of this singular book is thus forcibly more discerning than the detective" (74). The reader is also more important to the execution of Quain's novel than his protagonist, but like Barth, "Quain was in the habit of arguing that readers were an already extinct species" (78). While the narrator attributes this comment to Quain, thus distancing the insult, he clearly agrees that readers are habitually lazy and passive, in need of a lesson in inventiveness. More important than the correctness of the commentator's interpretation of Quain's
ambiguous statement is his activity as a reader--his ability to look beyond the surface of the text to discover multiple solutions in Quain's fictional structure. In other words, Borges teaches his reader through the example of his close reading narrator.

While Borges would agree with Barth that complex verbal structures are delightful and pleasurable, and thus worthwhile for their own sake, he also suggests that "formal complexities" sometimes "hindered the author's imagination" (77). Regarding April March, a novel for which the narrator provides a detailed structural diagram, the modest and self-depracating Quain is quoted as saying, "'I lay claim in this novel...to the essential features of all games: symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium'" (75). The rage to order which informs April March and creates nine different novels, each with a common first chapter, sometimes results in simple bad writing, "unworthy of Quain." But the reader's rage to order similarly alters the quality of the book, for "Whoever reads the sections in chronological order...will lose the peculiar savor of this strange book" (76). So while symmetrical and orderly man-made structures offer various pleasures, the desire for such structures inhibits the ability of literature to arouse our imaginations--and perhaps prevents us from discovering truth in disorder.
Like Borges, Quain believed "that of the various pleasures offered by literature, the greatest is invention" (78), and like Borges, he attempted in his last work, *Statements*, to encourage inventiveness in his readers. A work that seems to prefigure Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night a Traveler*, *Statements* consists of eight stories, each of which "promises a good plot, deliberately frustrated by the author" (78). By frustrating his readers' desire for a well-imagined story, Quain shifts the burden of completing the stories to his readers; unable to remain passive, the readers must become writers themselves. The narrator, for instance, who until the last line of the fiction has been identified primarily as a reader by his explications of Quain, is now the writer Borges, who has himself invented a fiction from one of Quain's stories: "I was ingenuous enough to extract from the third, 'The Rose of Yesterday,' my story of 'The Circular Ruins'" (78). For the narrative audience, the first story is as real as the second, Quain as real as Borges, but this last line of "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain" has a curious effect on the authorial audience. By identifying himself as both the reader of the imaginary Quain's work and the flesh and blood writer Borges, he crosses the boundary between what we know to be fictional and what we know to be real; as one critic suggests, Borges' use of a "shifting (and sometimes shifty) narrator intentionally confuses the
traditional limits and distance between literature and reality, between narrator and reader. By doffing his fictional pose and attributing the source of one of his own fictions to Quain, Borges makes the authorial reader question his own sense of reality and his role as a participant in a literary experience. Shumway and Sant translate part of the prologue to one of Borges' stories as follows: "A volume, in and of itself, is not an aesthetic experience; it is a physical object like any other. The aesthetic experience can only occur when someone writes or reads it." Though they do not exist in printed form as physical objects, the works of Herbert Quain are real as a result of their being part of a shared aesthetic experience; they exist as imaginative constructions of both Borges and his reader, for as Quain suggests, everyone "is a writer, potentially or in fact" (78).

Borges similarly seeks to teach the reader to experience the pleasures of invention in "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote," another story in which he attributes a "real" literary work to a fictional author. Menard was engaged in "reconstructing literally" Cervantes' "spontaneous work" (51), not merely in producing a physical copy of it. Those chapters of Don Quixote which Menard attempts to reconstruct from memory are themselves self-consciously concerned with literary theory, and in particular, the narrator in the ninth chapter tells the
story of his reading of the manuscript of Don Quixote; as Stark suggests, Borges' fiction is thus "literature about literature about literature." (Actually, one could add a fourth "literature" there, since Borges writes about Menard, who writes about Cervantes, who writes about literature; my quoting Stark adds literatures five and six, a development which would, I'm sure, amuse Borges, supporting as it does his contention that literature, far from being exhausted, is infinitely expansive.) Borges is, however, interested in Menard's authorship of the Quixote not for what it implies about actual literary production (the creation of physical books) but for what it implies about inventive reading: "Menard (perhaps without wishing to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading: the technique is one of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions" (54).

The narrator, for instance, ironically compares passages by Cervantes and Menard which are "verbally identical," but he claims that Menard's version is "infinitely richer" (52). The reader-narrator, knowing that Cervantes' was a product of seventeenth-century Spain, claims that the style of the original is more natural, while the twentieth-century Frenchman's version seems affected; but the content of Menard's passage is enriched by the cultural and intellectual changes that have taken place over three centuries. While Cervantes' suggestion
that history is the mother of truth is a "mere rhetorical eulogy of history," the narrator suggests that because he is a contemporary of William James, Menard's version implies that historical truth is what we think took place rather than what actually took place. Borges' own response to criticism that he refuses to accept the writer's responsibility to the social and political climate is that writers are always engaged in their own time:

Being contemporaries, we have to write in the style and mode of our times. If I write a story—even about the man in the moon—it would be an Argentine story, because I'm an Argentine; and it would fall back on Western civilization because that's the civilization I belong to....You have a certain voice, a certain kind of face, a certain way of writing, and you can't run away from them even if you want to. So why bother to be modern or contemporary, since you can't be anything else? 31

Although the linguistic structures of Menard and Cervantes are identical, Menard's have a different significance—a modern meaning—simply because he is a product of his own culture; meaning is always determined by context. But, of course, it is the inventive reader who perceives these distinctions and discovers different significations, and interestingly, this reader seems more able to escape his cultural dispositions than is the writer, for he is able to read the passage as the product of both the seventeenth century and of the twentieth century. Borges certainly does not mean to imply that the reader has any
responsibility to the author's intention, for he is far more impressed with the modern reading of Cervantes/Menard; but the narrator's explications do make the reader more self-conscious of the process by which she reconstructs the fiction as she reads. Borges would not, for instance, necessarily disapprove of an anachronistic Freudian reading of the relationship between Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon or of a Marxist interpretation of the failure of the Lydgates' marriage (except that he would be as skeptical of Freudian and Marxist theories as he is of other orderly systems), but he wants the reader to be aware of her own inventiveness in constructing such readings, and ultimately, he wants us to remember the inventiveness of all theorists who offer interpretations of both literature and the world.

Shumway and Sant suggest that for Borges, truth, "like meaning and value," "is located in the reader's mind, arising from the ability of the perceiving intellect to make sense of what it perceives. In other words, what raises coincidences to the level of pattern, what invests them with teleological possibilities is the constructive power of the mind." Like Barth, Borges extols the power of the human mind to construct order from a reality that is apparently chaotic, and while he educates the reader to the pleasures of labyrinth-making and game-playing, he also returns to the reader the responsibility for using this
constructive power wisely. By suggesting that all humans possess the power of inventiveness--"Every man should be capable of all ideas" (54)--and by reminding us of the man-madness of all structures of order, Borges attempts to create wary readers and cautious human beings. His rhetorical strategies—obscure references, sometimes real and sometimes fictional, a shifting narrator, multiple explications of texts, false attributions—all function to make his authorial audience wary of even the truths he offers; but they also make this audience uncertain of its own knowledge and skeptical of its own expectations that fiction should reveal truths about reality yet somehow remain outside of reality, somehow remain fictional. Borges thus disorients his readers not just to make way for his particular type of literary production, but to make them independent observers of society and culture, as well as inventive readers of the written word. "History, for Borges," suggests Scholes, "is a matter of witnessing as much as a matter of doing." And truth, the offspring of history, can only be perceived by those who exercise the mind's constructive power, by those who refuse to accept passively—those who dare to oppose—the systems of order offered to explain the world.

One of the most poignant warnings against the misuse of the mind's power to construct and against passive reading is contained in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," a
story in which the line between construction and destruction is as tenuous as the line between fiction and reality. In this fiction posing as essay, the narrator discovers an article on a fabulated country, Uqbar, in what should be a factual, trustworthy publication: an encyclopedia. His search for the truth includes careful reading, by which he "discovered, beneath the superficial authority of the prose, a fundamental vagueness" (19), and a trip to the library to check maps, travel books, and histories to affirm the validity (or, in this case, the invalidity) of the references contained in the article. His search might indeed parallel that of a reader who discovered Borges' exegesis of Quain out of its fictional context, in, for example, a sabotaged copy of The Oxford Companion to English Literature. The invalidity of the fictional article about a false country in an otherwise "factual" work is relatively easy to determine, however, since the country is purportedly part of the verifiable world. Not so, however, is the history of an invented planet, Tlon, which appears in a fictional encyclopedia entirely devoted to the construction of an orderly world where the imagination completely conquers matter.

The teleological possibilities of Tlon would clearly appeal to Borges. "Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality" (29), so that a lost item, for instance, may be duplicated simply by the
searcher's desire to recover the object, and the invented object may actually be more desirable than the original because it is "more in keeping with his expectation" (29). The literature of the planet is likewise Borgesian in character: their critics invent authors and falsely attribute dissimilar works to the same author, and plagiarism is impossible since "all books are the work of one single writer, who is timeless and anonymous" (28). Not only is the inventiveness of the secret society of scholars responsible for the encyclopedia of Tlon appealing, but the world they have invented is seductive in its orderliness, its idealism, and the control over reality it attributes to the imagination.

The obvious solipsistic pleasure offered by the construction of such a world is undercut by Borges' postscript. The human desire for order and construction is paralleled by the human desire for power and destruction of those people and things that do not coincide with our invented version of reality. The narrator tells us that people began to believe in Tlon, because "Ten years ago, any symmetrical system whatsoever which gave the appearance of order--dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism--was enough to fascinate men. Why not fall under the spell of Tlon and submit to the minute and vast evidence of an ordered planet?" (34). Borges calls upon us to be witnesses to history, wary readers of the world. Human
constructions can be fallible and destructive, but because they are made by humans, they can be perceived by humans: "Tlon may be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth plotted by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men" (34). Borges does not suggest that it is impossible to discover truths, only that it is impossible to construct an order that comprehends all of reality; if the world operates according to an orderly plan, it is "in accordance with divine laws--I translate: inhuman laws--which we will never completely perceive" (34).

Unlike Barth, Borges clearly believes that readers can discover complex human truths in fiction, truths that extend beyond simple statements like "love conquers all." For Borges, art is as valid a human construction for the dissemination of human knowledge as philosophical, theological, and even scientific discourses. Although his metafictional essays do indeed teach his authorial audience about fiction and the pleasures of inventive reading, Borges does not suggest that his readers are in any way dependent upon his virtuosity--his labyrinth-making and game-playing--for their pleasure, because his attempt to cultivate intellectual inventiveness arises from a belief that all readers are potential writers and that all writing--indeed all human constructions--can be imaginatively read. The reader's pleasure extends beyond Borges' verbal constructions. More important than his
humility, however, is the implication that the desire for literature cannot be squelched by the creation of inventive readers with altered expectations. Narrative, suggests Borges, "when it is not in their hopes or their fears, is at least in the memories of all my readers," and his narratives depend upon that "concave basin which is the collective memory" to "enrich and amplify them" (33). The desire for literature is connected to the desire for truth, both of which belong to the collective memory, which, Borges would argue, can only be subverted by the harmonious histories of fictitious pasts which passive readers might mistake for truth.
Notes


6 Lost in the Funhouse (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. ix. All further references will be noted in the text.


8 Susan Helgeson, "Fictions that Teach Readers How to Read—And Writers How to Write" (unpublished manuscript).


10 Shloss and Tololyan, p. 71.

12 Shloss and Tololyan, p. 71.


16 *Chimera* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1972), p. 16. All further references to this work appear in the text.

17 "The Siren in the Funhouse," p. 73.


30 Stark, p. 24.


32 Shumway and Sant, p. 51.

33 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p. 17.
CHAPTER III

THE FOLKTALE: MYTH AND FORM

The Mythic Consciousness of Robert Coover

Like Barth, who uses the metaphor of the circus performer to make a case for the value of performance literature, Robert Coover offers the reader of "Klee Dead" his tickets to the circus in order to make up for his failure to explain the phenomenon of death and of Klee’s suicide: "I'm sorry. What can I say? Even I had expected more. You are right to be angry. Here, take these tickets...I owe you something and this is all I have." On the surface, it seems that Coover is likewise attempting to change his reader's expectations that literature reveal truths about reality, to make them accept entertainment as the ultimate value of literature. But his apologetic proffering of the circus tickets suggests that its vagabond performers can fulfill some need in the reader that he himself has failed to fulfill, for circuses are made of more than virtuosi jugglers; tight-rope walkers and men shot out of cannons defy not only the laws of gravity, but death itself, and these performers thus appeal to us on an unconscious level. Or at least they used to, Coover
implies, before readers became too sophisticated for such simple metaphors. In "Romance of the Thin Man and the Fat Lady," for example, Coover suggests that the reason these two circus favorites no longer serve their function as romantic symbols is that the audience is too jaded by its experience with symbols: "Well, let us admit it, perhaps it is ourselves who are corrupted. Perhaps we have seen or been too many Ringmasters, watched too many parades, safely witnessed too many thrills, counted through too many books. Maybe it's just that we've lost a taste for the simple in a world perplexingly simple" (147).

Unlike Barth, Coover assumes that his readers already count themselves among the intellectual elite that enjoys the esoteric pleasures of post-contemporary literature. That assumption precludes the necessity of Barthian didacticism, but it does create different problems for the writer who must entertain this audience. While Coover need not persuade his already converted readers of the value of performance literature or of the necessity of careful reading, he must address their demand for innovative techniques even as he tries to use these techniques for his own peculiar aesthetic purposes. More specifically, Coover typically attempts to fulfill his sophisticated audience's desire for the unusual at the same time that he argues for the value of literature that appeals to the dark elements of our psyches. For in his reconstruction of
folktales and Bible stories, in his construction of tales from elements of popular culture, Coover seeks to reveal human motivations and desires that are timeless, that inhabit, in Borges' words, "that concave basin which is the collective memory" (33); furthermore, those timeless desires he focuses on involve fear, greed, lust, violence---those elements of the collective unconscious civilization seeks to repress. And the urgency with which Coover confronts his reader and tells his tales suggests that he, like Italo Calvino, writes fairy tales "not out of any desire for the unusual, but because of a deep-rooted conviction that some essential, mysterious element lying in the ocean depths must be salvaged to ensure the survival of the race."  

In Pricksongs and Descants, Coover tells essentially three types of stories to achieve his rhetorical goals. In stories like "Panel Game," "A Pedestrian Accident," and "Hat Act," Coover depicts the relationship between the performer and his audience in ways that do not particularly flatter the reader in order to make him question his own motives for reading contemporary fiction. Other stories are relatively simple parodies of fairy tales and Bible stories that force the reader to reevaluate both the original myths and the forms that contain them. The final type of story considered here includes metafictions like "The Magic Poker," "The Gingerbread House," "The Elevator,"
and "The Babysitter," stories made up of many individual narrative units that contradict each other and defy the reader who wishes to put them together logically. Throughout this collection of metafictions, Coover disorients his readers, not merely by suggesting that traditional fictional modes are worn out, but also by suggesting that for all their sophistication and rationality, readers of contemporary fiction are nonetheless susceptible to the fears, cruelties, and primitive passions which are at the heart of "simple" fairy tales.

The conflict between the intellectual and the primitive, between reason and instinct, provides both theme and form for Coover's "Morris in Chains." Though this story does not fit neatly into one of the categories above, it does provide a type of frame for the other tales in the collection by showing the degree to which civilized readers repress the primitive. Morris, an old shepherd of a dwindling flock, is pursued through sewers and the national park system by a group of scientists and urbanologists dedicated to freeing the world from "the sin of the simple" (49). While the urbanologists are busy categorizing, processing data, controlling the weather, and ordering Morris' disorder, Morris' "mad poetries" are concerned with earthy things--sex, the rebellion of his castrated ram, and the joy of piping a song. And in his appeal to primitive
harmonies, Morris threatens to corrupt the "studied dissonance upon which our modern State is painstakingly structured" (48); Morris must be silenced in order that there be "no confusions for them [the children of this modern state] between the old legends and conceivable realities" (49).

But it is through the contrast of the scientists' report, written in matter-of-fact, technical language, with Morris' poetic, stream-of-conscious musings that Coover suggests the failures of a technologized society, for despite the urbanologists' claim that Morris was captured because "simple song" had no chance "against our science" (47), Morris' song is far more compelling than the report's computerspeak. Although the report is far more "readable"--it is clearly written, abides by grammatical conventions, and accurately depicts and orders the events of the story--it is nevertheless sterile and devoid of personality. Morris' musings are more difficult to process, but as this description of a national park suggests, his language is infinitely richer and more satisfying:

third national they calls it but spite of that it's clear I've took a hankerin to it all right don't plot my trackin but seems as how we come on it often enough: silver poplars and old old beeches blowin wisted measures in the green breeze the mingled elms and hazels and westerlies shiftin the flickerin shadows and a clean brook for moonbathin and drownin the lice in and wanderin ivytendrils and foxglove and colocasia
mingled with the laughin acanthus and a sweet bluegrass bed halffoot spongy (50)

Morris is drawn instinctively to one of the few pastoral spots left in the nation, and his poetry reflects not only his appreciation of its beauty, but also his gratitude for its simple fulfillment of his needs—a place to bathe and a place to sleep. And the tourists who gather there sometimes fulfill other natural needs that have become increasingly complex as society has become more urban: "then top of all that why now and again on lucky days I even experiences an occasion to stick the old staff mongst the tender herbage as the poet says: a hurried little touristhumpin in the copse when the cops ain't heedin" (51). Morris' earthy, primitive humor and his ability to play with language not only distinguish him from the sober scientists, but they insure his survival. The doctors examine and humiliate Morris by clinically taking semen samples and insensitively offering him a job in a mutton factory after destroying his sheep, but they cannot completely destroy the shepherd's spirit. While his body may be chained, his imagination remains active, and Morris is given the last word in this alternating narration: "Doris Peloris the chorus and Morris sonorous canorous Horace scores Boris--should be able to make somethin outa that by juniper... it's the motherin insane are free!" (60). Although his sterile environment makes it more
difficult to exercise, Morris' desire for the poetic cannot be stifled, so the poet must find new subjects for his songs.

The rustic shepherd is clearly an anachronism in this well-ordered society, yet Coover's reader is sympathetic to Morris' plight. The artificial order imposed on the natural world (plastic flowers and mechanical crickets replace the real things) extends to the world of human emotions, where simple instincts are stifled by cold reason in order to preserve the complex status quo. Yet the sympathy Coover generates by contrasting the pastoral with the urban is itself artificial, for both Morris and Doris Peloris, the chief urbanologist, represent stereotypical extremes, and Morris' pastoral poetry gains from its juxtaposition with the scientific language of the urbanologists. Similarly, the reader's pleasure in Morris' bawdy language is enhanced not only by its anachronistic nature, but also by its inherent ironies. When, for example, Morris responds primitively--that is naturally--to the chirping of the mechanical crickets and to the piped-in springlike fragrance, which remind him of a simpler past and give him the courage to continue his flight, the reader knows the shepherd's instincts are contributing to his capture. Although Morris' simple songs may reflect primitive desires, they are inspired by complex artificial technology, just as the sophisticated reader may
unconsciously respond to the more negative aspects of popular culture and thus contribute to his own spiritual bankruptcy.

In "Panel Game," Coover casts his narrative reader into a role which he then persuades the authorial reader to reject; his intent, it seems, is to suggest that the reader of contemporary literature is as firmly entrenched in the quagmire of popular culture as is the armchair quarterback this reader would disdain. The contestant for a television panel game is drawn from the general audience, which is typically "docile, responsive, good-natured, terrifying" (80), and is identified not only as a Bad Sport, but as the reader of the narrative. The participant/reader's job is to "endeavor to disentangle this entanglement" (85) to discover the meaning of the game, and he thus runs through a series of verbal associations: "Wear and tear. Wary. Tarry. Salmonberry. Faster! Sticklestuff and Dryden's belly" (84). And his fellow panel members, all of whom seem more familiar with the rules than he is, are more inclined to confuse him than to help him: Lovely Lady intentionally distracts him with her sexuality; Mr. America, "fat as the continent and bald as an eagle" (79), tries to alert Bad Sport to clues, but later turns out to be Mr. Amentia; and Aged Clown might be well-loved by the audience, but as "a remnant from the Great Tradition" (83), he is more harmful than useful to the reader seeking the "lex of the game."
But it is the audience's response to the reader's panicky confusion that turns this story into something resembling a moral allegory. Drawn into this apparently innocent verbal game against his will, the reader/participant is greeted with hoots, catcalls, and wild applause whenever he errs or is humiliated by the Moderator, who like some writers of contemporary literature, seems to hold the key to the game but refuses to let his reader use it. And the outcome of the game, like the outcome of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," is inevitable: the reader/participant must be hung while the audience laughs and applauds. Richard Anderson cogently remarks that the audience is "no longer sensitive to the real values of life," and thus looks to the other panel members as culture heroes "who embody mass ideals." But Anderson concludes that the meaning of the story lies in the fact that "Those who, like Unwilling Participant, do not wish to be a part of a fad, are labeled 'Bad Sports' and summarily executed." The Bad Sport, however, was originally a member of this audience and like the rest, he responds to the Lovely Lady's bawdiness and the Aged Clown's crude humor; like Tessie Hutchinson, who is stoned at the end of "The Lottery," the reader/participant is not exempt from the evil residing in the human soul, but is distinguished only by having lost the game. As the noose tightens around his neck, the reader comments that he
"thought it was all for fun" (87), and comforts himself with the thought that the audience is at least happy—as he most likely would have been had he remained among them, as a spectator. The narrative reader thus recognizes himself as a member of an audience insensitive to the real values of life. Coover's casting of the reader into the role of spectator-turned-participant has a discomforting effect on his authorial audience, who is clearly included in this terrifying audience by having allowed itself to be entertained by the story. But at the same time, the authorial reader is encouraged to remain apart from this mass audience by condemning the false cultural ideals it embodies. In other words, while the narrative reader is himself satisfied with the fact that the spectators have been entertained, the authorial reader recognizes the horrifying nature of the "entertainment" in which he or she has participated.

Like "Panel Game," "A Pedestrian Accident," a story in which Mrs. Grundy tells a bawdy tale to a delighted crowd gathered to watch a young man die beneath the wheels of a truck, indicts its reader for his insensitivity and for his easy laughter at another's expense. John Gardner suggests that for many of the practitioners of experimental literature, including Coover, "outrage is more appealing than are careful exploration and persuasion," and further claims that "A Pedestrian Accident" owes it success to its
appeal to "readers of a certain kind" who take pleasure in such outrageous attacks on Christendom. Both of these stories do indeed offer ironic crucifixions—the reader/participant of "Panel Game" hangs to "save" the audience (that is to satisfy their perverse needs), and Paul, the young man left to die on the street, imagines the earth upended and "himself hung on the street, a target for the millions of raindarts somebody out in the night was throwing at him" (205). Although it might appear that by writing these black comedies Coover is mindlessly pandering to his readers' desire for tales that are increasingly outrageous and ultimately immoral, he makes that audience an integral part of these fictions. His inclusion of the auditors' responses to the Moderator and Mrs. Grundy not only suggests that the reader is in part responsible for the popularity of such fiction, but it also forces the reader to explore the reasons for his fascination with grotesque stories of sex and death. Paul, forced into the role of spectator by his accident, finds himself amused by Mrs. Grundy's fiction which casts him as her lover: "Her story in truth did not bother Paul so much as his own fascination with it. He knew where it would lead, but it didn't matter. In fact, maybe that was what fascinated him" (192). Coover, it seems to me, does not replace careful exploration with mere outrage, but rather, like "The Lottery" and "Young Goodman Brown," Coover's stories
frequently employ the outrageous mob mentality to force his sophisticated and intellectual readers to explore the general inhumanity in their own lives.

Coover's parodies of fairy tales and biblical legends suggest on the one hand the appropriateness of these forms for exorcising our fears and confronting our humanity, and on the other hand, the necessity of constantly questioning the validity of the myths these forms perpetuate. Like the policeman disgusted by Jason's love-making with his dead wife, Coover seems to suggest that there are certain innate human laws that may be salvaged by revising old forms:

"You understand, of course," he says [the policeman from "The Marker"], "that I am not, in the strictest sense, a traditionalist. I mean to say that I do not recognize tradition qua tradition as sanctified in its own sake. On the other hand, I do not join hands with those who find inherent in tradition some malignant evil, and who therefore deem it of terrible necessity that all custom be rooted out at all costs. I am personally convinced, if you will permit me, that there is a middle road, whereon we recognize that innovations find their best soil in traditions, which are justified in their own turn by the innovations which created them. I believe, then, that law and custom are essential, but that it is one's constant task to review and revise them. In spite of that, however, some things still make me puke!" (91)

Although one critic suggests that in the biblical parodies, "Coover creates skillful tricks of interpretation, but once the trick is grasped, all that remains is an irreligious jest," Coover's parodies are not intended merely to mock Christian belief, but to present another view, to make
readers question those beliefs that they may have blindly accepted or rejected.

In "J's Marriage" and "The Brother," the biblical parodies in *Pricksongs and Descants*, Coover creates two of the most memorable and human characters in the collection. While many of Coover's fictions elicit their effects by placing stereotypical, flat characters in bizarre situations, his *modus operandi* in the biblical parodies is to provide the miraculous events of the Bible with everyday significance and to provide human motivations and emotions to their essentially one-dimensional, silent heroes. Indeed, what makes these parodies effective is that Coover shows incredible restraint and gentleness in his treatment of these religious myths—the marriage of Joseph and Mary and the building of Noah's ark, and it is this restraint that makes it difficult to dismiss these fictions as "irreligious jests."

Coover, for instance, depicts J as a stoical man, devoted to his wife and disappointed, but not devastated, by their lack of a sexual life. A gentle, thoughtful man, J rationalizes their chaste relationship: "at this level sex could not be comprehended without love, but love could be distinguished without reference to sex; in short, that one was the whole, the other a mere part, contributing to the perfection of the whole to be sure, but not indispensable, not indispensable" (113). Since the story
is located in Joseph's consciousness, it never deviates from this gentle, rational tone to become a bawdy tale, and because the narrative provides no distance in time between the events of the tale and the time of the reading, the reader might well view J's plight as a contemporary one. As J's love for his wife, as well as his sexual frustrations, continue to increase, the reader increasingly sympathizes with J, so much so that when J finally walks in on his naked wife and thinks that the time has come when he will consummate his marriage, the revelation that she is pregnant is as great a shock to the reader as it is to J. The reader finally recognizes the tale as part of the Christian culture, and having gradually come to sympathize with Joseph, the reader must alter his or her conception of the original religious myth in order to accommodate that sympathy.

Coover, after all, does not parody the story in a way that allows us to reject it as a simple condemnation of Christianity. Even Mary's conception, which Joseph believes must be "an act of God" since nothing else in his experience can explain it, is, as the narrator suggests, "a common kind of story, and not a particularly entertaining one at that" (116). For the focus of this story is not the miraculous event of Mary's virgin birth, but their marriage--one Coover seems to suggest is sadly ordinary. Mary and Joseph "drifted quietly and impassively apart"
(118), and though they eventually consummate their marriage, their affection for each other slowly fades, and the marriage continues simply because "nothing was done to stop it" (118). Nothing, that is, until Joseph's death over a cup of ale in a tavern (Coover's single extravagance in this fiction, though even this is tempered by the narrator's admission that the manner of Joseph's death was inappropriate, "since not even in his advanced years was he much of a drinker" [119]). But before the old carpenter dies, he considers that his "life had turned out to be nothing more or less than he had expected after all," and though his life had not been particularly happy, "there was nothing tragic about it" (119).

By presenting the life of the holy family from the viewpoint of its least celebrated member, Coover does perform an act of reinterpretation, but as Anderson suggests, "Coover is as much interested in the suffering of everyday people as he is in performing literary acrobatics." Coover does not irreligiously change the "facts" of the myth by attributing Mary's conception to an act of adultery, for instance, nor does he alter dramatically the characters of Mary or Joseph as they appear in the Bible. Were Coover merely interested in mocking Christendom for certain types of readers, he would have created a burlesque along the lines of "A Pedestrian Accident"; the elements for an outrageous attack are
clearly present within the original nativity narrative, as they are within the tale of Noah and the ark, which Coover tells from the point of view of Noah's practical but good-hearted brother, who helps build the ark out of compassion for his aging sibling but is denied refuge from the storm. By attributing to Joseph and the brother very human emotions and by showing the unhappy and even cruel effects of God's mysterious intervention "in the tedious personal affairs of this or any other human animal" (117) on the less favored of his creatures, Coover does not mock the Christian myth by questioning the "factuality" or "rationality" of the original tales. Instead, he engages the reader's sympathy for these men by gradually pulling us into the story, making these characters "ordinary" men who are, as protagonists of their own tales, compassionate and worthy of our compassion. Coover calls upon the reader to question the compassion of these sacred myths by creating sympathy for the characters before he reveals them as participants in the original myths. For in carrying out the will of their god, both Noah and Mary unwittingly cause those who love them to suffer. In other words, Coover does not ask his readers to abandon faith for reason, but to temper faith with human compassion, to review tradition rather than blindly accepting it, and to carefully explore their own motives and desires.
As the stories discussed so far suggest, Coover is essentially pessimistic about the nature of the human beast, but as he says in his prologue to the "Seven Exemplary Fictions," a collection within the collection, narrative can serve "as a weapon against the fringe-areas of our consciousness, and as a mythic reinforcement of our tenuous grip on reality" (78-79). As his reconstruction of biblical and folk myths indicates, Coover believes that all narratives are fragments, partial stories that can be retold, but unlike Barth, who employs Menelaus as a means of escaping his own narrative drought, Coover alters narrative perspectives of already told tales in order to expose the cruelty and terror hidden in the recesses of our consciousness. While Rabinowitz suggests that readers "are often forced to call upon the 'best part' of ourselves when we join the authorial audience,"7 Coover, in revising popular folktales, seems to ask readers to recognize the "worst part" of themselves.

Noting that "folktales are real," Calvino outlines their universal elements and explains their significance in his introduction to Italian Folktales:

...these folk stories are the catalog of the potential destinies of men and women, especially for that stage in life when destiny is formed, i.e., youth, beginning with birth, which itself often foreshadows the future; then the departure from home, and, finally, through the trials of growing up, the attainment of maturity and the proof of one's humanity. This sketch, although summary, encompasses everything: the arbitrary
division of humans, albeit in essence equal, into kings and poor people; the persecution of the innocent and their subsequent vindication, which are the terms inherent in every life; love unrecognized when first encountered and then no sooner experienced than lost; the common fate of subjection to spells, or having one's existence predetermined by complex and unknown forces....There must be fidelity to a goal and purity of heart, values fundamental to salvation and triumph. There must also be beauty, a sign of grace that can be masked by the humble, ugly guise of a frog; and above all, there must be present the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things. 8

Calvino's description of the value of fairy tales coincides with common wisdom: these tales help young people confront their fears of assuming a place in the terrifying and unjust adult world, and despite the unknown terrors lurking in the forest and the violence underlying many of these tales, they ultimately uphold positive human values and suggest a world of possibilities. In many ways, Coover's parodies similarly suggest the instructive value of these tales; as the father of an adolescent Red Riding Hood realizes in "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts," he has neglected one of his duties as a parent by failing to adequately prepare her for a role in the adult world:

And so he was afraid. For her. For himself. Because he'd given her her view of the world, in fragments of course, not really thinking it all out, she listening, he telling, and because of her gaiety and his love, his cowardly lonely love, he'd left out the terror. He'd smelled the blood, all right, but he'd called it essence. And when she encountered it, found herself alone and besieged: what then? He'd be part of it,
that's what, feared and hated. (14)

By pretending that there were no monsters, witches, or wolves in the world, the father attempts to keep his daughter innocent and safe from fear, hate, and sexual passion, those fringe areas of our consciousness against which narrative serves as a weapon.

In Coover's revision, Red Riding Hood's father is the grown up Jack of beanstalk fame, now also performing the role of lumberman, and Jack's mother is not only the Granny to whom Red must take goodies, but she is also the Beauty who marries the Beast. The effects of this amalgamation of tales are multiple. The reader confronts familiar characters in unfamiliar adult roles that indicate that the promises of Jack's and Beauty's youth have been unfulfilled; Jack, thinking the Giant has been conquered, discovers the ogre in himself, and Beauty ages and falters without her Beast ever becoming a Prince. On the one hand, this defamiliarization suggests that fairy tales falsely perpetuate the myth of the happily ever after, for Coover's continuation of these tales shows that life offers difficulties long after that first sally into the adult world, after the defeat of the giant, and after marriage to the man or woman of one's dreams. As Granny's ruminations suggest, the "old times when virtue was its own so-called reward" were long gone already when she married her beast, but she went around kissing toads and "stinky old
creatures" because she believed "all the old legends"; she desires to see Red because she, like Coover, has "veils to lift and tales to tell" about the realities of life and death and sex and love. But on the other hand, Coover's casting of these romantic characters in unexpected relationships and in prosaic roles suggests that while the castles, princes, and wolves promised by the original tales failed to materialize, the very human concerns that replace them offer fears and rewards of their own. Jack, for instance, both resents and worries about his aging mother and tells his daughter half-truths because he loves her and "wanted her to love life" without fear or hate (14); and although Granny reminisces about the "old wild dreams" of princes and castles, she realizes that while her unfaithful, crude husband frequently caused her pain, she "loved him my child loved the damned Beast after all" (15). By transporting these romantic symbols from their mansions in the clouds to the complex reality of an everyday world that resists their fairy-tale dreams of the happily ever after, Coover suggests that traditional symbols no longer engage readers of contemporary literature or reinforce our "tenuous grip on reality." His deromanticizing of these symbols, then, forces his readers to confront their adult terrors directly, without the comforting illusion that the wolf is easily conquered.
Indeed, the only character who seems to be missing from Coover's composite tale is the hungry wolf, but his depiction is unnecessary because the monster resides within the hero himself:

He'd pretended to her that there were no monsters, no wolves or witches, but yes, goddamn it, there were, there were. And in fact one of them got ahold of him right now, made him grab up his axe, dig ceremonially at his crotch, and return to his labors, and with a weird perverse insistence, made him laugh. (15)

As father and lumberman, Jack is Red Riding Hood's protector, but "the Ogre in him wouldn't drop away and leave her free" (13), so he is also her seducer and an emblem of threatening male sexuality. Similarly, Granny is not only the Beauty victimized by the Beast, but her admission that she misses his crude sexuality paints her as a seductress, who cackles like a witch anxious to rob Red of her innocence:

bit of new fuzz on her pubes and juice in the little bubbies and off she prances into that world of hers that ain't got forests nor prodigies a dippy smile on her face and her skirts up around her ears well well I'll give her a mystery today I will. (16)

Coover's merged characters parody the traditionally one-dimensional fairy tale character and remind us that evil resides within rather than without and is thus not easily routed; no character is simply virtuous or evil, courageous Jack or bedridden Granny, and their complexity makes them
more compelling than the typically bland heroes of such tales (just as the monsters, witches, and evil stepmothers are inevitably more interesting than the fairy-godmothers and innocent children). Similarly, in contrast to the matter-of-fact tones and gentle cadences of most traditional folktales, Jack’s philosophical meditations on the "inexplicable emptiness" into which we are all born and Granny’s lusty stream-of-conscious musings individualize these characters and correspond to the complexity of their inner lives.

While Coover’s parodies are inventive and amusing, one must ask, as Schmitz does, if they are "more than adulterated versions of the TV cartoon, Fractured Fairytales"; in other words, does Coover hope to achieve more than a comic effect through his transposition and rearrangement of elements from fairytales? Schmitz criticizes Coover’s "pursuit of surprise" and suggests that it "mirrors the superficiality of this genre"; while the attempt to surprise and entertain his authorial audience is clearly one priority for Coover, he does not, it seems to me, pursue surprise merely for its own sake or to flaunt his own virtuosity, nor does he parody these tales in order to indicate the used-upness or invalidity of the form itself. While Coover, like Jack and Granny, clearly believes that the old legends perpetuate myths that are no longer viable, his parodying of folktales suggests the
cathartic power of this narrative mode, in spite of the invalidity of the traditional ideology it frequently espouses.

Surprise, then, is not just an effect of Coover's inventiveness, but it becomes an important rhetorical device to persuade readers to reevaluate not only the form, but the content of the tales as well. As Coover writes in his prologue, "The novelist uses familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms and to conduct the reader...to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation" (79). Yet writers of metafiction are frequently criticized for their formalist and structuralist concerns, as this comment by Schmitz illustrates: "Unless extended, expressive of a particular vision of experience ...metafiction becomes nothing but mode: a series of acrobatic exercises in technique." While a true formalist or structuralist might bracket off the content of stories in order to concentrate on their form, Coover's acrobatic transposing and combining of elements from different tales suggests that by changing a few elements in a tale, he alters the content of that tale in significant ways. Although Coover's tale retains Granny, the lumberman, an evil wolf-like threat, and an innocent Red Riding Hood, for instance, and although in many ways the relationships between these
elements are similar to those of the original tale, his adding of new roles and combining of familiar characters resists any simple formal reduction and leads his readers through form to a reevaluation of the content. And instead of "'decentering' the individual subject, who is no longer to be regarded as the source or end of meaning," an effect Eagleton attributes to structuralist poetics, Coover's parodies focus on the effects of the tales on the individual subjects and on their particular visions of experience. Although individuals may share a common mythic consciousness, Coover seems to suggest that readers need to evaluate (not merely analyze) those symbols that traditionally have embodied elements of that consciousness, and he uses surprising rearrangements to make us abandon traditional approaches to art and to view the familiar with new eyes. Through the act of reinterpreting, he suggests, we can indeed be the source of new meanings. For in Coover's composite fairy tale which acts as a prologue for his collection of fictions, Red is also the reader, about to embark on a journey that is familiar, yet "nevertheless possessed its own astonishments and conjurings, its towers and closets, and even more pathways, more gardens, and more doors" (19).

As Calvino indicates, the most important element of a folktale is the presence of "the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything," and Coover
employs the notion of infinite possibilities as a structural device for several of the stories in *Pricksongs and Descants*. Stories such as "The Gingerbread House," which is a revision of "Hansel and Gretel," and "The Magic Poker," in which a deserted island occupied by a Caliban-like character is visited by two sisters, are grounded in the fantasy of fairy tales, but they depart from the traditional form by failing to tell a single story with a conclusive meaning. "The Elevator" and "The Babysitter" take as their subjects modern, seemingly prosaic situations about which a contemporary folklore has developed. Elevators, for instance, not only offer the possibility of plunging to one's death, but they are also natural metaphors for claustrophobia and powerlessness. Similarly, babysitters are not only objects of parents' and intruders' fantasies, both as sexual conquests and as incompetent caretakers—perhaps even murderers—of the innocents entrusted to them, but as adolescents occupying adult roles, babysitters are subject to their own fears, real or imagined. Unlike his procedure with the more straightforward parodies of Bible and fairy tales, Coover does not simply relocate the center of consciousness of these tales in order to offer a different perspective, but he offers multiple perspectives which often contradict each other and defy the reader's attempt to analytically reconstruct the events of the narrative.
In "The Door," Coover's combined characters indicate the possibility of contradictory elements existing together--beauty with terror, protection with seduction, fantasy with reality, but in this final type of story, he extends the use of combination and contradiction to the structure of the narrative itself. In "The Babysitter," for instance, Coover creates over one hundred individual narrative units that describe the events of one evening, from 7:40 when the babysitter arrives and the Tuckers' depart for a party, until 10:30, when the news is over and the late movie is about to begin. Indeed, beyond this basic narrative situation, the only thing objective and definite in this tale is the passage of time, which is kept before the reader by the television as it shows musicals slipping into westerns slipping into spy shows slipping into news at half-hour intervals. Although told by a third person narrator who, as Anderson suggests, "frequently assumes the speech patterns of the characters it describes," the narrative does not establish any criteria by which the reader may distinguish between what really happens and what is only imagined by its characters. For like the television's variety of offerings, Coover's tale offers multiple possibilities, but while the TV can be tuned to only one station at a time, Coover suggests that his narrative reader can entertain all of the possibilities at once, while his authorial audience searches for a reading strategy that will make sense of the tale.
"The Babysitter" thus begins matter-of-factly, and the reader is led to believe by the opening narrative units that he or she will be able to understand this story through a modernist reading; that is, Coover begins his narrative by apparently employing shifting consciousnesses a la Faulkner or Woolf, with each narrative unit clearly representing a particular character's perspective on real events. Mrs. Tucker, for instance, distrusts the sitter with her three children, particularly with the baby, while the young girl's sexuality reminds Mr. Tucker of his own lost youth and makes Jimmy, the little boy, anxious to tickle her. Jack, the sitter's boyfriend, contemplates his sexual timidity, while his friend, Mark, suggests that they go to the Tuckers' and rape the girl. Throughout it all, the narrator provides descriptions of what's happening on television, as though it too has a perspective to share.

But soon the characters begin to fantasize—to offer perspectives on imagined events, and Coover leads the reader to believe that the key to constructing this story is to distinguish between fact and fantasy, not merely between the perspectives of the characters. For several pages, this reading strategy seems rewarding, and it is possible to distinguish between Jack's fantasy of raping the sitter while protecting her from Mark, his more innocent memory of necking under a blanket with her the last time she worked at the Tuckers, and the "fact" that he
is still with Mark at the pinball arcade, about to call her to see if the two of them can visit. Simultaneously, Mr. Tucker seems to be at the party but imagines the girl necking on his couch with a boyfriend and fantasizes about sneaking home and seducing her himself; the sitter, meanwhile, seems to be roughhousing with the children and trying to bathe them as she imagines trying on Mr. Tucker's underpants and looks forward to relaxing in the Tuckers' big tub herself.

Yet this reading strategy also ultimately fails, for it becomes impossible to determine with certainty which sections are factual and which are fantasy. A section which seemed factual, like Jack's first phone call to the sitter which results in her inviting the boys over "for just a little while, if you'll both be good" (215), is contradicted three pages later by another seemingly factual description of the sitter absolutely refusing to let them visit her. The reader who attempts to resolve the contradiction by reevaluating the first section and attributing the successful phone call to Jack's imagination--the hoped-for-result--may succeed in untangling this example, but he must also be prepared to alter his perspectives toward all that he has read and all he is about to read. For as the story progresses, Coover merges fact and fantasy in the same sections; an event which apparently is established as factual by an earlier
unit--Jimmy claims he has to use the bathroom while the sitter is bathing--suddenly becomes part of the girl's fantasy when she asks him to wash her back. But the reader cannot be certain that the sitter actually takes a bath at the Tuckers' on this particular evening, although it is established early through both the girl's and Mr. Tucker's thoughts that on some previous evening she had used their tub. The reader who attempts to distinguish between the real events occurring on this evening, real events that may have occurred previously, and imagined events is doomed to fail, because Coover intentionally confuses the chronology (only the television continues to present events linearly) and refuses to elevate any one set of narrative units to the status of "reality." As Waugh suggests, "The story makes no indication of a difference in 'reality' status of the various sections; it can only be the 'reality' of itself," and though a rational reader might be tempted to dismiss as fantasy those more bizarre sections--like those depicting the chubby and self-conscious Mrs. Tucker exploding from her girdle while everyone at the party shoves and pushes her back into it--the narrative itself offers no support for such a reading.

Where does this intentional ambiguity leave the narrative and authorial audiences? Answering this question also allows me to address such negative evaluations as Anderson's, who has said that "The Babysitter" fails
because "its characters' lack of any but the most superficial of human thoughts and emotions...and the story's slight social message, which informs its readers in no subtle terms that lust, violence, boredom, and deceit play a significant part in the real and imagined events of contemporary man." Although I agree with Anderson's description, I would use it for the basis of a different evaluation and suggest that Coover intentionally uses flat characters with basic fears and concerns in order to establish the universality of those emotions so that he can write a fairy tale that is connected to a "contemporary mythic consciousness." What Anderson and other critics frequently ignore is what it is like to read "The Babysitter." The reader is invited to enter multiple narrative audiences, to entertain the contradictory stories presented not only by the characters, but by the blaring television as well, which provides instant romance, intrigue, sex, and violence, as well as insight into the culture. The authorial audience, however, knows that all these stories simply cannot exist simultaneously, that they cannot all share the same reality status, but as characters begin to share the same fears and fantasize in similar ways, the reader must look to the ways in which the narrative units appeal to a collective consciousness.

While the "fact" that the sitter has taken a bath in the Tuckers' tub may spawn fantasies of seduction in the water
for both Mr. Tucker and the adolescent girl, other fantasies are similarly shared. The mother’s worries about leaving her children with a “careless” girl create fears of disaster, while the sitter’s concerns with caring for the baby (and her disgust with dirty diapers) lead her to imagine that the baby dies, either by choking on a diaper pin or by drowning in the tub. Similarly, Jimmy’s childish curiosity about sex merges with the sitter’s, so that innocent tickling, touching, and bathing become the source of not so innocent fantasies for both of them. While these examples depict psychologically valid responses to shared fears and concerns and suggest the power of stories—particularly those that seem fantastic—to help us cope as individuals and as a culture with the fringe areas of our consciousness, they nevertheless heighten the ambiguity of the status of each of Coover’s narrative units, for the appearance of the same event in several characters’ thoughts seems to make that event more possible for the authorial audience.

Coover also employs his non-judgemental third person narrator to heighten the ambiguity of some individual sections for the authorial audience. Consider, for instance, the effect on the reader of this unit which appears late in the tale:

"Stop it!" she screams. "Please stop!" She’s on her hands and knees and Jack is holding her head down. "Now we’re gonna teach you how to be a
nice girl," Mark says and lifts her skirt. "Well, I'll be damned!" "What's the matter?" asks Jack, his heart pounding. "Look at this big pair of men's underpants she's got on!" "Those are my daddy's!" says Jimmy, watching them from the doorway. "I'm gonna tell!" (231)

This transaction between reader and text is much more complex than it appears. While it is clear which character speaks each of the lines, it is unclear to whom this particular fantasy belongs. It could belong to Jack, whose pounding heart indicates a fearfulness and remorse for the thought of raping his pleading girlfriend, but it could also belong to Mark, whose machismo would make the idea of resistance on the part of the victim attractive. But as Anderson suggests in his cogent analysis of this paragraph, Mr. Tucker's underpants belong in the fantasy of the babysitter,16 who was interrupted by Jimmy when she tried them on (or perhaps as she was only thinking about trying them on), so this fantasy of rape might belong to the sitter, who is worried that Jimmy will tell his parents about the incident. Does the girl's fantasy find its way into the boys', or do the boys' find their way into hers, or is she actually raped while Jimmy watches? Coover's intentional ambiguity implies not merely that these are all possible strategies for constructing the narrative, but that he has chosen all possibilities for his narrative. It is possible for the authorial reader to propose several different answers to the question of whose fantasy this is,
just as it is possible for the reader to construct several different types of fictions from the narrative—Waugh, for instance, suggests the story is "a thriller, a detective story, a romance and a tale of middle-class domestic life" all rolled into one—but it is impossible to construct only one story, one meaning from the multiple possibilities.

Given these strategies for increasing the ambiguity of the events and for frustrating the reader's attempt to distinguish fact from fantasy, the reader must confront a collective psychological horror in "The Babysitter." In a more traditional horror tale, the evil resides in the mind of one or two diabolical characters, but in this tale, evil resides in the collective fantasy, which each reader, regardless of his or her own domestic situation, is assumed in some way to share. By overwhelming his readers with contradictions, combinations, and multiple interpretations, Coover not only makes it possible for his narrative readers to recognize themselves as participants in the mass culture, but he also makes his authorial readers participate in the construction of the narrative. The reader thus becomes partly responsible for the act of imagination called "The Babysitter." Fredrick Karl has suggested that Coover is a "'with-it' sermonizer," and indeed, he is different from many writers of metafiction in that he persuasively argues that the literary transaction
is valuable as a means of exorcising our fears and violent passions. In other words, Coover asks his audience to view reading as an emotional and ethical activity, as well as an intellectual one. In "The Babysitter," then, Coover disorients his audience by asking them to indulge in what begins as a harmless fantasy, but as that fantasy becomes increasingly dark and dangerous, the authorial audience becomes increasingly unable to distinguish between the fantastic and the real and must confront as real that uncivilized side of ourselves which we frequently repress. Though the techniques are innovative and the symbols contemporary, Coover uses them to persuade his jaded audience of the value of the literary transaction as a means of keeping the individual reader—and his or her culture—healthy.

Coover thus creates a modern folklore with a poetics of multiplicity, which places much of the burden of constructing meaning on his readers. Yet it is impossible to doubt the sincerity of Coover's convictions or of his desire to not only entertain his readers, but to provide them with fresh ways of looking at the world in order to ensure its survival. For while Coover might agree with Barth's Genie that "the treasure of art...could not redeem the barbarities of history or spare us the horrors of living and dying," he nevertheless believes that literature can provoke us into discovering truths about the real
world. The concerns of Joseph and Noah's brother are real concerns, just as the fears of the babysitter are real fears. If at times those concerns are silly or superficial, Coover's elaborate rendering of them might provoke the reader into evaluating the superficial values of his culture, and if Coover is unable to provide us with meaning, perhaps his metafictional techniques equip us to be the source of our own meaning.

In the final story of the collection, "Hat Act," Coover depicts the relationship between the performer and his audience in a different manner than in the other stories of this type. The magician's audience is more humane than the audience of "Panel Game," which taunted and jeered at the panelist's errors and cheered at his death. Though this audience still laughs loudly at the assistant's bawdy behavior, yawns when the magician performs the same tricks, and constantly insists upon new magic--new techniques--it knows the assistant who is stuck in the magician's hat is a real woman. When the magician's attempt to extract her from his hat fails, he "hurls hat to floor, leaps on it with both feet. Something crunches. Hideous piercing shriek" (255). Illusions have no bones to break or voices with which to scream, and when the magician's attempt to entertain this audience results in the woman's death, its members respond with weeping, retching, and moaning, horrified at the part they played in
The audience, unable to get a refund for the show, must accept responsibility for its role in the woman's crucifixion. Like the magician's hat trick, Coover's attempts to create new metaphors sometimes fall short of his intentions (as, for instance, in stories like "The Elevator"). But if he persuades his audience to look beyond the magic to the human essences it can reveal, beyond the trick to the crushed assistant or the sacrificed panel member, he has created an authorial audience sensitive to human values, an audience capable of viewing the barbarities of history and culture from different perspectives. Although they sometimes fail to provide us with new metaphors, perhaps Coover's fictions ultimately give us something more valuable: a belief in the power of literature to provide insight into the fears and hopes of real human beings who are connected to each other through a mythic consciousness.

The Consciousness of Form

"Less and less people seem to believe in us, to say nothing of understanding our art."19 So laments the tightrope-walking narrator of W.S. Merwin's "The Death-defying Tortonis." In language as precise and calm as Coover's is elaborate and hysterical, Merwin details the methodical, cautious approach the Tortonis take to their death-defying
act, describing even the fine sand which coats the wire upon which they ride their cycles. Like the metafictionalist, the narrator reveals the tricks of his art and its carefully constructed terrors. Grandfather Tortoni scorns their cautiousness and theatricality: "He says we are no longer of interest because in fact we are not defying anything real at all. According to him we know too much, and it is all a game. Even if we were killed we would be killed in a game" (111). Grandfather Tortoni suggests that the performers are unwilling to combine risk with wit to look at their art freshly, and that until they return to the simple art of defying death as he did--simply because it "got into him that he could"--they will be unable to ignite belief in their audiences. When Coover succeeds in moving his reader with his reconstructed fairytales, it is because he, like Grandfather Tortoni, believes in the reality of art and in its ability to help us defy death; but the risk, like the magician's assistant, must be real or it is all a game, all a construct. To understand the importance of this distinction, we must look at two other metafictionalists--Italo Calvino and Donald Barthelme--who use the fairy tale as formal possibility without defying anything "real" at all.

Barthelme's *Snow White* is a sixties update of the Grimm brothers' classic, and its heroine is a modern woman trapped in the role outlined for her in the original fairy
tale. Snow White keeps house for and sleeps with the seven dwarfs, who are employed as window-washers and makers of Chinese baby food, and although she is bored by her role, she stays with them and waits for her prince to come because, she says, "I have not been able to imagine anything better." In some ways, then, Barthelme's parody suggests that fairy tales not only fail to help us imaginatively confront our fears, but that by perpetuating untenable cultural values, fairy tales actively inhibit the imagination and prevent us from seeing things as they are. Snow White, for example, is described immediately as a "tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots...The hair is black as ebony, the skin white as snow" (3). Though the narrator has literally drawn a picture of the heroine's row of beauty marks, making it clear that her skin is not as white as snow, he mindlessly reverts to the expected phrase to end his description. Like Snow White, he is unable to imagine a better description because he is trapped in his culture's linguistic constructions.

Barthelme is quite concerned in Snow White with the "odd linguistic trip, stutter and fall" (139) and with "those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon" (97-8), but I will discuss the self-conscious language of metafiction in the next chapter and focus here on the use to which Barthelme puts the elements
of the fairy tale. Barthelme typifies his characters so that they are even less distinct than those of the original tale; Sleepy, Doc, Dopey and crew are at least distinguished by the trait which names them, but Barthelme's seven male characters lack even that individuation. Indeed, except for Bill the leader, the dwarfs seem defined only by the fact that they are seven, for when Bill is executed at the end of the tale, the group finds it necessary to convert the repulsive Hogo to dwarfdom in order to keep their identity as the "seven" intact. Bill is distinguished only by his role as leader, a position given him because at one time he seemed to possess "possibility." But when he fails to live up to that undefined possibility—when he, in other words, fails in his role as leader by losing the group's money and allowing the fire under the vats of baby food to die—Bill is found "guilty of vaticide and failure....and if you are guilty, then you must be hanged" (180).

The "main" characters are similarly defined only by the roles they play. Paul (the hero-prince, forced into this role because of his blue blood) and Hogo (a character not in the original tale who says "vile things more or less at random, not only because it is expected of me but also because I enjoy it" [p. 73]), are essentially different reflections of the same male-chauvinistic superficiality and act together as voyeurs outside Snow White's window.
Paul, unable to think of Snow White as a sexual woman because of his role as romantic hero, savors "the sweetness of human communication, through the window" (149), but because of his romantic insipidness and indecisiveness, he is unable to respond to her symbolic gesture of hanging her long hair out of her bedroom window. Hogo, on the other hand, believes women are only sexual objects and thus interchangeable; when he finds a woman more attractive than the one he has, he simply discards the old for the new. His rejection of Jane (the witch) for Snow White is prompted only by sexual desire, and though attracted to Hogo's sexuality, Snow White rejects him because she knows he's no prince.

Jane and the heroine are likewise inhibited by the roles tradition grants them. After being thrown-over by Hogo, whom she does not particularly care for, Jane whips up a poison for Snow White: "Now I must witch someone, for that is my role, and to flee one's role, as Gimbal tells us, is in the final analysis bootless" (158). But apart from her role as witch, Jane is no different from Snow White; she longs for a man to complete her and for some connection with other humans, and thus she writes a letter to a stranger in order to inject her "universe of discourse" into his. And while Jane nourishes her malice, because it is her role, Snow White is essentially as bitter as the witch. Because of her role as maiden-in-distress, she simply waits for her prince to climb her hair:
No one has come to climb up. That says it all. This time is the wrong time for me. I am in the wrong time. There is something wrong with all those people standing there, gaping and gawking. And with all those who did not come and at least try to climb up. To fill the role. And with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story. (131-132)

And this, of course, seems to be the moral of the story; no one can fill the roles demanded by the traditional literary and cultural structures, yet it is bootless to flee one's role because the structures are innate.

Barthelme's fairy tale characters are finally all of one type: uninteresting. The principle governing the seven men's life is "equanimity," and the reader must agree with the psychiatrist's diagnosis of Snow White: "He said I was a screaming bore" (21). Because Barthelme's characters are so intentionally superficial, because they lack even the tiniest bit of imagination, it is difficult to remain interested in them for 180 pages. Fairy tales, of course, are short, and their typified characters reflect some element of the mythic consciousness; because Barthelme's characters all suffer from boredom and inertia, all the characters reflect the same dullness, and despite Barthelme's interesting play with language, the reader feels, like Snow White, the dearth of possibilities in this world. Coover, of course, resorts to form in "The
Babysitter" to suggest multiple possibilities, and it is possible to interpret, as Gordon does, Barthelme's final list as a similar attempt at an "open-ended finale" providing "totally contradictory interpretations"\(^{21}\):

\[
\text{THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE} \\
\text{REVIRGINIIZATION OF SNOW WHITE} \\
\text{APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE} \\
\text{SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY} \\
\text{THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF} \\
\text{A NEW PRINCIPLE} \\
\text{HEIGH-HO} \\
(p. 181)
\]

While this list, like Snow White's lament that no one has the decency to supply the correct ending for the story, does remind the reader of the fictionality of the text he or she has just read, Barthelme's ironic "heigh ho" suggests that none of these endings will happen; the dwarfs have installed Hogo as their seventh, Snow White will continue waiting, and nothing will change. The novel ends essentially as it begins, suggesting a circular, closed structure, which, because its inhabitants lack imagination, will enclose them forever.

Coover parodies fairy tales in order to reinterpret, revise, and reassert the value of the literary artifact as a means of conveying small truths about the real world, not to suggest that inherent in the traditional form is "some malignant evil." Barthelme's parody of "Snow White," however, is a denunciation not merely of the content of the original tale, but ultimately of the value of literary
structures in general. Barthelme's parody suggests that his characters are imaginatively debilitated by the structures of their society (structures which traditional fictional genres harmfully perpetuate) and that no matter how long Snow White waits, the happy ending promised by the fairy tale will not materialize because art and reality have little to do with one another. In other words, the "truths" art teaches about life are lies, and literature can only teach us about itself--its structures, codes, and linguistic trips. This pessimistic view of literary constructions is emphasized by the questionnaire in the middle of Snow White. By asking his reader if she likes the story so far, if in "the further development of the story" she would like more or less emotion, Barthelme seems to show a willingness to respond to the reader's desires, to offer her a degree of control over the novel; but, of course, the novel is already completed, printed, and purchased, and the reader's responses have nothing to do with Barthelme's final construct. Similarly, Barthelme asks his reader "Would you like a war? Yes ( ) No ( )? ...In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? ( ) Two sets of shoulders? ( ) Three? ( )" (82-83). Just as questions about the novel's construction imply and then deny the reader's power, these questions imply the author's power to alter reality with words only to deny that possibility.
Despite the light he sheds upon the nature of language and his sometimes brilliant linguistic performances, Barthelme's extended parody of the fairytale is finally unsatisfying, and not, I need to emphasize, merely because of his pessimistic outlook. His use of fairytale characters seems gimmicky and solipsistic rather than probing of the specific genre; and while he denounces the pat structures of such tales and their happy endings, his own novel is for the most part neatly structured. Indeed, it is the choice of genre that ultimately undermines Klinkowitz's contention that Barthelme's undertaking in *Snow White* is a "thematic exploitation of language and the forms it takes." Despite Barthelme's basic assumption that literature is a retreat from reality rather than a commentary upon it, critics have ascribed vastly different meanings to *Snow White*: the novel has been called a "parody of the communes of the 1960s," a Freudian commentary on the tendency of males to fashion mythical women "with the dregs of their (and society's) unfulfilled dreams," a "parody of higher learning" and other social institutions, and Snow White "a latter-day Madame Bovary,...a typical victim of mass culture." These interpretations suggest the traditional importance of the genre as a means of transmitting social and cultural values, a convention readers expect and one which his linguistic play fails to completely alter. The genre, it seems, is indeed best
suited to portraying characters in action (or in the case of Snow White, in in-action). Barthelme's novel is an excellent example of the difficulty of maintaining the reader's interest in literary language and the forms it takes in an extended work and of the difficulty for both writer and reader of overcoming conventional genre expectations.

If Barthelme disdains structure, Calvino is obsessed by it in The Castle of Crossed Destinies. In the tradition of The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales, the Castle is a collection of tales told by a group of travellers gathered in a castle (Part I) and in a tavern (Part II), but Calvino's work is distinguished from his predecessors' in that the travellers have all lost the power of speech while crossing the forest and must tell their tales with decks of tarot cards. The stories are first told, then, in pictures, and Calvino's narrator interprets the patterns of the cards with his text. This strategy creates an interesting and complex metafictional structure. Although the relationship between teller and told seems to be that of the oral tale, neither the unvoiced storytellers nor their "auditors" can be certain that the tarots are being interpreted correctly, so like the writer who must rely not only upon his own ability to create interpretable patterns but also upon the reader's knowledge of language and literary conventions, Calvino's storytellers must trust to
their interpreter's knowledge of the conventions of tarot cards.

For like language and literature, the tarots suggest a system in which each tarot/sign has several ascribed meanings which must be interpreted in relation to the tarots that surround it. And as each teller fashions his individual discourse, he or she contributes to the general structure, in which stories intersect and comment upon each other according to general mythic forms implied by the symbols pictured on the tarots. And as Calvino's work progresses, his narrator relies increasingly upon his knowledge of literary prototypes in order to interpret the patterns before him; the tarots thus reveal the stories of Roland, Astolfo, Faust, Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear. The final story in the collection, "Three Tales of Madness and Destruction," is an inventive pastiche of the three Shakespeare plays in which each teller interprets the same cards in light of their own stories; the "Hermit" tarot, for instance, represents a mistakenly murdered Polonius in Hamlet's tale, while Lady Macbeth sees in this card "another ghostly apparition, the hooded shade of the butchered Banquo," and Lear recognizes himself in the Hermit, "outcast and mad, roaming in search of the angelic Cordelia." Just as the narrator uses his understanding of the literary tradition to interpret these tales, Calvino depends upon his reader's knowledge of the same system for the success of his pastiche.
Calvino's interest in the tarots as a "portrayal of the collective unconscious mind" (128) suggests a belief in the power of literary symbols that is similar to Coover's. Indeed, in the tale of the writer, "I Also Try to Tell My Tale," the narrator suggests that the "raw material" of writing is "all a rising to the surface of hairy claws, cur-like scratching, goat's goring, repressed violences that grope into the darkness" (101); further, he indicates that the observers' response to artistic portrayals of Saint George's slaying of the dragon is such that we hold our breath, "on the point of understanding that the dragon is not only the enemy, the outsider, the other, but is us, a part of ourselves that we must judge" (110). But this expressed faith in the significant role that legends and fairy tales play in the lives of readers and writers is lost in Calvino's almost obsessive structuring of the tarots and his strict adherence to the notion of tarots as system. We are never moved to hold our breath while reading Calvino's Castle, for like the author, we are always outside of the tales, our attention drawn not to the individual narrators or the elements of the unconscious mind they depict with the tarots, but instead to Calvino's structuring of the tarots and to the literary system they reflect.

The Castle of Crossed Destinies is thus a formal experiment that soon plays itself out, and the tales are
for the most part as flat as the tarots used to tell them. Even in the most successful tales--those pastiches playing upon the mythic nature of classic literature--readers are distanced from the experiences reflected by the tarots by the many layered narrative; these tales are fictions about fictions told first in a symbolic system (tarots) and interpreted in another (words). And as Calvino’s Shakespearean tale shows, the effect of retelling the plays through tarots is a flattening of these classic characters and their stories, and even the original playwright seems little more than a competent shuffler of literary symbols. In other words, Calvino’s interest in structure and system in this collection overrides any concern with distinguishing between those literary works that are great and those that are not, since all stories are similarly part of a single system.

While Calvino’s work is inventive, his obsession with pattern and system makes the literary transaction seem little more than a game that flaunts the role of the performer and keeps the reader at a distance--much like the Tortonis’ tight-rope performance might inspire the audience’s appreciation for the acrobats’ skills but nevertheless fails to inspire belief. Indeed, Calvino’s narrator seems to recognize this failure of his carefully constructed text: "Perhaps the moment has come to admit that only tarot number one honestly depicts what I have
succeeded in being: a juggler, or conjurer, who arranges on a stand at a fair a certain number of objects and, shifting them, connecting them, interchanging them, achieves a certain number of effects” (105). Like the Tortonis, Calvino seems not to defy anything real at all, for by distancing his readers with a methodically structured text, he might earn our respect for his craftsmanship, his acrobatic ability, but he fails to allow us to enter the narrative world to discover what we do in Coover's fictions—-that the "repressed violences that grope in the darkness" are not only real, but within us.
Notes

1 Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants* (New York: Plume Books, 1970), p. 111. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.


6 Anderson, p. 21.


8 Calvino, Introduction to *Italian Folktales*, p. xviii-xix.

9 Schmitz, p. 214.

10 Schmitz, p. 214.

11 Schmitz, p. 213.

13 Anderson, p. 103.


15 Anderson, p. 105.

16 Anderson, p. 104.

17 Waugh, p. 138.


20 Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1972), p. 59. All further references to this work are cited in the text.


CHAPTER IV
METALINGUISTIC DISCOURSE

Language as Both Means and End: Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife

In Fiction and the Figures of Life, William Gass suggests that "In every art two contradictory impulses are in a state of Manichean war: the impulse to communicate and so to treat the medium of communication as a means, and the impulse to make an artifact out of the materials of the medium and so to treat the medium as an end."¹ These contradictory impulses are present in all art, as Gass indicates, and particularly in metafictional art, but in those works where language is thematized and thus functions blatantly as both means and end, the conflict between these different attitudes toward the medium of fiction is most pronounced. In Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, for instance, Gass draws attention to his work as an artifact through the use of both self-referential linguistic structures and manipulations of the medium which emphasize the book's physicality, while at the same time, he uses referential discourse in order to communicate to his reader
a philosophical inquiry on the nature of language. Before considering the ideological implications of Gass' novella, I will explore the techniques Gass uses in order to alter not just his reader's expectations, but to alter the very experience of reading a text.

In his introduction to Surfiction, Raymond Federman suggests that "The very act of reading a book, starting at the top of the first page, and moving from left to right, top to bottom, page after page to the end in a consecutive prearranged manner has become boring and restrictive":

Indeed, any intelligent reader should feel frustrated and restricted within that preordained system of reading. Therefore, the whole traditional, conventional, fixed, and boring method of reading a book must be questioned, challenged, demolished. And it is the writer (and not modern printing technology) who must, through innovations in the writing itself—in the typography and topology of his writing—renew our system of reading.2

In many ways, Federman could be describing Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, a work which blatantly exploits the limitations of traditional methods of reading and interpreting literary works. Although the text does finally allow the reader to reconstruct it in a general way, it resists the reader who wants to start at the top of the page and move from left to right straight through. To begin with, Gass immediately draws our attention to the physicality of the text: not only does an outstretched arm
and pointing finger direct us to the title of his work, but on the following page that title is superimposed on and conforms to the naked torso of a woman, a woman who is next shown eating the first letter of the text (an erotic act which also mimics the reader who devours books and reminds us that books are consumer products). Tony Tanner suggests that Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife "begins with body and ends with words, or rather, they seem to come together--the text corporealised, the body verbalised." But the first images presented to us prior to entering the "body" of the text already depict this coming together of text and body and thus not only foreshadow a major theme of the book, but also work to establish the book as an independent art object to be viewed as well as read. In Fiction and the Figures of Life, Gass asks readers to view characters in a work of literature as we would a "striding statue":

...imagine the purposeful inclination of the torso, the alert and penetrating gaze of the head and its eyes, the outstretched arm and pointing finger; everything would appear to direct us toward some goal in front of it. Yet our eye travels only to the finger's end, and not beyond. Though pointing, the finger bids us stay instead, and we journey slowly back along the tension of the arm. In our hearts we know what actually surrounds the statue. The same surrounds every other work of art: empty space and silence. (FF, 49)
The pointing finger on the title page, of course, bids the reader to enter the work of art called Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, a work which seeks not to reflect the world outside of itself, but to simply fill, like the sculpture, the empty space and silence, the void outside of art.

Although it is possible for the reader to seek in the first few pages of the text a psychologically realistic representation of the title character, Babs Masters, a lonely ex-stripper engaged in an unsatisfying sexual act with a bland salesman, Gass' use of different type styles and varying discourses makes it difficult to view Babs mimetically, as one might, for instance, view Molly Bloom, another lonesome and unfaithful wife. But while Gass' play with different type styles in the first part of the narrative may draw our attention away from Babs as a realistic character to consider the ways by which the empty page is filled with print, the experimentation with type styles functions for the reader in another way: instead of randomly alternating types, Gass uses them in order to make it easy for the authorial reader to distinguish between different voices and discourses and to enter the multiple narrative audiences required of each type style. The italics of the first part, for example, are reserved for the voice that James Phelan has identified as a third person narrator who speaks "sometimes to remind us of the action that is happening as Babs speaks ..., sometimes to
refer to Babs's memories of past desires," a voice which Phelan also suggests is a potentially valuable device to "emphasize Babs's distance from her actions." But as Phelan indicates, Gass is more interested in language, or as I would suggest, in the uses to which language is put, than in the depiction of Babs as a mimetic character, so he never fully exploits the potential of the italicized discourse to characterize Babs. Gass does, however, use this voice to emphasize the ways in which language can be used to distance us from experience.

Rather than viewing this voice as one belonging to a narrator who is independent of Babs, I view it as another variation of Babs' narration, a variation which allows Babs to view herself from a distance in the third person. The italicized discourse, the first the reader encounters, promises a romantic love story: "She'd love him even if his head weren't shiny...His hair was the only illumination in the room. Its smooth slope lit her breasts" (3). This is the voice of the dime-store romance novel that promises transformation and fulfillment through sex, and Babs views herself as a character in such a romance, remembering how as a young girl she had wanted earlobes, "To dangle diamonds from, and pearls in petals of silver, spills of crimson glass or wheels of polished jade or even jasper" (3). The italicized voice represents romanticized literary discourse, and as such, it does provide its narrative
audience with the most mimetic portrait of Babs: it recounts, for example, Babs's first "romantic" encounter with the railroad conductor, explaining that it "had been a rehearsal, most of it, the jouncing and the ramming, the torrent of noise...sure, it must have been a rehearsal, for what had her life been since but bumpydump...bumpydump and gicky" (8-9). But as other discourses intrude, the failure of literary discourse to transform the unsatisfying sexual encounter with Phil Gelvin (the bumpydump and gicky) into a romance becomes apparent, and the italicized voice recalls Babs' role as a character in a play (another literary use of language): "She was eloquent, the way she walked, hands on her hips....She taps him on the shoulder with a sausage. He's kneeling in front of her, facing her navel. Rise, Sir Dick, she says, or something, tapping right and left" (12-13). Though Babs tries to imagine herself as an eloquent and jewel-bedecked romantic heroine, her literary language cannot finally alter the fact that she is more appropriately cast as a character in a bawdy play.

The reader is asked to enter a number of other narrative audiences in the first section of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, for Gass employs different discourses to illustrate the various uses--some deceptive--to which language can be put. After Babs's romantic comment about Phil's illuminating hair, a fragment of an advertising jingle intrudes in big, bold print: "It is certainly
amazing what brilliantine can do" (3). Frequently, as in this example, the authorial audience is called upon to recognize the ironic implications of the juxtaposition of different discourses. At other times, however, Babs will illuminate ironies within a single discourse for her narrative audience. When, in the discourse that occupies the largest portion of the first part (the section presented in "ordinary" print), Babs contemplates the names men give their penises, she suggests that "It would be agreeable, certainly, if they arranged them as to size and age, breeding, blood, or social position; then skill, too, would be sensible--Percy for some sorts, Raphael for others" (9); of course, she recognizes that the self-given names have nothing to do with size or ability to perform, and Babs' somewhat bawdy discourse thus foregrounds a concern with the discrepancy between sign and signified. Significantly, it is this discourse in which Babs tells her reader that she is like "imagination imagining itself imagine...as though a record might take down its turning and in that self-responsive way comprise a song which sings its singing back upon its notes as purely as a mirror" (7). This metafictional impulse is supported not only by Babs' words--the "content" of her discourse--but also by the inclusion of a mirror image of the page on which her discourse appears. Although Babs uses words to convey meaning to her narrative audience, Gass's play with the
text-as-mirror indicates a seemingly contradictory concern that the sign can ultimately only reflect itself, that imagination is tied explicitly to its medium.

Babs also considers the nature of metaphor in a more theoretical discourse distinguished by its bold type. She speaks directly to the narrative reader, asking him to imagine someone spitting in his mouth, then directs him, "If you have an experimental twist" to "expectorate into a glass--sufficiently--twelve times should do it. Do not tarry. Drink the spittle. Analyze your reluctance. And wonder why they call saliva the sweet wine of love" (4). The repulsiveness of the experiment she asks her narrative reader to make not only highlights the distinction between spittle and its metaphoric name, but it also forces the narrative audience of this particular discourse to consider language as theme. On the one hand, this direct confrontation of the narrative reader (later she directs him to "pick another's nose, for instance" [8]) distances Gass's authorial audience from Babs' narrative audience, toward whom she clearly directs the disdain she feels for her insensitive lovers. But on the other hand, the foregrounding of linguistic concerns in Babs' theoretical discourses ("There's no woman who's not, deep inside her, theoretical" [8]) suggests that the narrative audience and the authorial audience must consider similar questions, and the distance between the two is thus somewhat diminished.
Instead of flattering the authorial audience by indicating its distance from Babs' implied audience, as for instance, Barth does when he employs a narrator to berate his readers, Gass's theoretical Babs collapses the distance between the two types of readers; as Babs contemplates the metaphors of love, discovering their inappropriateness to her experience with clods like Gelvin, the authorial audience is made to feel similarly disdained, since Gass must blatantly draw our attention to words as signs, as though his reader were, like Babs' narrative audience, insensitive to the metaphoric richness of language.

The relative positions of the authorial and narrative audiences are further complicated in the second section of Willie Masters' *Lonesome Wife*. Babs, who has told us that she used to write the scripts for her bawdy strip-tease act, stealing "from the best, from the classiest greats, from books that only came in sets. They laughed just the same—for me or Gogol—they would yaw-yaw just the same" (10), presents a burlesque about a man who discovers his penis baked in his breakfast bun. The comedy achieves its effects through this situation, word-play, particularly double entendre, and the actors' gestures, which Babs describes in her footnotes as another type of sign: "The gestures of the actors are no more than words, mere words, the commonest kinds...Ordinary acting is like ordinary prose" (26-27). The juxtaposition of the "low" comedy with
Babs' frequently serious and scholarly footnotes not only satirizes the academic apparatus, but it also raises questions about the audience for each discourse. Though Babs' play is clearly presented for "all the bald bastards" (16) who typically watch strip-tease, its situation and characters—a castrating female and an impotent, wimpy, bald male—are designed to make this audience uneasy in its laughter. But Babs' footnotes, with references to Locke and Stein, suggest an awareness of a more sophisticated and educated audience, and her commentary increasingly occupies more of the reader's attention than the play itself, so much so that eventually the text of the play runs several pages behind the footnotes, thus disrupting the reader's typical top to bottom reading strategy. The use of footnotes not only calls the reader's attention to the text as body, to which these exterior "footnotes" are appended, but as a parody of scholarly pedantry (a word itself derived from the word foot), Babs' footnotes mock a more sophisticated audience, suggesting again a lack of distance between the narrative audience of the bawdy play and the audience of the "theoretical" footnotes.

Indeed, Babs becomes increasingly hostile to her narrative readers, occasionally chiding them for their failure to read closely, as in these footnotes within a footnote: "*** A cliche of course****. And did it catch you? Tisk. The image which immediately follows is a fake.
Life is full of similar tests****. Be more observant next time" (18). The text clearly mocks the conventional reader, described by Tanner as "the crude 'literalist' who, like a bad lover, can only think of plunging straight ahead in a crude monolinear manner." Obviously, Gass's many structural strategies (different discourses running parallel across the page, fragments from other writers' work, different type styles, and so on) function to disorient this type of reader, but Babs as commentator similarly attempts to alter her narrative readers' expectations. At one point she boldly (in both tone and print) uses her footnotes to assault her masculine lover/reader:

Now that I've got you alone down here, you bastard, don't think I'm letting you get away easily, no sir, not you brother; anyway, how do you think you're going to get out, down here where it's dark and oily like an alley, meaningless as Plato's cave? do you think you know the way? well you don't know anything, do you?... and as long as I talk to you, as long as I threaten you, as long as I bait you, as long as I call you names and blaspheme your gods and tease your pricks and promise to sugar my cunt like a bun for Easter, as long as I grin at you, spit on you, continue to hate--as long as I hate like a nigger, with a niggerish hate--then dear brother, lover, fellow reader--then I've got you deep inside me like they say in the songs, fast as a ship in antarctic ice, and I won't need to pinion your arms, lover, butt you or knee, you'll stay, you'll want to, you'll beg me not to go and take my myth, my baffling maze, my sex, my veils, my art away, you simple sucker, down here looking for dirt like a schoolboy, down at the foot of this page, between the toes of its body...(19-20)
Babs, who in the first part of the narrative acknowledges that her passivity provides her inept lovers with a "flesh-like copy...to keep them safe, to keep them clean of fact and fancy" (7), turns the tables on her lovers. She is used by Gelvin and his kind--she essentially consents to be raped--but through her note, she aggressively, if only figuratively, rapes her reader, who not only consents to the rape, but requires her art. Babs revenges her illuse as lover through the art of her play (by depicting the male's loss of the instrument by which he plunges straight ahead) and by casting her reader into the roles of both victim and voyeur, roles her reader must play to enter the narrative audience. The "bald bastards" who watch strip-tease are clearly voyeurs, vicariously experiencing the erotic through art, but as Babs suggests in her notes, readers are similarly voyeuristic, seeking to discover meaning through art.

How does this second part of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife function for Gass's authorial audience, and into what type of role is he casting us? Are we too imagined as "crude literalists" who typically plunge straight through a narrative? Babs is depicted as the protean narrator, able to create multiple discourses for multiple audiences: as Phelan indicates, "she employs at one point or another the abstract diction of a philosopher, the hortatory tone of a
schoolteacher, the abusive attitude of a bully, the peremptory tone of a play director, the tongue-in-cheek pose of a punster, and the concise eloquence of a poet."

As Babs' commentary grows in length (as well as in type size) in proportion to the play itself, Gass's reader must abandon conventional narrative expectations (like consistency of character) and concentrate on Babs' ability to manipulate language, and finally on the flexibility of language itself. And as Babs assumes a variety of poses, it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to distinguish between Gass as author and Babs as narrator and between his role as authorial reader and his role as narrative reader. In other words, as language becomes the explicit theme of the work, it becomes less significant as a speech act attached to an individual character and more important as a medium which makes the realization of both thought and imagination possible. Language, detached from its speaker, reveals an existence prior to and independent of an individual author, for as Gass suggests in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, "when language is used as an art it is no longer used merely to communicate. It demands to be treated as a thing, inert and voiceless" (FF, 93).

Thus Gass, like Babs, "steals" from the best, placing, for instance, a fragment from Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in a comic strip balloon, without, of course, crediting Hardy for "his" words. The words in the balloon
simply present another fragment of discourse that coexists with a page from an imaginary manuscript, a quotation from *Tristram Shandy*, musical notes, and so on, but Gass expects his authorial audience to recognize it as a fragment from a serious literary work; placing it in the balloon alters its context, makes it comic rather than serious, and forces the reader to view language as something which belongs to no one and to all. The balloon functions, like the concrete poems included in this section, to emphasize the medium as both a means of communicating (as Hardy's words do in the context of *Tess*) and as an art object, an artifact. As the voice of the poet tells us near the end of part two, "No one can imagine--simply--merely; one must imagine within words or paint or metal, communicating genes or multiplying numbers. Imagination is its medium realized" (35).

Babs' disdain for her readers is in many ways also directed toward the authorial readers, who must be manipulated and teased, and sometimes directly confronted, in order that they might view language as more than a means of communication, as more than a function of meaning. Were Gass's audience already sensitive to the magical properties of words, he could present his fragments, his artifacts, his multiple narratives without the aid of blatant discourses on the nature of language; but because his authorial audience includes readers who share the
insensitivity of Babs' lovers, Gass must include his philosophical diatribes to alert them to the power of language. As Gass speaks in a voice that is closer to that of a nonfictional author/philosopher than to that of a fictional character, he does indeed use language as a means to communicate to his reader a theoretical interest in language, and though these discourses may make readers question the "fictionality" of the work before them, they are an intrinsic part of a work that seeks to reveal multiple levels of language usage; ordinary prose, to use Gass's own rather sexist simile, is "like the gray inaudible wife who services the great man: an ideal engine, utterly self-effacing, devoted without remainder to its task" (FF, 93). The inclusion of non-poetic referential discourse suggests that language is indeed sometimes a means by which an author communicates with a reader, as well as a necessary agent for thought to take place at all.

How, then, is the reader to interpret the communication provided by a voice of an author, later identified as Joe Slatters, at the beginning of the third section:

The muddy circle you see just before you and below you represents the ring left on a leaf of the manuscript by my coffee cup. Represents, I say, because, as you must surely realize, this book is many removes from anything I've set pen, hand, or cup to....A wall divides us like the wall which grew between Pyramus and Thisbe on account of the quarrel of their families....All contact--merest contact--any contact--is
impossible, logically impossible (there's not even a crack between us), though I have been invited to kiss many an ass through just such a barrier. (39)

Here, it seems to me, Gass begins to acknowledge the ways in which the metaphor of reader and writer as lovers must finally fail. Although this discourse clearly seeks to convey meaning—just as Slatters' correspondents do indeed get their point across despite the impossibility of their request, that meaning indicates the extent to which reader and writer are completely separate entities which the "book," the art object, does not and cannot unite. For the book itself is an object independent of both reader and writer, made as it is of language that finally belongs to no one. Though the text may indeed seduce the reader into a world that is not her own, she never makes contact with the author, just as Gelvin, though he penetrates Babs, never really touches her or alters her, carrying away, as he does, his "contraceptive sack." The author, as known by the reader, is comprised only of signs and representative marks on a page: "When a letter comes, if you will follow me, there is no author fastened to it like the stamp; the words which speak, they are the body of the speaker" (58). Gass, then, seems an examplar of Roland Barthes' "modern scriptor" for whom, "the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin—or which, at
least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins."8

This emphasis on the text's physicality and independence does not, however, make reading a work like Gass's any less an erotic act, though it does alter the implications of the act. Language is not the means by which reader and writer make love, but rather, Gass suggests that it is a medium which should be used lovingly. In On Being Blue, a philosophical inquiry which shares many of the theoretical concerns of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, Gass details the ways by which sex enters literature, the most valuable of which is "the use of language like a lover...not the language of love, but the love of language...not what the tongue touches, but what it forms, not lips and nipples, but nouns and verbs."8 The use of language like a lover, and not language itself, is finally the subject of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, a work which Charles Caramello criticizes for its chauvinism and solipsism: "Gass wants to leap, unified, into the dance of art, 'leaving nothing of himself behind'; but he also wants to stage himself as a master, as a performing self, in a stripper's dance."10 Though Caramello indicates that these two desires are incompatible, I would suggest that the power of Gass's work comes from the interplay of these two contradictory impulses. For the incompatibility Caramello describes is similar to that which Gass identifies as the
difference between treating the medium as an end and using it as a means of communicating some 'authorial' meaning to a reader.

For Gass is indeed Barthes' "modern scriptor" in that he recognizes that the

...text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture....the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words. 11

Gass's strategies of juxtaposing quotations and fragments, of highlighting the "forms" language takes, of gradually altering his audience's reading experience in Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife suggest the extent to which the "author" participates in a system that is anterior to him, that shapes him in ways he cannot completely control, just as "the name a man has all his life must do something to him" (41). That is, the writer cannot escape the fact that he inherits a language that is both meaning-full and functional, or as Gass suggests elsewhere, "Words are properties of thoughts, and thoughts cannot be thought without them" (BB, 21). On the one hand, then, Gass uses
language as a means to an end: the education of readers regarding the more imaginative uses of language. That is, he must use language prosaically in order to draw our attention to his use of it poetically, to his mastering of its imaginative potential.

Barthes suggests that the writer's awareness of the degree to which he merely mixes unoriginal discourses ultimately results in the birth of the reader at the expense of the death of the author, but Gass's text suggests that both writer and reader 'live' by participating in a system that is itself originless and immortal. Thus Gass does not expunge the performing self (nor does he want to) by creating multiple narrative voices and audiences, but he does make of the text a "playhouse" that enables the reader, as well as the writer, to play with language. For though Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife is a fugue in which Babs sings with many different voices, there is never any question about who orchestrates these voices; Gass is the maestro who composes, educates, juxtaposes, and celebrates artistic imagination. Gass draws his reader's attention to his own verbal virtuosity and thus refuses to "die," for he is "the man of imagination [who] dares to make things for no better reason than they please him--because he lives" (50). Despite this solipsistic performance, Gass is finally Barthes' sceptor who refuses to provide a single "theological" meaning for
his reader; he confines his didactism to that which he shows he has himself mastered: the use of language like a lover. By refusing to make Babs a mimetic character, he avoids telling us how to live our lives, how to act toward our husbands, wives, or lovers, how to react to experiences in the "real" world. If Gass is an author-god, he is the god of art, not the god of ultimate meanings.

More disturbing than the charges of solipsism directed against Gass's strategies are these charges of sexism: "Gass does not unmake himself as master, does not subvert his own authority..., and does not disrupt our cultural or sexual assumptions."12 A study which seeks to evaluate the effects of Gass's rhetoric must come to terms with what is on the surface a clearly sexist metaphor, one that suggests that language, like a woman, is a thing to be used. Does the suggestion that language must be used lovingly overcome the reader's aversion to this sexist metaphor, or is Gass in fact writing from a traditionally male literary point of view and thus pandering to the "male reader's fantasy because that reader...is his, the writer's, double"?13 Frederick Karl, on the other hand, seems to ignore the negative implications of this metaphor entirely in his mimetic reading of Babs Masters, for he argues that Gass's work is really a response to the women's movement, a response which positively "helped to shape its literature, with plaints from a lonesome wife": 

Her self has been dismembered or eradicated, the archetypal female situation. This conception of the wife—a voice, unnamed, unpaged, unidentified—is Gass's triumph in the novella. He has, in this respect, helped to shape a conception of a plaintive woman; not a Medea but a modern-day Niobe.\(^{14}\)

Karl's view is somewhat naive, overlooking as it does Gass's metalinguistic concerns in favor of a realistic reading of the "main" character; he suggests, for instance, that the "pouring in of other voices, on the other hand, is often arbitrary, lacking in associational value, full of cliches meant to call attention to themselves as platitudes but that, lacking wit, fall flat."\(^{15}\) What Karl, and ultimately Caramello, fail to account for is what it is like to read Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, for despite the sexism of the metaphor, the text finally subverts traditional "male" criticism and novel conventions, so that the metaphor, the nude pictures of the female form, the text as body tease the reader into an anti-climatic, anti-male text.

The chauvinism of the metaphor is, I would argue, secondary to the experience of reading the novella. At the end of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, for instance, Babs voices a phallic plea for a more vibrant, living language: "It's not the languid pissing prose we've got, we need; but poetry, the human muse, full up, erect and on the charge, impetuous and hot and loud and wild like Messalina going to
the stews or those damn rockets streaming headstrong into stars" (60). Both the language we've got and the one desired are described in terms of the penis--one is wimpy and the other strong, direct, and quick to take off, an image that would clearly appeal to a male narrative audience. While the authorial audience might be alarmed that Babs, the playhouse of language, is made to mouth this phallic plea, as text, she subverts this image of rockets streaming headstrong into the air. For Gass plays not only with the relationship between sex and language use, but also with the relationship between sex, death, and the conventions of the novel. As a representative of imagination's immortality, Babs dreams like Madame Bovary: "Only I don't die during endings. I never die. They fall asleep on me and shrivel up. I write the finis for them, close the covers, shelf the book" (7). The failure of Babs' lovers is the failure of the realistic novel, in which all elements, including character and language, lead readers directly toward a climax--an ending which returns them, in Barthes' terms, to the culturally secure identity provided by a coherent system. Babs, however, finds Barthes' jouissance--the readerly bliss of finding oneself dispersed through the text--through self-play; for unlike her lovers, for whom imagining is "a babyhood disease" which requires "a substitute in plasti-goop or blanket-cloth to keep them safe, to keep them clean of fact and
fancy," Babs luxuriates in her ability to imagine, "reflecting on [her] own revolving" (7).

Though Caramello suggests that Willie Masters' *Lonesome Wife* is "soft-core porn," the reader who views it as such has experienced only one level of the text, has entered only the narrative audience for whom Babs performs her striptease. The discourse that follows, for instance, is directed toward the audience searching for climax through art.

YOU'VE
BEEN
HAD,

haven't you, jocko? you sad sour stew-faced son-ofabitch. Really, did you read this far? puzzle your head? turn the pages this and that, around about? Was it racy enough to suit? There wasn't too much plot? I thought the countess something fab. For the nonce. Nothing lasts. But, honestly, you skipped a lot. Is that any way to make love to a lady, a lonely one at that, used formerly to having put the choicest portions of her privates flowered out in pots and vases; and would you complain at having to caress a breast first, then a knee, to sink so suddenly from soft to bony, or to kiss an ear if followed by the belly, even slowly? Only a literalist at loving would expect to plug ahead like the high-way people's line machine, straight over hill and dale, unwavering and ready, in a single stripe of kiss and covering, steady on FROM START TO FINISH. (53)

The reader who searches for a climax through the text will undoubtedly be had, for unlike Babs as whore, who is passive and serves the needs of her unimaginative lovers,
Babs as text does not allow this "male" narrative reader to be a literalist. Even this relatively simple discourse reads in more than one way, with the bold letters reading vertically as one single, abusive sentence, and reading horizontally as the beginning and end of the entire discourse which asks its jocko reader to abandon his straight ahead, start to finish reading approach.

Gass's readers must enter a number of narrative audiences, including this sexist, macho audience who desires a sexual and textual quickie, the audience of Babs' plea for sympathy and better treatment, to whom this sexism is disgusting, the audience of the footnotes, the audience of a bawdy play, the audience of Hardy's quotation, and the audience of many other fragmented discourses. And the text finally resists any attempt by the authorial audience to construct a coherent whole from all these parts. That is, though we can safely say this text is a celebration of imagination expressed through the medium of language, the text resists any other attempt to attribute meaning to it; in other words, it resists both a single interpretation beyond this general statement of theme and a simple structuring that would lead to a traditional climax. Though it is possible to read Babs as a mimetic character, as the lonely wife who seeks to understand her situation--as Karl does--such a reading is finally a perversion of the text's multiplicity, for it ignores the other voices in the
text which work against the conception of Babs as a realistic lonely wife. The text, I would argue, finally does challenge our cultural and sexual assumptions by refusing to allow the reader to consume it (as Gelvin uses Babs) or reduce it to a "meaning." Instead of returning the reader to a secure cultural center, Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife leaves the authorial reader dispersed among the multiple audiences, part lover, part philosopher, part voyeur. And by celebrating his ability to speak in a variety of voices, Gass also celebrates our ability to enter these various audiences:

Well then: there's the speech of science and good sense--daily greetings, reminiscences and news, and all those kind directions how-to; there's the speech of the ultimate mind, abstract, soldierly, efficient, and precise; and then there's mine, for when you use me, when you speak in my tongue--the language of imagination--you speak of fact and feeling, order and spontaneity, suddenness and long decision, desire and reservation--all at once. (49-50)

The flexibility of language, its richness and variety, make it possible for all of these dualities to coexist, for the writer to speak in many voices, and for the reader to entertain these multiple voices by entering multiple audiences.

Gass's achievement in Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife, I believe, is not finally undermined by the sexism of his metaphor, for the experience of reading this particular
text makes us challenge our assumptions about what literature is, what it should be, and what it does. The intellectually erotic Babs coexists with the bawdy Babs, abusive Babs with teasing Babs, soft-core porn with philosophical diatribe, and the reader experiences his or her humanity by celebrating each use of language. And by challenging the conventions of the novel by creating an inconsistent character, by providing little plot and little action, by neglecting to "get description in" (51), by altering the type styles and our typical left to right, top to bottom reading strategy, Gass draws our attention to the frequently neglected medium of fiction and joyfully affirms its primacy.

Signs are Signs--And Some of Them are Lies

If Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife is finally a celebration of the medium of language as a means of expressing both imaginative and cognitive processes, Donald Barthelme's attitude toward the medium of his fiction is much more ambiguous. Barthelme's strategies frequently include disrupted narratives, lists, fragments, and puns that draw his reader's attention to the medium and affirm the potential of language to create powerful images:

"Surely Florence Green is a vastly rich vastly egocentric
old-woman nut! Six modifiers modify her into something one can think of as a nut. 16 But, as the self-reflexive second sentence suggests, Barthelme is also frequently uneasy about the power of language, both as it reduces complex emotions and ideas to simple signs, and as it distances us from experience and provides us with a false sense that we can "know" reality through language. The diarist of "Me and Miss Mandible," for instance, is a thirty-five year old man who has erroneously been sent back to the sixth grade, but his reexperiencing of his education allows him to understand why he has failed as an adult. While the other students "believe that the American flag betokens a kind of general righteousness," the narrator finally recognizes that "signs are signs, and that some of them are lies" (CBDC, 109). The problem with education (as with language), he suggests, is that "Everything is presented as the result of some knowable process," but that no one "points out that arrangements sometimes slip, that errors are made, that signs are misread" (110). Much of Barthelme's fiction, then, is directed at pointing out to his reader what the teachers fail to--that language is indeed powerful, but that part of its power comes from the fact that signs sometimes lie. That is, though Barthelme would agree with Gass that words embody concepts and that concepts cannot be thought without words, he does not celebrate this aspect of language as unequivocally as does
Gass. For Barthelme, human consciousness is frequently trapped within language, making it difficult for us to know or experience anything outside of language.

The difference in attitude toward language between these two metalinguistic writers can be emphasized by contrasting the metaphors they choose to depict the relationship between reader and writer. For Gass, as discussed above, the relationship is imperfectly depicted as one between lovers, expressed through the medium of language; when the relationship fails, it is due to the inadequacies of the "user" of language, not of language itself. Barthelme, however, depicts the relationship as similar to the one between psychiatrist and patient. In "Florence Green is 81," the author-narrator suggests that "the patient sees the doctor as a highly sophisticated consumer of outre material, a connoisseur of exotic behavior":

Reader, you who have already been told more than you want to know about the river Ob, 3200 miles long, in Siberia, we have roles to play, thou and I: you are the doctor (washing your hands between hours), and I, I am, I think, the nervous dreary patient. I am free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you into the problem. Or for fear of boring you: which?" (CBDC, 4-5).

The metaphor suggests that readers, like Snow White's psychiatrist, are "in this only for grins" (SW, 21), and that writers, like patients, have a duty to establish their
uniqueness, their entertainment value. In "Sentence," however, the roles are reversed, with the writer attempting to wash the dirt of the city from his hands without soap before he examines his reader/patient, whom he verbally transforms from the you of the sentence to a woman dressed only in a hospital gown; he decides to ignore the reader's point of view, since "it is finally his own point of view that he cares about and not hers" (CL, 115). Doctors and patients have equally fragile and 'hungry' egos in Barthelme's fiction, and more important than which role is assigned to reader or writer is the metaphor's implication of psychological unhealthiness, of the brain damage that infects modern consciousness and makes it difficult to know our own problems, much less put ourselves into the problems of others. And discourse, rather than being a medium by which doctor and patient, writer and reader, come to know each other, is frequently, Barthelme suggests, a means by which "the self armor[s] itself against the gaze of The Other" (SW, 59). In other words, language is the means by which we keep ourselves safe from knowing the other.

The difficulty of gaining knowledge through language alone is the explicit theme of "Views of My Father Weeping," the first story in the collection City Life. The reader enters three different narrative audiences in this story. The primary narrative is the chronological presentation of the narrator's attempt to discover the
aristocrat whose carriage ran over and killed his father, but interspersed within this search for the truth are two other narratives: a son's imagistic memories of his father in different situations (many of which depict him crying), and the son's attempt to know his father, and to understand why he attempts to understand him, through these fragments of memories.

The voice of the first narrative is, as one critic has suggested, similar to "such nineteenth-century Russian realist writers as Ivan Turgenev or Nikolai Gogol," and the reader of this narrative is led to expect a reconstruction of the aristocrat's crime against a commoner. But the narrator does not particularly exert himself to discover the truth of his father's death, since he is actually more inspired by the hope of compensation than by a desire for the truth. Although he interviews a few poor witnesses, one of whom gives him the name of the coachman, he does not actively seek out Lars Bang for fear of receiving a beating instead of a purse full of coins. As long as the coachman remained nameless, the narrator could imagine him and his master vulnerable, but the name puts him in possible possession of the truth, which he fears. But the coachman comes to him, and when his story is over, the narrator is told that "Bang is an absolute bloody liar"(27); the narrator is finally protected from the truth by the discourse of the "tavern story" Lars
tells. And the reader of this narrative is similarly kept in the dark, for the narrator ends his search, and his narrative, with Lars' lies, which he is privileged to tell because he is the coachman of an aristocrat.

The voice of the other two narratives is clearly that of a twentieth-century narrator who mentions automobiles and televisions, but this son seems only slightly more interested in understanding his father than the commoner is in discovering the truth of his father's murder. For the most part, the memories of the modern narrator are imagistic and depict his father behaving like a child:

My father has a red bandana tied around his face covering the nose and mouth. He extends his right hand in which there is a water pistol. "Stick 'em up!" he says....

There is my father, standing alongside an extremely large dog, a dog ten hands high at the very least. My father leaps on the dog's back, straddles him. My father kicks the large dog in the ribs with his heels. "Giddyap!"

(16-17)

These verbal pictures are effective largely because they are presented so dispassionately, in simple language that reflects the childishness of the father's actions. Because the reader is provided a portrait of a pathetic and senile man, the son's angry attempts to ignore his father and to prevent the images from intruding upon his consciousness seem inhuman:
Why watch it? Why tarry? Why not fly? Why subject myself? I could be somewhere else, reading a book, watching the telly, stuffing a big ship into a little bottle, dancing the Pig...He's trying to embarrass us. He wants attention. He's trying to make himself interesting. He wants his brow wrapped in cold cloths perhaps, his hand held perhaps, his back rubbed...I won't do it. (16)

Though there is no class system preventing the narrator from searching for the truth, he fears knowledge as much as his nineteenth-century counterpart. He resents his father for intruding upon his complacency, for drawing attention to his pain, for behaving in ways that are an affront to polite social discourse, for making the son suffer the pain of knowing another. His refusal to touch his father is the refusal to feel, and his rationalization of his father's actions is a doctor's response, not a son's.

When the son finally accepts that his father is indeed the man behaving so childishly and seems on the threshold of coming to an understanding of the old man's suffering, the narrator escapes into language:

Why!...there's my father!...sitting in the bed there!...and he's weeping!...as though his heart would burst!...Father!...how is this?...who has wounded you?...name the man!...why I'll...I'll...here, Father, take this handkerchief!...[...] I'll run for a towel...for a doctor...for a priest...for a good fairy...is there...can you...can I...a cup of hot tea?...[...] a joint?...a red jacket?...a blue jacket?[...] who has insulted you?...[...] a slander is going around?...an obloquy?...a traducement?[...] I'll move every mountain...climb...every river...etc. (p. 19-20, ellipses Barthelme's)
This speech not only reflects the paucity of the son's emotions, but also the ways in which language allows him to retreat from those feelings. The proliferation and artificiality of the exclamation points, for instance, suggest the superficiality of his feelings, a simple-mindedness likewise reflected by his ridiculous offers to fetch a good fairy or a joint or a brightly colored jacket to ease his father's pain. Similarly, the son suggests that the cause of suffering must be in language—an insult of some kind—and that the cure must therefore be linguistic—the cliched (and impossible) promise to move mountains. And the "etc." is the greatest insult, suggesting as it does the son's complete abandonment to cliche and the distance language offers him.

The "etc." is repeated at the end of this narrative collage, after Lars is revealed as a liar, and thus attains the same status as the other narrative discourses. This ending, then, suggests that the narrative could go on and on without either son discovering the truth about his father. The result of these juxtaposed narratives is finally more like a montage than a collage, for though the nineteenth-century narrator knows only what is not true and the twentieth-century narrator refuses to make sense of the images that intrude into his consciousness by retreating into language, the authorial reader is forced to experience
the process of knowing as one that is not reducible to language or reason. In other words, Barthelme does not allow the story to be reduced to a "meaning," but instead, as Klinkowitz suggests, "Process is the story itself."²⁰ The etc. returns to the reader the responsibility for trying to know the father, not through language, but as the sum total of the multiple narratives, including those images presented as memories.

The role of literature—and of literary language—for contemporary readers is the underlying theme of "The Glass Mountain," a story which employs many of Barthelme's typical rhetorical strategies. Using conventional symbols from fairytales, Barthelme tells the tale of a contemporary artist/knight ascending a glass mountain in the heart of the city in one hundred numbered statements (the numbers emphasize the linear progress/process of the climber/narrator and seem to suggest that the attainment of knowledge is, after all, the result of a step-by-step process). The narrator is typically deadpan as he relates in simple sentences not only his progress but also the events taking place on the ground. Despite his unemotional tone, the narrator's depiction of the crude acquaintances who offer "encouragement" by yelling "Shithead" and "Asshole," persuades the narrative reader to sympathize with the artist and his lofty goals; though the artist seems to naively and inaccurately interpret the events of
the narrative, his Quixotic and romantic belief in a world that rewards and appreciates artistic effort is surely appealing to the reader of traditional literature.

The narrator's attempt to discover a new symbol to satisfy the crowd below does create some innovative verbal constructions which draw our attention to his use of language as a means of making art from the phenomena of city life. He describes, for instance, the glass building in terms of what it, in fact, is, which deprives it of its reality as a building and transforms it into a symbol: the "mountain towers over that part of Eighth Avenue like some splendid, immense office building" (68). As the narrative progresses, the distance between his poetic language and the objects it describes becomes increasingly striking: "The sidewalks were full of dogshit in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder" (68). The narrative audience recognizes the knight as a romantic hero like Don Quixote, whose romanticism perhaps blinds him to the fact that dog feces are dog feces and not a painter's pallet, but whose quest to discover a beautiful enchanted symbol is nevertheless a worthy one. The authorial audience, however, recognizes the narrator as an overeducated, emotionally repressed intellectual who uses language not to create symbols that arouse the deep feelings that a symbol should, according to his quotation from A Dictionary of Literary Terms, but to
deceive himself and to create an emotional distance from the sordidness of society. The narrator, for instance, fears the physical pain of the eagle’s claws less than "the contempt" the acquaintances should show him were he to descend the mountain to get Band-aids, so he continues his quest in large part to avoid the pain of their disdain. And after describing these acquaintances looting the fallen knights below, "collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favors" (71), the narrator resorts to conventional platitudes to convince himself that all is well in the city: "66. 'Calm reigns in the country, thanks to the confident wisdom of everyone' (M. Pompidou)" (71).

Though the reader recognizes the ironic implications of the narrator's quotations, the narrator himself seems oblivious to their inapplicability to the state of affairs he describes. Although he quotes Anton Ehrenzweig, who suggests that "A weakening of the libidinous interest in reality has recently come to a close" (70), an awkward way of affirming a renewed libidinous interest in reality, the knight does in fact turn the building into a phallic symbol, but the discovery that the enchanted symbol is, in reality, "only a beautiful princess" (73) fails to satisfy his libido. The acquaintances, to whom he tosses the failed symbol, can be relied upon to deal with the real woman the narrator discovers at the top of the building because they are the ultimate pragmatists; that is, though
he fails to discover a symbol to arouse his feelings, the real woman is actually a fitting gift for this audience of acquaintances. And though the knight's quest to find a symbol for his narrative audience is similarly unsuccessful, Barthelme has made the quest itself a symbol for the authorial audience, who must search for meaning among the numbered steps of the knight's journey.

Barthelme's parodic quest story raises questions about the relationship of art to the real world and about the nature of the languages of each realm. Whereas Gass intrudes at the end of Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife to remind his reader that "You have fallen into art--return to life" (60), Barthelme's strategies suggest that art and life are not quite so mutually exclusive. Unlike Gass, Barthelme does not use explicitly theoretical discourse to draw our attention to the imaginative uses of language or to express an "authorial intention" in "The Glass Mountain." And though this story is composed of a number of different discourses--quotations from literary and philosophical works, cliches and exhortations voiced by the acquaintances, lists naming the fallen knights, the narrator's seemingly factual statements of events--Barthelme's numbering of these statements gives them all the same status and validity as linguistic units. The "meaning" of the story must come from the reader's recognition of ironies created through juxtaposition of
statements and the effect of the narrator's repetition. A single cliche might not draw our attention to this hackneyed use of language, for instance, but when four are listed one after another, the reader is forced to look upon these statements not as conveyers of meaning, but as language used to avoid thoughtful responses to the phenomena of the world. Similarly, though the narrator attempts to make an art object out of dog feces, the unusual description calls the reader's attention to the ugly reality of the city sidewalk and makes him or her see the debris which is usually overlooked, particularly in literature. Though the narrator is a traditionalist looking for ways of transforming the world through metaphoric language and symbols, Barthelme is an innovator who frequently uses the rubbish of the world as signs in order to draw our attention to their reality. Barthelme need not exhort his reader to return to life, for his short fiction never allows us a comfortable escape into the ideal realm of art.

Barthelme, like his dwarves in Snow White, pays "particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon" (97-98), so that his deadpan narrators (almost voiceless at times), his negative lists (the knights who failed to climb the glass mountain, for instance) and his fragmented narratives frequently suggest the failure of language. But
as one critic suggests, this negativity "serves to open, or keep open, the 'rest' of the world of possibilities; it keeps the sore festering." An explicitly metafictional story like "Sentence" both shows the weaknesses of language and its structures and affirms the attempt to form things with words. Though the writer of this sentence recognizes its "temporary" existence in the mind of the reader, he makes the most of this temporariness by allowing the sentence to sprawl on for ten pages, and even then he refuses to close it with the conventional grammatical period. As with "The Glass Mountain," Barthelme parodies the form while using it to its best advantage, so that while he calls upon conventional wisdom which informs us that "short, punchy sentences were best" (CL, 112), he ignores this convention, suggesting that readers are "mature enough now to stand the shock of learning that much of what we were taught in our youth was wrong" (113). And within the sentence, he imagines the possibility of "a better sentence, worthier, more meaningful, like those in the Declaration of Independence, or a bank statement showing that you have seven thousand kroner more than you thought you had" (117). But despite the fact that his sentence is not like those sentences, he suggests that it will have a place in the history of man-made objects:

a disappointment, to be sure, but it reminds us that the sentence itself is a man-made object,
not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones (118).

Structures like his imperfect sentence remind us of the fragility of human constructs, including language, but they also affirm the process by which language can be used to make us see into the structures of human thought and imagination. Because Barthelme's stories expose the processes by which readers must search for reality through language, they finally affirm the process, affirm the quest of the artist and the reader, even those quests that are imperfect. Barthelme is like this character in "The Sandman," who asks, "What do you do with a patient who finds the world unsatisfactory? The world is unsatisfactory; only a fool would deny it....you must be old enough now to realize that shit is shit" (S,85). Though Barthelme mocks the artist's ability to transform shit into art through language, he nevertheless finally celebrates the medium for its weaknesses as much as for its strengths: "I will be a negative factor until the cows come home, and cheerfully" (S, 86).
Notes

1 William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 94. Further references to this work will be noted as FF in the text.


3 Willie Masters' *Lonesome Wife* was originally published as TriQuarterly Supplement Number Two (1968); the hardcover reissue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) used here, like the original, is not paginated, but I have supplied page numbers for the reader's convenience. All further references to this work are cited in the text.


6 Tanner, p. 120.

7 Phelan, p. 203.


9 William Gass, *On Being Blue* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1976), p. 11. Further references to this work will be noted as BB in the text.

11 Barthes, p. 146.

12 Caramello, p. 105.

13 Caramello, p. 105.


15 Karl, p. 437.

16 Caramello, p. 109.

17 The celebratory nature of the text is perhaps not as safe an assumption as I suggest; Caramello, for instance, argues that "what disturbs is not simply its deferral of orgasm; it is that the deferral, the dance, also seems to lack an affirmative joy" (104).


CHAPTER V

READING READERS: DRAMATIZED NARRATIVE AUDIENCES

Thus far, we have examined the methods that writers of metafiction employ to alter the reader's expectations about the nature of the literary transaction, emphasizing in each chapter a particular aspect of that transaction. The subject of the first chapter is metafiction that highlights the author's performance and his attempt to teach us to be better readers of performance literature, while the second considers metafiction that draws our attention to the tale itself and to the power of narrative forms; the third chapter, of course, is devoted to literature that is primarily concerned with its medium, its own literary language. Having addressed the teller, the tale, and the medium, we can now turn to metafiction that emphasizes the final element of the narrative transaction, the reader or listener.

Before the explosion of reader-response criticism in the last twenty years, Gerald Prince was able to suggest that critics have largely neglected the narratee in literature in order to concentrate on the narrator, perhaps "because the hero of numerous novels and tales is himself a
writer, a narrator..., whereas there has never been a hero who is primarily a reader or a listener, at least not to my knowledge.\textsuperscript{1} Clearly, the activity of reading has seldom been romanticized or made the subject of a fiction, unlike the activity of writing.\textsuperscript{2} Though readers and listeners have frequently been dramatized or implied by works of literature, these narratees generally provide a frame for the narrative or an occasion that makes the tale possible, as for example, the pilgrims function in \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, or the Caliph in the \textit{Arabian Nights}. Their activity as narratees is always secondary to the tale itself. Even in works like \textit{Wuthering Heights} or \textit{Heart of Darkness}, in which the auditors are clearly affected by the tale, their responses either help to establish the reality of the tale (as Lockwood does) or provide a clue about how the "real" reader is to respond.

What distinguishes the three novels which are discussed here (\textit{October Light}, \textit{Kiss of the Spider Woman}, and \textit{If on a winter's night a traveler}) from more traditional texts which dramatize their narratees is that a reader or listener is indeed the primary subject—the hero—of each novel. Instead of merely being a frame for the more "important" aspect of the structure—the tale—the activity of reading (or of listening) is a primary activity in these novels, and the narratives embedded in these metafictional works seem in some ways secondary to the
responses that they elicit from the readers. By
dramatizing the narrative audience for the embedded
fictions, these novels also confuse the relationship
between narrator and narrative audience and author and
authorial audience. While the reader as character reads
only the embedded narratives, the 'real' reader reads both
the narrative of the reader's activity and the embedded
narratives, aware that both are written by the same author
in order to raise questions about the role of the reader in
the literary transaction and about the importance of
narrative in the lives of readers. The dramatized
narratees of Gardner, Puig, and Calvino function in vastly
different ways, suggesting not only these authors'
different attitudes toward their implied readers, but also
the flexibility of this particular narrative device.

October Light: The Reader of "Common Drugstore Trash"

Gardner's October Light is the most traditional of the
three novels discussed here, and its structure is the
simplest, with a single dramatized reader and a single
(though incomplete) embedded narrative. Though Gardner
employs the experimental device of the reader-as-
protagonist with clearly metafictional intentions, October
Light is in many ways a reactionary response to
contemporary writers like William Gass. Just as Gass's
Willie Masters' *Lonesome Wife* can be read as a fictional enactment of his critical interests, with a leading character who proves "that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes,"* Gardner's novel is, as Gregory Morris suggests, "a fictional companion piece" to *On Moral Fiction.*

The 'real-life' conflict in *October Light* is between Sally Page Abbott and her seventy-three year old brother, James Page, a cranky New Englander who has strong opinions on everything, but especially on the television's role in the corruption of American values. After shooting out his sister's television screen, James locks Sally in her room, where she stays for several days, eating apples from the attic and amusing herself with a novel she discovers on her floor. Though Sally and James both function as mimetic characters in the novel, Sally also exists as a reader who enacts the critical position Gardner develops in *On Moral Fiction*—that "metaphor becomes reality when we read":

Thus the idea that the writer's only material is words is true only in a trivial sense. Words conjure emotionally charged images in the reader's mind, and when the words are put together in the proper way, with the proper rhythms—long and short sounds, smooth or ragged, tranquil or rambunctious—we have the queer experience of falling through the print on the page into something like a dream, an imaginary world so real and convincing that when we happen to be jerked out of it by a call from
the kitchen or a knock at the door, we stare for
an instant in befuddlement at the familiar room
where we sat down, half an hour ago, with
our book. To say that we shouldn't react to
fictional characters as 'real people' is exactly
equivalent to saying that we shouldn't be
frightened by the things we meet in nightmares.5

Sally, as she begins to read *The Smugglers of Lost Souls*,
Rock—the "common drugstore trash" that is the only form of
escape available to her—reacts to the characters as she
would react to real people and is reminded, for instance,
of her nephew's suicide by the character in her fiction who
is about to jump off a bridge. And though she begins
reading hesitantly and without commitment, aware that the
novel is trashy, she soon abandons herself to the vision of
the fiction and thus becomes Gardner's ideal reader:

But quite imperceptibly the real world lost
weight and the print on the page gave way to
images, an alternative reality more charged than
mere 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 wearily disgusted
with the world....Life became larger, in
vibration to such words, and she, the observer
and container of this universe, became
necessarily more vast than its space....By
degrees, without knowing she was doing it, she
gave in to the illusion, the comforting security
of her vantage point, until whenever she looked
up from the page to rest her eyes, it seemed that
the door, the walls, the dresser, the heavy onyx
clock had no more substance than a plate-glass
reflection. 6

The words on the page affect Sally just as Gardner says
reading affects all of us in the critical passage quoted
above; indeed, the phrasing and images are nearly identical, and except that the activity is ascribed to a character in a narrative, this fictional passage would not be out of place in On Moral Fiction. As Gardner suggests in this work, the good writer "provides his reader, consciously and to some extent mechanically, with a dramatic equivalent of the intellectual process he himself went through;" October Light is certainly a dramatic enactment of Gardner's argument for a moral fiction, and his description of Sally's activity as a reader functions, sometimes mechanically, as "a simulation of real experience [that] is morally educational" (OMF, 114). For Sally, the words of the novel do not merely reflect upon themselves (one recalls the mirror-image page in Gass's text), but instead they make her own world, the world of her room, seem insubstantial (like the reflection of a mirror) compared to the reality of the fictional world.

The fictional world of the embedded narrative is indeed sick, "as sick and evil as life in America," as the National Observer blurb on the cover tells us (14). As Robert Morace suggests, Gardner parodies Stone's Dog Soldiers through The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock, a work that, like Stone's, is concerned with drug running, has a convoluted plot, and main characters who are indeed lost souls. Additionally, The Smugglers is a novel that dramatizes the objections Gardner has raised against
Pynchon, who "carelessly praises the schlock of the past...and howls against the schlock of the present" (OMF, 196) and Vonnegut, whose "novels have the feel of first-class comic books (trash culture elevated to art, if you will) and can easily be read by people who dislike long sentences" (87). The embedded narrative is thus a pastiche of the type of "immoral" contemporary fiction that Gardner believes misleads readers and draws them into a valueless world where life is cheap, the type of fiction that would never appeal to the god-fearing Sally were she not deprived of other entertainment.

The rhetorical challenge that Gardner takes on in *October Light* is finally rather complicated, depending as it does on Gardner's persuading us of the immorality and power of the embedded novel, which takes up over one-third of the book. Morris hints at this problem when he attempts to access the staying power of Gardner's work:

Perhaps the most troublesome of Gardner's books, in terms of its future, is *October Light*, for its success turns upon the controversy of its structure. What one thinks of *October Light* often depends upon what one thinks of the inner novel. If one accepts the structural relevance and necessity and effectiveness of the inner novel, then one accepts *October Light* as a major twentieth-century novel. If, however, one denies the purpose of the inner novel and perceives it as gimmickry, expediency, and failure, then one judges the book as an interesting but minor work of contemporary art.
There is little doubt that Morris believes this novel is a major work and that the inner novel is relevant, for his own discussion of *October Light* rests largely on the negative effect that *The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock* has on its elderly reader. But showing how Sally is misled by the embedded narrative is actually only one (and the simplest at that) of the challenges that Gardner must fulfill for his novel to succeed. Because *The Smugglers* is presented as a lengthy narrative that exists outside of *October Light*, the reader must be able to experience the novel as Sally experiences it; that is, *The Smugglers* must entice and intrigue the narrative reader apart from its function in the larger story. At the same time, the narrative reader must enter the audience of Sally and James' tale and find in it a world that is finally more valuable than that of *The Smugglers*. And if Gardner is to persuade his authorial audience of the superiority of "moral" fiction and of the corruptive power of immoral fiction, he must make us identify with Sally's activity as a reader of the embedded narrative, and he must thus present Sally as a reader whom we cannot easily dismiss as simple-minded or foolish.

The elderly reader is slowly drawn into the story, despite the fact that she "had no intention of reading a book that she knew in advance to be not all there" (15). The narrative reader of the embedded fiction experiences it
as Sally does, reading first the advertising blurbs on the cover and then reading one paragraph at a time, for Gardner frequently interrupts *The Smugglers* with sections describing Sally's response to what she reads. When Peter Wagner, the suicidal protagonist, suggests that "All life, he had come to understand, was a boring novel," Sally utters aloud, "Isn't it the truth!" and hovers "between fury at her brother and escape into the book" (16); this alternating of the two texts suggests that Sally is not yet committed to the narrative (one that is metafictional in its attempt to depict life as nothing more than a fiction) and responds to what she reads in terms of the recent events that led to her imprisonment. The narrative reader is likewise more committed to the outer novel and experiences Sally's reading, which is mediated by the same third-person narrator who tells the outer story, as a similar distraction from the evening's argument; at this point, we read Sally's reading as it will reveal her character and as her responses will illuminate the conflict at the heart of *October Light*. Sally, for instance, laughs at Wagner's making a joke out of suicide by asking what the authorities could do to him for hanging from the bridge, "Shoot him?" (18). But she immediately steps back from the narrative and, recalling her nephew's suicide, is angry both at the novel for making light of the subject, and at herself for giving into the novel's comic effect. Morace
indicates that "Sally's taste in books and television is indiscriminate, and this lack of critical taste makes her especially vulnerable to The Smugglers pernicious influence," but she does indeed respond critically to the book when she first begins to read. But as Sally increasingly escapes into the novel, reading entire chapters before responding, her critical comments become less frequent, which also encourages the real reader of October Light to experience The Smugglers as an independent narrative and to enter its audience in addition to the narrative audience of Sally's reading.

Before considering the effect of the inner novel on the reader of October Light, we will consider the effect that escape into The Smugglers has on the dramatized reader. First, the act of reading (no matter the book) provides Sally with entertainment and encourages her to remain in her room, neglect her chores, and endure the solitude. But in addition to making her more stubborn in her fight against her brother, the book affects Sally's outlook on the world. Though she consciously believes that "She wasn't some child, going to be corrupted by a foolish book" (61), her reasons to continue reading even though she knows large sections of the book are missing reveal an increasingly cynical outlook on life; she continues "merely to escape the stupidity, the dreariness, the waste of things" (42). Sally begins, unconsciously, to echo the
existentialist philosophy proclaimed by the suicidal protagonist of her novel: "...life's a waste...Love is an illusion. Hope is the opiate of the people. Faith is pure stupidity" (27). And the casual, meaningless, marijuana-inspired sexual orgies of the novel, instead of seeming an affront to the eighty-year-old woman, make her remember her nephew's love affair with an Irish girl of whom James would have disapproved, and inspire regret, as though she had missed something by having remained faithful to her husband all her life:

"The lives she might have lived, the lovers and children she might have had (Horace had gone through World War I and was afraid to have children; the world was, he thought, too dark a place), the career she might have had as an actress on the stage, or even as a prostitute in New Orleans--why not? why not? the young people were right!--she'd missed them all for all eternity....(370).

While Sally continues to think of the book as trash, written by someone "foolish and inept," she is nevertheless corrupted by "the novel, which had triggered her gloomy mood" (199).

But Sally's reading does more than stir up memories and regrets; it actually alters her behavior, making her more self-conscious and vindictive. When, on the morning after the fight, Sally refuses to come out of the room or accept James' attempt to forget the whole incident, she sat in bed, "smiling with self-satisfied, malicious delight,
like a foxy old general—or like wicked Captain Fist in the novel she was reading” (72). More importantly, the novel she reads treats death as a joke, makes life cheap, and plays tricks on the reader. Not only does Peter Wagner miraculously live after jumping off the bridge and being rescued by the smugglers, but after executing an elaborate plan to kill the competing smugglers with electrical shocks from eels, Wagner, Captain Fist and crew believe Santisillia and his gang are dead; but suddenly, “like a telegram from heaven: Rules all changed” (197), the men are all brought back to life. Sally subtly begins to see life as a cheap game like the one played by the characters in her novel, and she plans a deadly trap with an apple crate for her brother should he enter her room:

The plan was the only hope she had....it was like a gift from heaven--not her own plan at all but something that had 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....It wasn't she who'd started this war....Even if it was no one's fault really, she must do what she must. (373)

As Sally comes to believe in the reality of the novel, she confuses the violent world it depicts with her own life on the Vermont farm, and like its existential hero, she sees no way to end her argument with her brother short of violence. That the novel is somehow to blame for Sally's
violent act is obvious even to her great-nephew, whose mother is seriously injured when the crate falls on her head; having found the "dirty book" in the pigpen, Dickey confesses to having left it in Sally’s room the night of the argument, and the small child feels responsible for the events that have occurred since then. Sally, however, refuses to take the responsibility for the accident (and she never acknowledges the extent to which she has come under the novel’s sway); the world, she reasons, is full of tyrants like her brother James, and her novel suggests that the only way the individual can fight tyranny is with violence. Indeed, the violence of the novel so desensitizes her to the value of human life that "despite the image of her niece fallen and stock-still in the doorway," she decides that she must "hold firm, stick tight to her principles" (429). Like the characters in her novel, Sally learns to justify her actions by an appeal to existential ideology, but in the process, she becomes more like the stubborn brother against whom she is fighting.

George P. Elliot admires *October Light*, suggesting that it is "a fine straight novel into which he [Gardner] inserts a punk anti-novel (now why did he do that?)." Sally’s reading of the anti-novel is, of course, an intrinsic part of the novel. On the simplest level, Sally’s escape into the novel keeps the fight going, thus forcing James to reconsider his past and come to terms with
(and accept partial responsibility for) his son's suicide; recognizing that his strong opinions on what was right prevented him from showing his son that he loved him, James comes to understand that he "had had a petty-minded notion of truth, had been a dangerous fool" (493). James gains self-knowledge by the end of the novel, an understanding that truth is not always black and white. And he even lets Sally win the war by suggesting that television might be "a wonderful invention" at election time, thus finding a reason to allow the despised machine back into his home. James' moral working out of the problem--his facing his guilt and responsibility--is made more significant by Sally's escape into the trashy punk anti-novel. For as she reads, Sally increasingly loses the ability to think for herself and accepts the opinions offered by her immoral novel, one that allows ideas to be used to defend violent and criminal activity. That the embedded narrative is essential to Gardner's intention is obvious, but why have so many readers like Elliot failed to see its importance to the overall structure of October Light?

The problem with the inner novel of October Light, I'd suggest, is dual. On the one hand, the narrative reader must surely find The Smugglers "boring and exasperating," as one reviewer describes it, which makes it difficult to identify with Sally's entering the narrative audience of the embedded narrative. Gardner's parody of contemporary
fiction includes every form of immorality he despises; it appeals to "readers of a certain kind [who] take pleasure in attacks on Christendom" (OMF, 76) by making a messiah figure of the thirty-three-year-old existentialist. The implied author of The Smugglers, like Mailer, takes a "greater interest in his ideas than in his characters" (OMF, 86), so that characters not only have allegorical names (Fist/Faust, Goodman, Nit), but they frequently spout preachy, ideologically shallow comments to support reprehensible actions:

'But what is a hero? If there were truths independent of the currents of being, there could be no history of truths. And what is a saint? If there were one single eternally right religion, religious history would be an inconceivable idea. However well developed a man's consciousness may be, it is nevertheless something stretched like a membrane over his developing life, perfused by the pulsing blood even betraying the hidden power of cosmic directness. (435)

Even Sally recognizes Dr. Alkahest as "a gothic cliche, one more version of the age-old mad scientist" (386) who is attempting to regain his lost youth through his pursuit of the smugglers. And the novel ends in science fiction fashion, allowing the woman who sleeps with all the men (like Barthelme's Snow White) to escape, along with the messiah, the responsibility of the group's actions: they are "beamed up" to a UFO. Gardner makes of The Smugglers an exemplar of all immoral fiction, but because the parody
is didactic and humorless (not at all the "Black-comic Blockbuster" promised by The Smugglers' book jacket), the embedded narrative is not only an exemplar of immoral art, but also of bad art. By loading the dice so thoroughly against his embedded narrative, Gardner makes it difficult for the narrative reader to enter the audience of this fiction and easy for the real reader of October Light to dismiss (or to miss altogether) the reason for its inclusion. Morace, for instance, praises the structure of the novel because "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." The suggestion, of course, is that Gardner's authorial audience is saved from the effects of works like The Smugglers by having experienced Sally's corruption as a reader. While the authorial reader of October Light must recognize the effects the immoral fiction has upon Sally, the embedded narrative fails to elicit an effect other than boredom from its narrative reader, and the real reader is quite likely to dismiss the notion that fiction like this is morally threatening. In other words, Gardner weakens his lesson by making the embedded narrative so tedious and unenjoyable to read. After all, the moralist should realize that the real moral threat comes from novels that are well-written and persuade us to accept "immoral" ideas, not from simply bad novels.
The more serious issue raised by the structure of *October Light* is that Gardner's depiction of Sally reading is not only a somewhat mechanical and unpersuasive illustration of the process of reading which he develops in *On Moral Fiction*, but this depiction also suggests a rather low opinion of his authorial audience. Gardner clearly (and I believe sincerely) desires to reach an audience larger and less "elite" than the more radical metafictionalists discussed thus far, and he argues against views of writers like Gass by suggesting that "the creative process is vitiated if the writer writes only for himself":

...if an intelligent and sensitive writer would rather communicate with the general public, let him learn the conventions of popular fiction and turn them to his purpose....The fool is the man who arrogantly denies the worth and common sense of the people to whom he pretends to speak. In short, another test of creative energy is the test of efficient communication: to what extent does the artist know whom he is dealing with, telling him what he needs to know, not less. (OMF, 196-197)

Yet Gardner denies the worth of his reader in *October Light* and simplifies the activity of reading. Though he depicts his dramatized reader as an intelligent woman capable of distinguishing between trashy novels and well-written ones, Gardner nevertheless shows Sally abandoning those critical talents to accept, unconsciously, the values of her immoral fiction. Sally, infuriated by the appearance of the flying saucer, rants against the author who would write "such
slop," and she begins to wonder about the readers of such novels, "trying to imagine what debauched, sick people would believe such foolishness amusing" (452). While it is tempting to dismiss Sally's rantings as ironic, in light of the fact that she has been amused by the book for several days—that she has read the entire novel and submitted to its world—Gardner refuses to allow us to view Sally ironically. She is his ideal reader, viewing characters and events as real, and she functions as a warning to Gardner's authorial reader of the unconscious influence books have upon us; Gardner tells us that though we too may consciously deny the value of The Smugglers, trashy novels will corrupt us unless framed by the moral fiction of October Light. Though James learns the value of thinking for himself, the reader is denied the same freedom, the same common sense. What Gardner ignores, I believe, is that his outer fiction is better not merely because it is moral, but because it is more entertaining, mythic, and artistic than The Smugglers, a novel which I imagine many readers of October Light simply skim or skip in order to read about Sally and James. Gardner's novel not only shows his disdain for contemporary fiction, but also for his authorial audience, whose worth he denies by suggesting that when we read, we become incapable of making moral choices. By making the equation between moral and immoral fiction so simple, Gardner actually provides us with no
choice. He does not teach us to be better, more cautious readers of the types of fiction he believes are immoral, but rather, like a fundamentalist preacher, he simply bans all fiction that is not "moral."

Kiss of the Spider Woman: The Ideologic vs. The Romantic Narratee

Manuel Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman similarly considers the effects of narrative on "readers," but the structure of his novel is more complex than that of October Light. Narrative becomes the means by which two men—one a political revolutionary, the other a homosexual windowdresser—find a temporary escape from their imprisonment in a Latin American jail and come to understand and care for each other. Molina, the homosexual who lives through romantic and popular movies, remembers and retells the plots of films that have already influenced him in some way, so he is both a narratee and a narrator, while the ideological Valentin listens to the movies, comments upon them, and analyzes them from his Marxist and psychoanalytical viewpoint. And because Kiss of the Spider Woman is told almost entirely through the dialogue of the two prisoners, without the mediation of a third-person narrator, the reader similarly comes to know the characters as they learn about each other—through the
discussions which are prompted by the embedded movie narratives.

While Gardner uses his dramatized reader to establish the dichotomy between moral and immoral fiction, Puig employs his different narratees to raise questions about the relationship of low culture to high culture. By including Molina's verbal summaries of popular movies, some based upon "real" movies and some invented by Puig, the author elevates the status of popular art forms to literary art. As Lucille Kerr suggests, Puig frequently achieves his effects by bringing "into the realm of 'high' art, or 'Literature,' various 'low' forms of art and culture and typically nonliterary modes of discourse." Valentin is, despite his revolutionary ideology, the character who denigrates popular culture, saving the telling of films for evening, when the lights are out and he can no longer read his "serious" works of social and political philosophy. That is, he pigeon-holes the movies into "entertainment," a "trivial" activity compared to the "more important things" he to has to think about during the day. Molina's challenge as narrator is that he must persuade this ideological narratee of the power of the so-called "low" culture which has so greatly influenced him, while Puig's challenge is to weave the popular fictions into the "serious" fictional reality of the prison cell in order to persuade his authorial audience of the humanizing effects
of popular culture. As Molina, the spider woman, spins his tales and traps the dramatized narratee, Puig's authorial reader similarly comes to appreciate the power of popular forms.

The narrative reader of *Kiss of The Spider Woman* enters the tale near the beginning of the first of six movies recalled by Molina, the tale of the panther woman. Because the novel is told through the dialogue of the two prisoners, the reader at first only knows that there are two distinct voices, a teller and a listener who intrudes to ask questions and clarify the details of the tale; the situation of the teller and told, as well as their individual identities, are only slowly revealed, a strategy which divides the narrative reader's attention between the fictional world narrated in the opening pages of the novel and an attempt to discover the reality of the world in which the teller and listener exist. The embedded narratives, as the means by which the prisoners reveal themselves to each other, are woven into the texture of the novel, and instead of seeming extrinsic to or distracting from the "main" narrative of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the reader enters the world of the prison cell through the fictional worlds of the films. As the listener responds to the movie, for instance, the reader comes to understand that both teller and told are prisoners. First, the narratee attempts to limit the narrator by asking him to
"remember what I told you, no erotic descriptions. This isn't the place for it," (4), and later, when the narrating character describes a scene in which birds are drinking water, the narratee remembers that he forgot to fill the water bottle "when they opened the door for showers" (8). Similarly, we come to understand that the narrator is telling a movie and not a true story, an original fiction, or a literary work. The descriptions provided by the narrator are visually detailed (he lingers on atmosphere, clothing, scenery), and his manner of telling frequently refers to what "you see" and to his attempt to remember correctly. Though the reader has these clues about the type of narrative being told, it is made explicit several pages into the novel, when the listener anticipates the plot, and the narrator accuses him of having already seen the movie. The reader of Kiss, then, enters two narrative audiences, "overhearing" the "fictional" narratives told to the dramatized narratee, but because the reader also reads the story of the telling through the dialogue of the narrator and narratee, he or she struggles to situate the characters known thus far only by their roles in the narrative transaction.

The characters similarly define themselves by their roles in the transaction and jockey for power in the narrative relationship. The narratee frequently limits the descriptions the narrator provides, asking that he not
speak of sex or food, and he sometimes interjects playful explanations for events and thus angers the narrator by refusing to passively enter the narrative audience. The first movie recalled, for example, is supernatural, and its suspenseful effects depend upon the narratee's ability to suspend disbelief and accept that the main character might in fact turn into a panther woman when she kisses the man she loves. The dramatized narratee, however, mocks the genre chosen by the narrator by suggesting that the reason the panther woman will not kiss her husband is that he has bad breath. In a more serious mood, the narratee attempts to usurp the story from the narrator by explaining its meaning, refusing supernatural explanations and supplying psychological ones:

--You get what's going on, don't you? [Listener]
--That she's afraid she'll turn into a panther. [Narrator]
--Well, I think she's frigid, she's afraid of men, either that or she has some idea about sex that's really violent, and so she invents things. [L]
--Wait, will you... If you're going to laugh I won't go on, I'm telling you this in all seriousness because I really like it. [N] (15)

The listener is jealous of the teller's talent and power, suggesting that the narrator has "the fun of telling it and I just want to chime in once in a while too, see what I mean? I'm not the type who knows how to sit around and just listen all the time" (15). But the teller is jealous too, refusing to expose the romantic narrative that he
likes so well to the mockery of his listener, and though he reveals his somewhat more powerful position by suggesting that he can refuse to tell the tale, the recalling and telling of the films also gives him pleasure, allowing him to "feel fabulous" and forget "all about this filthy cell, and all the rest, just telling you about the film" (17). And as the tells and told compromise and reach an agreement on how to discuss the film, the narrative reader of Kiss of the Spider Woman begins to view the different responses to narrative as way of distinguishing between the two characters who are as yet unnamed. The narratee's responses reveal an intellectual, a man not used to sitting quietly and escaping into art, one who is interested in the psychological validity of the film and in relating the events to the "real" world; the narrator, on the other hand, is a romantic interested in the film's power to transport him to a world other than the one's he's in, and he thus attends to visual details, the images and symbols, the illusion created by the film.

The interdependent relationship between the dramatized narrator and narratee also reflects that of the writer and reader of the novel, for by placing his characters in these narrative roles, Puig directs his authorial reader's attention to the processes by which the author and reader struggle to extract meaning from a text. Molina, who admits to inventing "some things, to round them out for
you, so you can see them the way I’m seeing them... well, to some extent I have to embroider a little" (18), essentially denies his authority by telling films created by others; Puig similarly creates the illusion that he has expunged himself as author, by weaving "real" films into his invented ones and by relating the dialogues between Molina and Valentin in cinematic fashion, without the mediation of an "authorial" narrative voice. This strategy forces the authorial reader to look for meaning as it arises through the dialectic developed between the fictional film world and the "real" prison world and between the romantic narratee and the realistic narratee. In Valentin, then, Puig dramatizes this authorial reader, for whom he constructs *Kiss of the Spider Woman*; not only do we enter the fictional worlds of the films along with Valentin and identify with his role as narratee, but the effects of the novel are created for a reader like the intellectual and "uppity" Marxist, who denigrates the popular and pleasurable forms of art, suggesting to Molina that it is a "vice, always trying to escape from reality like that, it’s like taking drugs or something" (78). That Valentin represents the authorial reader is, I believe, made explicit by the inclusion of the footnotes on homosexuality; the "authoritative" voice of the footnotes responds directly to a clinical question posed by Valentin, who asks to know more "about people with your [Molina's]
type of inclination*" (59). The asterisk refers the reader to a discourse of the type that Valentin reads during the day, a summary of "scholarly" discussions of homosexuality. Ronald Schwartz suggests that "The reader may prefer to skip over the footnotes since they represent the 'serious voice' of authority, society, possibly the author."16 The footnotes are indeed the author's response to implied readers like Valentin who believe that an understanding of human beings results primarily from serious study, for Valentin--along with the authorial reader--learns more about Molina and his homosexuality from the narratives he tells and his actions toward his cellmate than from the type of theoretical discourse provided by the footnotes. Puig thus undermines the authoritative discourses he summarizes in those footnotes and elevates the status of popular forms as means of humanizing understanding.

As the reader enters the narratives of popular films, he or she is distanced from the 'reality' of the prison cell, while the prisoners' discussions about the films return the narrative reader to the real world depicted in the larger fiction; this strategy allows the narrative audience to experience the popular fictions both as an escape from and as a means of entering the narrative of the prisoners; in other words, we experience the structure of Puig's novel as an enactment of the two responses to art which are foregrounded by the dialogue between the two
dramatized narratees. Though Valentin enjoys the film about the panther woman because it gives him the pleasure of interpreting it psychoanalytically, he finds Molina's second telling ideologically offensive because it is "a piece of Nazi junk" (56) that distorts the "reality" of Hitler's regime; but he sees in the film an opportunity to "educate" Molina, and his condescension insults the narrator and makes him cry:

--Of course you're offensive the way you...you think I don't even...realize what Nazi propaganda is, but even if I...if I do like it, well, that's be-...because it's well made, and besides it's a work of art, you don't understand because you never even saw it. (56, ellipses Puig's)

Molina thus attempts to direct Valentin's interest to the pleasures of art and asks him to ignore the "political stuff," since "when it came to the love scenes the film was divine, an absolute dream" (89), while Valentin continues to justify his interest in a film which he says he hates: "But all the same I want to know how it turns out, just to understand the mentality of whoever made the film, the kind of propaganda they were into" (87). The authorial reader comes to understand that neither the ideological reading of the political activist or the escapist, romantic reading of the homosexual alone is adequate; indeed, the structure of the novel requires us to experience both types of reading, the "escapist" popular narrative of Molina's movies and the "realistic" narrative of the prisoner's dialogue.
But as the dramatized narratee, Valentin is affected more by Molina's pleasure than Molina is by Valentin's ideology. Molina is a self-conscious narrator who educates his intellectual listener about the conventions of the popular media: "I like to leave you hanging, that way you enjoy the film more. You have to do it that way with the public, otherwise they're not satisfied. On the radio they always used to do that to you. And now on the TV soaps" (25-26). Valentin is so manipulated and affected by Molina's story-telling strategies, learning as he does "the bad habit" of pleasure, that when he tells about his girlfriend, he unconsciously mimics Molina's narrative style and even borrows the fictive name and title bestowed on his story by his cellmate: "Jane Randolph in...The Mystery of Cellblock Seven" (43). Puig similarly encourages his authorial readers to respect Molina's talent as a manipulator of narratees, not only as they enter the narrative audience for each film, but also as they enter the plot of Kiss of the Spider Woman. Molina's attention to detail allows him to play one audience against the other, warden against Valentin, and he manipulates both to achieve the effects that he wants--a relationship with Valentin and a pardon from the warden. The poisoning of Valentin's food weakens him as the prison official hopes it will, but Molina uses his cellmate's illness for a different purpose; no longer able to read his political
texts, Valentin increasingly comes under the influence of Molina's films, abandoning himself to the pleasure and escape from his suffering which they offer. And Molina convinces the warden that in order to act realistically, to persuade Valentin that his mother has visited, he must return to his cell with packages of food, which he then uses to nurse Valentin back to health. The ability to create illusions and tell stories enables Molina to do more than simply escape from reality; it gives him the power to alter his situation.

Molina nurtures Valentin both physically and psychologically, humanizing him and winning his affection through generosity. As Valentin responds to Molina's narratives and nursing, he comes to understand that the act of making someone feel better, whether physically, by providing food and clean sheets, or mentally, by telling narratives that allow the individual to escape from reality temporarily, is an activity as moral and effective as the revolutionary activity that continues to occupy him. As he listens to Molina's final two film narratives—one a supernatural tale about zombies and the other a melodramatic romance—Valentin allows himself to enter their narrative audiences, to refrain from wise comments and intrusive ideological interpretations, to simply be affected by the stories and Molina's manner of telling.

Earlier, Molina suggested that "boleros," a popular type of
song, "contain tremendous truths" (139) and suggests that Valentin has no right to dismiss them as "a lot of romantic nonsense" (133). By the end of novel, Valentin is able to see the value of romance and suggests that the last film, which Molina finds so sad because he foresees in it the separation of Valentin and himself, similarly tells a simple truth. The ending which Molina finds so "enigmatic," that the woman both cries and smiles at the death of her lover, seems "the best part of the film" to Valentin:

--It means that even if she's left with nothing she's content to have had at least one real relationship in her life, even if it's over and done with. [V]
--But don't you suffer even more, after having been so happy but then winding up with nothing? [M]
--Molina, there's one thing to keep in mind. In a man's life, which may short and may be long, everything is temporary. Nothing is forever. [V]...
--Yes, it's easy to say. But feeling it is something else. [M]
--But you have to reason it out then, and convince yourself. [V]
--Yes, but there are reasons of the heart that reason doesn't encompass. And that's straight from a French philosopher, a very great one. I got you that time....[M] (259)

The authorial audience recognizes this discussion not only as an interpretation of the film we have just heard along with Valentin, but also as a discussion of the ending of the novel in which the dramatized narrator and narratee are characters. Though Kerr suggests that their disagreement
indicates that a "switch occurs also in their 'philosophical' positions," Valentin and Molina are still essentially the same type of narratee, one intellectual and stoic, the other sensitive and romantic. Each has, however, recognized the value of the other's way of responding to narrative structures; Valentin's rational acceptance of the emotional truth offered by the narrative is tempered by Molina's emotional suggestion that the truth of the fictional ending—that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all—might be unrealistic because he is unable to feel its truth. This discussion of the ending of the film draws the reader's attention to the question of fictional endings in general; not only does the discussion reflect the characters' attitudes toward their relationship which must soon end, but it also reminds the reader that his or her own involvement in the fictional world of Kiss of the Spider Woman is about to end.

Molina's death is as enigmatic to Valentin as the ending of the final film is to Molina. Valentin allows himself to be drugged in order to escape the pain of being tortured, and the drug-induced dream about the spider woman which ends the novel shows the extent to which Molina's narratives have altered him. Whether Molina "was sad or happy to die that way, sacrificing himself for a just cause," or whether he "let himself be killed because that
way he could die like some heroine in a movie" (279) is something Valentin believes only Molina knows. But Valentin does not know what the authorial reader knows, that Molina used his talents as fiction-maker not merely to recall movies to entertain his cellmate, but to manipulate the warden and Valentin in order to get out of prison and to win the latter's affection. Though Schwartz suggests that *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* is Puig's "attempt to grapple with the political stranglehold the Argentine government exercises over its masses," the authorial reader is lead to believe that Molina's final act reveals a commitment to the ideals of romance rather than to those of political action. Not only does he know that his actions will likely lead to his death (he withdraws his money for his mother), but he uses that possibility to enact and revise the ending of the final film which he tells Valentin so that it corresponds to his interpretation. For though Valentin may hope that he will some day be released from the prison, Molina is less idealistic about social change than his Marxist cellmate, and death is the final escape for Molina from the pain of finally having had "one real relationship" and "winding up with nothing." While Valentin's dream reflects his interpretation of the film, that Molina will always be with him in his thoughts, Molina's self-sacrifice validates his own more melodramatic interpretation--that the suffering of having lost the joy of love is worse than
never having loved at all. "Each time you've come to my bed, " Molina tells Valentin, "I've wanted...not to wake up again...But it's not some notion that's gotten into my head or something; I'm telling you the only thing I want is to die" (236). Molina clearly dies as a romantic heroine, not as a social revolutionary fighting for a just cause.

Though Puig's novel is political in that it "explicitly reveals the sad state of the Buenos Aires prison system [and] the punishments meted out to anarchists," the authorial reader is persuaded that narrative acts are perhaps more effective than political ones and that popular forms can affect us in ways that explicitly didactic discourse cannot. Not only does Puig weave the dialogue of Valentin and Molina around the film narratives, but his authorial reader recognizes that the relationship between the prisoners develops as a variation of a popular romance, with Molina's death providing the sad, enigmatic ending which his films all have in common. And within the 'real' world of the prison cell, the narrator whose life is influenced by his melodramatic and romantic films is finally more able to influence his reality with his fictions than the ideological narratee is with his serious study. For despite Valentin's noble intentions as a revolutionary, he begins as a member of the intellectual elite with disdain for the escapism of popular forms, but Molina's narratives allow the dramatized
narratee to enter the world of the populace he hopes to free from political oppression. Puig's novel is indeed a political one, but not simply because he depicts the narrator and narratee as victims of an injust system; by weaving the popular fictions into the structure of his narrative, Puig democratizes literature and persuades his intellectually elite authorial reader of the power of popular art to affect us and make us human.

By dramatizing his narratee, Puig shows that narratives provide Valentin an experience that explicitly political discourse cannot: the opportunity to suppress his own ego in order to enter the world of another, to form emotional attachments, and to recognize his own humanity. Valentin understands that he has a heart only when he becomes "attached to the characters. And now it's all over, and it's just like they died" (41). The emotional understanding he develops as a narratee enables him to express affection for his cellmate and to escape temporarily the oppression of the political system, to act, as he says "like a decent human being" (202). And by making the process by which the narratee is humanized by Molina's narratives a part of the larger fiction, Puig reminds his authorial reader that the world in which narrator and narratee exist is also a fiction, and that the reader has similarly suppressed her own ego to enter that world and to become attached to these characters. Though
the pleasure of entering a fictional world is a temporary one, just as the relationship developed between Valentin and Molina must end, and just as the happy escape provided by the films lasts only as long as the telling, Puig suggests that the pleasure offers more than an escape from reality. The activity of reading requires us to suppress our egos to temporarily enter a world created by another, Puig suggests, and is thus an activity which encourages us to form attachments to characters and experience the loss of endings; in other words, fictional structures enable us to experience what is necessary to be decent human beings.

If on a winter's night a traveler: The Protean Reader

While Gardner and Puig use their dramatized narratees as principal characters, they essentially argue through these readers for the effectiveness of a particular type of literature; that is, though Sally and Valentin are both important characters in the larger fictional worlds of October Light and Kiss of the Spider Woman, their activity as readers functions to show the potential of literary forms to affect us, to alter our behavior, to make us better or worse human beings in the reality that exists outside of fiction. These characters thus respond to the embedded fictions in ways that enable Gardner to denounce the immorality of contemporary narrative strategies and
Puig to elevate the status of popular narrative forms. Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, however, employs the device of the dramatized reader in a radically metafictional way, for instead of arguing for a particular reading strategy or a particular form of literary discourse, Calvino depicts a variety of readers, a multiplicity of texts, and a number of different situations which require us to engage in the activity of reading. As the real reader encounters this multiplicity, he or she must become a protean reader in order to keep up with Calvino, who, as Russell Davies suggests, "has made a virtue of his lack of, or chronic impatience with, a convinced narrative standpoint."

But *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a text designed to both flatter and frustrate even the most protean of readers. Calvino's rhetorical strategies, on the one hand, seem to deny the primacy of the author's role in the literary transaction, for the narrative beginnings suggest that writers are also readers attempting to decipher a chaotic world. But on the other hand, Calvino cleverly manipulates his readers, persuading us to consent to a game designed to both fulfill and frustrate our expectations for structure and closure.

Madeleine Sorapure suggests that "To defeat the myth of the authoritative author, Calvino not only puts his name into the text but also multiplies images of himself throughout, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to
determine the single controlling voice of the author."²⁰ Though Calvino, like Barth, does in fact undermine his "authority" as a truth-giver or message-maker by assuming multiple narrative voices, his inclusion of his name in the text alerts the reader to the author's role as constructor of the fictional worlds which appear in the text. Calvino makes it impossible for the reader to forget that he is entering a fictional funhouse or the extent to which he is manipulated by its operator, who begins the novel with a self-conscious address to the reader: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, If on a winter's night a traveler. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade."²¹ By foregrounding the reader's activity and by alerting the reader to the noise and flurry taking place in the world outside of the fiction, where "the TV is always on in the next room" (3), Calvino also draws our attention to the radically reflexive reading experience provided by this text.

With the "you" of the first sentence, for instance, Calvino immediately makes his reader aware of the double-leveled activity of entering a fictional world. The narrative reader enacts the experience of the you of the novel, reading these first lines as preparation for beginning Calvino's latest work. The authorial reader, however, recognizes that he or she is in fact beginning the
novel by reading about beginning it, and therefore must reflect upon the activity of reading as he or she reads. As the narrator pretends not to know very much about the narrative reader to whom he is directing his discourse, his introductory comments seem both paternal and solicitous: "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" (4). Though a seemingly tentative and playful discussion of our preparedness for the activity of reading, this quotation also reveals the extent to which our comfort as readers depends upon the author's adherence to our expectations; the reader cannot foresee as he reads these solicitious remarks that the author's construction of the text—and not the reader's need for a cigarette or the use of the bathroom—will be the thing that interrupts his reading. And rather than being a means by which he extirpates the author from the text, Calvino's references to himself (in the third-person, of course) remind us that the reader is entering a world controlled by "an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself" (9). Calvino thus prepares his authorial reader to expect the unexpected.

The first chapter not only makes the reader self-conscious about his or her participation in the narrative
transaction, but Calvino also self-consciously displays the imaginative process by which the author constructs his reader, proving that the writer's audience, as Ong would say, is always a fiction. From the tentative and general solicitations about the reader's physical comfort, Calvino moves swiftly to a detailed narrative of the reader's trip to the bookshop; he still pretends, however, not to know all, wondering, for instance, if the book was wrapped or simply placed in a bag, if the reader has an important job or an unnecessary one. As he includes specific details of the reader's activity apart from reading If on a winter's night a traveler, the authorial reader is further distanced from the 'you' of the novel, the you who is gently mocked by the narrator. Though Calvino may not be able to know his real reader's expectations, he is certain of the expectations he attributes to this fictional reader: Calvino's Reader is a cynical man who knows that "the best you can expect is to avoid the worst" (4) and allows himself the "youthful pleasure of expectation" only in regard to books. His ideal book is thus one in which he can "take possession of this newness at the first moment, without having to pursue, to chase it" (7); what most exasperates the Reader is to find himself at "the mercy of the fortuitous, the aleatory, the random," and he desires the activity of reading to provide an orderly world which does not exist outside of the text, to allow him to enter
"an abstract and absolute space and time in which you could move, following an exact, taut trajectory" (27). Calvino's male Reader, then, is one of Frank Kermode's apocalyptic readers who, "to make sense of their span...need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems."22

While the male Reader continues to expect a completed novel, Calvino's authorial reader knows after the first interrupted beginning that fragments are all he or she can expect from the titled chapters. Though we might enter the first narrative beginning along with the dramatized reader and expect it to be carried through to the end, the intrusion of the manipulative metafictional voice at the beginning of Chapter Two distances us, not only from the Reader's expectations, but also from his reading experience. For the authorial audience, reading continues—we read about the binding error that causes the same signature to be repeated over and over and not the repetition of the same signature. The narrator relates the second person protagonist's initial reaction to the repetition of the text by ironically commenting upon his misreading—his failure as an authorial reader:

You are the sort of reader who is sensitive to such refinements; you are quick to catch the author's intentions....But at the same time, you also feel a certain dismay; just when you were beginning to grow truly interested, at this very point the author feels called upon to display one of those virtuoso tricks so customary in modern
writing, repeating a paragraph word for word.
(25)

Calvino is of course displaying one of those virtuoso tricks, but not the one the Reader identified; by referring to the tricks of modern writing, Calvino calls his authorial audience's attention to his own virtuosity and thus distances us from the male Reader's expectations for a conventional novel. The book we are reading is certainly not the book that the you of the novel is reading, and our expectations must no longer—if they ever were—be the same as his. That is, while the male Reader continues to be annoyed by the interruptions, Calvino's authorial audience ceases to expect finished narratives and instead reads the titled chapters with full knowledge that the expectations they raise will be frustrated. *If on a winter's night a traveler* is not, as one reviewer calls it, "a book about broken narrative promises,"23 but rather it is a book that simply makes different promises than conventional novels. Instead of promising an orderly and authoritative narrative that will help the reader make sense of the world, Calvino promises the reader the experience of entering multiple potential worlds in the process of being read, "the promise of a time of reading that extends before us and can comprise all possible developments" (177). Once the authorial reader recognizes Calvino's strategy, he or she adjusts the expectation of what will be found in the titled
chapters accordingly, and reads like Ludmilla—to catch a
voice, to enter a world that is different from the world of
the other beginnings. The fact that this adjustment occurs
fairly quickly is both a tribute to Calvino's rhetorical
talents and to the reader's flexibility and responsiveness.

But as the male Reader pursues both a complete novel
and the Other Reader, he becomes a character in a
metafiction that does indeed satisfy the type of reader who
expects to discover in books the order of an absolute space
and time: the dramatized Reader begins and ends by reading
Calvino's novel, his existence contained within the covers
of the text and lasting only as long as the reading. One
critic suggests that the numbered chapters describing the
reader's activity form "a framing device that follows the
romance pattern," 24 while another indicates the extent to
which the reader's quest fulfills the function of a
detective novel. 25 Calvino, of course, parodies both
romance and detective fiction in the numbered chapters, a
strategy which allows him to fulfill on one level the
reader's expectations for an orderly working out of events,
particularly since these popular genres are those most
likely to adhere to conventional expectations. As the
Reader pursues the mystery of the interrupted novels, he
meets a number of different types of readers and non-
readers and becomes involved in just about every aspect of
the book business by meeting a professor, a publisher, a
writer, an Ircanian Director General whose job it is to ban books—with all roads leading to a translator in charge of an apocrypha conspiracy. At the center of both the mystery and the romance is the Other Reader, Ludmilla, whose love of reading inspires jealousy in Marena, who in turn uses his talent as a translator in an attempt to prevent her from ever again reading a complete novel. As the narrator tells the Reader, "The pursuit of the interrupted book, which instilled in you a special excitement since you were conducting it together with the Other Reader, turns out to be the same thing as pursuing her" (151). Both detective novel and romance come to a conventional conclusion, with the mystery unravelled and the Reader and Ludmilla married.

Calvino’s depiction of the quest in terms of reading, however, makes it impossible to view the male Reader (whose only name is his function in the text) and Ludmilla as mimetic characters. Though their story provides both a narrative impetus for the novel and the working out of the romance/detective plot satisfies certain readerly expectations, Calvino employs one-dimensional characters to persuade the authorial reader of the invalidity and artificiality of the conventional expectation that the author should create a stable reality from a chaotic world. That is, these characters function both structurally and thematically, but unlike the dramatized readers of Gardner and Puig, they resist a mimetic reading;
the Reader, Ludmilla, Lotaria, Irnerio, Marena, and even the writer, Silas Flannery, have little reality apart from their attitudes toward literature. Ludmilla's apartment is likewise depicted only to show the ways we read character through the signs of one's possessions, and the lovers' activity, far from producing an erotic effect, is included to reveal that "lovemaking and reading resemble each other most [in] that within both of them times and spaces open, different from measurable time and space" (156). The metafictional frame both establishes reading as the theme of the novel and provides the structure for a reading experience that is contrary to conventional expectations that literature should somehow help us make sense of the world. In other words, by foregrounding his position in regard to reading in the numbered chapters, Calvino not only fulfills the expectation of the Reader desirous of a conventional plot, but also the expectations of a meaning-seeking reader like Lotaria, who "wants to know the author's position with regard to Trends of Contemporary Thought and Problems That Demand a Solution" (44). But Calvino fulfills these desires metafictionally instead of realistically, drawing our attention to the artifice of even the most conventional literary forms. Within the frame of the novel, therefore, both the male Reader's and Lotaria's expectations are frustrated; the Reader never does find the ending of any of the novel beginnings, and
Lotaria is disdained as a reader who reads books "only to find in them what she was already convinced of before reading them" (185). Through the metafictional numbered chapters, Calvino persuades his actual reader to consent to, and perhaps acknowledge as more real though less satisfying, the alternative reading experience provided by the interrupted beginnings.

While Calvino recognizes and in his parodic way fulfills the desires of readers like the protagonist and Lotaria, his ideal narrative reader is Ludmilla, for whom, reading means stripping herself of every purpose, every foregone conclusion, to be ready to catch a voice that makes itself heard when you least expect it, a voice that comes from beyond the author, beyond the conventions of writing. (239)

While the protagonist finds it difficult to "keep up with her, this woman who is always reading another book besides the one before her eyes, a book that does not yet exist, but which, since she wants it, cannot fail to exist" (72), Calvino not only keeps up with her narrative demands, but he fulfills them. Each beginning after Ludmilla is introduced in the second numbered chapter is a response to her desire to catch a different narrative voice, to enter a different narrative audience. Her desire for a novel that brings her "immediately into a world where everything is precise, concrete, specific" (30), for instance, prompts "Outside the town of Malbork," which begins with "An odor
of frying waft[ing] at the opening of the page" (34), and her wish for a novel with "its driving force only the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories" (92) is met with a narrator who finds "stories that cannot be told until other stories are told first" (109). This strategy has prompted at least one critic to suggest that Calvino abandons his authority by adopting multiple voices in order to satisfy the Other Reader and therefore "invites his readers to play an active role in the construction of the novel and thus to assume some of the responsibilities traditionally belonging to the author." But what this interpretation ignores is that Ludmilla is a construction of Calvino's which enables him to meet the rhetorical challenges he has set for himself in this novel. Rather than suggesting that the reader is so powerful that her desires must be met, this strategy allows Calvino to show the extent of his own power as a narrator with multiple voices. His inclusion of Ludmilla's desires, then, is another of the means by which he structures his novel and encourages his authorial reader to enter the narrative audience of each titled chapter; that is, Calvino uses Ludmilla's desires to persuade us to play his game, to read the beginnings in order to see if he meets the challenges he sets for himself through her. But while the authorial reader is thus prepared for the incomplete narratives and alert to the expectations raised through Ludmilla, he or
she nevertheless enters the narrative audiences of the titled chapters, enticed by the stories promised there; through this metafictional device, then, Calvino induces his authorial audience to reflect upon its own act of reading and to be self-conscious about the processes by which it enters different narrative audiences.

Through the metafictional frame, the authorial reader observes multiple readers employing different strategies in various situations and must identify in some way with each of the readers and situations; we have all heard a text read aloud, been part of a study group, glanced at other readers in the library, approached a text with preconceived ideas. But as observers of these readers' failed reading strategies in regard to the interrupted beginnings, we are distanced from them and discouraged from entering the narrative beginnings as they do. Instead of reading the titled chapters for an authorial truth, an orderly plot, or even a sense of an ending, we read multiple narrative voices, all tentatively engaged in their own acts of reading the world. While the authorial reader is of course encouraged to search for "truthful" descriptions of reading in the metafictional frame, he or she experiences the activity of reading differently in the beginnings, knowing that they are only potential sources of meaning, immanent rather than imminent. Though Calvino tempts the reader's natural desire to detect links between the stories by
including similar proper names and narrators who all seem to have trouble beginning their stories, he ultimately frustrates this desire to bring order to the multiplicity of the titled chapters by emphasizing the distinctive way each narrator attempts to read and narrate his experience in the world. And critics who have attempted to explain *If on a winter's night a traveler* by isolating one or another of the beginnings to suggest that it provides the key to the novel are guilty of attempting to escape both the burden and pleasure of being a protean reader. The reader, by beginning again and again, experiences the sense of confusion and chaos that these multiple narrators confront within their fictionalized worlds.

For *If on a winter's night a traveler* is finally a novel that resists readers who wish to attribute a single meaning to it. Calvino's reader must be protean, at times like Lotaria, entering the metafictional chapters to observe many readers reading, and at times like the male Reader, following the romance and detective plot of the frame to its conventional conclusion. And like Ludmilla, the reader must forego conventional expectations that narrative will make order of disorder to enter the narrative audience of the fragments; the reader instead must expect from each new beginning an inconclusive yet distinctive narrative voice in the process of attempting to order the multifarious experience of being in the world.
By drawing our attention to the artifice of conventional novels through the metafictional frame and his parody of popular genres, Calvino persuades us of the more "true-to-life" nature of his interrupted narratives. In this sense, then, Calvino does refuse the god-like stance of the authoritative writer in that he depicts the impossibility of writing one "true" novel; the writer, like the reader, is in the world and not outside it. But of course, it is through his own artifice that Calvino gains our consent to the "realism" of his narrative fragments and alters our expectations regarding the realism of traditional novelistic conventions. The experience of reading, however, finally must be distinct from the experience of being in the world, and as Kermode suggests, books "that continue to interest us move through time to an end, an end we must sense even if we cannot know it." Calvino can only persuade us to accept his fragments by housing them in a metafictional frame that begins and ends with the Reader reading Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, for the vision of multiplicity and chaos reflected in the titled chapters may be more than even the most protean reader can bear.

In the continuum of effects created by the use of a dramatized reader illustrated by the three novels discussed here, Calvino's use of this device is by far the most radically metafictional and self-reflexive; the authorial
reader is not merely called upon to consent to a single vision of what it means to be a reader, but he or she is also asked to reflect upon and to enact the various experiences described by the text. Calvino's second-person protagonist/reader compels the reader to be self-reflexive in a way that is distinctly different from either Gardner's elderly reader, whose responses are revealed through the third-person narrator of the outer novel, or Puig's narratees, whose conversations about the films are unmediated by an authoritative narrative voice. While both Gardner's and Puig's dramatized narratees exist in a frame where reading is, though important, not an end in itself, the you of If on a winter's night a traveler's frame has no identity apart from his activity as a reader, the same activity in which the actual reader of the novel is participating; in other words, while the authors of October Light and Kiss of the Spider Woman subordinate the metafictional elements to the mimetic "outer" narrative in order to raise questions about the effects of fiction on readers in the world, the outer reality of Calvino's novel is itself about books, their construction, their production, and, finally, their consumption—their being read.

Although we are encouraged to view Ludmilla as Calvino's ideal reader, she is the one who suggests that the pure pleasure of reading is "transformed into something
else" as soon as a reader learns too much about how books are made, and as members of Calvino's authorial audience, we are never allowed to abandon ourselves completely to what she calls "the unsullied pleasure of reading" (93). Calvino deromanticizes both the creative process and the reading process by exposing the means by which an author constructs his reader, a publisher constructs the book, a reader constructs the text, and ultimately, a society constructs its literary conventions and values. Like the male Reader, Calvino's authorial reader must self-consciously cross the boundary line, "on one side [of which] are those who make books, on the other those who read them" (93). As we make our way through this particular text, we are compelled to reflect not only upon the complex relationship between its narrator and dramatized readers and its author and ourselves, but also upon the complicated process by which all books are conceived, produced, translated, sold, consumed, and interpreted. In addition to making its authorial reader conscious of his or her own activity, Calvino's If on a winter's night a traveler makes its reader reflect upon all the different types of readings that help constitute the text.
Notes


2 Though the activity of reading is frequently romanticized in autobiographical works, such as Mills' Autobiography and Wordsworth's Prelude, even in these cases, the activity is praised as it helps the individual writer or poet develop.


6 John Gardner, October Light (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), p. 20. All further reference to this work will be noted in the text.


8 Morace, p. 141.
9 Morris, p. 229.


12 Morace, p. 141.

13 In addition to the dialogue between the two prisoners, Puig includes several dialogues between Molina and the warden, the surveillance report on Molina's activities after he is released, the "authorial" footnotes on the nature of homosexuality, and a final dream sequence attributed to Valentin.


15 Manuel Puig, Kiss of the Spider Woman, trans. Thomas Colchie (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). Actually, Molina tells only five movies to Valentin; the sixth is only remembered by Molina while Valentin reads his political discourse. All further references to this work will be noted in the text.

17 Kerr, p. 209.
18 Schwartz, p. 141.
21 Italo Calvino, If on a winter's night a traveler, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 3. All further references to this work will be noted in the text.
24 Marilyn Orr, "Beginning in the Middle: The Story of Reading in Calvino's If on a winter's night a traveler," Papers on Language and Literature, 21 (Spring 1985), p. 211.
26 Sorapure, p. 705.
27 Kermode, p. 179.
CHAPTER VI

THE METAFICTIONAL AND THE MIMETIC:
REDEFINING REALISM?

The Self-Conscious Mimetic Novel: The French Lieutenant's Woman

Most writers of metafiction employ more than one of the techniques that have been discussed thus far in order to draw their reader's attention to the processes by which a fictional world is constructed and read, but in The French Lieutenant's Woman, John Fowles exploits most of these self-conscious techniques in order to raise complex questions about the relationship between artifice and reality. Fowles not only parodies conventional forms and narrative techniques, but he also draws his reader's attention to evolving linguistic structures, employs an intrusive narrator who denies his "authority" as an omnipotent god, includes multiple endings, and even makes of his title character a modern text to be read by the male protagonist; as Linda Hutcheon notes, The French Lieutenant's Woman is "a kind of summation of metafictional techniques." Though practitioners of these self-conscious techniques are frequently denounced as solipsistic,
narcissitic, and elitist, Fowles clearly aims for a larger audience than most of the other writers discussed thus far, and this novel's presence on the New York Times' Bestseller List for over a year suggests that he reaches that audience. Despite its popularity, however, The French Lieutenant's Woman is the subject of a number of critical controversies, most notably over the parody of Victorian narrators and the dual ending, a situation which prompts William Nelles to note "That a best-seller, which presumably causes no serious problems for the average reader, should be a source of confusion for literary critics suggests that our theories are failing to account for certain narrative possibilities." A study of the ways in which Fowles uses metafictional techniques to affect his narrative and authorial audiences differently can perhaps help us to understand why this novel has found both a "popular" and an "academic" audience.

As Hutcheon notes, early readers of The French Lieutenant's Woman stressed its parody of the Victorian novel form and the thematic function of the theories of social evolution and existential freedom, but they either "denounced the self-conscious coyness of Fowles himself" in the metafictional chapter 13 and the double ending, or ignored these metafictional touches as though they were somehow extrinsic to our understanding of the text—"a boring red herring," as Walter Allen calls Fowles'
experimentation. Readers who wish to read this text as though it were indeed a product of the nineteenth century or as though it were a simple parody of the novel form are, it seems to me, misreading the clues Fowles gives us about the relative positions of his narrative and authorial audiences in relation to the events and characters depicted in the narrative and fail to distinguish between the narrator in the novel and the author of the novel.

Despite Fowles' use of the Victorian novel form, both the narrative and authorial audiences of Fowles' text are clearly situated in the latter half of the twentieth century. Although the narrator begins by imitating the Victorian novel, which itself is frequently an imitation of history or biography, there is never any doubt that he and his reader are contemporaries. Before the end of the first page, the narrator has revealed his position—and his narrative audience's—by referring to the twentieth century sculptor, Henry Moore. But for the reader who misses this clue, he blatantly indicates his temporal distance by issuing his narrative reader an invitation to visit Lyme and test the accuracy of his description, for though the town has changed a great deal, the Cobb "has changed very little since the year of which I write." Later, the narrator clearly locates his readers in the 1960s by suggesting that Sam was a sharp dresser, "quite as sharp as a 'mod' of the 1960s," (39) and translates for his
narrative audience the Victorian term "gooseberry" into the 1960s term "square" (105).

The frequent use of these kinds of references establishes the reader's distance from the events of the novel and a perspective that is clearly contemporary for the audience of a work published in 1969; but by distancing us temporally from the characters of the novel, these linguistic references also help Fowles to establish a relationship between the narrator and his narrative reader by suggesting that both have knowledge that the Victorian characters can not possess. What would be included in a footnote to a twentieth-century edition of an actual Victorian novel becomes part of the text of The French Lieutenant's Woman, with the narrator drawing his reader's attention to the changes in language that have occurred since the nineteenth century. When Ernestina calls Charles a "cad" after the two exchange a series of feeble puns, the narrator intrudes to explain that a "'cad' in those days meant an omnibus conductor, famous for their gift of low repartee" (263). But because this exchange takes place soon after Charles spends the evening drinking and pursuing a prostitute, Ernestina's pun has ironic implications for the twentieth-century audience. Similarly, the narrator frequently reminds his reader that contemporary assumptions may not be applicable to events depicted in the Victorian novel. After showing Sarah and the young maid asleep in the same bed, the narrator addresses his reader directly:
A thought has swept into your mind; but you forget we are in the year 1867...some vices were then so unnatural that they did not exist. I doubt if Mrs. Poultney had ever heard of the word 'lesbian'; and if she had, it would have commenced with a capital, and referred to an island in Greece. (128)

In this way, then, the narrator establishes his reader's distance from the world of the novel, not only temporally, but also ideologically; the changes in language reflect the changes in both the conventions of society and of fictional forms.

While critics frequently refer to the parodic nature of the narrative, it is similarly important to remember that the narrator himself establishes this intertextuality for the narrative audience before Chapter 13. He frequently refers to Hardy, Dickens, Arnold, and a number of other Victorian writers, and as Ernestina and Charles stroll on the Cobb in the first scene, she shows Charles "the very steps that Jane Austen made Louisa Musgrove fall down in Persuasion" (13). The narrator likewise tells us that Sarah reads a great deal of literature, "which served as a substitute for experience. Without realizing it she judged people as much by the standards of Walter Scott and Jane Austen as by any empirically arrived at; seeing those around her as fictional characters, and making poetic judgments on them" (48). But we are also told that Sarah is a keen judge of people, "or as if jumping a century, she
was born with a computer in her heart" (47). In this way, Fowles shows that Sarah's experience reading literature has been beneficial, providing her with a greater understanding of those who occupy the world of The French Lieutenant's Woman, and he thus establishes the value of conventional literary forms even as he parodies them. Charles, "the scientist, the despiser of novels" (15) has failed to learn that fiction is a means of understanding the world around him, a lesson which the events of the novel are designed to teach him. Although the narrator has not yet broken the illusion that he is writing a historical biography, he does establish for his narrative audience the relative importance of literature in the lives of his characters.

Perhaps the narrator's most ironic reference, one that points out the differences between nineteenth and twentieth-century novel conventions, is to the sentimental cliffhangers common to Victorian serial novels. At the end of Chapter 12, Sarah stands crying at the window, but the narrator refuses to employ the convention so frequently used by the Victorians:

I will not make her teeter on the windowsill; or sway forward, and then collapse sobbing back onto the worn carpet of her room. We know she was alive a fortnight after this incident, and therefore she did not jump. Nor were hers the sobbing, hysterical sort of tears that presage violent action; but those produced by a profound conditional, rather than emotional, misery--slow-welling, unstoppable, creeping like blood through a bandage. Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come? (80).
Rather than emphasizing the plot by making the question of whether Sarah lives or die a matter of suspense, the narrator emphasizes existence and being as questions much more suspenseful. The final lines, then, indicate a question which the narrative audience, the audience aligned by the "we" with the narrator, expects will be answered by the next chapter. And because the novel has established a pattern in which scenes showing the characters in action are followed by scenes in which the narrator explains those actions, the authorial audience too might expect chapter 13 to reveal Sarah's nature. What then, is the consequence of the self-conscious intrusion of the narrator in Chapter 13?

The narrator tells his narrative audience what Fowles' authorial audience has known all along, that "this story I am telling is all imagination" (80), a comment that should not, however, come as a complete surprise to his narrative reader, since he has just established that he would not make Sarah teeter as Austen made Louisa fall down the steps in *Persuasion*. He denies that he has "disgracefully broken the illusion" (82) that he is writing about real people, suggesting that his narrative audience must now read *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a fiction, a novel, rather than as history or biography. But he is a modern writer of fiction and can no longer pretend to have the same godlike control over his characters that Dickens or Austen had over
The novelist is still a god, since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority."

Since Sarah would not reveal her motives, he cannot violate her integrity—or her freedom—as a character and reveal them for her, and the narrator would have his narrative audience "share my own sense that I do not fully control these creatures of my mind" (82). Yet this chapter distinguishes Sarah from the other characters; she is not only more modern in relation to the Victorian world the narrator has described, but she also represents a modern fictional construct. The narrator allows himself to explain and probe the minds of his Victorian characters—Charles and Ernestina—but he must respect Sarah's freedom as a modern character.

But this chapter does more than merely repeat what the narrator has already established as the most significant difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century "morality," that the modern age has replaced the nineteenth century's emphasis on duty and convention with an emphasis on existential freedom. This metafictional chapter both distances the narrator from Fowles and the narrative reader from the authorial reader. While the narrator seems close
to Fowles when he suggests that all novelists "wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is" (81), he is clearly distant from Fowles when he suggests that "a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world." (81) While the narrative reader accepts the narrator's refusal to violate Sarah's freedom as a defense of the mimetic illusion that operates in most Victorian and modern novels--that the characters are independent of their creator--Fowles reveals his own plans explicitly in the text through the narrator's explanation. In other words, though the narrator's plan to reveal Sarah's character is rejected with an explanation the narrative audience accepts, the author's plan to reveal the rejection is not. While Fowles may agree with his narrator about the relationship of created worlds to the real world, he and his narrator clearly disagree about the independence of characters and the importance of the well-constructed world. Similarly, the narrative audience who accepts this mimetic illusion is distanced from the authorial audience who, like its author, approves of well-planned fictional constructs and recognizes that chapter 13 does indeed fulfill, though with a twist, the established pattern of the novel. The authorial reader thus sees Chapter 13 as a revelation of Sarah's character--she ceases to be viewed by this audience as a mimetic character and
becomes important for her function as an enigmatic, modern fictional construct.

As the narrator becomes increasingly distant from the author, eventually appearing à la Thackeray as a character in the narrative and thus clearly becoming a fictional construct himself, the authorial audience's experience of the text becomes increasingly metafictional. While the narrative audience remains interested in what Charles learns from his relationship with the more modern Sarah, the authorial audience becomes increasingly concerned with how Charles reads Sarah, that is, with how Sarah functions to make Charles develop. Though Hutcheon argues that Sarah's use of artifice makes her the "narrator's impresario persona" and the "narrating novelist's surrogate," she insists that "despite appearances, it is Sarah who is the named protagonist of the novel." Sarah is indeed an artist figure, but she is more closely connected to the author than to the narrator, concerned with the effect that she elicits from Charles by revealing her fiction making strategies to her reader; and despite the narrator's naming of Sarah as the protagonist--an irony clearly intended to be perceived by Fowles' authorial audience--Charles is the character who has the greater mimetic reality in the text, the character to be affected by Sarah's fiction-making. Sarah represents not only the modern age, but also the modern text that achieves freedom
from convention through its flaunting of artifice, and
Charles is both a man on the verge of entering the modern
age and a "dramatized" reader on the verge of understanding
that modern text. Sarah, as we have seen, judges people
according to the standards of fiction and indeed treats her
own life as though it were a fiction, creating for herself
a romanticized autobiography, an autobiography as real as
but other than the one that was. Though she originally
adopts the persona of the French lieutenant's woman for the
public of Lyme in order to free herself of the conventions
of her day, she sees that Charles is both a reader who can
be manipulated by her rhetorical strategies and a reader
valuable enough to share in her idealized fictional world.

Sarah thus flatters Charles by telling him that he is
the first person to whom she has told her story, and while
Charles senses her uniqueness, he cannot yet understand
her. The narrator tells us that Charles, upon hearing her
story, thought, "here, if only some free man had the wit to
see it, is a remarkable woman" (147). The authorial
audience recognizes that though Charles uses the word free
to mean unengaged, the irony is that he is clearly still
not free enough of convention to understand the
significance of her decision to give herself to the French
lieutenant in order to be mistress of her own destiny.
When Charles responds to her story with typical Victorian
cant, Sarah uses artifice to indicate the falseness of his
reaction: "She reached up and touched a branch of the hawthorn. He could not be sure, but she seemed deliberately to press her forefinger down; a second later she was staring at a crimson drop of blood" (146). Sarah's act encourages Charles to view her ambiguous note, which promises that if he does not come to her, she will never trouble him again, as a possible suicide threat and makes him feel somehow responsible for her existence.

But Charles does not know, until later, what both narrative and authorial audiences do, that Sarah carefully orchestrates her dismissal by boldly walking past the forbidden dairy in front of Mrs. Fairley. But while the narrative reader searches for realistic reasons for Sarah's action, the authorial audience sees it as a function of the narrative's structure. In other words, Sarah's exercise of her freedom--her decision to make Mrs. Poulteney fire her--is more significant in light of its position between two scenes that illustrate the extent to which Charles is incapable of mastering his own destiny--the one in which he arrives at his uncle's estate expecting to be given the house and the one in which he must tell Ernestina of his uncle's upcoming marriage. The narrative continues to progress in this way, alternating scenes which show Sarah's increased freedom with those showing Charles' decreased freedom--not only is Charles losing control of his manservant, but his economic position makes him beholden to
Mr. Freeman, Ernestina's manipulative father. The authorial audience recognizes that by juxtaposing these scenes, Fowles shows the degree to which Sarah has achieved freedom through her artifice, while Charles, bound by duty and convention, is unable to imagine a better world.

The authorial audience likewise watches Sarah carefully construct her seduction of Charles. Several chapters before the love-making scene, the narrator shows Sarah unwrapping her packages. She places her new nightgown on the bed, checks the color of her hair against the green shawl before wrapping it around the shoulders of her nightgown, and places a bandage in a drawer. These are the devices by which Sarah will actualize her own fiction and persuade Charles to accept the burden of his own choices. For it is important to remember that Charles chooses to go to Exeter to visit Sarah after fictionalizing a bit himself: imagining a marriage with Ernestina in which they "did not live happily ever after" (264), Charles realizes that if he rejected freedom for duty, if he married Ernestina, "the book of his existence, so it seemed to him, [would] come to a distinctly shabby close" (267).

As Charles reads into the future, he enters the open-ended modern text and prefers it to the closed ending of the Victorian novel. But though he chooses to go to Sarah, what he discovers there is a "conventionally" helpless woman, her hair enhanced by the green shawl, and though the
audience knows that Sarah has planned this seduction, faked her sprained ankle, feigned her weak stance, Charles is overwhelmed with desire for the powerless female, and the act which takes "precisely ninety seconds" proves to him that she was a virgin and had thus deceived him. But the authorial audience recognizes that the success of her seduction depends not merely on his having participated in the act, but on his awareness of the deception involved in the act. Sarah is thus like the metafictional text in that she always reveals her fictional strategies, and her reappearance in her indigo dress, without the limp, but with her "old defiance," makes it clear to Charles that he has been "the dupe of her imaginings" (279), though his indignant reaction—that he has risked his reputation for her—suggests that he is not yet free. Charles, then, is like the narrative audience in that he believes Sarah's explanation of her use of artifice: "Today I have thought of my own happiness. If we were to meet again I could think only of yours" (279). But were Sarah only interested in her own happiness, she would not need to self-consciously reveal her use of artifice, for it would be enough that she achieved her own freedom through it; but like the metafictionalist, Sarah wants to alter Charles' attitudes toward convention by revealing her power to construct alternative realities through artifice.
For Sarah does achieve her own freedom through artifice, and her success as seductress confirms her ability as a fiction maker and makes the story of her shame a reality; that is, she is not only able to imagine another world, but she uses artifice to make that world possible. As she tells Charles the story of her French lieutenant, she finds solace in the fact that "I have a freedom [others] cannot understand. No insult, no blame, can touch me" (142). And though her situation in life changes and she gains confidence in her idealized world, Sarah is an essentially static character. Her uses of artifice, however, effect the changes that take place in Charles and help him evolve toward the modern man who chooses freedom over convention. But Charles' development is not without setbacks. Soon after making his choice for freedom in the church, Charles has a vision of "dressing Sarah! Taking her to Paris, to Florence, to Rome!" (287), a vision of possessing her and denying her freedom, and as he writes his letter to Sarah, he realizes that it is formal and stiff--conventional--in part because he does not really understand Sarah and thinks of her only as an ideal. Charles must therefore continue to pursue, not Sarah, but the ideal she represents; in other words, he must live with the consequences of having chosen Sarah and of his failing to be rewarded in conventional ways (with a romantic ending in which he marries Sarah) for choosing correctly.
Similarly, Fowles' metafictional use of the intruding narrator in Chapter 55 and the double ending, like Chapter 13, function for the authorial audience as Sarah--the modern text--functions for Charles. The effect of the novel, like the effect of Sarah's seduction of Charles, depends in large part on Fowles' revealing to the authorial audience his own use of artifice. The fictional narrator who appears in the train compartment with Charles suggests that readers "judge writers of fiction both by the skill they show in fixing the fight (in other words, in persuading us that they were not fixed) and by the kind of fighter they fix in favor of" (317). The narrative audience agrees with the narrator's assessment that fixing the fight would be, on the one hand, futile, since the novel takes place a hundred years ago and its outcome has little to do with the twentieth century, and on the other hand, a falsification of the "modern" novel he is writing which denies him the right to fix his characters in a single fate. In order not to give one version more authority by placing it last, he tells us he will decide the structure by flipping a coin. The narrator thus not only grants the autonomy of his characters, but also of his narrative readers, who value the open-ended nature of a novel that allows them to choose the ending. In other words, to persuade the narrative audience of both the value and burden of the increased freedom of twentieth-century
man, Fowles creates the illusion that they must bear the burden of choosing an ending. The narrator denies his own god-like stance in order to make the narrative reader assume the responsibility for the ending. As Frederick M. Holmes suggests, through multiple endings Fowles "tries to convey the suggestion of indeterminacy, impart the notion that characters have been freed from the tyranny of his plot." But it is a strategy which allows him to show the necessity of freedom without actually giving that freedom to his authorial audience.

For the order of the endings is not as arbitrary as a flip of a coin, and Fowles has in fact fixed the fight for his authorial audience in favor of the modern Sarah. That is, once Fowles commits himself to writing a narrative explanation—a metafictional revelation of his strategies—he also commits himself to controlling his characters and persuading his audience to validate the world he imagines. Not only does the second ending gain strength because Fowles directs his reader's attention to "the tyranny of the last chapter" (318), but because of his own expertise with artifice, Fowles' second ending is more aesthetically persuasive. Not only is it more modern in its ambiguity, but Charles is depicted as a still evolving human. He refuses Sarah's offer of an intimate, though "illegitimate" relationship because he saw that "he would become the secret butt of this corrupt house."(364) Though Sarah's
manipulations have prodded Charles along, he is still caught up in the conventions of his age and not yet deserving of a twentieth-century woman, and her rejection allows him to grow further, to gain "an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness" (366).

The second ending is also more persuasive because Sarah's function as modern text is again emphasized. Charles, like Fowles' authorial audience, realizes that Sarah has also fixed the fight; Charles does not really exercise his own freedom in his refusal of Sarah's offer, for "he saw finally that she knew he would refuse. From the first she had manipulated him. She would do so to the end" (364). While the narrative audience may accept the narrator's offer to choose an ending, Fowles' authorial audience is manipulated one last time by this artifice, and Fowles persuades us of the validity of the created world of the second ending. Thus Fowles, like Sarah, gains a certain freedom—the ability to control his fictional world—through artifice, while the authorial audience, like Charles, realizes the extent to which he is in fact dependent on narrative conventions. But by discovering his or her distance from the narrative reader who believes he has a choice, the authorial reader, again like Charles, recognizes his own uniqueness—and enjoys the pleasure of entering the audience for whom Fowles exercises his artifice.
While Fowles employs metafictional techniques to create new illusions for his narrative audience, illusions which illustrate his theme of existential freedom, the success of his novel depends in large part upon the authorial audience's recognition of the process by which we are manipulated by conventions, and the extent to which we are in fact dependent upon them, in literature as in life. By suggesting that the narrator's characters are free and independent of "authorial" control, the novelist not only reveals the distinction between conventions operating in the Victorian novel and those operating in the modern mimetic novel, but he also reminds the authorial reader of the artifice inherent in all literary conventions. Similarly, the illusion created by the double ending—that the reader is free to participate in the novel by choosing the fate of the characters—supports the theme for the narrative reader, while the narrative explanation reveals that the authorial reader must consent to the "tyranny" of the last ending, for he or she has entered the author's imaginative world, a world in which Fowles is free to choose among conventions. The imaginative world of The French Lieutenant's Woman is, as the narrator tells his reader, "as real as, but other than the world that is," and it thus does not promise infinite possibilities. The narrative reader is given only two endings from which to choose, for the narrator rejects the conventional Victorian
dream-ending depicting Charles married to Ernestina. And Sarah, though she uses artifice to achieve a degree of freedom the other characters cannot know, is limited by the conventions of her nineteenth-century world: she may choose to be either a governess or a "whore." Just as Sarah appeals to feminine conventions in order to seduce Charles, the author appeals to the conventions of mimetic fiction in order to seduce his narrative reader, but just as Sarah reveals her artifice in order to disillusion and educate Charles, to show the process by which she attains her more powerful position in the ninety-second seduction, Fowles reveals his artifice, his planning of his fictional world, in order to educate his reader about the process by which he gains his own limited freedom.

Finally, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a text that draws attention to the process by which it is constructed to establish a new sense of realism. Fowles does not suggest that all life is a fiction, only that "Fiction is woven into all." "We are all in flight from the real reality," as the narrator suggests: "You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it...fictionalize it, in a word" (82). As Hutcheon suggests, Fowles shows the extent to which "the act of making fictions is a natural and 'vital' human function." Fictionalizing, for Fowles, is also a function of morality, one that allows us
to imagine possibilities and to make peace with the choices we make. Though the novel cannot—and does not desire to—extirpate its author, Fowles employs metafictional techniques in order to make his authorial readers self-conscious about the process by which we free ourselves from the "real reality" through fictionalizing; though he does not give us the freedom to choose an ending for his fictional world, he suggests a new relationship between the fictional and the real, a relationship in which artifice is inherent in all that we believe is real. Fowles thus empowers his reader, not by granting him or her control of the fictional world of The French Lieutenant's Woman, but by revealing the processes by which he and Sarah discover freedom through their imaginative use of fictional conventions. Though Fowles employs many different metafictional techniques to reveal the extent to which we are dependent upon "artificial" conventions, he finally subordinates the metafictional elements of the novel to his own historical—and realistic—interpretation of how the shift between the centuries occurred.

The Realism of Metafiction: Conclusions

As Patricia Waugh suggests, "the most fundamental assumption" of metafictional writers "is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or
constructing one's 'reality.' Instead of pretending to mirror the world outside of fiction, metafiction mirrors its own construction, draws its reader's attention to the processes by which an individual author or reader employs fictional conventions in order to create the illusion of an orderly world. Even in a novel like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in which the reader is able to enter a narrative world that is as 'real' as the world outside of the fiction, the authorial reader's attention is drawn to the processes by which the mimetic protagonist--Charles--confronts the conventions of his time and moves toward constructing his own reality, apart from Victorian conventions. Though Fowles' novel offers narrative readers a well-made and realistic plot, he nevertheless reveals to his authorial readers the process by which he constructs that plot, the decisions he makes for his characters, and the means by which he fixes the fight in favor of the modern Sarah. Instead of offering authorial truths to readers, then, writers of metafiction are interested in revealing the processes by which fictional worlds are constructed and in making the reader aware of his or her role in the process of that construction.

Metafiction, by foregrounding its use of artifice, thus asks its readers to participate more self-consciously than does traditionally mimetic fiction. But by acknowledging the reader's participation in the making of
meaning from a fictional text, the author does not necessarily abandon his own role as constructor of the reader's experience. Raymond Federman suggests that the "new fiction will not create a semblance of order, it will offer itself for order and ordering":

Thus the reader of this fiction will not be able to identify with its people and its material, nor will he be able to purify or purge himself in relation to the actions of the people in the story. In other words, no longer being manipulated by an authorial point of view, the reader will be the one who extracts, invents, creates a meaning and an order for the people in the fiction. And it is this total participation in the creation which will give the reader a sense of having created a meaning and not having simply received, passively, a neatly prearranged meaning.

Though many writers use metafictional techniques to create the illusion for their narrative audience that the reader has control over the fiction and responsibility for its meaning, the fact remains, as Fowles' narrator suggests, that "not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely" (82). Some writers of metafiction (Barth, Calvino, and Gass, for example) do desire that their readers no longer consider the author to be "a prophet, a philosopher, or even a sociologist who predicts, teaches, or reveals absolute truths," as Federman suggests, but none of the authors considered here extirpates himself from his fiction. Nor do they desire to. In many ways, metafictional techniques
are every bit as "authorially" manipulative as those of the traditionally realistic novel, for they make the activity by which the competent reader enters the authorial audience of most texts part of the narrative text; in other words, by foregrounding the process by which the text is constructed, authors of metafiction frequently usurp a comfortable critical role from their readers. As they invite us to construct the text, they also force us to become aware that we are constructing it at their bidding. They make us self-conscious about their activities as well as our own.

The metafictionalists' concern with form, structure, language, and the conventions of fiction leads critics like Neil Schmitz to argue that "Unless extended, expressive of a particular vision of experience,...metafiction becomes nothing but mode: a series of acrobatic exercises in technique." All metafiction, however, does provide us with a vision of experience--the experience of constructing a fictional text, and as authors of the realistic novel have shown us, all rhetorical techniques, whether mimetic or metafictional, can be used for moral, amoral, or immoral purposes. While metafictional techniques may be inherently self-conscious, they are not inherently asocial, ahistorical, or even inherently unreadable or elitist. Fowles' novel, for example, though a summation of metafictional techniques, cannot be accused of any of these
typical complaints about experimental literature. Though Sarah functions metafictionally, Charles is a character with whom, in Federman's terms, readers can "identify," and the narrative progresses in an essentially traditional and linear manner that makes the novel quite "readable." And in addition to the role of parodist, Fowles plays the roles of historian and sociologist, acknowledging the fictitiousness of his created world at the same time that he indicates its relationship to the "real reality" that exists outside of the fiction.

Thus, while I have argued throughout this study that some metafictional texts are more successful than others, some more or less interesting and persuasive, I would also suggest that while the techniques are designed to make us more self-conscious of our activity as readers, they are nevertheless techniques used by particular authors to achieve particular effects, techniques which can be exploited for many different intentions. Gass, for instance, employs metalinguistic techniques to celebrate the medium as a means of expressing both imaginative and intellectual processes, while Barthelme uses them to raise questions about the ways language limits and deadens our cognitive processes. Similarly, Barth teaches his readers to celebrate and luxuriate in man-made constructions, while Borges warns his to be wary of orderly rhetorical systems. And while Coover parodies traditional narrative forms in
order to elevate the status of the tale and to revive our faith in the redemptive power of fiction, Barthelme parodies the tale of Snow White to reveal the sometimes paralyzing effects of conventional fictional structures. The variety of intentions and effects created by metafictional techniques suggests that metafiction is a genre analogous to—and not necessarily in opposition to—realism; that is, its practitioners, unlike those of tragedy or romance, are generally less interested in the well-wrought plot than in the "truthful treatment" of their material, in the depiction, in other words, of the processes by which their texts are constructed and read.

Metafiction also raises another ideological question about the different satisfactions offered by self-conscious texts. Texts that are radically metafictional—Willie Master's Lonesome Wife, parts of Lost in the Funhouse, many of Barthelme's stories, Coover's "The Babysitter," If on a winter's night a traveler—do indeed seem more "unreadable" than texts that retain strong ties to mimetic narrative conventions, as do, for example, the novels by Gardner, Puig, Fowles, and many of the stories by Coover. By challenging our unexamined and conventional assumptions about the activity of reading, by constantly exposing the structures and questioning the language used to make fictions, the authors of radically metafictional texts reduce the reader's emotional involvement in the text and
make it difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to respond in familiar ways. Cynthia Ozick, speaking about the experience of reading Hardy's novels, suggests that "it is possible first to ask the question 'What is this novel about?' and then to give an answer":

Hardy writes about--well, life (nowadays we are made to hesitate before daring seriously to employ this word); life observed and understood as well as felt. A society with all its intermingleings and complexities is set before us: in short, knowledge; knowledge of convention and continuity; also knowledge of something real, something there. Tess, for instance, is thick with knowledge of Cow. What is a cow, how does it feel to lean against, how do you milk, what is the milkshed like, what is the life of a milker, who is the milker's boss, where does the milk go? To touch any element of Cow intimately and concretely is to enter a land, a society, a people, and to penetrate into the whole lives of human beings.13

An experimental text that refuses to allow its narrative readers to enter a land in which cows are real is, according to Ozick, "unreadable" and fails "because it is neither intelligent or interesting."14 But while these radically metafictional texts refuse us the emotional and intellectual satisfaction of penetrating the whole lives of human beings, they offer other satisfactions. Instead of offering the narrative audience "knowledge of Cow," these texts offer their readers a knowledge of the processes by which narratives are constructed, a knowledge of the intellectual processes by which reader and author make sense of the written word, a self-consciousness about the
activities of reading and writing. One of the strategies of these "unreadable" texts, then, is to make the reader work hard and then to pay him or her well; the reader who enters the elite authorial audience of a difficult text is made to feel that he or she has accomplished something that not everyone can. One satisfaction of reading radical metafiction, then, is that instead of making us aware of our "oneness" with the world, is that we sense our intellectual uniqueness. If writers of metafiction must sometimes plead guilty to the charge that they are elitist, so then must their readers acknowledge that part of the pleasure of reading metafiction is the act of joining an elite authorial audience.

Metafictional writers, then, as well as those readers who find metafiction both intelligent and interesting, assume that these intellectual activities are valuable, worthwhile, and important—as fitting a subject for fiction as romance, marriage, tragedy, society, and other aspects of "life." Ironically, those critics, like Ozick, who most ardently hail the value of literature as a means of enlightening readers are also those most likely to denounce the metafictionalists for their triviality; that is, while they believe fiction-making and fiction-reading are inherently valuable activities, they nevertheless denounce these activities of the mind as too trivial to be made the subject of fiction. One of the pleasures of entering a
text that is self-reflexive and process-oriented, then, is the acknowledgment that one's activity as a reader is in fact important. And as radically metafictional texts call our attention to the processes by which we read, they encourage active and self-conscious readings of texts and worlds. Metafictional writers suggest, as does Wayne Booth in his preface to *A Rhetoric of Irony*, that the activity of reading, of contemplating language and the structures that make up fiction, is inescapably a moral activity, one aspect of living a full life:

...not just the practice of literary criticism but life itself can and should be enhanced by looking to our language. Unlike some of those earlier scourers of the language of the tribe, I cannot claim to have high general hopes. But then I do not, like some of them, think that if the world is not saved, all is lost. For me, one good reading of one good passage is worth as much as anything there is, because the person achieving it is living life fully in that time.15

The value of metafiction, as well as the satisfactions it offers, lies in its exposing the processes by which human beings construct and read worlds; rather than being anti-realistic and anti-mimetic, metafictional techniques merely suggest a different realism by revealing (or imitating) the processes by which fictional worlds are constructed. Instead of subverting "not only literature but the desire to have a literature,"16 as Ozick claims that experimental literature does, metafictional techniques proclaim the value not only of "literature," but of the life of the mind.
which the processes of fiction-making and reading develop. As John Barth suggests, "As long as the private, verbal registration of experience has a future--and, just as important, the registration of verbal experience, the experience of language, which can take us beyond the possibilities of reality--literature has a future."17
Notes


5 John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman (New York: Signet Publishers, 1969), p. 10. All further references to this work will be cited in the text.

6 Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narrative, p. 67, 66.


8 Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narrative, p. 58.


14 Ozick, p. 239.


16 Ozick, p. 243.

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