WHAT WE LABEL TODAY as "metafiction"—fiction which is, in some dominant and constitutive way, self-referential and auto-representational—suggests that the mimetic connection between art and life (by which we still seem to want to define the novel genre) has changed. It no longer operates at the level of product alone, that is, at the level of the representation of a seemingly unmediated world, but instead functions on the level of process.¹

We, as readers, make the link between life and art, between the processes of the reception and the creation of texts: the act of reading participates in (and indeed posits or infers) the act of textual production. The focus here is not on the reader and author as individual historical agents or on the text as the product of action, but on the processes involved in what in French is called the énonciation, the entire context of the production and reception of the text.²

In The Discourse of Modernism, Timothy J. Reiss claims that it is precisely this process, this discursive activity, that has been suppressed by our present cultural paradigm, by the dominant discursive model that "provides the conceptual tools that make the majority of human practices meaningful."³ Since the seventeenth century this model has been one that Reiss calls an "analytico-referential" one, and it has functioned equally potently in science, art, and philosophy. In the collective name of scientific objectivity and universality, of novelistic realism, and of critical (formalist) anti-Romanticism, the process and agents of the actual énonciation have been ignored. In Reiss's view, however, any such suppressed discursive practice will gradually act to subvert the dominant model by creating (or maybe by revealing) such conflicting internal contradictions that the practice itself will begin to form the new tools of analysis. This, I suspect, is what we have been witnessing in the rise of reader-
response criticism over the last fifteen years, as at least one of the
agents of the énonciation is made into a part of the analytical
model. If literary, as well as critical, practice is heeded, how-
ever, it is not just the reception of the text that is often overtly
thematized or inscribed in metafiction, but also its production.

Witness the narratorial/authorial voice in George Bowering’s
*Burning Water*, explaining to the reader the conditions and moti-
vation of his writing: “We cannot tell a story that leaves us
outside, and when I say we, I include you.” In order to write
of George Vancouver off the West Coast of Canada, “George
Bowering,” the narrator, self-consciously goes in the opposite
direction, eastward to Trieste. His story alternates between
narration of the process of writing or preparing to write (in the
present) and the telling of Vancouver’s past trials and exploits.
Through his meditation on art and life, he sees the difference
between himself as novelist and Vancouver as namer, the one
who wanted to write “all over the globe” and to “be a famous
story” (p. 62). Until his story is told by someone else, however,
Vancouver remains a man who charts and names, rather than a
“man of imagination” (p. 75), despite his claim that the imagina-
tion is not the opposite of his search for facts: “The imagination
depends upon facts, it feeds on them in order to produce beauty
or invention, or discovery” (p. 155).

Gradually the controlling authorial voice is silenced and the
story appears to tell itself, just as in the “good old days” of the
realist novel for which the narrator had yearned (p. 23) — but
with a difference: “as the voyage grew longer and the book got
thicker he felt himself resting more and more on his faith in the
readers: would they carry him, keep him afloat? He thought so”
(p. 173). The difference is that this narrative voice, wondering
about its reader, is thematizing or allegorizing, in a sense, the act
of énonciation, the interaction of textual production and re-
ception. Reading it is like looking at Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*,
another inscribed allegory of énonciation: we look at a painting
of a painter looking at us. Yet the real subjects of the work being
*painted* (rather than being *viewed* by us) are the king and queen
situated in our position but perceived by us only in a background
mirror. *Las Meninas* — like *Burning Water* — is a work of art that
presupposes the viewer’s presence and then plays ironically with
it; it also includes a representation of the producer at work.

In Timothy Findley’s *Famous Last Words*, on the other hand,
the producer of the text within the text is a writer whose "whole and only ambition," we are told, had been "to describe the beautiful." Yet what he chooses to inscribe on the walls of the Grand Elysium Hotel is, as we shall see later, anything but beautiful. The artist as aesthete is only a voyeur; fittingly, if horribly, he dies with an ice-pick in his eye, a silver pencil in his hand. The reader, however, is also a voyeur, though one whose vision of the hero's text, at least, is literally controlled by another character within the novel, Quinn. We only read Mauberley's inscriptions as Quinn does; we too watch. As voyeurs, we cannot be exempt from the implications of the novel's moral theme of silence and the responsibility of action. However, more subtle than the overt Brechtian techniques of Burning Water, the self-consciousness of Famous Last Words points as well to reading as an act in itself, an act that brings to life words on a wall or a page, and through them, their writer; through reading, the word is made flesh. This collaboration of textual producer and receiver, as allegorized in the relation of Quinn to Mauberley (the hero) and his text, situates the novel in the énonciation, in the context of the joint creative acts of writing and reading.

Both of these novels are, however, more than just self-consciously fictive constructs that thematize their own discursive processes. Both are also examples of what we could call historiographic metafiction, a recent but popular variant (see, for example, John Banville's Doctor Copernicus and Kepler, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, D.M. Thomas' The White Hotel, John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman, Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose, and so on). Unlike documentary fiction, such as some of the work of Thomas Keneally or of the New Journalists as they were known in the sixties (Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer), the act of énonciation here is not suppressed, for in these novels there is usually a clearly definable narrating voice that overtly addresses a reader. There is none of the authorial self-effacement of cinéma vérité or of some "non-fictional novels," a suppression totally characteristic of "analytico-referential" discourse.

Another narrative technique used by this kind of historical metafiction is not to have one overt narrating voice, but many. The reader of Rudy Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear is left to pull together the various and fragmentary points of view she has been given and, like the jury at the end of the novel, the
reader — also at the end of the novel — must make an evaluation and interpretation of all that she has been told. Similarly, in Chris Scott’s *Antichthon*, the narrative perspective on Giordano Bruno’s life and death is constantly changing (as are the time and place coordinates), as new testimony is established, then cancelled out, then re-established, only to be doubted once more. Yet all points of view are ultimately united in and by the reader who, in this case, resembles the hero who says to himself: “A man should know his own mind, Giordano. And I do, Cardinal, I do. For I am you; and Fra Giovanni, the French King and the Holy Roman Emperor; friend Zuan and my lord Archbishop Priuli; I am Michel de Castelnau and Francis Walsingham, Pope Clement and the angel Michael (even she!), the one and the many, a unity and a diversity — myself!” The reader has a second surrogate in the novel as well — Kaspar Schopp — who shares with us both a certain foreign distance from the complex Italian proceedings and a keen desire to learn the “truth” about the circumstances leading up to the death of Bruno. When, in chapter 8, he pieces together the puzzle of the real reason why Bruno must die, within a few pages the reader does as well. We, like Kaspar, have been manoeuvred by the text into the proper position from which to see the anamorphosis — the death’s head which had always been visible, but could only be understood from one particular point of view.

What is perhaps most interesting about this emphasis on the complex situation of the *enonciation* is the way in which this kind of metafiction thematizes its own interaction both with the historical past and with the historically conditioned expectations of its readers. If, as these texts suggest, language constitutes reality, rather than merely reflecting it, the reader becomes the actualizing link between history and fiction, between the past and the present. She does so, not in the mode of traditional historical fiction, where history is meant to authenticate fiction on the level of *product* or representation, but in a new or at least in a newly articulated mode. It is not just a matter of life and art both being fictive, as Borges and Nabokov have been teaching us. Historiography, claims Hayden White, is a poetic construct; fiction, suggest Bowering, Wiebe, Scott, Findley and others, is historically conditioned. To write history — or historical fiction — is equally to narrate, to reconstruct by means of selection and interpretation. History (like realist fiction) is *made* by its writer,
even if events are made to seem to speak for themselves. Narrativization is a central form of human comprehension. As Fredric Jameson argues, it is one of the ways we impose meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events. Narrating solves "the problem of how to translate knowing into telling." Such statements are only possible in the context of yet another attack on the empirical, positivistic assumptions of "analytico-referential" discourse: "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled," challenged Michel Foucault. If these devices have not yet been totally dismantled, they have certainly been granted intensely self-conscious attention recently.

Hayden White, for instance, sees the link between novelist and historian in their shared "emplotting" strategies of exclusion, emphasis, and subordination of elements of a story, but he feels that the difference in their tasks lies in the historian's confrontation with "a veritable chaos of events already constituted." Yet as Foucault and Jameson have repeatedly stressed, in a very real sense history, while it had a real referent once upon a time, is only accessible to us in textualized form. Therefore the historiographic metafictionist who also deals with "events already constituted" but who self-consciously signals their textual nature within his novel is perhaps in an even more difficult position than the historian: he is constrained by the demands of narrative fiction as much as by those of history's events. He must deal with literature's intertexts as well as history's documents.

Foucault has claimed, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, that we can never describe our own archive, our own discursive history, because we speak from within it. Yet it is also true for Foucault that the historicizing of the historian's consciousness is a condition of historical study. That this same insight has not yet had an impact in literary studies in our particular interpretive community can be seen by the fact that there was such an outcry at D.M. Thomas' (acknowledged) incorporation of an historical, eye-witness account of Babi Yar in his novel *The White Hotel*. For weeks, accusations of plagiarism littered the letters to the editor column of *The Times Literary Supplement*. Yet no one has sought, I believe, to chastise the "parasitic" novelist for his fictional parody of a Freudian case-history. Perhaps this marks a willingness today to acknowledge the role of fiction and interpretation in psychoanalysis, a role which we seek to repress in our
“analytico-referential” view of historiography and biography, as if these had some more direct and unmediated access to “reality,” as if they were more objective and, in the end, more “scientific.”

Many metafictional works investigate this ontological issue of what exactly can be said to constitute fact and fiction, life and art. They challenge what Wolfgang Iser dismisses as “the basic and misleading assumption...that fiction is an antonym of reality.”

The relation of fiction to historical fact in these novels is made much more complex than this opposition by the role in the *énonciation* of the reader and producer both. *Antichthon*’s title at once suggests metafictive, rather than historical, dimensions because the word signifies a world opposite to our own. Yet the novel itself tells the tale of the real historical heretic/martyr, Giordano Bruno. In doing so, however, it calls into question the nature and value of so-called historical fact, even of eye-witness accounts. Kaspar Schopp tries to render facts as accurately as possible: the reader is provided with letters, transcripts of conversations, and other documentation, revealing Kaspar’s belief that the human heart, if not the mind, could be “a great fabricator of lies, and it was important for the correct historian to maintain the distinction between fact and fiction” (p.142).

Yet, as one character cynically proclaims: “Truth and falsehood are what men believe them to be, neither more nor less” (p.223). Schopp’s own integrity as a clerk who records history accurately is undermined when an ecclesiastical authority, after washing his hands of Bruno’s fate (“I’ve done all I can, the record will show”), then adds: “The record, what’s that? Posterity, that makes sinners of wise men and saints out of fools. We pay our clerks to write it, pay them according to the need. Ours is spiritual, theirs material. This German now, Scioppius, he’s in Rome. We’re watching him, expect some promise there” (p.181).

This relationship between historical fact and the act (and permanence) of writing is a common theme in historiographic metafiction. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, the fixed permanence and arid factuality of written treaties and of newspapers (not to mention the aptly named Scriptures) of the white world are pitted against the oral, unrecorded, and thus undefendable, discourse of the Indian world. The challenges to the novelist here were great: how to capture and create in print an historical personage, Big Bear, whose power and essence were in his voice; how to convey the rhetorical and ritualistic power of oral Indian speech in written English; how to present, in a convincing
fashion, the historical fact of Big Bear’s oral presence when no records, much less recordings, of his speeches have survived.

In The Scorched-Wood People, Wiebe continues to probe these issues; Louis Riel, as a Métis, is caught between these same two worlds: “his people mere pemmican-eaters, not a word about them necessary anywhere in the libraries of the world, while their words crowded upwards in him until he felt his head would burst! He must write their words down, the persistent sound of their words rising, vanishing with the grass, the fading buffalo; and who would hear them if he did not speak, did not write, write?” Part white, Riel feels the need to write, but the culture he will record lives on in an oral tradition of legends and songs that exist “to help you remember” (p. 38), as in the world of Big Bear. The desperate need to give a recorded voice to the “voiceless” Métis (p. 106) is what drives Riel at the end of his life. Although “magnificently tireless with talk” (p. 190), Riel was also madly writing: “words to fill the leather suitcase, to give his unwritten people a place on paper before the frozen earth closed them away one by one and no one would hear them, the words they cried to each other lost like the cry of gulls turning trackless over the river, words to be used against him, for every written word called to judgement” (p. 245).

This permanence is accepted with ambivalent responses: Riel seeks it for his people, and yet he knows its negative power only too well (“The words crouch black on pale paper, unchangeable and deadly” [p. 170]). He is careful to have Schmidt read aloud to the people all the written declarations, but we read them as written text, as we do the whole “song of Riel,” granted to and narrated by the Métis singer Pierre Falcon, a song which we read in English, of course:

So even [Riel’s] vision I can only offer in the words which he so clearly borrowed from the Bible he read both in Latin and French: and sometimes, desperately, in English…. For the violent and silly acts of our people I received songs; for this, our greatest vision and commitment to a hard road, nothing. I must leave the words to stand in all their unmemorable bareness: their unearthly power will have to be seen in the effect they had on Riel, on our people, and on Canada during those last ten years. (pp. 140–41)
Added to the metafictional self-consciousness about language and its relation both to fact and to narrative in this passage is something else: an awareness of the potential power of language, and of written language in particular. McDougall, the “paper man,” arrived to act against the Métis armed with “a sheet of paper and two boxes of guns” (p. 28); and since the paper “would prove everything” (p. 16), it was potentially the more dangerous. When the narrator presents as ironic “fact” Sir John A. Macdonald’s politically opportunistic interpretation of Riel’s situation and its usefulness to him, we are reminded of the various conflicting “facts” of Big Bear’s trial proceedings.

Historiographic metafiction, therefore, in a very real sense, is ideological fiction, taking ideology as meaning “those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power.” To write either history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control. As Hayden White has remarked, “the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications.” The creator or discerner of that formal coherence is in a position of power — power over facts, clearly, but also power over readers. We come back to the metafictional reinstating of the enunciation, then, but this time to look at its potential for ideological manipulation.

That this is a potential inherent in the writing itself of both history and fiction is evident in a novel like Famous Last Words. The naming of the protagonist as Mauberley is an intertextual mark of fictionality from the start; yet this fictive character offers as “fact” some events which we know to be historically accurate, intricately linked to others which are clearly invented. In the context of the novel as a whole, however, this fact/fiction relation also operates on an ideological level: although directly (if peripherally) involved in great political events and moral issues of his age, Mauberley falls victim to his own aestheticism, his life of aesthetic contemplation and absorption in subjective impressions of beauty. His culpable silence, his hesitations and procrastinations, are paid for with that final testimony and confession written on the walls before his death.

Chris Scott’s Antichthon is another example of historiographic metafiction that addresses ideological issues through its ques-
tioning of the relations between fact and fiction, between truth and imagination. It is a novel about the fear of the subversive power of the visionary. Giordano Bruno is presented here as a threat, not because of his doctrines — false or true — but, as one character explains, because "he could show men what they wanted to see, enticing them on with their reflections until they were captivated. He was oblique and evasive like a mirror, a dealer in illusions, not false so much as superficial" (p. 21). Mirrors usually reflect some reality, however. Yet Bruno himself constantly insists that he is speaking "as a philosopher," by which designation he means "speaking figuratively" (p. 35). We are told that he speaks the "language of allegory" (p. 36), a language that is not to be taken literally. Nevertheless, Bruno is executed by those in power who are themselves not above using blackmail, spying, and finally torture to assert their authority over the "truth": "Question not the Word, Giordano" (p. 184).

Obviously, this kind of metafiction represents something beyond a post-colonial Canadian need to reclaim the past, because it is not necessarily Canada's past that is always sought out. Instead, novels like these appear to signal another need, one shared by writers everywhere today: a need to investigate both the ontological nature and the function of their literary products and of the processes that created them and keep them alive. The institution of literature is comprised of the producers and the receivers of texts, but also of the "circumstantially dense interchange" between them that has social, historical, and ideological dimensions. The narrator of Burning Water addresses the reader: "We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction" (p. 9). The placing of these last two terms in apposition is not so much a teasing contradiction as an affirmation of the common nature of both history and fiction: both are discourse, and discourse is language as énonciation. With that affirmation comes an awareness of the potential for ideological manipulation of the reader — through rhetoric or through the power of language and of the vision it can create. And with this awareness comes too the realization of the possibility, if not the permissibility, of evasion through silence of the responsibility implied in the act of énonciation.

What the apparent paradox of historiographic metafiction brings to the fore might really be a characteristic of all novels:
the fact that a work of fiction is never only an autonomous linguistic and narrative construct, but is always also conditioned by contextual forces (such as society, history, and ideology) that cannot or should not be ignored in our critical discussions. The (formalist) critical move away from history has recently come under serious attack.8 And it is clear from the metafiction we have been looking at here that the strongest force operating to establish literary context — besides that of the énonciation itself (textual production and reception) — is its historical and ideological determination. Fictional and traditionally non-fictional genres interpenetrate in this paradoxical new metafictional variant through the reader’s realization of their equally essential discursive identity. We owe to Roland Barthes the strong formulation, if not the concept, that language is always fascist and that power is involved in even the most subtle mechanisms of social exchange.9 Literature is no exception to this rule.

NOTES


2 A standard, clear definition of énonciation would be that of Tzvetan Todorov in Les Genres du discours (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 48: “Un discours n’est pas fait de phrases, mais de phrases énoncées, ou, plus brièvement, d’énoncés. Or l’interprétation de l’énoncé, est déterminée, d’une part, par la phrase qu’on énonce; et, d’autre part, par son énonciation même. Cette énonciation inclut un locuteur qui énonce, un allocutaire à qui on s’adresse, un temps et un lieu, un discours qui précède et qui suit; en bref, un contexte d’énonciation. En d’autres termes encore, un discours est toujours et nécessairement un acte de parole.”


4 George Bowering, Burning Water (Don Mills, Ont.: Musson, 1980), p. 9. All further references to this work appear in the text.

5 Timothy Findley, Famous Last Words (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1981), p. 5. All further references to this work appear in the text.


11 White, *Metahistory*, p. 6n.


18 Besides the recent works cited above of both Said and Eagleton, the best-known attack on anti-historicism is that of Frank Lentricchia in *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).