All of the four types of narcissistic narrative have appeared to turn in on the reader, forcing him to face his responsibility for the text he is reading, the dynamic "heterocosm" he is creating through the fictive referents of literary language. For complicated philosophical and sociological reasons, many a modern novelist seems to feel akin to the founders of the novel genre. He may reject a nineteenth-century relationship with his reader, one based on the convention of omniscient presentation of a mirror of empirical "reality," as if that were an absolute objective entity. He may even reject the twentieth-century narrowed first-person perspective on any "reality." What he is now willing to offer his reader seems, to some people, minimal: a relationship based on a mirroring of the actual process in which he is engaged at that moment as he puts pen to paper- the process of bringing to life the fictive worlds of his imagination in and through language. The reader once again is engaged in an analogous creation but in the opposite order, from those same words to the worlds of his imagination.

Throughout this discussion the term "reader" has been employed in a general sense. But in self-conscious fiction, especially of the overt variety, the "reader" is close to what Gerald Prince calls a "narratee," and Gérard Genette, a "narrataire." Following Todorov's lead, this

chapter will nevertheless continue with the term "reader," meaning by it the receiver of the text at the level of the énonciation. The reader is, then, a function implicit in the text, an element of the narrative situation. No specific real person is meant; the reader has only a diegetic identity and an active diegetic role to play. As Cortazar wrote in Rayuela (Hopscotch): "Let us say that the world is a figure, it has to be read. By read let us understand generated."

When a person opens any novel, this very act suddenly plunges him into a narrative situation in which he must take part. Certain expectations of a novelistic code are immediately established, and he becomes a reader in the above-mentioned sense of the word. Overtly narcissistic texts make this act a self-conscious one, integrating the reader in the text, teaching him, one might say, how to play the literary music. Like the musician deciphering the symbolic code of musical notation, the reader is here involved in a creative, interpretative process from which he will learn how the book is read. In covertly narcissistic texts the teaching is done by disruption and discontinuity, by disturbing the comfortable habits of the actual act of reading. That some texts pander to the reader-and indeed satisfy him, while others-especially modern ones - disturb him, has been pointed out already. The unsettled reader is forced to scrutinize his concepts of art as well as his life values. Often he must revise his understanding of what he reads so frequently that he comes to question the very possibility of understanding. In doing so he might be freed from enslavement not only to the empirical, but also to his own set patterns of thought and imagination.

In self-conscious parodic literature, the reader-character identification circuit is often broken. It is sacrificed in order to engage the reader in an active dialogue with the generic models of his time, an exercise that is usually only the writer's. By reminding the reader of the book's identity as artifice, the text parodies his expectations, his desire for verisimilitude, and forces him to an awareness of his own role in creating the universe of fiction. Reading and writing share those two significantly human paradigmatic functions. The first is the making of

ordered fictions, which is not unlike the myth-making impulse in its imaginative freedom that paradoxically creates order and meaning. And the second is the use of language to create those fictional worlds. In the face of a growing lack of faith in the ability of language to reproduce reality, linguistically and diegetically self-conscious fiction asserts both the autonomy and validity of these creations of language, and the important "vital" function of that creative action itself—author and reader. The novel is experientially or "vitally" significant because it insists on its own reality, confronting the reader, constructing and comprising his experience, operating upon his consciousness. In the beginning is the word, as William Gass too has remarked, and the word creates a world through the co-operative activity of the sender and the receiver of the text.

As the reader progresses through any novel, the effect of the author's guiding rhetoric, of the narrator's mediation, and of the accumulation of fictive referents, is to force him to bridge the gap between his own world and the potential fictional universe. When he begins to read, because language is public, he can only read by relating the words to his knowledge of linguistic, objective, or subjective realities. However, the cumulative effect of reading is to transform this transparency of language into an increasingly dense set of aesthetic entities, into the fictive heterocosm. All this has already been examined in Chapter Six. All novels manage to interrelate what appear at first to be outwardly referential signs in order to create a self-sufficient, mutually supportive system. The narcissistic work, however, appropriates the reader's consciousness in a more deliberate and paradoxical manner, for here he must live within an acknowledged fictional universe as he reads. Yet the work constantly demands responses comparable in scope and perhaps even in intensity to those of his life experience—thanks to the reader's active participation in the very formation of that fiction.

The paradoxical demand—for both intra- and extra-mural validity—constitutes a challenge for the modern novelist, faced as he is with an empirical reality more readily communicated and more sensational in content than anything he could probably create. He must forge new connections between his art and his reader's life by forcing the reader to re-examine and re-evaluate his relationship to the text and to the world outside it. The language of the text itself becomes what Murray Krieger, in a somewhat different context, has described

---

8 In his essay, "Su Lombardi e Arbasino," in Il Verri no. 13 (1964), 79-80, Angelo Guglielmi claims that in La controra, Arbasino offers his reader both a certain content and its de-mystification, and that this is brought about purely by a linguistic act, with no declarative, narrational help. In this way, claims Guglielmi, a purely linguistic operation becomes an operation conducted on reality itself.
as an enclosed set of endlessly faceted mirrors, closed in on itself, which becomes, "magically," a window to the world. The reader is both trapped in the looking glass and led through it.

This same paradox has been described in ideological terms by David Caute as that of a "dialectical"10 literature which recognizes its own nature, is self-conscious, and self-critical. It is a process as well as a product; both transitive and intransitive, it is itself the paradox facing the reader. It attempts representation while discarding the myth of representation. It tries to transcend its own textual limitations while never forgetting that this is impossible. It "makes a primary virtue of honesty and yet proves its virtue by means of cunning tricks." Such fiction is narcissistic in that it encourages an active personal response to itself and creates a space for that response within itself. Again, it is Cervantes and Sterne who stand as the forbears of the modern form of this art for Caute as well. However, he rejects texts that are explicitly about writing and novels as too elitist, too introverted, and thus too divorced from his wider social, moral, and political concerns. This would only be true if one ignored the equation of reading and writing, the pulling of the reader into and through the looking glass. Narcissistic texts merely make explicit the two directions-centripetal and centrifugal-in which the reader's attention moves in reading all literature, as Northrop Frye has pointed out. It is not only the early nouveaux romanciers who sought "de nouvelles formes romanesques capables d'exprimer (ou de créer) de nouvelles relations entre l'homme et le monde," and who decided "à inventer le roman, c'est-à-dire, à inventer l'homme."11

The reader of fiction is always an actively12 mediating presence; the text's reality is established by his response and reconstituted by his active participation. The writers of narcissistic fiction merely make the reader conscious of this fact of his experience.13 All texts are to some extent "scriptible,"14 that is, produced rather than consumed by the reader. In the serialized novel, for example, the reader works to

10 The Illusion (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 265: "The dialectical novel must inevitably de-mystify fiction by recognizing its fictitious nature and by using it as an operating principle within literature, within the Book and within the general field of linguistic communication." The subsequent discussion in the text is derived from pp. 177, 178 of Caute's book.
12 Critics still assign overly passive roles to readers, however. For example, Walter J. Ong, S.J., "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," PMLA 90 (1975), 12: "A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him." And Lianne Norman, "Risk and Redundancy," PMLA 90 (1975), 285: "He gives himself up, in other words, to imaginative experience."
imagine what happens next, since suspense determines the cut. Dickens, for this reason, saw his reader as a co-author. The sense of a journey with which so many of Hardy's novels open is the storyteller's way of getting his reader on the road as well. In *Emma*, Jane Austen creates, in the Box Hill episode, the illusion of understanding in both the reader and her characters (Mr. Knightly, Frank, Jane), so that the reading of the novel from this point on will *enact* the puzzle of misunderstandings that the author wants to illustrate. Like Emma, the reader is made to feel his fallibility; he is made aware of how fiction works and of what happens to him as he reads. Tales such as Stendhal's *Armance*, which have ordering and constructing as a theme, can become paradigms of reading.

In fact, as has already been pointed out, other earlier texts such as *Don Quijote* and *Madame Bovary* overtly thematize the imaginative power of reading. The epistolary (and sometimes the journal) novel actually makes the act of reading diegetically functional. Yet some sort of historical progression does seem to be visible. Fielding tells his reader, as consumer of his wares, how to read; he prescribes his imaginative participation. Sterne parodies this in *Tristram Shandy* in order to show his respect for his reader's imagination-leaving blanks, for instance, in the text in order to promote active reader involvement. The meaning of texts such as Ford's *The Good Soldier* is co-extensive with the reading process, and not its product. The reader is an active interpreter here. Again Sterne had anticipated this role in a self-conscious manner. It is not in the conventional direct addresses to the reader that Tristram's narrative is narcissistic in a modern way. It is so rather through the characters who act as surrogates for the reader, anticipating his various interpretative responses. Part of both the novel's theme and its method involves watching the responder at work. The protagonists of Part Two of *Don Quijote* become the readers of Part One, the creators of themselves.

This same thematization (and allegorization) of the role and activity of the reader is characteristic of overtly narcissistic texts. 

20 As a matter of policy, to avoid disrupting the text, no page numbers will be given for brief references to novels mentioned or quoted in this section.
Menard is the perfect reader, enriching a "halting and rudimentary" art by writing the *Quijote*. We are not surprised to hear that Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but that the second is almost infinitely richer. John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* is a set of meditations on the act of reading (and listening) as life-granting ("You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking") and life-creating. In "Title," the reader is constantly asked to fill in the blanks (for example: 'just as people would do if adverbial clause of obvious analogical nature."). He is requested by the narrator to acknowledge his complicity in both the fictional creation and the self-consciousness about it: "You tell me it's self-defeating to talk about it instead of just up and doing it; but to acknowledge what I'm doing while I'm doing it is exactly the point." The writer is a reader too and must face this knowledge, as does the narrator of "Life-Story": "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?" In "Petition," this power of granting death as well as life is explicitly delegated to the "intradiegetic" reader, that is, the reader included within the narrative.

That the reader's desires and expectations ought to be met is the spring-board for the frustration of these very demands (as in the opening of Steve Katz's *The Exaggerations [sic] of Peter Prince*) in an attempt to raise the reader's consciousness of his act. Part One of Barthelme's *Snow White* ends in a questionnaire to the reader querying his interest: "Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )"; his understanding of plot and symbols; his requests for the continuation of the book. He is also asked to rate the novel on a scale of 1 to 10. But more interestingly, the reader is brought back at the very end to his concrete nondiegetic identity outside the text: "14) Do you stand up when you read? ( ) Lie down? ( ) Sit? ( )." Nabokov's novels also mock the reader's notions of both reality and fiction, while making explicit demands on the reader for the novelistic worlds' imaginative existence. Humbert Humbert tells the reader of his manuscript and the reader of *Lolita* both: "do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me." *Lolita* too, of course, is only the product of his own erotic imagination.

Such overt challenges to the reader's conventional responses are matched by more covert subtle ones in texts by the *nouveaux romanciers*, by their Anglicizers (such as Giles Gordon), by the Italian neoavant-garde and also by American writers such as Sukenick, Federman, and Sorrentino (from whose work many of the chapter epigraphs of this study have been taken). Here the process of ordering, interpreting, and imaginatively "concretizing" is the same as that overtly taught by Barth and Nabokov, but reading is either allegorized as a creative process shared with the author (see the last paragraph of Pinget's *Passacaille* or the back-cover comment of Sanguineti's *Il giuoco dell'oca*),
or it is actually made so disruptive and challenging as to force the reader, if he is to read at all, to do that ordering, interpreting, and imagining for himself. Pinget has stated that the reader ought not to be given any clarity or facile order as he reads, since the author had no such thing as he wrote. Ricardou added: "pas de préface, ni postface: les règles du texte sont dans le texte. C'est en lisant qu'on apprend à lire: on ne peut pas faire le travail de lecture à la place du lecteur." The reader must work to decipher the text as hard as the writer did to cipher it, with the result that the stress of the work is displaced from the communicating of a message to the inciting to produce meaning, as well as order. This demand for action, claims Ricardou, "suscite chez le lecteur un mouvement de production tel qu'il doit logiquement aboutir à l'écriture." Pinget too claims that his reader "participe lui-même au travail d'élucidation, de décortication que je m'impose page après page, prendre conscience que le livre se fait sous ses yeux avec tous les doutes de l'auteur, ses hésitations, ses passions, ses reculs, ses éclans."

The act of reading becomes a creative, interpretative one that partakes of the experience of writing itself. These fictions are about their own processes, as experienced and created by the reader's responses. They also contain, however, in their self-consciousness, their own self-criticism. "When consciousness of its own form," writes Ronald Sukenick, "is incorporated in the dynamic structure of the text-its composition, as the painters say- theory can once again become part of the story rather than about it. One of the tasks of modern fiction, therefore, is to displace, energize, and re-embodys its criticism-to literally re-unite it with our experience of the text. It is not accidental that Sukenick, like Barth, Federman, and many other metafictionists, is himself an academic. The critical and the creative meet in their fiction as they do in all narcissistic texts. The reader, like the writer, becomes the critic; without sacrificing his I-Thou amateur relation to the text, the reader also establishes an I-It distanced rapport. He is both drawn intramurally and pulled extramurally, into and through the looking glass. Reading is sequential and open to memory and association; criticism is usually systematic and reasoned discourse. But, the reading of these texts-especially covertly narcissistic ones-is often a rereading, a necessary constructing of meaning and system in the mind of the reader. The work is both an object and a performance.

23 Ibid., p. 407 (in the discussion).
24 Ibid., p. 154 (in the discussion).
26 "Twelve Digressions Toward a Study of Composition," New Literary History 6 (Winter 1975), 430. See also David Caute, The Illusion, pp. 22-23.
Page by page, the reader creates the meaning of the text, reshaping and reordering former unities into new ones as he proceeds. This is true of any text. The reader's progress is conditioned by many factors. Formalistic, structuralist, stylistic, and linguistic analyses all tend to ignore the importance of pace, for example, to the reader's understanding. Critics such as Ian Gregor and Stanley Fish have attempted to return to the dynamics of the reading experience as a key to theorizing about and teaching the novel. It is the developing responses of the reader, in relation to the words as presented in a linear consecutive fashion, that condition meaning, as metafiction teaches and illustrates so well.

Because the novels that have been discussed here make these demands upon the reader and constitute their own critical framework (in part), the existing theories of "reader aesthetics" are of only partial use to the critic/reader. Of course, no one critical model is ever complete; the subject and the model are never the same thing, although in a sense one might want to claim that the model distorts and so creates its own subject. When the model is the text itself, however, this problem is undercut. Yet there are approaches to the dynamics of reading which do cast useful light on this topic. Bateson's concept of the historical reader and Richards' psychological balancing of reader tensions are not at issue here, though. Nor shall this study be based in any way on the reader's desires, as was Virginia Woolf's in her "Phases of Fiction." There are other approaches, however- in particular, the Freudian, the phenomenological, and the rhetorical- which can account for part, but rarely all, of that paradoxical position in which the reader finds himself, as he is forced to remain within the world of fiction and yet see the act of reading as an experiential phenomenon analogous to the act of writing, and so related to both public language and private imagination.

Freud believed that the writer aimed at awakening in the reader the same emotions and "mental constellation" that produced in him the impetus to create. While this is not far from what has been suggested here as being true of metafictional texts themselves, Freud's perspective was more general, his concern being the unconscious and not just the literary. In The Dynamics of Literary Response (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), Norman Holland tried, by a critical method which relied specifically on his own reading response to a text's stimulus, to reach the "core of fantasy" of that text and so develop a general model for the interaction of literary works with the human mind. Yet another Freudian, Frederick Crews, disagreed with this endeavour to present, as the basis of literature, a disguised infantile

---

fantasy that had somehow acquired significance. The real value of literary psychoanalysis for the reader is, he feels, that it can "embolden us to be alone with books, to recognize our own image in them, and from that recognition to begin comprehending their hold over us."\(^{28}\) However close to what self-informing narrative suggests about the reading and writing processes as extramural, "vital" functions of art, this view denies the other half of the paradox of literary response— that the reader can "lose himself" within the fictive world he has created.

Another critical perspective offers more suggestive assistance to the critic/reader of metafiction. Literary phenomenology is a general term for many related but differing theories. For instance, much of the recent German investigation into an aesthetics of reception and impact seems more an effort to rejuvenate literary history seen as a dialogue of the present and the past, than a concentration on the experience of reading (although Hans Robert Jauss\(^{29}\) does rightly bring to attention the fact that both the reader's response and his judging of a work are based on his past experience of literary data).

One does come very close to another kind of phenomenological approach, however, when the statement is made that self-conscious fiction teaches that a novel only becomes a living aesthetic reality when actualized by the act of being read. Mikel Dufrenne defines the aesthetic object (the work of art as executed by the reader's perception) as the "en-soi-pour-nous": "cet être est suspendu à la perception et s'achève en elle. Cet être est un apparaître.\(^{30}\) This object cannot be reduced to mere representation; it has its own ontological reality. Yet this perspective tends to deny the outwardly directed paradigmatic half of the reading paradox. If the reader sets the work off in its intentionality by defining it in its perceptual characteristics alone, he must try to "bracket out" as irrelevant all his beliefs, prejudices, and preferences as reader. If he attends only to how art looks or sounds, he ignores one very important aspect for literature: the public, shared nature of language that does indeed carry meaning beyond the surface texture. The cutting off of the practical context by the phenomenological *epoche* endangers just that response which narcissistic fiction demands.

The lack of concern for the whole of the reader's paradoxical position here is also a problem in the consideration of Georges Poulet's views on the "Phenomenology of Reading.\(^{31}\) Poulet does accept as premises both the heterocosmic nature of the fictional world of literature, and its absorption of the consciousness of the reader during the act

---


31 *New Literary History* 1 (Autumn 1969) 53-68.
of reading. The text, for him, contains "a mental activity profoundly engaged in objective forms"—originally the author's—which the reader discovers "exposed in its ineffability and its fundamental indeterminacy." But, since it is this "transcendence of the mind" and not the text itself or even the reader as such that interests Poulet, his approach is not of much value in actually explaining the paradox of reader-oriented but self-informing fiction.

This same objection, that only half of the problem can be considered, could also be raised against the Geneva phenomenological group as a whole. One must agree with Jean Rousset when he claims: "Il n'y a de lecture complète que celle qui transforme le livre en un réseau simultané de relations réciproques." The reader is a participant, not a spectator; thus, writes Rousset, he must reserve all judgment. Yet if this critical distance, this ability to judge, is forbidden, how can Rousset claim, as he does a few pages earlier, that: "la contemplation de l'oeuvre implique une mise en question de notre mode d'existence et un déplacement de toutes nos perspectives"? Narcissistic narrative demands just this sort of involvement, yet also a detachment and ability to judge, to face certain implications for both art and life.

The theories of Roman Ingarden, however, seem to come closer to the needs of metafictional criticism, and confirm from a different critical and philosophical vantage point many of the observations offered in this study as a whole regarding the heuristic value and paradigmatic nature of the teachings of self-reflective fiction. The Ingarden view of the "heteronomy," the stratified tissue that creates a "habitus of reality" (different from "real space") in literature is essentially the concept presented earlier as the fictive referent and the heterocosm. And for Ingarden as well, it is the reader who concretizes the work of art: "Concretizations constitute, as it were, the connecting link between the reader and the work and emerge when the reader approaches it cognitively and aesthetically" (p. 352). Ingarden's stratum of represented objects (and their aspects) is equivalent to what have here been called the text's fictive referents, and like them, is both outside the strictly linguistic sign system and cannot be judged in terms of truth (see pp. 167-69): "the directional factors of the nominal meanings do not point beyond the purely intentional objects to any determinate real objectivities" (p. 170).

However, even Ingarden's phenomenological perspective would seem to conflict at several points with the findings presented regarding narcissistic fiction in particular. Ingarden distinguished, as Dufrenne

would later, between the work of art itself and the work as an aesthetic object concretized through the various intentional acts involved in reading it. Yet the overtly narcissistic fiction that has been examined thematizes and makes conscious, within the work of art, the fact that it is an aesthetic object thanks to reader involvement. Little is left, in fact, of Ingarden's distinction. A second reservation is related to this. Ingarden feels that titles, narrative shifts, quotation marks, and so on, distance the reader (as would, in other art forms, a stage or a picture frame), and necessitate a conscious, intersubjective bracketing of experience. Yet, it appears that narcissistic works use these very same techniques to bring about the closeness of the reader to the text, through the activating of the imaginative processes.

Ingarden also claims that the reader abandons his own centre of orientation and distances himself from his own world in order to enter the world of art. On this basis, he decides that the objects of this world cannot, therefore, be "imaginational" because they "would then have to be perceived by internal perception, where in each case the center of orientation would necessarily have to be [the reader's] own" (p. 231). Yet narcissistic narrative, in breaking the traditional realistic illusion, constantly jolts the reader back to his own orientation, reminding him that he is reading a novel or short-story. Perhaps, then, the heterocosms of self-conscious fiction are "imaginational" in this sense.

Working from certain of Ingarden's premises, Wolfgang Iser has outlined a view which is of more direct relevance to this discussion, for it deals specifically with the active involvement of the reader in what he is producing as the epitome of how all experience is acquired- that is, through the forming of Gestalten, the recognition of their inadequacies and the subsequent re-forming of information into new consistencies. Iser has examined in detail the mechanism behind what has here been called the creation of the fictive heterocosm by the reader's accumulation of fictive referents. But he has done so in terms of the text's repertoire, consistency-building and breaking, the filling of textual gaps and non-textual vacancies, and the reader's structuring of a field which finally brings the imaginary object into being.

Modern art, Iser feels, induces the reader to a more self-conscious participation in the text, causing him to reflect on the various operations he is asked to carry out. While Iser's perspective allows him to

speculate on the effects of such reading upon the individual (heightening his perceptions, educating his sensibility), the concern in this chapter is more with the simple fact that all fiction does have an effect on the reader at a "vital" level and that narcissistic texts tend to relocate that effect. In other words, it is no longer a matter of the reader's having to identify with a character in order to be involved in the work; the act of reading itself is the real, dynamic function to which the text draws his attention. Like writing, reading is bound by a consciousness of generic tradition: one has to learn what stories are, as a child, in order to enjoy them. Similarly one has to learn to read—actively, imaginatively—in order to enjoy the demanding fiction of today.

The only problem with Iser's theories in relation to such texts arises when he agrees that the autonomous world of fiction is created by the reader, but that this is accomplished by the reader's temporarily leaving his personality and experience behind in order to select, order, anticipate, and remember-in order to make the text into a living event. However, self-conscious fiction tries actively to prevent even a temporary abandoning of human experiential responses, while also trying, it is true, simultaneously to lure the reader into an overtly fictive universe.

These last points suggest a third critical perspective which has a certain relevance in the discussion of metafiction—that of the rhetorical tradition. Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) was the first large-scale examination of the novel as an art of communication, of the rhetorical resources available to an author intent on making his reader create a valid fictional universe. Every author has a rhetoric, whether or not he writes with his reader specifically in mind; his only choice is in what kind he will use. Every word he writes, according to Booth, will guide his reader's response in some degree to certain values and beliefs upon which the work depends. Every sentence will contribute to making the reader see what he has never seen before, to moving him into a new order of perception and experience—imaginative, presumably, as well as more directly "vital." The rhetorical-objectivist tradition here includes both a technical interest and a concern for the reader's response.35

Plato had felt the danger of art because of its power over man's emotions. Aristotle had seen the positive purgative potential of this power. The Romantic poets felt that art refined the emotions. M. H. Abrams claimed that a "pragmatic" art theory which grew out of the rhetorical tradition (aided by explicit Horatian theories of art as teaching through pleasure) has been the dominant theory since the eighteenth century. This evolution through the years may have pre-

---

35 See Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetoric of Fiction and the Poetics of Fictions," *Novel* 1 (Winter 1968), 113: "Though an effect on audiences was implied by its form, the critic pursued the internal nature of the poem by analyzing its parts in relation to the whole work."
pared the way for the increase today in what has here been named process mimesis; the artist developed from the straightforward mimetic poet, assigned the minimal role of holding a mirror up to nature, through to the pragmatic poet who is ultimately measured by his ability to come to terms with his reader. This pragmatic-rhetorical point of view could combine the recognition of the independent ontological status of the novelistic world with a regard for the life-art link through the reader-that mimesis demands (even mimesis of process).

From the rhetoric of Sterne to that of John Fowles, self-conscious novels have asserted their fictiveness while refusing to allow the reader the particular kind of distance that comes of passivity or lack of involvement. In his study, *Balzac to Beckett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), Leo Bersani has shown the validity of regarding the changing relationship between the reader and the novelistic language as the point of reference for theories of realism. If the reader's relation to the novel is felt to be purely in terms of his own experience, that is, if language is thought to be only referential to empirical reality, then it is a case of a Balzacian situation in which the fictional world seems to reflect confidently some external reality (in other words, product mimesis). With Flaubert's realism, the reader's relation is primarily to language itself and this language, the reader is made to feel, can never correspond to reality. This is, in fact, according to Bersani, Emma Bovary's tragedy and what makes that novel an interrogation of the value of art. With more modern metafiction, the reader has yet another role. He is left to make his own meaning, to fill the void, to activate the work. He is assaulted, frustrated in his normal novelistic expectations. The author seems to want to change the nature of literature by altering the nature of the reader's participation in it.

As creator, the writer has always had only limited control over the particular responses of his reader. Phenomenological awareness has perhaps increased authorial consciousness of the fact that the work of art has no existence in and of itself; only through the imagination and understanding of the reader is it made to live. While acknowledging the reality of the reader's power, often overtly, the writer must also combat the implicit refusal of many critical theories-from phenomenological to formalist-to consider that aesthetic connection with the reader's own experience that is implied in any act of making fictions and in any creative and rhetorical use of language. In narcissistic fiction, the problems and joys in the act of shaping language and experience are part of the content. The reader can somehow participate in the novelistic heterocosm and still share in the personal struggle of its creation. There is always a certain tension between involvement and self-awareness in the act of reading, and self-conscious fiction only dramatizes this tension within the work itself.

The metafictionist, by this mirroring of process, may intend to upset his reader, as did Gide in the past. Reading is not always the pleasant, controlled, harmonious experience that the Classical and Romantic traditions both suggest. It can be disrupting, challenging, not to say threatening. Narrators such as that of John Barth's "Life-Story" (in Lost in the Funhouse) are on the attack: "The reader! You, dogged, unsuitable, 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? . . . Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off?" Novelists know of their relationship to their readers. Likewise the idea of the reader as participant-as a perhaps disturbed, but unavoidably active, reagent or crypto-creator-is not particularly a novelty to critical theory. In 1921, Percy Lubbock wrote that the reader was a kind of novelist, "the maker of a book which may or may not please his taste when it is finished, but of a book for which he must take his own share of the responsibility."37 The reader has always been a collaborator, an accomplice. Metafiction explicitly adds the dimension of reading as a process parallel to writing as an imaginatieve creative act. The result is that the reader's degree of participation appears to increase. He must do his share of the work, be it bridging Iserian gaps of "indeterminacy" or coping with what Kermode calls "hermeneutic confusion and problematic closure."38

Umberto Eco has dubbed this kind of art a form of "opera aperta" and offers as a critical framework, "serial" rather than structuralist thought. The latter, of course, has obvious limitations for the study of narcissistic texts since it refuses-in theory-to deal with the subject and with elements outside the closed structure it investigates.39 It also concentrates on the shared code-decoded message relationship while, in "serial" thought, the message itself self-consciously puts the code into question. Here each message establishes its own code; each work appears to be its own linguistic foundation, its own poetics. Each work is therefore the key to its own reading.40 Where structuralism aims at discovering, by the use of the linguistic model, serial thought aims at

39 Gérard Genette has suggested that structuralism could be used as a complement to a hermeneutic approach which would consider the intersubjective interiorizing contact of reader and text which structuralism must ignore. See "Structuralisme et critique littéraire" in Figures 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 161.
producing. Series, then, are self-doubting structures which cannot but see themselves as historical. The value of such a theoretical framework for self-conscious fiction is evident, although it offers little actual concrete aid to the critic, short of directing him back to his own reading of the text. Then again, fiction which establishes, indeed constitutes, its own frame of critical reference can likely not be approached in any other manner. The critic, freed from the need for any external props for his analysis, need only revel in the text and in his own liberation. He is now reader, writer, and critic.

The reader of narcissistic fiction is indeed left with more than his usual share of freedom to create order, to build unities and relationships between parts. The author lets the reader complete the "open" work but he still, obviously, retains some control. It is "open" but in a field of relations (created by the novelist) which imply some sort of inner coherence. The reader never really creates literary meaning freely; there are codes and rules and conventions that underlie its production. Selection and isolation procedures are inevitably restricting, but they are also necessary. The paradigmatic nature of metafiction—its imaginative and linguistic analogues of process with the reader's experience—adds another dimension, that of freedom, to this situation. Like the writer, the reader can evade the mundane and the empirical; he can enter a world of his own making, a world constructed through language. In *Imaginary Qualities of Actual Things*, Sorrentino's narrator refuses to give the reader traditional character details (hair colour, etc.), preferring to root his meaning in language, not in fake real people. If the reader needs (as he well might) more concrete details to form his imaginative impression of the characters, he is free, according to the narrator, "to write the book that I have no interest in writing."

The book is a material object; it can be opened and closed at will. It can be read in bits, violating its temporality; it can be reread in part or whole, violating its linearity. It moves with the reader and is still when he abandons it. This material freedom has its analogue in the imaginative realm. The paradoxically "induced" liberation as taught by Fowles's heroine and surrogate in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, is felt by the reader, as by the author. The critic too is freed from the restrictions of any single methodology by the fact, emphasized throughout this study, that metafiction embodies within itself its own critical frame of reference as part of its theme and often its form. Freudian, rhetorical, and phenomenological theories are suggestive, but in no way definitive in their contributions to the understanding of narcissistic narrative. Self-interpreting texts imply the amalgamation of the functions of reader, writer, and critic in the single and demanding experience of reading.