CHAPTER TWO

Process and Product: The Implications of Metafiction for the Theory of the Novel as a Mimetic Genre

The novel is an invention, something that is made; it is not the expression of "self"; it does not mirror reality. If it is any good at all it mirrors the process of the real, but, being selective, makes a form that allows us to see these processes with clarity.

Gilbert Sorrentino

This study of the forms and implications of metafiction is obviously guided by sustained reference to certain central arguments- that of the parallels drawn by self-conscious texts themselves between the acts of writing and reading, that of the subsequent paradox of the reader (drawn into yet out of the text), that of the responsibility of freedom demanded of the reader. Another issue which was raised earlier and which will be the focus of these pages is that of the difference between what has been called mimesis of process and mimesis of product.

As Claudio Guillén has noted: "The exceptional formal qualities of the verbal work of art appear less remote if only one views poetic 'form' (the achievement of the writer as maker or 'poet') as both a product and a creative process underlying this product- as form-making, that is, or formation; and a cultural structure, in a dynamic sense too, as structuration." 1 Literary history suggests that new critical languages are necessarily developed in order to come to terms with new literary forms. In the case of narrative, this sequence has probably never been more clearly demonstrable than it is at present: the time-honoured critical equation between the novel and nineteenth-century concepts of "realism" is being challenged, assaulted by these ever more self-reflecting metafictions. In order not to displace this literary challenge by attributing it, as is tempting and likely even valid, to yet another of those philosophical, ideological, or scientific redefinitions of the

"real," one might begin by accepting as an axiom the fact that one is dealing here with a methodological problem of literary history, and attempt to find solutions within these terms of reference.

This self-conscious variety of narrative appears to be an international phenomenon; it is discernible in the works of the French nouveaux romanciers, in those of the Italian Gruppo 63, and individual writers from Barth to Borges, from Cohen to Coover, from John Fowles to Julio Cortazar. This is not to say that this operation is new in literature. Shelley's analogy of the Aeolian lyre for the poetic mind was also, of course, the subject of poetic discourse. Nor is the dual interest in the storytelling as well as the story told new to the novel genre, as Tristram Shandy bears witness. ("I have a strong propensity in me to begin this chapter [1, 23] very nonsensically, and I will not baulk my fancy.") Nor are those increased demands made on the reader really new, as Wolfgang Iser's The Implied Reader (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1974) has revealed. Reading and writing are both active, creative exercises and always have been; it is perhaps merely the degree of self-consciousness regarding their quasi-parallel natures that has increased. In metafiction the reader or the act of reading itself often become thematized parts of the narrative situation, acknowledged as having a co-producing function.

In the light of such fiction, it is not surprising to discover an increased critical interest in reader aesthetics. Some of these theories will be examined in a later chapter. Yet, the largely negative reviews of much new metafiction on the basis of its being the death of the novel, solipsistic, and self-destructive, not to say "unrealistic," might suggest that certain of the categories of novel criticism are being revealed as inadequate. The generally accepted concept of novelistic realism which is, in essence, only a period-description, would seem to have been reified and extended beyond its critical range in an attempt to encompass all fiction.

Such a generalization fails to do justice, not only to modern metafiction, but to the novel genre as a whole. It ignores that one fact that is worth keeping in mind at all times- that Don Quijote is one of the first of

2 Cf. Robert Scholes, "On Realism and Genre," Novel 2 (Spring 1969), 269: "It seems to me that the whole phenomenon known as realism has been governed for some centuries by empirical assumptions and attitudes about the nature of reality, and that these assumptions are now beginning to lose their force just as the theological assumptions that governed what Auerbach called 'figural realism' lost their force with the waning of the Middle Ages. We are at an ideological watershed . . . [and] I believe I see in the writers I have called fabulators the way toward a new reality." See also Murray Baumgarten, "From Realism to Expressionism: toward a History of the Novel," New Literary History 6 (Winter 1975), 416 on the epistemological and ontological realms in narrative.

the self-informing fictions that thematize the power, the consequences, and the very workings of both the creative imagination and the language of literature. What Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), calls the "realism of presentation" of the eighteenth-century English novel of Richardson and Defoe, is actually coeval with the equally potent "realism of assessment" of Fielding and Sterne.

In fact, there would seem to be considerable evidence to suggest that the parodic, self-reflective nature of many of these early narrative works is paradigmatic. In Chapter One, it was suggested that the key to the novel's origins and development might well lie in parody, in the unmasking of dead literary conventions and the establishing of new literary codes. As Robert Coover writes in his dedication to Cervantes in "Seven Exemplary Fictions," Cervantes' parodies gave birth to the novel and were "exemplars of a revolution in narrative fiction, a revolution which governs us- not unlike the way you found yourself abused by the conventions of the Romance- to this very day."

In this light perhaps nineteenth-century French or eighteenth-century English "realism" was not so much the epitome of the novelistic mode, as a stage in the genre's development, a stage containing within itself the contesting seeds of its own transcendence. Even *Madame Bovary* can be, and has been, read as an attack on this very concept of "realism," as an allegory of the power of language and literature. Emma is the naïve realist who, like Don Quijote, believes that words in books refer directly to reality, to experiences "out there" waiting for her.

Yet, the history of novel criticism demonstrates that, while the novel form developed further, its theories froze in time somewhere in the last century. What was a temporary stage in literature became a fixed definition in criticism. From this point on, any form which revealed a moving beyond that stage could only be dealt with in negative terms (as not really a novel, or at best as a new novel or perhaps as a *metafiction*), rather than being treated in terms of a natural, dialectical development of the genre, as the backgrounded traditions parodied in such forms themselves proposed.

One of the reasons why this kind of fiction has been refused entry to the ranks of the genre seems to be that the theoretical basis of "traditional realism" is what could be called a mimesis of product. The reader is required to identify the products being imitated- characters, actions, settings- and recognize their similarity to those in empirical reality, in order to validate their literary worth. Since no codes, no conventions for this procedure are acknowledged, the act of reading is

seen in passive terms. Metafictions, on the contrary, bare the conventions, disrupt the codes that now have to be acknowledged. The reader must accept responsibility for the act of decoding, the act of reading. Disturbed, defied, forced out of his complacency, he must self-consciously establish new codes in order to come to terms with new literary phenomena. Since product mimesis alone does not suffice to account for the new functions of the reader as they are thematized in the texts themselves, a mimesis of process must perhaps be postulated. The novel no longer seeks just to provide an order and meaning to be recognized by the reader. It now demands that he be conscious of the work, the actual construction, that he too is undertaking, for it is the reader who, in Ingarden's terms, "concretizes" the work of art and gives it life.

The act of reading, then, is itself, like the act of writing, the creative function to which the text draws attention. That this process is now the object of imitation does not alter the essential nature of the novel as a mimetic genre. Metafiction is still fiction, despite the shift in focus of narration from the product it presents to the process it is. Autorepresentation is still representation. All art has always been what Claudio Guillén calls "an inorganic entity or process endowed with formal qualities and expressive virtualities and thus capable of stimulating in turn a kind of experience that is vital (that is 'life' too)."

Art as mimesis: classical rhetoric granted a certain liberty to the imitators of nature by sanctioning deviations for purposes of instruction or delight. Sidney argued that the poet teaches best because he creates another nature, a "heterocosm." Addison's papers on "The Pleasures of the Imagination" paved the way for the non-instrumental Romantic theories of creative autonomy. Within this tradition, the rigidly mimetic theories of "novelistic realism" in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century France almost seem reactionary, especially in the light of the freedom and autonomy sought by Cervantes, Sterne, Diderot, and many other early novelists.

Modern metafiction which thematizes its own fiction-making processes signals a contesting of "realism" of this kind. Perhaps it even means a return to what might be considered the mainstream of a tradition of narrative freedom, for it embodies its own theories, demands to be taken on its own terms. The course of literary history is being altered, and, as always, it is being altered by the texts, not the critics. In fact, this new narcissistic fiction is allowing (is forcing?) a re-evaluation of the novels of the past, thanks to its challenging of the inadequate, reified critical notion of "realism" based on a narrow product mimesis alone.

8 "The Aesthetics of Literary Influence," Literature as System, p. 28.
"The history of the novel," according to Frank Kermode, "is the history of forms rejected or modified, by parody, manifesto, neglect as absurd." If so, why has novel criticism faltered? Why have the "truth to life," the documentation- in short, the (unacknowledged) conventions- of a particular kind of fiction at a particular stage of the development of narrative (the French novel of, say, Champfleury's 1857 *Le Réalisme*), been extended from being parts of a period-description, and been permitted to take over, and indeed to tyrannize the definition of an entire genre?

It could probably even be argued that, in a larger narrative perspective, this so-called "realism" is more an aberration than a norm. Auto-referentiality can be traced back, beyond *Don Quijote* and *Tristram Shandy*, to the epic practice of having a character relate part of his own tale (e.g., Ulysses in the *Odyssey* 9-12) in order to give the illusion of taking attention away from the Homeric voice and to create a *mise en abyme* structure. Actually what happens in this case is that the narrating becomes an act like any other within the fiction, a mirroring on a minor scale of the epic narration. The content has expanded to include diegesis or the process of narration itself. This would suggest that a concept of mimesis of process is a constant in literature, and not just a new critical need. The modern diegetic preoccupation may only differ in its explicitness and theoretical self-consciousness within the novels themselves.

Some distinction between the two kinds of mimesis- product and process- does seem desirable, especially because product mimesis, when petrified into a limiting concept of "realism," becomes exclusive and denies the validity of any process orientation. Even Aristotelian mimetic theory, essentially objectivist in nature, allowed room for the imitation of creative process, since art was perceived as an active rival of the ordered and ordering processes of nature itself, as the act of creating a totality through a harmonious design to a logical end.

In classical theories of mimesis it is clear that mimetic art involves the creation of a fictive illusion which only simulates a reality. In antiquity, this notion of recognized fictionality was not used to negate ties between the literary and the empirical. It is, nevertheless, difficult today to dismiss the negative connotations of the word "imitation"- artificial, sham, inauthentic- which suggest a lower ontological status: art is inferior to the "life" it copies, and draws any value it has from its proximity to that "life." Yet both Plato and Aristotle were aware of the power and validity of art as mimesis, both in itself and as a force for the education and the shaping of man. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle underplays Plato's distinction between drama and narration (*mimētikon*) and

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diēgēmatikon, treating both as forms of a general imitation, in a way that corresponds roughly to the suggested use here of the terms product and process.

What exponents of "traditional realism" ignored, when they turned to classical mimetic theory for support, was that the instinct to imitate is complemented, in the Poetics, by an equally strong impulse toward ordering (7: 2 and 4). Aesthetic imitation involves the completed and harmonized integration of parts into an organic whole (8: 4), even if such parts should involve the irrational (24: 10) or the impossible (25: 5). Mimesis is never limited to a naïve copying at the level of product alone.

Yet, as M. H. Abrams has shown at length in his famous analysis of the mirror archetype in The Mirror and the Lamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), the mimetic concept of art in criticism after Plato and Aristotle did become restricted, concentrating on product, on the relation of subject matter to empirical reality and truth. It is to this general critical tradition and not to the natural line of novelistic development in particular that the concept of "traditional realism" as a genre (rather than period) description would seem to belong. In demanding recognition of diegesis or narrative process as part of mimesis, metafiction is in a sense demanding a reworking of the Aristotelian theory. It is not that the emphasis has shifted from mimesis to the creating imagination, but rather that the critical terms in which we discuss that which is imitated in fiction must be opened again to make room for the new novels being written and read:

Poiesis, the act of making, forms one necessary addition to the novelistic mimetic code, as a process shared by writer and reader. Harold Rosenberg’s observation about the visual arts holds true for literature as well: "for all the modernist passion for denuding things of their mystery, art has been unable to relinquish its affinity with man's most mysterious power, and his most precious one: I mean, the power of creation." Now it is the reader who is being forced to acknowledge his active creative role.

Of course, he has always been the one to activate the latent universe of the novel or short story; metafiction merely makes this fact conscious and functional by revealing the conventions that "traditional realism" sought to conceal, or even deny. The writer has always had to try rhetorically to unite shared language and his private imaginative experience. The reader then approached that same language, bringing to it all his own experience of life, of literature, and of language, in order to accumulate enough fictive referents to bring the autonomous fictional universe into being. This has always been the case. It took, however, the diegetic and linguistic self-consciousness of a Fowles or a Borges to begin to bare this process by thematizing it within fiction

itself, thereby revealing that what had formerly been accepted as an
unimpeachable canon of "novelistic realism" was really just another set
of literary conventions.

What one comes up against, then, is a problem or a block in literary
theory. This reification of a period-concept of "realism" need not be dealt
with in philosophical, psychological, sociological, or ideological terms of
reference. There also seems no need to be concerned with definitions of
"truth," since the interest here is in textual validity. In his "Des
différentes conceptions de la vérité dans l'oeuvre d'art," Roman
Ingarden argued that the term "truth" was best limited to that logical
epistemological result of knowledge. He felt that alternate terms should
be selected to refer to the other seven kinds of aesthetic "truth" he
isolated. The more neutral term of "validity" seems adequate here to
account for both the static notion of inner cohesion and ontological
autonomy of literature, and the more dynamic one of Aristotelian
ordering or mutual motivation of parts of the work of art. If one's roots
are in structuralism, as are Barthes', the term is also useful since in the
light of the Saussurian sign, the real object outside the linguistic system
is not relevant; the adjustment of signified to signifier is. Inner coherence
replaces inner-outer correspondence (the achievement of which is, in any
case, doubtful).

As many metafictionists have assured their readers, fictional creations
are as real, as valid, as "truthful," as the empirical objects of our physical
world. The essence of literary language lies not in its conforming to the
kind of statement found in factual studies, but in its ability to create
something new- a coherent, motivated "heterocosm," or other world.
Mimetic literature has always created illusions, not literal truths; it has
always utilized conventions, no matter what it might choose to imitate-
that is, to create. The familiar image of the mimetic mirror suggests too
passive a process; the use of micro-macro allegorical mirroring and mises
en abyme in metafiction contests that very image of passivity, making the
mirror productive as the genetic core of the work. In such fiction the
reader is made aware of the fact that literature is less a verbal object
carrying some meaning, than it is his own experience of building, from
the language, a coherent autonomous whole of form and content. This
whole is what is meant here by the term "heterocosm." Sartre might
protest the "unreal" ordering of experience that occurs in such a fictional
cosmos, but as Henry James, among others,

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12 Revue d'esthétique 2 (1949), 162-80. See also the variants of Frege's Sinn and Bedeutung
distinction in John K. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," New Literary
History 6 (Winter 1975), 319-32; in Georges Lavis, "Le Texte littéraire, le référent, le
réel, le vrai," Cahiers d'analyse textuelle, no. 13 (1971), 7-22; and in Paul Ricoeur, "The
Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," Social Research 38 (1971),
123-29.
has explained, the selection and ordering processes are what make art valid as art. Mimesis is transmutation, not reproduction, 14 whether it be a mimesis of product or process. Diegesis is a part of mimesis, as Aristotle perceived, and so ought to be taken into account in definitions of what constitutes novelistic "realism."

There is, to be sure, no shortage of attempts to define this elusive term. Novelists explain how their particular works are "realistic"- James, Virginia Woolf, Cary, Robbe-Grillet, and so on. Psychologists, philosophers, journalists 15 add their opinions. And, of course, so do the literary critics. Often these latter, the experts, are the least helpful. The inability of many reviewers to treat the new fiction on its own terms is not a result of the outdating of concepts of mimesis and representation themselves (as Jean Ricardou has felt16), but rather, it results from that transfer of a period description to a genre definition which threatens to distort the entire history of the novel as a mimetic form. Ricardou has been among the most outspoken of the modern critics of this inadequacy in fiction theory:

In his earlier debate with Greenwood on the topic of "realism,"18 René Wellek too had fought against this same dangerous reification, urging a restriction of the term "realism" (and not, one might note, mimesis) to the nineteenth-century European novel. He did so in order to prevent any generic reduction from denying the creative efforts of making a world. Such a reduction also risked endangering the novel's freedom to grow; too often "realism" became identified with truth, with the universal, or with good art in general.

The danger of such generalizing, normative definitions is easily seen. In The Rise of the Novel, Ian Watt uses eighteenth-century "formal realism" as a qualitative measure, as the defining characteristic of "the novel." He thereby ultimately forces himself into a position of declar-

16 See Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui 1 (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 10/18 1972), 376 for one of many such statements.
18 Neophilologus 45 (1961), 1-20; 46 (1962), 89-97 and 194-96.
ing almost everyone but Richardson as outside the novel tradition. Even Auerbach, in *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), writes from the implied stance that nineteenth-century French realism is the true modern "realism"; therefore, all "realistic" attempts before Stendhal are but imperfect steps toward the true "realism," and any after, signs of its decline.\(^{19}\) When "imitation of reality is imitation of the sensory experience of life on earth," as it is to Auerbach, products alone, especially in their visual and oral manifestations, will take precedence over the processes of imagining and writing. (It is interesting to signal, in this regard, the antiphonocentrism of Jacques Derrida's post-structuralism.)

It would seem to be very difficult to keep the term "realism" in a literary context and retain a fixed meaning\(^{20}\) free from epistemological or ideological connotations. It is for this reason that a name change has been suggested here, a return in the terminology of novel criticism to the term *mimesis* which would, in Aristotelian terms, encompass also the diegetic. The inclusion of this latter element is important since all written narrative differs from that of the oral tradition in that the storyteller, as well as his story, is represented or imitated. (Even the epic, perhaps the closest form to our novel, was for Plato [*Republic, 3: 393*] both diegetic and mimetic, the narrating of a story which was the imitation of an action.) In the basic structure of the novel genre as a whole, the story's diegesis becomes an element in its mimesis. Early novels often thematized and integrated this process self-consciously into their very form: *Tristram Shandy, Vanity Fair, Tom Jones, Jacques le fataliste*. The presence of an authorial narrating figure served as mediator, and the act of narration oriented the reader temporally and spatially in the fictive universe.

The modern novel seems to be the literary heir, less of Richardsonian or Balzaccian "realism," than of the critical awareness and diegetic self-consciousness of the eighteenth century. It is also, of course, heir to the Romantic view of the imagination and the creative act. This latter force entered fiction, as has been seen, in the *Künstlerroman*. Although there appeared to be a reaction against the Romantics and back to earlier poets at the start of this century, the same artist-critics who first brought about this revolt- Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Pound- adopted a Romantic view of the imaginative processes, while combining critical awareness in the *act* of writing with a kind of instinctive subjective consciousness.\(^{21}\)

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In fiction, this critical awareness or self-consciousness has been more and more structurally internalized, moving from the Preface into the content, and finally into the structure of the novel itself. This movement suggests the need for a broader concept of mimesis which would enlarge the range of objects of imitation from those of the empirical world to include the problems of writing and reading. The novels about novels of the early half of the century - of Gide, Huxley, Flann O'Brien - give way increasingly to novels which thematize and actualize the very processes undertaken by both writer and reader.

In the light of literary history, as has been shown, self-reflecting art is not unique to the twentieth-century novel. Its forms, however, do change with the conventions of the genre and of the time, conventions which it challenges and parodies. From Diderot to Gide, the narrator-novelist's intrusion into the characters' heterocosm creates a new illusion, even as it claims to denounce the one on which the "traditional realistic" novel is based. From Gide to Ricardou, the narrator-novelist gives way to the internalized act of narration itself, the process which mediates between reader and text.

This threat to rigid notions of mimesis which are limited to product alone has been effected by the novels themselves, for they contain and constitute their own critical terms of reference. That they must do so in such a deliberate manner is perhaps a comment more on the novel criticism they might be seen to contest, than on the fictions themselves. They are not about "reality," but about the imaginative processes of coming to grips with it in formal aesthetic terms. If this is true, cannot all fiction be so described? Is Flaubert any less a "scripteur" than Robbe-Grillet? Perhaps the definition of this term by Ricardou might apply to earlier fiction writers as well:

l'activité de l'écrivain ne saurait se réduire à celle de ce propriétaire du sens institué qu'on appelait autrefois l'Auteur: elle est celle d'un Scripteur. Le scripteur n'est aucunement une neutralité idéale: rien de ce qui le situe dans la réalité, corps, travail, pensée, qui ne le concerne au plus près. Seulement, loin d'être l'objet d'une expression ou d'une représentation, cet ensemble se trouve investi, à des niveaux variés, dans un processus général de transformation qu'on commence à entrevoir et qui pourrait se nommer en l'occurrence inscription. Pris de mille manières dans l'écriture, cet ensemble subit des rėorganisations incessantes.

Literature creates its criticism: a change in the language of novel theory was born out of the need to account for the fiction of Joyce,

22 See Jean Verrier, "Le Récit réfléchi," Littérature 5 (février 1972), 59-60
23 Literary history is never static but is a process, a plurality of culturally active currents. See Claudio Guillén, "Second Thoughts on Literary Periods," Literature as System, pp. 465-69.
Proust, Pirandello, Virginia Woolf. Discussions began to centre around the concept of "subjective realism," and usually they were based on the belief that a new epistemology, a new psychological view of reality had caused, or at least conditioned, the literary change. The proof lay, it was argued, in the manner and subject matter of the novels, as well as in the novelists' own pronouncements.

Yet, what seems equally clear, from these very same testimonies, is that what was seen as a new philosophical and psychological mode was just as much an attempt to abandon the constricting literary forms of "realism" and naturalism, while remaining within the bounds of a mimetic genre. Pirandello tried in his novels to free himself of the "stupissima verosimiglianza, a cui l'arte crede suo dovere obbedire"; Virginia Woolf demanded the novel be released from the tired, constricting conventions of the outdated "realists"; in Le Temps retrouvé, Marcel claims that "la littérature qui se contente de 'décrire les choses'... est celle qui, tout en s'appelant réaliste, est la plus éloignée de la réalité." 25

The early nouveau roman reveals a tension of transition between a concept of "realism" based on product mimesis alone, and that which includes process, the shared act of creating a fictive universe. Later critics (Barthes, Ricardou, Todorov, Genette) formulated in theoretical terms what the novels had already asserted- that what this fiction was imitating (that is, creating) was not any empirical world, but a view of its own linguistic and literary production. The textual mirror was turned inward anti activated, as Roland Barthes explained:


27 Though not the anti-representational Tel Quel texts which claim to be, and indeed seem to be, outside the critical categories of novel and mimesis completely.
creates, through the reader, a kind of fictional world (since novelistic language is a form of discourse and cannot escape referentiality). No matter how diegetic, metafictions remain mimetic- and "vital"- to use Claudio Guillén's term once again. Novelistic "reality" has always been fictive. It is ordered and patterned in a way that life experience rarely, if ever, is. Yet it is a paradigmatic order. One of John Barth's characters even claims that "Art is as natural an artifice as Nature; the truth of Fiction is that Fact is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world." Narrative (diegesis, the creative process) is a natural act of the human mind, transferred from life to art. What is new in modern self-conscious fiction is the acknowledged involvement of the reader who is asked, as an early statement by Robbe-Grillet claimed, to invent "à son tour l'oeuvre- et le monde- et d'apprendre ainsi à inventer sa propre vie." Novel theory which has reified "realism" and has limited mimesis to product alone has ignored the dialectical relationship that must exist between literature and criticism, a relationship that demands a reworking and possibly a transcending of the limits of any theoretical formulation which fails to come to terms with new literary forms. Reader aesthetics has been one reply to the needs of modern metafiction. A related concept of mimesis of process might be another.

The potential methodological value of the return of diegesis to mimesis lies in its allowing room for metafictions, new novels, even new new novels (that is, post-Cerisy 1971), within the boundaries and terms of reference of the mimetic genre we call the novel- the narrative form born of Cervantes and Sterne, as much as of Defoe and Stendhal. There is no literary reason why socialist realism should be considered any more novelistic, any more mimetic, than the fantasy fictions of Borges. By claiming that it is nothing but art, nothing but imaginative creation, metafiction becomes more "vital": it reflects the human imagination, instead of telling a secondhand tale about what might be real in quite another world.

29 See Barbara Hardy, "Towards a Poetics of Fiction: 3) An Approach through Narrative," Novel 2 (Fall 1968), 5-14.