CHAPTER THREE

Thematizing Narrative Artifice:
Parody, Allegory, and the *Mise En Abyme*

(1) fiction must acknowledge its fictitiousness and metaphoric invalidity or
(2) choose to ignore the question or deny its relevance or (3) establish some other acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader.

John Barth

Barbara Hardy\(^1\) has suggested that narrative is a primary human function, one which is part of life, and which is represented overtly in the form of certain literary genres. If this is so, it would not be "unrealistic" to have novels about the actual narrative processes. Daily we create worlds\(^2\) for ourselves— that is, ordered visions of our lives (real or (fantasy); the novelist's act is basic to his human nature, as basic as his desire to imitate. *Diegesis* and *mimesis*, as was argued in Chapter Two, can indeed go together. This fact is most clearly seen in that mode and form of narrative self-consciousness which has been called overt diegetic narcissism. This is at once the most straightforward and the most instructive of the four types outlined earlier, and for this reason would warrant an extended investigation in the next two chapters.

John Barth, one of the most overt of metafictionists, has openly claimed that one way to come to terms with the generally supposed discrepancy between art and the world we live in is to affirm the artificial element in art— "you can't get rid of it anyhow"\(^3\)— and make it part of the point of the work. Certainly, the stories in his *Lost in the Funhouse* once again provide a clear example of diegetical preoccupation in the extreme. Storytelling runs amok: the "Menelaiad" works up

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1 "Towards a Poetics of Fiction: 3) An Approach through Narrative," *Novel* 2 (Fall 1968), 514.
to seven levels of narration by section seven and then works back down to one level by the end (after seven, the section numbering also reverses to one). The reader is faced with this:

"Speak!" Menelaus cried to Helen on the bridal bed, 'I reminded Helen in her Trojan bedroom,' I confessed to Eidothea on the beach,' I declared to Proteus in the cavemouth," I vouchsafed to Helen on the ship,' I told Peisistratus at last in my Spartan Hall," I say to whoever and where- I am. And Helen answered:

"Love!"

Needless to say, the reader's task becomes increasingly difficult and demanding, as he sorts out the various narrative threads. The universe he thus creates, he must then acknowledge as fictional and of his own making. With this latter recognition his conscious relation to the text alters. With a technique not unlike that of Brecht's alienation effect, the parody and self-reflection of narcissistic narrative work to prevent the reader's identification with any character and to force a new, more active, thinking relationship upon him. It becomes increasingly clear that, though free to interpret, the reader is also responsible for his interpretation. Alfred Appel's remarks on Nabokov and his Ada apply to most metafictional diegetic self-consciousness as it relates to the reader's relationship to the parodic text: "Through parody and self-parody, he exorcises the trite terms inherent in each story lie chooses to tell, and by parodying the reader's conception of 'story'- his stereotyped expectations and preoccupation with 'plot' machinations- Nabokov frees him to experience a fiction intellectually, aesthetically, ecstatically."  

In much metafiction the reader is left with the impression that, since all fiction is a kind of parody of life, no matter- how verisimilar it pretends to be, the most authentic and honest fiction might well be that which most freely acknowledges its fictionality. Distanced from the text's world in this way, the reader can share, with the author, the pleasure of its imaginative creation. In forcing recognition of a literary code, parody seems to be one important means to this paradoxical kind of narcissistic extramural involvement. The narrator of Nabokov's The Real Life of Sebastian Knight informs the reader that the novelist, Knight, "used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion," and that he "was ever hunting out the things which had once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted."  

4 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 155. Later page references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.  
6 (1941; reprinted, Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1959), p. 91. Later page references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
This is very close, of course, to a theoretical statement of the Russian formalist concept of parody, a concept that seems particularly applicable to metafiction. Parody develops out of the realization of the literary inadequacies of a certain convention. Not merely an unmasking of a non-functioning system, it is also a necessary and creative process by which new forms appear to revitalize the tradition and open up new possibilities to the artist. Parodic art both is a deviation from the norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material. Forms and conventions become energizing and freedom-inducing in the light of parody.

Yet critics of the new novel in France and of similarly narcissistic fiction elsewhere have seen the parodic element of overt self-consciousness as debilitating, as replacing the function of literary criticism, itself or as revealing the limitations, in fact, and not the strengths of imagination and creation. But to see parodic metafiction, as does Earl Rovit, for example, as "the Novel as Jig-Saw Puzzle," in terms of the piecing together of factory-cut parts, is to underrate the creative function of parody and also to presume that pieces put together anew remain the same-irrespective of context. Parodic motivation is absorbed into a new text and the pieces are reworked, re-signified. Rarely do they form what Rovit sees as "a firm and unyielding regimen of subordination" or an arbitrarily chosen, closed system or even a superimposed external order. (As Sartre once remarked, all ordering is fictive.) There is no reason why parody must limit itself to satirical exposure of non-literary external elements-"the false, the ugly, the affected, and the hypocritical"-especially since the parodic code as used in metafiction is both internal and literary. To claim that John Barth is prevented by parody from communicating his "unique metaphor of experience" is to ignore the fact that, of all writers, the vehicle, if not the tenor, of Barth's metaphor is parody. Like Nabokov, on whose use of parody much has been written, Barth uses parodic

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10 "The Novel as Parody: John Barth," *Critique* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1963), 79. The quotations following are also from this article and page.
devices to point to the diegetic, fictive, literary elements of his fiction. He makes the artificial and the creation of it into the significant part of his literary universe. In the works of both of these parodists there often are characters who are aware of their status as fictional entities. Rather than limiting the range and significance of these works, this device is related to what has here been called a mimesis of process: the imaginative effort involved in creating ontological identity becomes fundamental in the text, as in life. As shall be shown shortly, in The French Lieutenant's Woman, identity itself- be it the reader's own or that of characters in fiction-is always an artistic construct.

This form of parody, however, is but one way of pointing to artifice. If the historical development of narrative narcissism, as outlined in the Introduction, is accepted, then it is important to note that the first full flowering of the novel genre in the eighteenth century coincides with the revival of the concept of art as an independent and unique function of life, a revival distinguished by a certain critical self-awareness. In the novel this meant that frequently the content's dramatic presentation of the diegetic act became a major controlling factor in the structural, as well as in the thematic, unity of the work.

In this light, the omniscient "authorial" narration so common in the traditional novel of the next century- from Manzoni's manuscript editor to Thackeray's garrulous Master of the Puppet Show- becomes a potentially useful self-reflecting device. The presence of an "authorial" narrating figure as mediator between reader and novel world demands recognition of a subsequent narrative distance. This results in an added emphasis on diegesis, on the act of storytelling. In such fiction, the reader is temporally and spatially oriented in the fictional world by the act of narration itself; the narrating figure is the centre of internal reference. This can also occur in a first-person narration, and especially when such a form is used parodically in metafiction. In Giuseppe Berto's Il male oscuro (Milano: Rizzoli, 1964), for instance, the narrator seems at first to function as would a traditional first-person narrator character who happens to be a patient under psychoanalysis. It is only later in the novel that he self-consciously admits that all he knows about analysis he has really learned from Italo Svevo's novel, La coscienza di Zeno and from Svevo's own comments (such as, significantly, the one that Freud is of more value to writers than to sick patients). Berto's novel picks up the motifs of the Oedipal struggle and the search for a cure for seemingly imaginary ills from Zeno, but the narrator comes to see that he cannot (except parodically) redo Svevo or even Musil. It is important that he is "cured" when he burns the photos of his dead father along with the first chapters of his "traditional" novel. At this point the

novel about the "obscure malady" also must end. The new parodic form has literally as well as thematically destroyed the old.

V, the narrator of Nabokov's novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, claims to have difficulty writing the biography of his novelist brother (the novel we read is more a tale about his attempts than the actual biography). He does not want to tell the story of Sebastian's childhood with methodological continuity as if he were a character of fiction. Loathing the "biographies romancées" (p. 20) he chooses, perhaps, the "roman biographié," since he has, after all, taken a "be-an-author" correspondence course (pp. 34-35).

Narratorial (not authorial) self-consciousness such as this often takes, the form of a parodic awareness of literary conventions- of the journal (Butor's *L'Emploi du temps*), of criticism (Nabokov's *Pale Fire*), of the epic (Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*), of biography (Woolf's *Jacob's Room*), of the essay (Borges' *Labyrinths*) and, of course, of the novel. The "rules" of fiction-making come into play as the overt subject matter of much modern metafiction. Barth's story, "Lost in the Funhouse," directs the reader's attention to the conventions of traditional realism-verisimilitude, dialogue, factuality ("Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a figment of the author's imagination?"), and even the actual printing, such as the use of italics for emphasis or the legalistically cautious blanks ("in the town of D--").

Many of the other stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* recount the problems and progress of their own structuring process. How does one begin a story, structure the action, end it, integrate imagery, find the best point of view? "Autobiography," "Anonymiad," "Title," and "Life-Story" address themselves to these directly-asked questions. Barth is one of the most self-conscious of writers today, especially regarding the diegetic process and fictive ontological identity. On the other hand, as the reader is told by the narrator of "Life-Story": "assaults upon the boundary between life and art, reality and dream, were undeniably a staple of his [the writer-character's] own and his century's literature, as they'd been of Shakespeare's and Cervantes's" (p. 129).

However, Sterne is perhaps the most blatant forebear of Barth’s brand of parody and self-consciousness about novelistic conventions. The causality of plots, the use of illustrations and footnotes, the demand for moral content, adventures, suspense, the time conventions, the writer's power, the critic’s demands, chapter divisions, the use of prefaces, cover pages, digressions, stylistic uniformity- these are only a few of *Tristram Shandy*’s parodied conventions. Sterne’s problem in aesthetic terms seems to have been the difficulty of reconciling the planned novel form and its conventions with a content which was concerned with the process of writing and living-that is, with contingency. Not unlike Sartre in *La Nausée*, he solved his problem in a self-conscious parodic manner. Barth’s problem is more one of
acknowledging the fictionality of art- as emblematic of that of any of our ordering efforts in life as well- without destroying the validity of all art. In the story, "Title," the reader is told that even the demise of the novel, which is doubtful, would not necessarily mean the end of narrative art. Thanks to parody, the "end of one road might be the beginning of another" (p. 109). The intertextual reference to Barth's own novel, The End of the Road, is not, of course, accidental.

A more interesting kind of overt diegetic self-consciousness is that in which the focus is on the process of actually writing the fictional text one is reading at the moment. In Borges' "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," the narrator begins by informing the reader that, under the influence of Chesterton and Leibniz: "I have imagined this story plot which I shall perhaps write some day." Then, he proceeds to do just that, allowing the reader to observe the creative choices at work: "The action takes place in an oppressed and tenacious country.... Let us say (for narrative convenience) Ireland; let us say in 1824." Similarly Italo Calvino's reworking of Dumas' Count of Monte Cristo story in Ti con zero allows for Dantes to imagine his escape possibilities from prison by imagining an Alexandre Dumas and two assistants writing variants to be selected for a novel. To plan a book is to plan an escape- for the reader. One of the most extreme versions of this novel of process is Raymond Federman's Double or Nothing. But this same mode is thematized in a more simple and accessible form by Nabokov's narrator of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, according to whom the characters of Knight's first novel are "methods of composition": "It is as if a painter said: look, here I'm going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it" (p. 95).

For the reader/critic of metafiction, overt diegetic narcissism seems to involve the thematizing within the story of its storytelling concerns- parody, narrative conventions, creative process- with an eye to teaching him his new, more active role. For the metafictionist himself this thematizing operation is also central. Barth writes that the "regnant" idea linking the stories of Lost in the Funhouse is that of turning as many aspects of the storytelling as possible- "the structure, the narrative viewpoint, the means of presentation, in some instances the process of composition and/or recitation as well as of reading or listening-into dramatically relevant emblems of the theme. Aside from parody in general, the two most frequently used literary devices in this thematization process are the mise en abyme (a term for which there is no convenient English equivalent) and a kind of more

extended allegory, two devices which are often hard to distinguish one from the other. Although all the theoretical works of Jean Ricardou dwell to some extent on the *mise en abyme*, it is his *Le nouveau Roman* ([Paris]: Seuil, 1973) that works out most fully the kinds and their functions "rêvélatrice," "antithétique" and so on. Not all of these are of interest in the discussion here, however. A horizontal *mise en abyme* on the level of "fiction," for example, will perhaps call attention to the repetitive, "un-lifelike" nature of the plot, but Ricardou's (interrogatory) efforts at making this narcissistically functional remain somewhat unconvincing: "si la mise en abyme éclaire la fiction, n'est-ce point, dans certains cas, parce qu'elle l'a engendrée à son image?" (p. 53). If, as Ricardou states, the fascination which the adventures of the "fiction" exercise is inversely proportionate to the exhibition of the generative, productive procedures (p. 76), then it will be both the *mises en abyme* which operate on the "narration" level- verbally and structurally- and those which involve both the "narration" and the "fiction," which are of particular interest here. For instance, the narrated description of the engraving of the defeat of Reichenfels, in Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*, is no less minute and no different tonally or diegetically from the rest of the narration, so the reader is not surprised when the picture functions not only as a horizontal *mise en abyme* on the "fiction" level (male figure with box) but as a vertical one as two levels of fictive reality and narration proceed to merge.

The *nouveau roman* is not unique in its use of diegetic or "narration" level *mises en abyme*. At the end of Borges' "Averroës' Search," the narrator thematizes this concern in telling the reader: "I sensed, on the last page, that my narrative was a symbol of the man I was while I wrote it, and that to write that story I had to be that man, and that to be that man I had to write that story and so to infinity. (The instant I stop believing in him 'Averroës' disappears.)" And so does "Averroës’ Search," of course.

One of the most complicated and extended examples of this kind of thematization of overt diegetic narcissism is, once again, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* where each of Knight's novels functions as a *mise en abyme* of Nabokov's novel itself-both of its "narration" and its "fiction." The first, *The Prismatic Bezel*, is a detective tale about a dead man who turns out to be alive. This indeed turns out, for the reader, to be a clue to the status of the hero of the very text he is reading. At any rate, Nabokov's novel is also about a detective (V., Knight's brother) who hunts for clues to a man's life and death. *Success*, Sebastian's second novel, is about the meeting of two lovers in a plot which echoes both the writer's and his brother's attempts to find the fascinating woman of Knight's life. Siller, the character on the train in Sebastian's "The Back

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of the Moon" becomes Silberman who meets V., also on the train. *The Doubtful Asphodel*, the final novel, contains in its plot elements of Sebastian's life (and therefore of V.'s narrative and of Nabokov's novel) which the reader (but not V., seemingly) notices. The reader is further told that at the end of this particular book, "the author seems to pause for a minute, as if he were pondering whether it were wise to let the truth out" (p. 180). In order to understand what "truth," the reader must look at the end of *this* novel where he finds V. writing: "Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (p. 205). When the reader learns that Sebastian was planning (but, according to V., never wrote) a "fictitious biography," he is left to decide if what he has read- Vladimir Nabokov's novel- is supposed to represent V.'s biography of Knight, or a fictionalized autobiography by Knight, or Knight's latest novel. It is not a matter of life or art, but of which kind of art. The same mechanism operates in other of Nabokov's fictions. In *The Eye*, for instance, what appear to be psychological problems turn out to be *mises en abyme* of problems of composition.

Often the *mise en abyme* contains a critique of the text itself; as in Borges' world of Tlön, a "book which does not contain its countertext is considered incomplete."16 In Barth's "Title" there are at least three *mise en abyme* levels: the narrator's problems with his companion, his problems with the story he is telling and therefore with his reader, and finally, his problems with his society and the literature to which he contributes. Even more blatantly, the narrator of "Life-Story" tells the tale of a writer who, suspecting that he is a fictional character, wants to write a story about a writer who also has this feeling: "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus in infinitum! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes?" (p. 117). Obviously Barth does not, but also, the processes of art as thematized in the text are always presented as "vital," humanly real in themselves and for themselves.

The reference above to the "regressus in infinitum" suggests that there may exist more than just a simple mirroring *mise en abyme*. And such is indeed the case. Lucien Dällenbach's extensive study of this reflexive modality, in *Le Récit spéculaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), traces the term itself back through its critical heritage in the works of C. E. Magny and P. Lafille in the 1950s, to Gide's own use, taken from the heraldic image of an escutcheon bearing in its centre a miniature replica of itself. Dällenbach feels that the mirroring image is central to the concept of the *mise en abyme*, but that there are three distinguishable kinds. One is a simple reduplication, in which the mirroring fragment has a relation of similitude with the whole that contains it. A second type is a...

repeated reduplication "in infinitum" in which the above-mentioned mirroring fragment bears within itself another mirroring fragment, and so on. The third type of doubling is labelled "aporistique," and here the fragment is supposed to include the work in which it itself is included.

The detailed typology with which Dällenbach follows this diachronic analysis is based on three structural levels of reflection. For example, the *mise en abyme* might consist of an *énoncé* which reflects the text's *énoncé*, its story. This could take the shape of any kind of plot *résumé*, in narrative or in any other art form. For instance, in Hubert Aquin's *Trou de mémoire*, it is Holbein's painting of the “Two Ambassadors” which fulfills this function in a very self-conscious manner. At this level it is also important to note the position of the *mise en abyme* in the text, and the direction in which it points, for it can direct the reader to future events, yet unread, or to past ones, both within and preceding the text. Dällenbach's second level of reflection is of even more interest to a study of overt narcissistic fiction for in this case an *énoncé* reflects on the *énonciation* or the process, the production, carried out by the agents—both author and reader. A third level, in which it is the code itself (either narrative or linguistic) that is reflected, is obviously that at which both overt and covert modes of metafiction can operate.

At a certain point, however, the *mise en abyme* becomes so extended in size that it is better described as a kind of allegory. In "Lost in the Funhouse," the narrator recounts the difficulties he (Ambrose) has writing a story called "Lost in the Funhouse" about Ambrose's being lost in the funhouse, of course. The narrator becomes confused, forgets the direction of his narration, becomes lost in "Lost in the Funhouse" which is itself lost in the middle of the collection, *Lost in the Funhouse*. All of this play functions in addition as an allegory of the position of the reader who is lost in the funhouse with Ambrose as he tries to find his way out of the mirror-maze of the story. At the end he is told that Ambrose "will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed" (p. 97)—that is, among the readers. Barth once wrote about a modern "literature of exhaustion," one that, by such means as the parody and the internal mirrorings and allegorizings that have been discussed here, sought to use up all the possibilities of art—never succeeded. Narcissus lives on, or in Barth's own terms: "exhaustion is just an invitation to administer artificial resuscitation to the apparently dead. But I want the result to be real life, not some Lazarus-like life." \(^{17}\) The implications of this identity of art and of the artistic process as "real" are what must now be faced and investigated.