CHAPTER SIX

The Language of Fiction: Creating the Heterocosm of Fictive Referents

These people aren't real. I'm making them up as I go along, any section that threatens to flesh them out, or make them "walk off the page," will be excised. They should, rather, walk into the page, and break up, disappear.

Gilbert Sorrentino

The theoretical implications of modern metafiction reach out in several significant directions, and many questions come to mind. If literary critical notions of novelistic mimesis must be expanded to include that creative and "vital" process shared by writer and reader, then what subsequent effect will this expansion have on the critical view of the nature of literary language and of the fictional, autonomous identity of the narrated world? If, as recent structuralist theories have suggested, language constructs and directs our world and the limits of what we can conceive and communicate, then can there be such a creature as a transparent linguistic text in the traditional realistic mode? Or does metafiction teach that a text can exist only as language and can function only insofar as it mediates linguistically between writer and reader?

Of all the literary genres, the novel is the one which has perhaps most resisted being "rescued" from the myth of the instrumentality of language. Poetry escaped with the aid of the Symbolists, the New Critics, and others, but the critical fate of the novel has been less open. Part of the problem is no doubt the result of the extended length of the genre. New Critical methods are not totally successful with larger verbal structures, partly because of memory limitations. Since a novel is never a coherent spatio-temporal unit in the reader's mind, as a lyric poem might be, the critic, in discussing its language, must decide whether he will isolate passages for commentary, trace linguistic threads through the work, or use some other method. 1 Metafiction often resolves this

1 See, for example, Roger Fowler and Peter Mercer, "Criticism and the Language of
dilemma in part for the critic by bringing the formal language issue into the foreground, into the thematized content itself.

Whereas poetic language is now more or less accepted as autonomous and intransitive, fiction and narrative still suggest a transitive and referential use of words. This is no doubt in part due to the fact that the novel is written in prose, and prose is usually considered a discursive medium for ideas. It is also associated with ways of verifying facts, since it often records or describes actual events. However, this superficial explanation alone does not suffice to account for the intransigent belief of many critics and readers that the referents of fictional language are real, that is, that they are of necessity part of the empirical world, as if there actually were a stable and objective reality "out there." As a reader begins a novel, he does indeed read referentially in that he refers words to his linguistic and experiential knowledge; gradually, however, these words take on a unity of reference and create a self-contained universe that is its own validity (anti "truth"). The fictions and essays of Jorge Luis Borges, for example, stand as allegories and statements of this, the reading (as well as writing) side of poiesis. What happens is that the referents of the novelistic language (which, as shall be demonstrated shortly, are fictive and not real) gradually accumulate during the act of reading, gradually construct a "heterocosm," that is, another cosmos, an ordered and harmonious system. This fictional universe is not an object of perception, but an effect to be experienced by the reader, an effect to be created by him and in him.

Given the great number of narcissistic texts which thematize the creative process, novelists themselves would seem to be aware of the emblematic or paradigmatic nature of the act of creating ordered fictive worlds through language- be it by the author or by the reader. In their basic relations to themselves, comments Robert Musil's narrator in Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, most people are narrators. What they like is the orderly sequence of facts, because it has the look of a necessity. By means of the impression that their lives have a "course," most people manage to feel somehow sheltered in the midst of chaos. As Frank Kermode has pointed out, fictions are indeed man's way of dealing with the discrete brute facts of chaotic reality. He constructs ordered worlds, mental structures which humanize time by giving it the form of narrative plots. The novelistic universe draws at least some of its potency from this paradigm, and so Kermode fears that the self-reflective literary forms of today reveal a loss of confidence in our


2 See, for a blatant example, Jean-Paul Sartre, "L'Ecrivain et sa langue," *Situations* 9 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 40-82, as well as his famous "Qu'est-ce que la littérature" in *Situations* 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 57-330.

"human concords." Although he remarks upon the progression from a literature which assumed it was imitating an order to one which assumes it must create its own order, Kermode does not go on to note that, as has been suggested here, the process \textit{per se}, the act of creating any new ordered world, is in itself a human act of great intrinsic interest and quite in accord with those human concords, if at another level of realization. The act of creation becomes paradigmatic of all human acts of constructing ordered visions. The writer and reader share this process in and through the novelistic text.

Narrative itself could be seen, then, as a natural mental act, as much a part of life as art. We do not, it is true, take leave of fiction-making when we abandon fairy tales and childhood games. We always tell stories -to escape, to remake, to alter our past and our future. To teach this is the thematized function of the protagonist, Sarah, in John Fowles's novel, \textit{The French Lieutenant's Woman}. The novel is not a copy of the empirical world, nor does it stand in opposition to it. It is rather a continuation of that ordering, fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience.

In John Barth's novel, \textit{The End of the Road}, the mythic world-creating, or the storytelling capacity of the mind, is thematized overtly as the basis of "mythotherapy." In life, as the doctor explains to the hero, Jacob Horner, "there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story. . . we're the ones who conceive the story, and give other people the essences of minor characters." For Barth, as for Fowles, the narrative heterocosmic impulse is related to human choice and existential freedom. "So in a sense," continues the doctor, "fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life." Jacob, who is significantly a teacher of the English language- the means by which he creates his fictions-is in the grip of a Pirandellian relativity paradox. To turn experience into linguistic speech, he reflects:

\begin{quote}
\text{-that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it- is always a betrayal of experience; a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful \textit{myth-making}, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. When my mythoplastic razors were sharply honed, it was unparalleled sport to lay about with them, to have at reality.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 112-13, italics mine.}}
\end{quote}

Jacob perceives that language, by its creative power, is the key to this myth-making; by its structures, it is the means to the only lucidity man
can ever know. Novels such as this which show a character looking at-
that is, creating- the novelistic world, mime the mind’s ordering process
of coding and decoding, ciphering and deciphering. And 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 universe. Svevo’s hero in La coscienza di Zeno, thinking that
he can be the novelist of his own life, learns that to recapture the past is
to structure it, to falsify it, to invent it, in short, as if it belonged to
someone else. Later in “Il vecchione,” the only part of the past that Zeno
actually can recall as real is what he wrote down- that is, in part invented
due to his linguistic limitations: a native Triestine-speaker, Zeno can only
relate in Italian those parts of his world for which he has sufficient
vocabulary.

As the “content” of a work of art, the heterocosm is not necessarily to
be judged by its relationship to extralinguistic, extraliterary reality. What
Mukařovský claimed for poetry holds true for fiction: “the question of
truthfulness does not apply in regard to the subject matter of a work of
poetry, nor does it even make sense. Even if we posed the question and
answered it positively or negatively as the case may be, the question has
no bearing on the artistic value of the work; it can only serve to
determine the extent to which the work has documentary value.” The
heterocosm has inner motivation and validity; its relationship to “truth”
may be irrelevant, for the reader, at least.

This idea of a heterocosm that the reader and writer create together is
not merely a concept of just another world. The cosmos is “the world or
universe as an ordered and harmonious system” (Oxford English
Dictionary). Even in classical mimetic theory, mirrors are seen to create
worlds even as they imitate (as Plato explains in the Republic 10).

Literature remains a self-sufficient aesthetic system of internal relations
among parts that aim at an Aristotelian harmony which the reader
actualizes. Along with the ordered and self-informing characteristics of
the novelistic universe (as created in the act of reading), the reader must
also come to terms with its fictive nature. Since fiction is not a way of
viewing reality, but a reality in its own right, the fictive heterocosm will
have its own rules which govern the logic or motivation of its parts. It
will have rules or codes of which the reader becomes gradually aware as
he proceeds.

As well as being ordered and fictional, the heterocosm is constructed
in and through language, and both author and reader share the
responsibility for this work. For the reader, literature has a particular
context created by those relationships activated between words. Also, the
actual referents of those words are not necessarily real in the

6 “Standard Language and Poetic Language,” in Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin
context of empirical reality. The result of the potential dual remove from the "real" is the liberation of the reader from the world he knows only through the senses. The fictiveness of the referent of the novel's sign is responsible for this freeing of language from being a mere counter to any reality outside fiction. It is simplistic to claim that detective stories are "unrealistic," as does one critic, because, although full of murders, no one really dies. Surely, this is true of all fiction: no one fictional event is more or less real than any other.

This is not to deny the novel's "vital" connection, that is, its link to life. It has been claimed that novelists feel that they use language only as the verbal mediation of a devised succession of events. Yet, as David Lodge responded to this view: "whatever novelists 'feel,' it is axiomatic that it is only through language that they are communicating." Lodge accepts Wittgenstein's view that consciousness is conceptual or verbal; we know preverbal experience exists, but we cannot be conscious of it without verbal concepts. Articulation is understanding. The primacy of language in the creative and cognitive processes is what Nabokov, Joyce, Beckett, and even Flaubert have suggested to their readers.

What has here been referred to as the "linguistic heterocosm," however, does have its own ontological status as a self-sufficient artifact to be brought to life, or "concretized," by the reader. It does not partake of the contingency of life, however much it may thematize it or borrow from it in its genesis: witness La Nausée, once again. This heterocosm is a totality in a way that lived life is not. This has always been the case. "En voyant reparaître dans Le Père Goriot," wrote Balzac, "quelques-uns des personnages déjà créés, la public a compris l'une des plus hardies intentions de l'auteur, celle de donner la vie et le mouvement à tout un monde fictif."

The concept of an autonomous and coherent fictional universe is implicit, then, in even that rigorous nineteenth-century period-concept of novelistic "realism." The ontological independence of the fictional world depends not on "truth," but rather on the notion of validity or motivation, on both that dynamic logic and that formal coherence within the text. That Gregor Samsa turns into an insect is made logical and credible within the literary world of Kafka's Die Verwandlung. The functional logic of this change in appearance cannot follow the logic of literal or even of one-to-one symbolic representa-

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But this different order of logic does not at all invalidate the paradigmatic function of the reader's (and the author's) construction of the heterocosm. That mimetic art/life (or "vital") connection continues to operate; it functions as a way of linking two worlds—that lived in and that living through the reader.

In most novels, it is the narrator who provides the reader with the most explicit bridge into a novelistic universe, since, for the reader, his living in that world is simultaneous with his writing of it: "as long as I live or write (which in my case means the same thing)," comments Tristram Shandy (III, iv). The narrating historian of Gabriel García Márquez's heterocosmic Macondo (in *Cien años de soledad*) presents to the reader real historical events (the Colombian civil wars) as if lived for the first time in his fictional world where fantastic things occur equally logically; time and space have no meaning outside the text itself.

Fantasy literature is in this sense the extreme form of all novelistic creation, as the last chapter suggested in another context; new viable worlds must be created, but the medium is the language of this world, the use of which might be said to limit the novelist's ability to evoke in the reader the figures of his imagination. But all novelists must convince the reader of the reality of their fictive worlds during the reading act; and they must do so through language alone. Fantastic novels may perhaps demand an increased effort on the writer's part because of the axiomatic imaginary character of their worlds. Or is the opposite true? Do the reader's expectations as he reads a fantasy novel perhaps facilitate the task by also making axiomatic the fictiveness of the referents of the language? No one demands that Tolkien's Middle Earth be a counter to our empirical world, just that it be a coherent heterocosm. Tolkien himself wrote that the successful story-maker creates "a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside."¹² This is true of even the more radical fantasy worlds such as that of Ambrose Bierce's "The Damned Thing" where there are colours human eyes cannot see and sounds human ears cannot hear, or in David Lindsay's land of Tormance (in *A Voyage to Arcturus*) where the human hero, Maskull, has to grow new non-human organs to cope with the geographical and emotional peculiarities of each region.

However, the more traditional novel within a mimetic code has to battle constantly with the very demands for empirical counters that fantasy literature can evade. Perhaps the self-conscious thematization of this battle in modern metafiction is aimed at forcing recognition of the fact that the referent of fiction is not necessarily the same as that of non-literary language. Prose may be the form of our newspapers and our letters, but there is an important difference in context between my

letter to my parents and Richardson's Pamela's to the Andrews. My letter will be judged by informational or expressive criteria- the accuracy and interest of its details, my sincerity as writer; but the details and form both of Pamela's letter have a structural function in the plot and character motivation of the novel. They have no necessary relationship to real referents outside the text of the novel. In literature, the language creates its object; it does not have to describe an object outside itself. Literary language has a kind of fundamental reality of its own, marking, as Blanchot has suggested, not the presence of real objects, but their absence.

This problem cannot be resolved in purely linguistic terms since my letter and Pamela's can and must be treated without their contexts, that is, in the same manner linguistically. A word-"dog" for instance-in either letter consists of the written representation of an acoustic image and a concept of dog-ness, as opposed to cat-ness, perhaps. Within a Saussurian or Hjelmslevian frame of reference, it is this signifier and signified that are important for signification, and not the denotative relationship of sign and referent.

Jean Ricardou feels that the confusion of traditional realism is one between the signified of a literary sign and its referent: "je songe à tous les gens qui pensent à propos de tel roman: moi, à la place de tel personnage, j'aurais fait autre chose. . . . Eh bien, ces gens font en quelque sorte passer un personnage du domaine du signifié à celui du référent." However, Ricardou has ignored a more basic point – that the signified of the literary language is the same as that of ordinary language; it is the nature of the referent that has changed. Such people as he mentions confuse, not signified and referent in this case, but real and fictive referents.

This latter distinction was made by Georges Lavis in 1971 in "Le Texte littéraire, le référent, le réel, le vrai," in response to Arrivé's contention (in Langue française 3 [septembre 1969]) that the literary text had no referent. At the level of langue, Lavis claims, using Saussure's definition of reference, there are real referents which can be either physical (table, front) or non-physical (honnêteté). There are also fictive referents which are physical (licorne) or non-physical (ubiquité). At this langue level, fictive referents are not real because they are non-existent in empirical reality.

On the level of parole this issue is more complex. Referents can again be real, as in most ordinary language usage, or fictive (physical or not). Here, however, they are fictive either because they are lies (false

15 Cahiers d'analyse textuelle no. 13 (1971), 7-22.
referents) or because the objects are imagined. It is this latter instance
that is of interest here (although one might note that the denigration of
fiction in earlier centuries as "lies" has its root in the question of false
and fictive referents). In the literary text there are no such things as real
referents for the reader: all are fictive—table, front, licorne, homéité, ubiqüté—and some doubly so (e.g. licorne). The reader accepts this once
he accepts the fact that what he is reading is an imaginative construct.
That the author may or may not have had real referents in mind can
never be determined with certainty.

Norman Mailer's The Armies of the Night (New York: New American
Library, 1968) acknowledges these kinds of referents; its two parts are
the novel as history and history as a novel. Genres are not just
classificatory devices; they also enable the reader to orient himself and to
understand the context in which he must interpret the work. "Dans le
roman," wrote Blanchot, "l'acte de lire n'est pas changé, mais l'attitude de
celui qui lit le rend différent." It is very relevant to the reading
experience whether or not the referent is believed to be real or fictive—
that is, whether one is reading about the "real" world or creating an
imaginary one for oneself.

That reification of what was essentially a temporally limited concept
of "realism" into a definition of the entire genre has resulted in the
positing of the referent of fiction as real, with the underlying assertion
and apologia for the novel, that if something "really happened" (or could
be made to seem so), it was then its own justification and verification.
This "referential illusion" destroys the integrity of the sign, cancelling out
the Saussurian signified by presuming direct collusion between referent
and signifier. This substitutes a kind of incomplete denotation
(sign/referent becomes signifier/referent) for connotation in order to
create what Barthes called an "effet de réel."

Yet, even early or very traditionally realistic novels have thematized
this effect as fallacy. Don Quijote and Emma Bovary are literary
examples of what happens when the referent of fiction is presumed to be
real and operative. Emma is the most serious of realists, for she truly
believes that art—even the romantic literature she reads—is a vehicle for
experiences which really exist and/or can be made to exist in her world.
Her belief raises the question of how both ordinary and literary language
can ever correspond to the precise nature of non-verbal realities. It is not
that Emma reads the wrong books, as some have suggested, but that, like
Cervantes' hero, she reads believing the referents to be real.

It was suggested in Chapter Two that literature can really only have
validity, and now it can be seen that this is so, because "truth" would

16 "Le Langage de la fiction," in La Part du feu, p. 82.
17 See Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de réel," Communications no. 11 (1968), 88; "l'avoir-été-là
des choses est un principe suffisant de la parole."
demand a real referent, not a fictive one which, at the level of parole, is either a lie or imaginary. To read a literary text for "truth" is to read it as a non-literary text. Whether we call the parts of the heterocosm unreal "mental forms" or "subjectified objects," it is the fictiveness of the language's referents that effects the freeing of the reader from what Georges Poulet calls the "usual sense of incompatibility between [his] consciousness and its objects," for it is the objects of consciousness whose ontological status has changed in literature.

What Lavis calls fictive referents, Paul Ricoeur calls "non-ostensive" ones—those which project a fictive universe, aware always of its verbal reality. This too is Blanchot's belief:

In fiction the fictive referent and the signified must not be confused, for the former lies outside the linguistic sign and in the imagination of the reader. This is not an any way to place the referent above the sign in importance, obviously. Two signs may have the same referent (for example, mutt and dog) but, since the signified marks the distinctive features of the sign, the pejorative connotations of mutt are revealed through it and not the referent. In cancelling out this important role of the signified, realist dogma postulates a common real referent that all readers share, despite individual ideoloects. And in doing so realism actually mitigates the possibility of a "vivid" imagining of the text.

It is only by the gradual cumulative constructing of the heterocosm through its (acknowledged) fictive referents that readers can be said to share a text or a novelistic universe. At first the reader can only read referentially but both because he expects a fictive world and because of the accumulated weight of fictive referents, he gradually comes to create a world. An imaginary mental image is symbolized rather than just signified.

Georges Lavis suggests:

18 "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1 (Autumn 1969), 55. Poulet, however, attributes this change to different causes.
20 "Le Langage de la fiction," p.38.
21 Hence, Ricardou's inability to see the distinction: within the framework of structural linguistics in which he operates, the referent is irrelevant. In the act of reading a novel, however, it is too relevant to ignore.
Le référent dans un roman, c’est donc l’ensemble des actions, situations, personnages, objets, sentiments... qui constituent la fiction du récit, mais qui, en dépit de leur caractère fictif, me sont présentes comme réels. Ce référent- d’une manière analogue à ce qui se passe pour le discours quotidien- se trouve limité et précisé par son contexte naturel qui est l’ensemble du récit. Mais, par ailleurs, ce référent- dans la mesure où il est fictif, ou, plutôt, dans la mesure où moi, lecteur, je prends conscience qu’il est fictif- acquiert, comme le référent du discours poétique, une généralité qu’il n’a pas, ou pas souvent, dans le discours quotidien ; et, par là, il fait appel, d’une manière plus large, à ma connaissance du monde, à mon expérience d’être humain.  

If this is so, once the reader is aware or at least made explicitly and purposively conscious of the fictiveness of the text’s referents- as he is, most blatantly, in much metafiction- the novel acquires a certain generality (as well as an aesthetic purity usually associated only with poetry). What appears as aesthetic introversion (fiction for fiction’s sake) is revealed as an extroverted, indeed paradigmatic, phenomenon.

Although the novel, then, has no responsibility to the real, although “le reel Romanesque n’est pas operable,” 24 there are still retired cavalry officers who write to Simon that the lived his La Route des Flandres, the novel Ricardou claims is not at all representational. At Cerisy in 1971, when this question arose, Ricardou’s reply was typically dismissive because to him, and possibly to Simon, such personal experience is irrelevant: “Ce qui est donné par Simon, ce sont les référents de la fiction: cela ne veut nullement dire que la fiction obtenue par le texte est l’équivalent de référent donné à titre documentaire.”

This consciousness of the possible tension in the reading experience between real and fictive referents is perhaps most clearly seen in the novelist’s use of real place names in novelistic settings. Robbe-Grillet admits that he has used Hong Kong and New York as explicit locations for the action of his fiction, but adds: “Je savais désormais qu’il ne pouvait plus être question de représentation, et je pouvais nommer une ville réelle tout en produisant par mon propre texte une ville parfaitement imaginaire.”

Lest this appear to be a new and radical stand, it is worth recalling Kafka’s vision of Prague. In his Preface to Roderick Hudson, Henry James wrote that he actually felt that the naming of a real place in the novel, instead of being economical and realistic as intended, was limiting and unnecessary.

The autonomy of the referents of literary signs in relation to real referents is, therefore, not a modern radical realization of recent
criticism. Self-informing, self-reflective metafiction merely points self-consciously to what is a reality of the novel genre, a reality that the structuralists have also made manifest. So too have linguistic philosophers such as Wittgenstein who worked to end the confusing of the meaning of a name with the bearer of a name, and to suggest that the interpretation of art is justified by its internal, not external, relations. All language will have an effect of some kind on the reader, because it is an experience and not merely a store of easily extractable meaning. Yet, there does seem to be a difference in the reader's imaginative process, an increase in the active element of that experience, if the referents are acknowledged as fictive by the word "novel" on the book's cover, or even more overtly, through narcissistic thematization.

These fictive referents form an increasingly complete heterocosm of referential totalities by means of a process of semantic accumulation. Nothing is in these referents that has not been expressed-explicitly or implicitly-in the text itself. Therefore both the ontological and epistemological natures of the heterocosm (of its characters, events, and so on) are fundamentally different from those of the real world. No matter how "prosaic" the language, no matter how close to banal reality the story, the language of fiction is transformed because it invites the reader to, in Blanchot's words, "réaliser sur les mots eux-mêmes la compréhension de ce qui se passe dans le monde qu'on lui propose et dont toute la réalité est d'être l'objet d'un récit." It is the reader's genre expectations and his imaginative creating of the fictional universe through the referents of the language, and not the subject matter or any supposedly real referents, that determine the validity and even the status of the novel's reality. In The French Lieutenant's Woman, Sarah's "true story" is revealed to be fictional, and it is through the very realization of both that fictiveness and its validity, that Sarah can free Charles at the end of the novel- in a mise en abyme of the liberation of the reader by the novelist.

Novels such as this one which acknowledge their fictiveness textually and thematically do not represent the death of the genre. Rather, like fantasy fiction, they become emblematic of what is a literary reality of the novelistic form. All fiction obviously retains the representational orientation of words, but it also creates a heterocosm through those words because the representation is of a fictive referent; it creates a second symbolic system which increasingly dominates in the act of reading. Fiction conserves an interest in reference without sacrificing the essential non-instrumentality of its language.

29 Blanchot, "Le Langage de la fiction," p. 84.
Literary language signifies and creates; it does not imitate or even describe. Reading is therefore an active, creative, and demanding process. Once again, it is Blanchot who expresses this best:

Qu’est-ce qu’une oeuvre? Des mots réels et une histoire imaginaire, un monde où tout ce qui arrive est emprunté à la réalité, et ce monde est inaccessible; des personnages qui se donnent pour vivants, mais nous savons que leur vie est de ne pas vivre (de rester une fiction) . . . Mais la fiction n’est pas comprise, elle est vécue sur les mots à partir desquels elle se réalise, et elle est plus réelle, pour moi qui la lis ou l’écris, que bien des événements réels, car elle s’imprègne de toute la réalité du langage et elle se substitue à ma vie, à force d’exister.30

Even if an author of a determinedly naturalistic novel should choose to draw upon, for reasons of economy, his reader’s knowledge of extraliterary realities, he can really only do so in the sense of his text’s having an "analogon" in the world outside it; such a relationship is metaphoric rather than referential (that is, with a real referent). On the other hand, a theory of fantasy literature must also draw upon a concept of fictive referents (at the level of both langue and parole) because surely vampires, devils, unicorns, and hobbits exist only in words. Only language can allow us to conceive of the absent, the unreal, the supernatural.32 This importance of the absent, of the fictive does not obviously imply that writers of metafiction have no interest in or response to the world outside their art. All this view of reference suggests is that for readers the meaning of each word increasingly takes its context from other words in that same work; the locus of reference gradually changes from the readers' linguistic, literary, and existential experience in general, to include their experience of that text in particular. This last stage leads to the creation of the "heterocosm."

Language has the power to make the reader formulate meaning and build these imaginary worlds. It also possesses inherent limitations, however. These are the recurring themes in what was called, in the typology of Chapter One, the overt kind of linguistic narcissism. The narrator of Borges' "The Aleph" despairs: "All language is an alphabet of symbols whose use presupposes a past shared by all the other interlocutors. How, then, transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my fearful mind scarcely encompasses? . . . What my eyes saw was simultaneous: what I shall transcribe is successive, because language is successive."33

It is not just that a writer can be either amazed and heartened or resigned and despairing at what language can or cannot do. Nor is this

30 "La Littérature et le droit à la mort," p. 341.
31 See Claude Duchet, "Une Ecriture de la socialité," Poétique 4, no. 16 (1973), 450.
a new concern of novelists. Joyce used *Ulysses* to demonstrate that, since English was insufficient for his imaginative needs, he must create neologisms: "I'd like a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service." 34 Nor is it a new thematized concern in fiction: Emma Bovary and Don Quijote both attest to the powers and terrors of literary language.

What is new perhaps in the metafictional use of this linguistic theme is that new role of acknowledgement and active involvement that is textually pointed out to the reader. The act of reading is no longer safe, comfortable, unproblematic; the assaulted reader's confidence in, and certainty of, his very language is undermined. At the very end of a long and (as a metaphor) comprehensible description of the "Library of Babel," Borges' narrator parenthetically addresses his reader: "(An n number of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol library allows the correct definition a ubiquitous and lasting system of hexagonal galleries, but library is bread or pyramid or anything else, and these seven words which define it have another value. You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?)." 35

In the overt variety of linguistic narcissism, at least, this questioning and reworking on the level of language is pointed out to the reader directly or is thematized in some way. In the covert equivalent, however, the reader again is expected to have learned and mastered the demanding new techniques.

There are at least three ways in which a novel or short story can be self-conscious about its existence as language. In the simplest form, the work can parade its parodic play on a certain style of writing, as Fowles's text does in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or as Nabokov's does in *Lolita* in which Humbert's poem read by Quilty ("Because you took, because you took advantage of my disadvantage") parodies T. S. Eliot, or in *Ada* which opens with a parody of a version by a bad translator (a "transmongrelizer") of Tolstoy's opening of *Anna Karenina*. The heroine's name, for example, is given as Anna Arkadievitch, not the correct feminine Anna Arkadievna.

In a second manner, the novel can be aware of its existence as a written or printed text in words. There is both what one might call a static and a dynamic version possible in this form. In its static form, one might find a text which is intensely aware of its medium. Barth's subtitle to *Lost in the Funhouse* is "Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice" and indeed while some are definitely pieces meant for print (the narrator of the "Anonymiad" cures his own goat hide on which to write the story), others lose much meaning in print and have to be imagined spoken. The story, "Lost in the Funhouse," on the other hand, plays

with the actual conventions of printing ("A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, which in turn is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words")36. Many of Borges’ pseudo-essays with their fictive footnotes and editorial commentary reveal an intense awareness of the text as text. The allegory of the black and white printed page that Ricardou sees in Roussel’s "Parmi les noirs" and in Poe's "Arthur Gordon Pym"37 and which can also be detected in Camus' "Le Renégat ou un esprit confus,"38 is to be found as well in Ricardou's own opening to *Les Lieux-dits* ("A peine franchie, sous les nuées, cette sombre ligne de faîte, tout le pays, en contrebas, dispense ses reflets"). As he so carefully explains himself: "La première [phrase] figure le texte lui-même: les nuées répercutent la blancheur du papier en haut de la page initiale; la sombre ligne de faîte fait allusion à la première ligne d'écriture au sommet du texte."

There also exist more dynamic varieties of this manner of overt linguistic narcissism. The marginal commentary included in *Ada* is not just a static acknowledgement of the novel's textual identity, but also forms both a kind of active critique of the storytelling and a dramatic verbal dialogue between Ada and Van from a later point in narrative time.40 The reader also becomes more actively involved in the dynamic self-awareness of the *process* as well as the *fact* of sentence-composing when Barth's narrator in "Title" makes him fill in blanks as he reads: "Why do you suppose it is, she asked, long participial phrase of the breathless variety characteristic of dialogue attributions of nineteenth-century fiction, that literate people such as we talk like characters in a story?" (p. 107). Thematically the structures of language are linked to those of fiction and life experience both: "The novel is predicate adjective, as is the innocent anecdote of bygone days when life made a degree of sense and subject joined to complement by copula" (p. 109). The reader is explicitly told that building worlds with words as material can only create an artifice. Unlike wood and iron which are "first-order reality," "words are artificial to begin with." In other stories, such as "Life-Story," it is the writer figure who is acutely aware of his progress in writing words on paper, and thus he draws the reader's attention to the linguistic creative act in time and space ("while in the introductory adverbial clause it seemed obvious to him that . . .

36 *Lost in the Funhouse* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 72. Other page references to stories in the collection will appear in parentheses in the text.
40 Douglas Fowler disagrees. In his *Reading Nabokov* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 188, he asserts that Ada is "intended to be a text, by Nabokov on Nabokov, and has dismissed all dramatic resources in order to be a text."
by the time he reached the main clause he had to admit that..." [p. 125]).
Again it is the thematized concern for the reader's act that tends to
distinguish this linguistic self-awareness from that of, say, Diderot or
Sterne, although the devices employed may be similar.

The third and perhaps most obvious type of overt language concern is
to be found in the various forms of thematized (not actualized) word play,
usually puns or anagrams, which call the reader's attention to the fact that
this text is made up of words, words which are delightfully fertile in
creative suggestiveness. The frantic "self-recorded fiction" of Barth's
story "Autobiography" punningly explains to the reader: "I must
compose myself. Look, I'm writing. No, listen, I'm nothing but talk" (p.
36). The tale ends with the text, still punning and still frantic, trying to
terminate itself:

Basket case. Waste.
Shark up some memorable last words at least. There seems to be time.
Nonsense, I'll mutter to the end, one word after another, string the rascals out, mad or
not, heard or not, my last words will be my last words [p. 39]

In Nabokov's Lolita, Humbert Humbert uses language-its semantic
richness, its punning and anagrammatic fertility-to build a protective
defence, to control his confession. But it is in Ada that word play takes
on its most important narcissistic function, as shall be seen again in
Chapter Eight. Van wants to write a poem to "Ada, our ardors and
arbors" at Ardis; Van's father, Demon ("a form of Demian or
Dementius"), collected, the reader is told, old masters and young
mistresses: "He also liked middle-aged puns." Van himself has "word
dreams."

Most important are the thematized word games that function as mises
en abyme to teach the reader how to read Ada and to direct him to the
main themes of the novel. At a picnic, Ada plays a thematically revealing
game of anagrams which proceeds from insect to scient to nicest to incest
(p. 91). Similarly games of "Flavita" (from the Russian game, alfavit, or Scrabble) turn into preludes to sexual dallying between the siblings (pp.
234-40). Though not quite a game, the code devised by Van and Ada for
their love letters becomes textually functional and emblematic when the
narrator (Van) then forces the reader to employ it to read his text (p. 168).

In The Black Prince, Iris Murdoch's narrator describes Hamlet as the
play in which Shakespeare "has performed a supreme creative feat, a
work endlessly reflecting upon itself, not discursively but in its very
substance, a Chinese box of words as high as the tower of Babel, a

6 (Spring 1964), 35-48.
in the text.
meditation upon the bottomless trickery of consciousness and the redemptive role of words in the lives of those without identity, that is human beings. *Hamlet* is words, and so is *Hamlet.* Sometimes, however, it is less the creative force of language that is narcissistically thematized, than its ordering and sense-making capacity for writer and reader both.

The title of Murdoch's *A Word Child* is derived from the saving discovery of language by her orphan-bastard protagonist, Hilary Burde: "I was not, except in some very broken-down sense of that ambiguous term, a love child. I was a word child." A reader of foreign languages, Hilary loves in them the rules of grammar and proceeds, like Barth's Jacob Horner, to structure his life like a rigid grammatical code—certain people to be seen at certain hours of certain days, with fillers such as riding the Inner Circle Tube Line. Similarly, tyrannical Hilary believes these rules will also govern the lives of those with whom he comes into contact: "I relied upon routine, had done so perhaps ever since I realized that grammatical rules were to be my salvation... Routine, in my case at least, discouraged thought... The patterned sameness of the days of the week gave a comforting sense of absolute subjection to history and time, perhaps a comforting sense of mortality" (p. 27).

While, as narrator, Hilary Burde's comments on language reflect as well on his activity as writer, they also form an almost allegorical commentary on the act of reading. He comments: "I loved words, but I was not a word-user, rather a word-watcher, in the way that some people are bird-watchers" (p. 28). The reader, of course, is both a word- and a Burde-watcher. Like the reader, Hilary is "one for whom the spoken and the written word are themselves different languages" (p. 28). It is not surprising that one of the characters should claim to read Hilary "like a book," as, of course, does the reader.

All novels, however, force the reader to work, in the sense that he must imaginatively create a fictional universe out of the accumulation of fictive referents. If this is so, then one of the things modern narcissistic fiction has achieved is to have helped, through its thematization of this process, in the unmasking of what might be called the referential "illusion" of novelistic realism. A concept of fictive referents based on the reader's generic expectations allows for a theory of the autonomous nature of the universe of fiction without falling too far into the trap of the poetic-ordinary language controversy of European structuralism and North American New Criticism. Many writers have insisted on themes of misunderstanding, non-communication, and confusion based on the inadequacy of language in *life.* In literature words create worlds; they are

not necessarily counters, however adequate, to any extraliterary reality. In that very fact lies their aesthetic validity and their ontological status.