TOWARD A NEW SYNTHESIS

ROBERT J. BEGIEBING

The following "classic essay" reprints the introductory chapter of a book entitled Toward a New Synthesis: John Fowles, John Gardner, and Norman Mailer, *published by UMI Research Press in 1989; it was re-issued by the University of Rochester Press/ Boydell and Brewer in 1992. In the process of writing the book in my thirties, I came to realize I was writing my swan song to academic literary criticism, my goodbye to all that, as I turned to writing literary journalism and fiction. The book's chapter on Mailer's* Ancient Evenings *appeared in the 2009 edition of* The Mailer Review, *so the "essay" below is the setup for that chapter, as well as for chapters—one each—on John Fowles and John Gardner. My thanks to Phillip Sipiora,* Mailer Review *editor and valued colleague, for reprinting this essay.*

—RB

Our relativist minds made by a relativist world make a relativist world. And there is no Truth in us.

Betty Jean Craige, *Relativism in the Arts*

INTRODUCTION

Fiction and theories about fiction today are shaped by renewed debates over ancient issues—means versus ends, form versus function. The factions are diverse and numerous, and as Elizabeth Bruss points out in *Beautiful Theories*, lack of consensus is the order of the day: no single program has gained such widespread support that its speculations "take on the look of simple common sense." And as Alan Wilde argued in *Horizons of Assent*, there is

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likewise no monolithic program among Anglo-American authors, whether modernist or post-modernist. There are only tendencies. Although it may be even more difficult to name schools of theory that have achieved prominence among fiction writers and poets than it is to name the various schools of theory themselves, self-reflexive tendencies have flourished in imaginative literature that parallel prominent ideas in theoretical scholarship. Yet, as Wilde points out, certain authors often considered post-modernists struggle beyond and transform the limits set forth by the theoreticians.[1] At the center of the contentious, rootless environment in which fiction writers work, however, is a debate (to use Robert Scholes' terms derived from Edward Said) over the hermetic and secular powers of art and perception. The hermetic position tends to view the novel as a closed system or word game, while the secular position tends to view the novel as a moral force in the world.

Vincent Leitch has suggested one reason for renewed debate: our post-romantic philosophical heritage that calls into question traditional Western concepts of being, truth, and consciousness.[2] Alan Trachtenberg has identified roughly a dozen factors contributing to the breakdown of any predominating intellectual or moral schema in the post-War world, ranging from the "ethic of abundance" and the sexual revolution to the scientific revolution in quantum physics and cosmology.[3]

Equally important is the radical dissociation of art from idea among twentieth-century avant-garde artists in Europe. From Dada, through Existentialism, to what Claude Mauriac has called Aliterature, avant-garde writers in Europe and America have created a "post-modern fiction" that Raymond Federman describes as:

> "fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction . . . challenges the tradition that governs it . . . exposes the fictionality of reality . . . and admits that no meaning pre-exists in language. . . . This creature will be totally free, totally uncommitted to the affairs of the outside world . . . irrational, irresponsible, irrepressive, amoral, and unconcerned with the real world."

Other writers such as William Gass have argued, in more moderate language, that a writer is best when he does not believe in ideas, that the chief value of the novel is not moral judgment but aesthetic quality and elegance, and that

the only moral activity for a writer is to contribute to the world objects of beauty worthy of contemplation in themselves.[4] But in public debate over the function of moral vision in art with his friend William Gass (whom he admires), and more notably in *On Moral Fiction* (1978), John Gardner represented an opposing (secular) view. He argued, essentially, that the novel can affirm what is "good" and "true," can move the reader toward affirmations of value, can raise questions of how to live and of moral judgment.

My purpose here is not to describe this debate in detail, nor to trace the history of such controversies, nor to define at length the techniques and concerns of "metafictionists,"[5] nor to map advanced literary theory. These tasks have been undertaken by many others. I do need to offer here, however, a reminder (or, for those unfamiliar with it, an explanation) of the debate sufficient to understand that element of post-modernism to which John Fowles, John Gardner, and Norman Mailer are responding. I shall undoubtedly simplify and do a certain violence to the complex post-modern ethos by focusing on what is a kind of temperamental bias, which Scholes identified as the "hermetic" tendency in post-modernism. It is true that the various expressions and emphases of post-modernism depend on a given practitioner or theoretician. Yet this hermetic temperament or tendency is, by the testimony now of many analyses, fundamental to Anglo-American post-modernism and therefore to our understanding of it. Moreover, this hermetic tendency is the particular issue that most engages the three subjects of this study, and that is the central reason for our attention to it here. These three authors directly address contemporary questions about whether imagination and perception are separate from the world or cosmos, and whether art can or should point to moral dilemmas and struggles that resonate in our political, professional, and life conduct.

One could argue that a number of Anglo-American writers have taken up a secular, even ethical, position against the hermetic. Candidates in America might include Bellow, Malamud, Updike, Cheever, Ellison, and Beattie to suggest a few—and in Britain Greene, Golding, Spark, and Burgess—to suggest a few more. My main purpose here, however, will be to examine extensively how three particular novelists have vigorously entered the debate, how they have constructed a new fiction that serves as an indicator of humanity's moral condition, and how they have all used at the center of their work the device of the magician and the theme of restructured consciousness through moral revelation. Moreover, each of these writers employs a similar struc-

tural principle: the dialectical narrative of a hero's or narrator's encounters with the magus figure. Such narrative expresses the dialectic of quest, allegory, and romance as psychomachia—the debate and fight for mind and soul.

DIDACTIC MORALISM VERSUS MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

At times, authors who have concerned themselves with the ends of art rather than the *means* have led the way toward preachiness, authoritarianism, or outright repression. Certain of the Puritans come immediately to mind, as do some of the lesser Victorians. And of course medieval English literature is by and large the moralizing literature of Catholicism. In our own century the literature of state Marxism, to suggest but one example, has exercised its totalitarian power. With ample justification theorists and readers concerned with technique have warned against or ridiculed the excesses of overzealous moralists. The late twentieth century is not a vantage point of innocence, and most intelligent people these days have a healthy skepticism for pompous or self-righteous zeal. We don't need many reminders of the tyrannies that have had their day because a person, or a group, or an institution, or a nation has claimed privileged knowledge of one or another religious, social, or political absolute, whether such privilege has appeared in the guise of patriarchal Victorian Christianity or in the mask of the devourer—a Nazi madman.

But a common error is to mistake the posing of ethical dilemmas, the suggesting of moral responsibilities, or the raising of ethical issues for the dangers of didactic moralism, cliché, and authoritarian zeal. Gerald Graff notes a similar leap of logic, using Susan Sontag and Richard Gilman as two of his examples. For both Sontag and Gilman works of art are greatest when they are "self-sufficient, self-justifying universes without secondary connections to the world." Making such "secular" connections, their logic continues, between art and life, form and content—"those old Mediterranean values"—has led to the horrors and tyrannies of Faustian Western man.

Alasdair MacIntyre considers a similar logical leap in other contemporaries:

> There are a series of later writers—J.L. Talmon, Isaiah Berlin and Daniel Bell are examples—who see in this republican commitment to public virtue the genesis of totalitarianism and even of

> terror. . . . It was rather, so I would claim, the ways in which the commitment to virtue was institutionalized politically . . . and not the commitment itself which produced some at least of the consequences which they abhor; but in fact most modern totalitarianism and terror has nothing to do with *any* commitment to virtue.[6]

The problem with mistaking ethical content or question for authoritarian moralism and zeal is, simply, the error of confusing values or ideals with our failures to meet them at obvious historical moments. One might end up blaming Goethe for Hitler. Surely "the enemy" lies elsewhere. Are not the conditions of twentieth-century life requiring of us greater sophistication, and even more basic distinctions between cause and effect?

We need to understand, first, what three frequently misunderstood writers—Fowles, Gardner, Mailer—who connect art and consciousness to an actual world or cosmos, or even to history, are *not* approaching in their work. Then we will also be more prepared to define, as the subject of this book, what their work *is* approaching. Generally, they have sought to combine certain of the least restrictive and most flexible elements of our classical, romantic, and existential heritage. These three writers have not, therefore, devoted their careers to the production of literal precepts to live by, nor to the production of moralizing platitudes, nor to the foolish moralizing of such artistic criteria as "poetic justice" that certain rigors of Christian neoclassicism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced. Nor have these three authors presented a series of unbreakable rules of unity or form. Neither has Fowles, Gardner, nor Mailer accepted that other facet of neoclassicism which has tended toward its own fanaticisms: the philosophical rationalism rooted in Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. That is to say, these three contemporary writers have not argued for some innocent confidence in the ability of human reason to find and systematize the unalterable laws of nature or the regulations of God. If at their worst Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer can at times seem preachy, it is more a preachiness of tone than of substance. And in their better, more typical, moments, that preachiness belies the experimental, even tentative, nature of their quests.

These three writers have drawn, above all, their very sense of the purpose of art and the role of the artist from the ancient springs of classicism. Fowles, especially in *The Aristos*, Gardner, in *On Moral Fiction*, and Mailer, in *Can-*

nibals and Christians and throughout his nonfiction, all argue that art seeks elusive but significant truths, persuades and nurtures the mind and soul, and leads toward greater personal integrity, toward "virtuous" growth. Viewed from the hermetic position, they are contemporary heretics because they have drawn on primitive roots by connecting form with ideas associated with the form, have viewed art as *psychogogia*, and have, even through the most experimental forms, still returned to the conviction that the form implies the values and the idea. Fundamental to form for all three writers is the concept of "man *in via*," as Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, or of human life as a narrative structure of quest or journey. Every classical and medieval view of virtue is "linked to some particular notion of the narrative structure of human life," to the individual's ability "to survive evils" on his or her "historical journey." MacIntyre writes specifically of Gardner, but he might have been writing of Fowles and Mailer when he continues on this point:

> It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.
>
> The virtues are therefore to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good . . . and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.[7]

These three artists work on the assumption that art is rhetoric, to borrow Frank Lentricchia's terminology in *Criticism and Social Change*, that the artist (or theorist) has a choice to work on behalf of the dominant hegemony or to work "counter-hegemonically as a violator." I find myself hard put to think of three other contemporary Anglo-American authors who see their work so much as an effort (in Lentricchia's phrasing) to reeducate or inform, to aid the birth of cultural revolution or transformation, and to create a body of work that can stand as a "redemptive social project." [8]

Moreover, we are considering in this book three authors whose central, prototypical novels express secular themes through techniques and charac-

ters that arise out of a tradition in English literature—the dramas, metadramas, and masques of the magus. During the fifteenth through the early seventeenth centuries the magus became a symbol of the possibilities open to humanity. As Barbara Howard Traister puts it, the human being becomes an opening through which the "inexhaustible richness of being" may pour, even though the magician—as teacher, master of revels, and metadramatist—is always "precariously balanced upon the margin of an absolute risk." If the magicians of medieval romance with their spectacles and role-playing for the discomfort, edification, and entertainment of spectators came to be associated also with the creative artist, this association increased as Tudor-Stuart drama developed, just as the philosophical tradition of magic increasingly informed the fictive tradition.

The magicians of Renaissance drama raise moral questions of "how much achievement, power, or knowledge is permitted to man, and what are his possibilities and his human limitations." Likewise, the magicians of court masque, if more stereotypical and inhuman, were central figures in moments of transformation, in elaborately staged "internal conflicts." If magician figures could not survive the rationalism and skepticism that began to dominate English intellectual life in the seventeenth century, Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer restore the metaphorical, psychological, philosophical, and spectacular powers of magicians and their "magic" to literary art. Once again, the magus plays a role in "explorations of the nature of man and his place in a world he comes painfully near to controlling."[9] Once again three authors, through the magus figure, return their readers to the referential terrains of history, of life lived in the society of others, of moral consequence and responsibility.

Though at times Gardner and Mailer, especially, have been erroneously singled out as reactionaries who accept what is "right" only because it is established, they have, on the contrary, tried to discover what it is in human conduct and life that leads to freedom rather than repression, to individual growth rather than diminution, and to life rather than death. No three contemporary writers have, moreover, been so deeply concerned about the growth and psychology of the individual amidst the totalitarian impulses of twentieth-century cultures. And therein lies their second chief artistic resource—their roots in our rebellious romantic and existential heritage. Basic to Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer is their belief in the potential of the individual to assess means as well as ends in life and art. All three authors also em-

phasize the significance of psychological reality, emotion, and originality in the development of humanity's moral sense. And by their works, these three writers hope to suggest possible avenues to freedom amidst the labyrinths of established or "revolutionary" oppressions. But they are not willing to substitute the labyrinths of word-game for the labyrinths of oppression. By their definitions of freedom, Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer would transcend the restrictions and the ethical limitations of either kind of labyrinth. Though these three writers have used, variously, such typically post-modern and metafictional techniques as multiple choice endings (or plots), embedded tales, parodied mythic and fabulative texts, "false" characters who address readers, multiple contradictory points of view, labyrinthine games, speculations about fiction *in* fiction, the deliberate confounding of fact and fiction, the parody of popular genres, irony directed at both characters and writers, and improbable coincidences, they are not prepared to accept such techniques as an intervention *only* in other fictions (or writing) or to accept fiction *only* as a symbolic system of signs and relationships without connections to the world.

PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIVISM AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

Besides the disruptions of the Second World War and the world that followed—from Vietnam, to political terrorism, to corporate waste dumps that poison the waters of life (among the scores of crises that have been and are before us)—a separate element in contemporary thought has added to the confusion and debate about what we can and cannot know, and how we should or should not define ourselves, our political systems, our conduct toward one another, and our art. That further element in contemporary speculations is structuralist and "post-structuralist" thought in linguistics and the human sciences. One might speculate that the influence of structuralist theory on contemporary Anglo-American fictional practices is akin to the influence of Freud and Freudianism on the British and American literary mind during the first forty years or so of the twentieth century. The lines of influence are being traced out by other critics. Robert Scholes focuses our attention on one important parallel when in *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979) he writes that modern fabulation is connected to structuralist thought by its rejection of the "empirical concept of history" as something that may be retrieved "by objective investigations of fact." The

"fabulative histories" of Pynchon or Barth adapt history "to the artifices of daydream and fabulation."[10]

The similarities between the post-war experimental fiction—by metafiction, nonreferentialism, fabulism, surfiction or any other name—and the radical subjectivism in certain structuralist theories, especially as those theories have taken root and flourished in the American academy, are by now commonplace observations of the critical canon. But I need to emphasize the drift of powerful and persuasive elements in late-twentieth-century theory and fiction so that we begin to understand the magnitude of the challenge, indeed the sheer audacity, of writers who persist in regenerating through practice and critique a contrary view of fiction as moral force. Despite the at one time appropriate revolutionary claims of the post-structuralists, one of the most heretical and philosophically disturbing things a writer can now say is that human consciousness and hence art as the expression of that consciousness are attached to an actual world where historical processes are not only knowable and valuable in some degree, but are processes that create an arena where humanity still tests its own ethical dimensions and still grows either farther from or closer to its responsibilities to itself, to history, and to the earth.

In his search for the ways in which the literary intellectual can participate in the radical work of social transformation, Frank Lentricchia arrives at a similar view of the hermetic tendencies in current theory. Using Paul de Man as his example of the "undisputed master of deconstruction in the United States," Lentricchia writes:

> "I would wager that he [de Man] will be rediscovered as the most brilliant hero of traditionalism, the theorist who elaborated the cagiest argument for the political defusion of writing and the intellectual life. . . . The insidious effect of his work is not the proliferating replication of his way of reading . . . but the paralysis of praxis itself: an effect that traditionalism . . . should only applaud."

Throughout *Criticism and Social Change* Lentricchia places as de Man's great theoretical antagonist Kenneth Burke—he who connects gnosis with praxis (Mailer would be our chief novelist counterpart here), he who restores to art its antinomian force, and he who reverses the tendencies of "aesthetic

isolationism" since the late eighteenth century toward a political and social (i.e., historical) "aesthetic pragmatism." If Burke insists on the potential efficacy of the engaged life, de Man insists that we cannot know enough to intervene as activist intellectuals or artists (or worse, that all intervention is doomed to failure); if Burke argues for the possibility of historical consciousness, de Man argues for its impossibility; if Burke implies we can be agents of change, de Man implies we can be only agents of the status quo. Lentricchia concludes that, because for de Man there can be no revolutionary change on the terrain of history, then de Man's claim expresses "the postulation of the most genuine meaning of political conservatism. . . . This is the effect of his theory; this is his social work; this is the message of post-structuralism in the United States."[11]

Earlier, in *After the New Criticism*, Lentricchia had emphasized the two general principles that, from Saussure to Barthes, arise out of the structuralist movement: first, that the self is an intersubjective construct formed by cultures and not controlled by the individual and, second, that the text is a formless space where shape is imposed by structured modes of reading.[12] The whole movement of post-structuralism and deconstructionism continues to argue for the loss of an "identifiable center" or a "privileged position" for any body of knowledge, any particular meaning, or any ethic. Indeed, the only center now becomes the "centerlessness" of all texts, and the only positive value the "free play" of mind in creator and reader. The work of art becomes an enclosed labyrinth without reference to "reality," history, absolutes, or center. Hence the terms *non-referential* and *decentered* in recent discourse on fiction and theory. Now the self has become rootless, and the thing "signified" has no meaning beyond a rootless "signifier."

Yet the "issue of whether or not signifieds are purely arbitrary or partly grounded upon phenomena," writes Robert Scholes in *Textual Power*, "is an issue of great importance." Scholes positions Umberto Eco as a reasonable corrective to post-modern theoretical excesses because Eco argues for the interdependency of verbal and non-verbal worlds. It is, for Scholes, reference—"a dimension of the human use of language"—that has been "systematically repressed or ignored by structuralist and hermetic theoreticians." In short, the "hermetic view of textuality inhibits any attempt to criticize either the text or the world." Although Scholes applauds such elements in the deconstructive analysis as the correcting of "naïve empiricisms of all sorts," his critique is very close to Lentricchia's. It is to this recoiling "with horror

from contamination by praxis," to this "wide-spread phenomenon of deconstructive paralysis, a permanent state of equivocation before the bridge that leads from thought and writing to consequential action," that Scholes is likewise unsympathetic. "The foreknowledge of guilt leads to an abdication of responsibility." Ultimately, Scholes argues, as does Lentricchia, that the problem with hermetic attitudes is their tendency to accept and foster the "quietistic acceptance of injustice." Scholes' theoretical project (and our three authors' fictive project) is to "rehabilitate reference" and "rescue the referent" without falling into "naïve assumptions about the empirical object."[13]

One upshot of post-modern theory, then, is a pervasive contemporary vision of reality as universal disorder, and any vision of ideals, ideas, or values (old or new) as mere supports of relative, repressive ideologies. The only order, if there is any, exists within language itself, and the body of fiction thereby becomes an enclosed world or pure contemplation where all ideas may be entertained as of equal value and as without external consequence. That relativity and lack of consequence is what has been called the "self-deconstructive quality" of the text; it is what makes fiction very like a game, nothing like moral force, certainly not a substitute for dead religions and past ethics.

Structuralism and its theoretical offspring, then, are certainly disenchanting. To the extent that humanity has needed disenchantment, we can understand the desirability of espousing such theory. As Michel Foucault has argued, the potential of advanced linguistic theory and analysis is the disillusioning of historical vision through the process of learning to see history as a series of revolutionary orders imposing themselves and their game rules on one another. It is this vision of history, to Foucault, that frees humanity to question all values continually, including and especially the system of values within which one lives, even though there is no final answer, cause, or value to be discovered. But as Lentricchia points out, this "deconstruction" of history, with all its healthy ramifications for individual action and responsibility within the larger world, has not been the predominant direction of transplanted structuralism, via, above all, de Man.[14]

Some, including Graff as early as 1973 and Karl Kroeber a decade later, have gone so far as to connect post-modern theory to the general "bureaucratization and technicization" of university education. It is, Kroeber argued, simply the "smashing academic success of the natural sciences" that has so tempted literary critics to "found the kind of academic specialization that

empire builders need in our bureaucracy of criticism." It has been for us, Kroeber argues, all too easy a step from the bureaucratization of our intellectual life and our progressive desacralization of life generally to "the idea of art's autonomy" or triviality, because "an object without relation to other phenomena *is* by one definition unimportant."

Whether one agrees with Kroeber's analysis, the limitations of advanced theories and fictions have gradually become clear. I have noted certain of Scholes' and Lentricchia's reservations. Even in his search specifically for the "ethical control" in contemporary fantasy, Scholes concluded with a similar reservation, and he later argued in *Textual Power* for the importance of literary studies in the classroom as a corrective to students' lives in the most manipulative of cultures. Graff, to take another example, argues that the whole "post-modern movement within contemporary literature and criticism calls into question the traditional claims of literature and art to truth and human value," and thereby tends to render literature increasingly "meaningless in the classroom." And Jacques Barzun, extending his critique to prevailing movements in art and culture, has questioned our tendency to substitute revulsion and nihilism for disinterested critical judgment; and he has questioned our narcissistic tendency to create "this train of images in which individual responsibility is lost," art is dissociated from history and biography, and art's "energy of emancipation" is dissipated.[15]

As we will see, there are important correspondences between this theoretical critique of the limits of post-modern hermeticism—however wrongheaded that critique may seem from the post-modern position—and the critical reactions and fictional practices of Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer.

THE AVANT-GARDE: ROOTS OF THE POST-MODERN NOVEL

In addition to our modern philosophical heritage, the global disruptions during and after World War II, and influential aspects of structuralist thought, the literary avant-garde itself, as it responds to all of these developments, makes a further contribution to the milieu in which Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer have lived and worked. If each of these writers has to some extent employed the literary techniques that developed within a post-modern milieu, each has also reacted against the most relativistic and hermetic orientations within that milieu.

One more threat to the possibilities of equilibrium in human nature and the social order, one more challenge to the assumptions of humanism, the

avant-garde in Europe in its revolutionary stance against traditional art forms and culture has furthered the detachment of consciousness from history, the disintegration of "reality," the conversion of man to automaton, and the substitution of artifice for life. Finally, the avant-garde has turned art against itself. The roots of the movement go deep.

In *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, for example, Ihab Hassan argues that the "Dionysiac frenzy" of surrealism and post-modern literature is manifest early in romantic irony and—through Heine and Mallarmé—moves imagination toward its abolition. Art is persuaded of its own impossibility. The avant-garde that Hassan traces through Sade to Hemingway and Kafka, and finally to Genet and Beckett, is a "literature of silence" that "de-realizes the world" and then either "turns consciousness upon itself" or condemns it to the solipsist drama of self and anti-self, to the autism of an "ambivalent semantic."[16]

The *nouveau roman* of Nathalie Surraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Jean Cayrol, and others, Hassan argues, seeks nothing short of a complete transformation of the idea of the novel that would render past genres alien, or at best, quaint. These writers embrace a vision of life's futility in a universe without established norms. In France, the post-modern novel is neutral. It rejects protest, denies the possibility of analysis, abhors ideology. It has become notorious for its vision in life as a depthless surface that is essentially trivial and banal, and for its stylistic flatness or "*matisme complet*," as Roland Barthes calls it. The fictional labyrinth, the structure or form, again becomes, as Robbe-Grillet argues, the principal value of the work. This value Robbe-Grillet gladly limits further to the total subjectivity of superficial perceptions, or "*écriture*." And if, for Hassan, Genet takes us all the way back to Sade's transvaluation of values and the resulting denial of the ethical differences of all symbols—from swastika to cross—then Beckett, the "supreme post-modern artist," gives us the ultimate literature of the "solipsistic drone," consciousness separated from matter, of that solitary game the human voice plays with itself, of, finally, human "consciousness spinning loose of history" (160–69, 177–209, 210–47).

This growing emphasis on surface as opposed to depth in continental literature of which Hassan writes, Alan Wilde places as one of the most fundamental reversals of modernism at the hands of late modernist and post-modernist authors. Ivy Compton-Burnett is Wilde's model transitional figure in English literature. Compton-Burnett's early approaches to the reflexive, reductive, and anti-referential adumbrates certain later tendencies

and themes, as does the "morally and psychologically claustrophobic ambience," the narrow range of human possibility, and the "acid bath" of irony in her novels (108, 122).

TOWARD A NEW SYNTHESIS

I want to suggest at this point that in much of our theoretical debate we may be missing the central issue. Few would argue seriously with what Scholes identifies as the unbridgeable "Borgesian" gap between language and reality—a veritable cliché of modern epistemological and poetic theory, generally called "formalism." But Scholes argues that despite the wide acknowledgement of this gap, Borges himself does not turn his back on reality for a purely verbal universe. Scholes sees in Borges a willingness to acknowledge the "ungraspable reality" while to some degree defining it through complex allegory, rather than through a single reducible truth.[17] What Scholes is saying about Borges and Eco's bridging of the gap between signifier and signified—whether through allegory, historical irony, or theoretical discourse—does parallel a synthesis that Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer have begun to construct. This synthesis, as we will see, is perhaps closer to the spirit of an international genre of historically engaged metafiction and ethically challenging experimentation (represented also by Márquez, Calvino, and Fuentes) than to the spirit of Anglo-American post-modernism of the 1960s and 1970s. The central issue, however, may be that the debate over slice-of-life realism versus reality-denying metafiction is by now a conflict of strawmen. The theoretical and fictional issues are more complex.

Graff seems to suggest this complexity when he considers the politics behind such debates: "Before we can even argue about such concepts (reason, ethics, objectivity) it seems necessary to free them from false politicization. . . . Until this is done, debate can hardly get off the ground, since what is being attacked is not 'reason' or 'realism' itself but a caricature that has been set up in order to be quickly disposed of" (28). As Graff puts it, of course: "The choice having been reduced to one between defensive Puritanism and open-minded creativity, not much remains to be argued about" (82).

I think the issue worth pursuing now is the difference between amoral and ethical fiction (whether realistic, fabulative, or metafictional). Who, for example, can seriously argue that chronological plot development has been the only true form of fiction for the past two hundred years? Yet some post-modern critics and fiction writers still treat plot development as their chief

bogey, with "characterization" and "setting" standing just behind plot like a row of effigies awaiting the torch. Sukenick gives us one example of the level of this debate:

> Realistic fiction presupposed chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative, an irreductible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization, and . . . the ultimate concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. In the world of post-realism, however, all of these absolutes have become absolutely problematic. The contemporary writer . . . is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist.[18]

The problem with such absolute expressions of the nonexistence of reality warring against absolute expressions of objectively verifiable reality is that they both are like shooting fish in a barrel. They are too easy. And they are off the real target. By the late twentieth century few are willing to support (or need bother to support) dusted philosophies of nominalism, or of the absence of reality. There *are* no innocent fictional forms anymore. What serious contemporary writer would argue that his work is a priori the only "frame" on reality?

To my mind, the more important question is one of seriousness of purpose *within* experimentation of form and technique. That is a question which leads to the examination of form and technique. That is a question which leads to the examination of the ethical control of design. To put it another way, what Fowles requires of a novel is that the design direct our attention to the ethical content, to the question of what the individual's responsibilities to self and others are. What Gardner requires is that the novel be morally alive, that it explore the subtle, shifting connections between self and others and history. What Mailer requires of a novel is that it be above all "philosophically disturbing." But Sukenick requires only that a novel be written in the new style, or "Bossa Nova" as he calls it, that the novel represent only itself through the techniques of opacity, abstraction, and improvisation. "Opacity implies that we should direct our attention to the surface of the work . . . keeping his mind on that surface instead of undermining it with profundities" (*Surfiction* 45). To the "surfictionist" then, the greatest enemy beyond plot and character is, as Marcus Klein put it, "didacticism of

any sort, with its implication of the possibility of social and philosophical certainties beyond the work of art." Only by remaining "rigorously detached" from his material will the author achieve his avant-garde effects and style.[19]

But the issues grow more complex still when sympathetic critics like Scholes set out to find precisely the ethical content in experimental fiction. Scholes asks: What is the nature of the ethical concern, where is it vigorously denied, and, finally, how does such denial of ethical value differ from the affirmation of ethical value in particular works? It is part of Scholes' final question that I try to answer in this book chiefly by examining three related affirmations of ethical value in the contemporary novel.

The very process of Scholes' search for the "ethical control" in works by Barth, Fowles, Murdoch, Barthelme, Gass, Vonnegut, Coover, Hawkes, and Southern might suggest, however, just how sparse the ethical dimension in most of these novelists is. Scholes discovers a hint of ethical order in Gass, who seems to portray "object man" becoming sentient, harmonious man, and Ishmael Reed, who returns to social satire through fabulation. Scholes can say of John Fowles alone that he writes "precisely about" the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical.

If there is to be a new synthesis through a new fiction, Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer show one direction that synthesis may take. Not only do they regenerate certain classical, Renaissance, romantic, and existential literary traditions through their work, and not only do they employ some of the most current fictional techniques and theoretical concerns, but they also attempt to integrate some of the most productive affirmations and skepticisms of modernism and post-modernism. If like post-modernists these three are chary of solutions, doubtful of the self's integrity and identity, open to randomness and contingency (what Fowles calls our environment of "hazard"), and conscious of a chaotic world, they have not given up the traditionally modernist concern with psychological and metaphysical depth for post-modernist surfaces, nor have they sought to demystify life but, on the contrary, to return to life its mystery. They long, like modernists, to bridge the gaps and discontinuities of life through, first, their art. They long, in Wilde's phrase, "to restore significance to the broken world," not to catalogue a world and selves beyond repair. Out of these concerns arise their redemptive themes and symbols, including their heroes who—however small or ordinary their heroisms may at times seem—cut strange figures in the disjunctive and anti-heroic terrains of so much post-war fiction.

For Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer, the small, rare assents of post-modernism, as Wilde defines them through the examples of Elkin, Apple, and Barthelme, remain insufficient in moral and antinomian force as well as in the energy of emancipation. It is not enough for these three subjects of my study, for example, merely to participate in or accept the world of disorder and chance to be able to enjoy its small pleasures for oneself. It is not enough merely to recover one's humanity within disillusionment, and it is not enough merely to express the range of one's "minor, banal dissatisfactions," to continue with Wilde's definition, or to express "not anomie or accidie or dread but a muted series of irritations, frustrations, and bafflements" amidst that death of consciousness, a death which "may explain the concern with the apocalyptic in much recent fiction or with the self-abnegations of the minimalist and the aleatory in painting and music" (15–16, 129, 165, 170–78). And that is why the current "minimalist" fiction of, say, Raymond Carver or Frederick Barthelme—sometimes seen as the proper successor to post-modernism—seems to pale beside the new synthesis Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer have been approaching since the 1960s. Such "minimalism" (and I want to include here those variants that Gardner identified in *The Art of Fiction* [1983] arising from the suppression of technique and style—or any artistic modification of reality—as well as the suppression of sublimity, ideology, or morality by a kind of surface, "super"- or "photo"-realism) is closer to the hermetic spirit of post-modernism, not nearly so bold a challenge to that spirit nor so dynamic an adaptation of technique.

The interest and skepticism of Scholes and Hassan, among others, are important because they help us to understand the direction in which the work of Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer seems to be taking us. These skeptical critics are of course sometimes writing about different authors and literatures, they discuss in the course of their books a variety of issues, but on the issue of historical engagement as bold, ethical challenge they generally agree. From one point of view the skeptics may be wrong, but their positions on that issue—their desire to "rescue the referent" and return art and theory to praxis—are similar. As Scholes expresses it in *Fabulation and Metafiction*:

> The lesson is clear. . . . Alienation is simply the price we pay for civilization. . . . Having reached the point where we understand this, we can see that the great task of the human imagination for the present time is to generate, in literature and in life, systems

> that bring human desires into closer harmony with the systems operating in the whole cosmos. . . . It is now time for man to turn civilization in the direction of integration and away from alienation, to bring human life back into harmony with the universe.

This is the task Fowles, Gardner, and Mailer have undertaken with varying degrees of success, and it is this undertaking that makes them worthy of our choice and attention if we are to understand the themes and forms that may be superseding post-modernism itself. Scholes continues: "For fiction, self-reflection is a narcissistic way of avoiding this great task. It produces a certain kind of pleasure, no doubt, this masturbatory reveling in self-scrutiny; but it also generates great feelings of guilt—not because what it is doing is bad, but because of what it is avoiding" (213–18).

If Scholes sees "signs of faith in something" in the "obsessive ingenuity" of Pynchon, the anger of Coover, the energy and inventiveness of Barth, he also sees the birth throes of a new artistic epoch when these "marvelous monsters, like leviathans and pachyderms" will go the way of woolly mammoths whose environment grows "more hostile to them every day." As the time of these "great and gaudy creatures" ends, humanity seems increasingly aware that "history is real and . . . we are in it": a condition of consciousness that grows more alien to self-reflexive fiction every day (209, 212).

Likewise, Hassan's similar skepticism is expressed in the conclusion of his study of the avant-garde, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus.* Hassan believes that the necessary "reign of terror, wonder, and burlesque in our age," which culminated recently in America, connects contemporary fiction to the whole post-modern spirit in Western art, politics, science, and morality. But that spirit is itself merely the birth throe of a new epoch. We are witness in America and Western culture generally, Hassan argues, to "the renewal of shapes" that strain "the structure of human life." Hassan concludes:

> I can only hope that after self-parody, self-subversion, and self-transcendence, after the pride and revulsion of anti-art will have gone their way, art may move toward a redeemed imagination, commensurate with the full mystery of human consciousness. Neither more nor less. Our revels then will have ended. Everyone then his own magician, and no man a magician alone. (256)

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Bruss, *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 9–10, 22; and Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 7, 15–16.
2. Vincent Leitch, "The Book of Deconstructive Criticism," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 12 (1979): 19–40.
3. See Trachtenberg's "Intellectual Background" in *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979), 1–50.
4. *Surfiction: Fiction Now—and Tomorrow* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981), 7, 13. See Gass in *The New Republic* 180 (10 March 1979): 25, 28–33.
5. Larry McCaffery's *The Metafictional Muse* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982) provides a useful summary of metafiction. Such fiction typically examines its own construction as it proceeds, comments on previous fiction, or examines how fictional systems operate *in* fiction. Metafiction is playful, self-conscious, and willfully artificial. Alienated or victimized by a cold, meaningless, fragmented, or entropic social order, the central characters typically create private systems of meaning and may end up controlled by their own systems. Moreover, metafiction reinforces the concept of the radically subjective nature of all systems and perceptions that shape our experience of the world. Rather than interpretive, metafiction is, therefore, self-reflexive, a "mask which points to itself" and whose only reality is that of its own discourse (see esp. 4–5, 7, 16). Several books have focused as much or more on metafictional and larger post-modern impulses in British literature. Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984); Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer's collection *The Contemporary English Novel* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979); and Bradbury's *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978) are but a few examples. Some of the authors most often associated, in widely varying degrees, with post-modern practice and theory include Samuel Beckett, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, Alan Burns, John Fowles, B.S. Johnson, Doris Lessing, David Lodge, Iris Murdoch, Ann Quin, Muriel Spark, David Storey, and Angus Wilson. Waugh expresses a generally acknowledged belief that British experimentation and self-consciousness tend to be more limited and less radical than the more extreme American examples.
6. Gerald Graff, *Literature against Itself* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979), 64–66; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1981), 221.
7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 163–64, 204. MacIntyre establishes the "core concept' of virtue as: (1) *practice* (the pursuit of excellence in praxis, including politics), (2) *the narrative order of a single human life*, and (3) *the moral tradition* (especially the classical).
8. Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983), 147–48.
9. Barbara Howard Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1984), 11, 23–30, 67, 170–80.

10. Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979), 206–7. See also Elizabeth Bruss, *Beautiful Theories*, esp. her chapters on Gass and Sontag, for further discussion of theory-artistic practice relationships.
11. *Criticism and Social Change*, 2–6, 10, 38–41, 46–50, 116.
12. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), see esp. 108.
13. Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literacy and the Teaching of English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 4–7, 49, 74–76, 85–87, 94, 99, 104, 109–10. Alan Wilde's positive look at modernism and post-modernism presents a similar warning about the principal risk of post-modern "suspensive irony," an irony which accepts the world as it is. The risk is "passivity"; see *Horizons*, 155.
14. *After the New Criticism*, 189–207.
15. Graff, 7, 32. Jacques Barqun in "Liberalism and the Religion of Art" and "Biography and Criticism: A Misalliance?" in *Critical Questions: On Music and Letters, Culture and Biography*, ed. Bea Friedland (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982). Similar discussions occur in Anna Balakian, "Relativism in the Arts and the Road to the Absolute," and Hayden White, "The Limits of Relativism in the Arts," in *Relativism in the Arts*, ed. Betty Jean Craige (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983). Kroeber's article appears in *PMLA* 99 (May 1984): 326–39. As early as 1969 Fowles had written: "Both academic criticism and weekly reviewing have in the last forty years grown dangerously scientific, or pseudo-scientific, in their general tenor. Analysis and categorization are indispensable scientific tools in the scientific field; but the novel, like the poem, is only partly a scientific field. No one wants a return to the kind of bellelettrist and onanistic accounts of new books . . . ; but we could do with something better than we have got." See "Notes on an Unfinished Novel," collected in *The Novel Today*, 149.
16. Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), esp. 13–14, 67. Future references are parenthetical.
17. *Fabulation and Metafiction*, 2, 7–10, 13.
18. See "The New Tradition in Fiction," in *Surfiction*, 35, and Klinkowitz's "Literary Disruptions" in the same book, 165–79, where the same argument is repeated.
19. Marcus Klein, "John Hawkes' Experimental Compositions," in *Surfiction*, 204.