5-2006

Seeking an Aesthetics of Metafiction

Erin J. Vachon
University of Rhode Island, erinjvachon@gmail.com

Name: Erin J. Vachon
Title: Seeking an Aesthetics of Metafiction
Summary:
According the Oxford English Dictionary, metafiction is 'fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions…and narrative techniques.' In short, metafiction announces itself as a textual artifact and examines the very nature of fiction. Metafiction has been defined as such, but I seek the effect of the text upon the act of reading and the reader: into what space is the reader initiated when the boundaries between author-text-reader become dismantled or confused? What does the act of reading become, beyond a mere analytic exercise? I am searching for the beauty of metafiction: is there a specific aesthetic quality to metafiction? How does the importance of reading change with the recognition of a text as metafiction? Furthermore, I seek to critique the acquired definition of metafiction: do all texts have an unspoken metafictional quality to them? This thesis is an exploration of these questions, driven by the examination of fictional and theoretical texts in conjunction with my own work.
Keywords: metafiction, aesthetics, reader response
Advisor: Dr. Galen A. Johnson
Majors: English and Comparative Literature
E-mail: skyelyte13@hotmail.com

"*Thus, the meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity but, if anything, a dynamic happening*."
-Wolfgang Iser

"We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things."
-Montaigne

Let's start at the beginning, while we still can. Soon you may feel a queasy sense of imbalance, of decentering[1]. But as for now, let us pretend that we are at the origin, and that I am in control here[2]. Off we go to play.

In the essay "Las Meninas,' Michel Foucault writes about the Velázquez painting of the same title. What better place to start than painting in a discussion on beauty? I shall start here, with a focus on meta-painting, as a catapult into literature[3]. Foucault describes the picture:

> The painter is looking, his face turned slightly and his head leaning towards one shoulder. He is staring at a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves, who are at that point: our bodies, our faces, our eyes. The spectacle he is observing is thus doubly invisible: first, because it is not represented within the space of the painting, and second, because it is situated precisely in that blind point, in that essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking (4).

In gazing at the picture, we become the subject of the painting, even though it has already been painted.

In this way, "Las Meninas" is a study out of time and solid objects, which changes with each new spectator, at the same time that it occupies a specific time and place, shown by the historical figures within the painting. Or rather, the subject of the painting is visibility itself: the in-between of the object-painting and the spectator. In the same way, the subject is painting: the in-between of the object-painting and the artist. "Las Meninas" is a study in the in-between. Such is

[1] Are you the 'you' to whom I speak? Or the one before you? Perhaps after?
[2] Soon, you may ask, who is this 'I'?
[3] Keep in mind that this study of "Las Meninas" and Foucault shall be fairly basic – a worthy study would require a full thesis in itself.

metafiction. If this meta-painting is a painting about painting and the visibility of painting – in other words, the construction of the painting and how it is constructed – then meta-fiction is writing about writing and likewise, reading about reading. In metafiction, we, the reader, are the subject of the text, even though it has already been written. Or rather, the subject of the text is reading itself: the in between of the object-text and the reader. In the same way, the subject is writing: the in between of the object-text and the author. Metafiction is a study of the in-between.

Yet, at the same time, meta-painting is a study in doubling[4]. Foucault says of "Las Meninas": "No gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity" (5). In addition, he says:

> We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in face apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lusterless back. the other side of a psyche (6).

We cannot see ourselves seeing - even though this is the tension-filled subject of "Las Meninas" – and thus, the painting is a constant movement in reciprocity – a continuous reversal of seeing and seen – in order to catch visibility. But visibility, by its state as the in-between, cannot be caught. It is the nexus around which subject and object rotate, so that visibility is always a splitting in the same moment that it is a unifying. Consider the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind": "I would be hard pressed to say *where* the painting is I am looking at. For I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it" (126). Visibility does not make a subject out of the viewer and an object of art; this reversal of vision confounds this dynamic of power and objectification by collapsing notions of subject and object. Thus, metapainting invites participation in its production as art and process, rather than a fixation on its state as an object.

Such is metafiction. We cannot read ourselves reading, though metafiction attempts to expose this action. Thus, metafiction is also a constant movement in reciprocity – a continuous reversal of

[4] I do hope that you've already caught onto this, with my use of language, the repetition of sentences – it is dizzying.

reading and being read – in order to catch reading itself. This is the nexus around which the reader and the text rotate, so that reading is always a splitting in the same moment that it is a unifying. We cannot determine subject and object from each other; rather, reader and text exist in this constant reversal between the two. So we proceed. This is the beauty of metafiction: it de-familiarizes the familiar act of reading (and writing) by exposing the act of reading as the in-between which produces doublings, at once splitting the reader from and unifying the reader to the text. In turn, I posit that this movement is not particular to reading about reading (and writing about writing); metafiction merely acts explicitly in the same way that all texts exist implicitly, so that metafictionality becomes a trait rather than a genre.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, metafiction is 'fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions…and narrative techniques." In short, metafiction announces itself as a textual artifact and examines the very nature of fiction *through* fiction. This is the commonly accepted definition, though there is much debate about the stability of this. Linda Hutcheon notes this: "No attempt has been made to propose a comprehensive theory of metafiction. In the first place, any such theory would be reductive, much more reductive than any other theory of the novel in general. This is because the point of *meta*fiction is that it constitutes its own first critical commentary, and in so doing, it will be argued, sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered"(6). Rather than squabble with other critics over the rights and wrongs of definition, it seems only logical that the solution must rest in attentiveness to language, always noting that language is an unstable system of referents, rather than an exact model of meaning. Since metafiction is composed in and with words, we should return to the word "metafiction" [meta- + fiction *n.*] itself. Here, the *OED* has much to say. In its attachment to "fiction," "meta-" denotes the study of a subject "beyond, above, at a higher level" or a study "which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline" – in this case, fiction. But what happens when we look at these four letters specifically, in m-e-t-a-'s connection to another word, such as "metamorphoses"? Here, the prefix becomes a sign "denoting change, transformation, permutation, or substitution." Ah. Hold please.

"Fiction" is the "action of fashioning or imitating." This brings us to aesthetics – mimesis or imitation splits into two theories of representation. First, the notion of *reflection* – the duplication of the world through art, so that art becomes cliché – is the replication of the familiar. The other proposal is mimesis as *re-presentation*, in which art re-presents the familiar world as unfamiliar. Rather than cliché, art becomes critique. Perhaps fiction is an oscillation between cliché and critique, a movement that exposes the nature of both modes. But what happens when we attach the prefix "meta-"?

Of course, "metafiction" studies fiction at a "higher level," and questions the very fiction-ness of fiction, how representation is represented. But what if the secondary definition of the prefix is applicable? Meta-fiction becomes the *changing* of fiction and almost certainly, *a change in reading (and writing)* fiction. What happens when we begin to see fiction as transformative, a process that unfolds rather than an isolated site on the written page? Right away, we can expect metafiction to be an art that reveals the natures of cliché and critique by moving above and beyond fiction and by changing both the notion of fiction and the reading of it. Do not take this move lightly, this romp into the doubled meanings of words; doubling becomes extremely important in the study of metafiction. In the original word itself, metafiction doubles the meanings of each syllable, multiplying possibility while walking the line of contradiction.

You may ask, "How do I know if I am reading metafiction?" Patricia Waugh makes a fairly all-inclusive list of metafictional characteristics:

> [T]he over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator…ostentatious typographic experiment…explicit dramatization of the reader…Chinese-box structures…incantatory and absurd lists…over-systemized or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices…total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative…infinite regress…dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names…self-reflexive images…critical discussions of the story within the story…continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions…use of popular genres…and explicit parody of previous texts whether literary or non-literary…In all of these what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text (21-22).

Metafiction deals in juxtaposition: whether between a double and its twin, in the parody of outside texts and conventions, in the embedding of referential names and narratives, or in a self-referential critique. These explicit modes implicitly reveal the very nature of language – of which all texts are composed – to

be referential, a system of juxtaposed signs. In this way, metafiction forms another double: the levels of explicit and implicit meanings.

It is natural to look at the double, and even the triple, and ask in frustration, "Well, which is correct or real?" But I must warn you. This study is not interested in right and wrong. I do not deal in judgment. In addition, we realize that we must tred lightly on issues of "real" and "fiction" – does this delineation have any purpose when speaking of meaning[5]? Rather, we must ask, "What does this doubling produce?" and "How does it do so?" Before we get any farther down the rabbit hole[6], that is, down into metafiction, fiction in general (of the seemingly non-meta sort) demands attention[7].

In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Jacques Derrida explores *jouissance* – 'play' both in the sense of amusement and the movement of a system such as language. He determines that a structure is organized by a center, which limits the "play" of the structure as a whole (278). But the structure *can* move, if we alter our concept of the origin:

> Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a *function*, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play (280, italics mine).

When the origin goes missing, we can play – the whole system can play because there is room to do so. In fiction, the author has typically reigned as the center of meaning – he or she holds authority over the text because they have *created* it. For this reason, we think of the uncovering of meaning in fiction as excavation – the digging out of an embedded Truth that the author has buried for us to find. But Derrida (along with Roland Barthes) frees us. Let us consider the author as a *function*; in this case, meaning is possibility – a multiplicity of truths. The author aligns words in the world and limits our focus, but *he or she does not hold the key to meaning*. Rather, I do. And you do. The reader generates meaning through the process of reading. Take note of James Machor's question: "If readers construct texts in the act of interpretation, what is the object that is being interpreted?" (1127). Do not confuse the book with the text

---

[5] Can you be sure that fiction is the opposite of reality?
[6] Is this not cliché? I'm playing with you.
[7] Please remember my caution that metafiction is just as much implicit in all fiction as it is explicit in its own genre: we shall see how the ignorance of this shall lead to theoretical goofs when philosophers generalize.

– its physical status always exists, but there is question to what meaning gets derived from the signs it contains. In other words, I am answering the age-old question, "If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?" with another question, "If there is no one there to hear it, is there any meaning to that sound?" Derrida returns to the effects of this decentering on participants in the system. He grants two possibilities:

> Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation (292).

Again, a doubling – a seeming fork in the road. But Derrida gives the first insight into the interpretation of a doubling: "although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing*" (293). The doubling produced by decentering and the refutation of the stable origin *is not an either/or binary*. Rather, Derrida's doubling is at once a splitting and a unifying, a perpetual reversal of position and meaning. Perhaps this is helpful for those who find contemporary literature and, in particular postmodern theory, to by cynical[8]; the double gives us room to experience the yes and the no. Instead of walking the straight line, we move back and forth, from side to side, and in the process, *we see all sides*.

Indeed, Michel Foucault uses the term 'author-function' in "What is an Author?", an essay which he restricts to "the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it" (115), though in a slightly different way than Derrida. He problematizes the author as authority, but acknowledges the weight put upon his or her name: "an author's name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement, or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification" (123). While Derrida informs us that the author is not the center of

[8] While it is absolutely incorrect to say that metafiction is postmodern – since we can trace metafiction much farther back in time, ie. *Tristam Shandy*, etc. – it *is* accurate to state that metafiction is explicitly prevalent in modern and postmodern literature.

the text and its meaning any longer, Foucault examines the author's new role as a function. He or she dwells on a boundary, separating and defining texts and the relationship of the text to the reader:

> We can conclude that, unlike a proper name, which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it, the name of the author remains at the contours of texts – separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence (123).

For Foucault, the author does not exist inside the text, but as an outer casing, a hard shell determining its shape, and a sign of "reliability" (126)[9]. He or she does not produce contradiction between texts, but resolves them in the search for an originating, unifying principle of coherence:

> [T]he author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts. Governing this function is the belief that there must be – at a particular level of an author's thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire – a point where contradictions are resolved, there the incompatible elements can be shown to relate to one another or to cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction (128).

For Foucault, the author untangles. In addition, there is only an unstable link between the author and the narrator of a text (whether in first or third person)[10]. The 'I' of the text, says Foucault, is not the author:

> It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a 'second self' whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book (129).

Juxtaposition once again forces us to find meaning in the in-between, but without the acknowledgment of the metafictional, this meaning seems definite.

This time, Foucault births the 'author-function' out of juxtaposition: "It would be false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the 'author-function' arises out of their scission – in the division and distance of the two" (129). Foucault delineates the roles of each one through mathematics:

> In a mathematical treatise, the ego who indicates the circumstances of composition in the preface is not identical, either in terms of his position or his function, to the 'I' who concludes a demonstration within the body of the text. The former implies a unique individual who, at a given time and place, succeeded in completing a project, whereas the latter indicates an instance and plan of demonstration that anyone can perform provided the same set of axioms, preliminary operations, and an identical set of symbols were used. It is also possible to locate a third ego: one who speaks of the goals of his investigation, the obstacles encountered, its results, and the problems yet to be solved and this 'I' would function in a field of existing or future mathematical discourses. We are not dealing with a system of dependencies where a first and

[9] This gets problematized in metafiction when the author exists within the text, as well as at its bounds.
[10] Oh, I hope you did not assume that the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* was indeed Chaucer himself. Can we really actualize the self in writing anyway? Do not make too many assumptions, dear reader – you stand on a crumbling precipice.

> essential use of 'I' is reduplicated, as a kind of fiction, by the other two. On the contrary, the 'author-function' in such discourses operates so as to effect the simultaneous dispersion of the three egos (130).

And so, Foucault renders his holy trinity of narrator-hood: the author, the 'I', and the author-function[11]. The first exists at a specific intersection of time and place in relation to the text, ie. John Smith wrote the first sentence of his novel in his New York City apartment while sitting in a checkered bathrobe at 12:48pm while the daily news was on and his dog barked for the twenty-seventh time that day, and on and on. The second is a space: a set of clothing that fits everyone at every point in time, altering its shape enough with the form of the reader - the 'I' exists indefinitely, but requires attachment to a reader for vitality. The third splits and unifies the first two: the author-function is possibility. Waugh explains this tension:

> The author attempts desperately to hang on to his or her 'real' identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens, however, when he or she enters it is that his or her own reality is also called into question. The 'author' discovers that the language of the text produces him or her as much as he or she produces the language of the text. The reader is made aware that, paradoxically, the 'author' is situated *in* the text at the very point where 'he' asserts 'his' identity outside it (133).

Since the author-function exists as an in-between, as an unstable sign, its meaning changes with reading. The author-function subverts the authority of the author by existing in order for play to be possible – for the structure of the text to move with its reader. If we fold this in with Derrida's theory of function, the author-function is a nonlocus of possibility, the intersection in a chiasm that does not exactly meet, but leaves room for play. Metafiction merely locates this nonlocus explicitly within the text.

Derrida and Foucault are not speaking about the absence of the center and the author-function specifically in terms of metafiction. But metafiction takes these theories and *explicitly reveals them* in the reading of literature. We have discussed the author in so-called 'normal' fiction (that is, non-metafictional). But I am most concerned with the reader. I have hypothesized before that metafiction explicitly does what all fiction performs implicitly, but before I turn to the specific work of metafiction on the author, let us dwell in basic reader-response theory for some time.

---

[11] Please note the likeness in syllables to the Christian Trinity: the fath-er, the son, and the hol-y spir-it/the auth-or, the 'I', and the auth-or func-tion. I wish I could say that I had planned it. Perhaps it would improve my authority at this stage in the game.

In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Wolfgang Iser outlines the relationship between the reader and a text – the act of reading: "As a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process" (ix). The meaning of a text appears in reading itself: "the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process" (ix). Therefore, Iser locates aesthetics within this relationship, and almost entirely ignores the idea of the author[12]. He states the relationship as priority in reference to beauty: "Aesthetic response is therefore to be analyzed in terms of a dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction" (x). And he uplifts the reader over all else: "The most important of these [textual] factors is without doubt the reader himself, the addressee of the text" (20). But let us not forget the text[13]. How could we? Isn't that why you read this text – because of your interest in texts beyond this one? Iser knows you and I: "If the study of literature arises from our concern with texts, there can be no denying the importance of what happens to us through these texts" (x). But he recognizes that we are not predetermined as readers. Our responses are unprecedented, aesthetic experiences. For this reason, the *history* of textual reception is insignificant, or at least no more important than all future response. Iser reminds us: "A theory of response has its roots in the text; a theory of reception arises from a history of readers' judgments" (x). This is the impetus to read and write: a moment of beauty that critiques in the very same breath. Fiction itself is a response to history – just as we are a response to a text. What is unresolved? Does the text see it? Do I see it within the text? Iser says, "literary texts constitute a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms" (3). This is the problem of history – the norms generated over time become invisible blockades to solutions. If we return to the notion of mimesis as a defamiliarization of the familiar, it is easy to see how a literary text may be essential to the uncovering of new meanings

[12] I shall show my bias – Iser and I walk hand-in-hand. Let us throw out the author (if not entirely, then let him sit down in the back). The reader has come and makes it new. I shall say why later.
[13] But what is a text? Something to be written and read – constructed and constructing in the same instant. I shall come back to this – would I spoil the surprise ahead, just down the linear path?

necessary to pull ourselves out of the same hum-drum – though often destructive – patterns and conditions.

But we must be careful here. Let us not suck the marrow of the text dry and assume that this was its purpose all along – to be exhumed. Listen to Mr. Iser:

> For, in general, "If the function of interpretation is to extract the hidden meaning from a literary text, this involves certain rather peculiar presuppositions:…'with the arrival of the critic would come the hour of truth, for he claims to disclose the original meaning together with the reason for its disguise.' This brings us to the first guiding (and suspect) norm: If the critic's revelation of the meaning is a loss to the author – as stated at the beginning of the book – then meaning must be a thing which can be subtracted from the work…literature is turned into an item for consumption. This is fatal not only for the text but also for literary criticism, for what can be the function of interpretation if its sole achievement is to extract the meaning and leave behind an empty shell? (4-5)

Meaning is irreducible: "the critic fails – the work does not offer him a detachable message; meaning cannot be reduced to a 'thing'" (7). Meaning is always attached[14]. But here is the next leap. Ready, set, here[15]: interpretation is *always* an exchange: "Reading is not a direct 'internalization', because it is not a one-way process, and our concern will be to find means of describing the reading process as a dynamic *interaction* between text and reader" (Iser 107). Perhaps it is easier to assume that I interpret the text, and that the text lays idly, prone, open, and ever apathetic to my gaze. Consider Andre Marchand's parable of the painter walking in the forest:

> In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me…I was there, listening…I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it…I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out (qtd. in Merleau-Ponty 129).

The text talks back. In the same instant that I construct the meaning of the text, I am constructed by the text: "And even though we may lose awareness of these experiences while we read, we are still guided by them unconsciously, and by the end of our reading we are liable consciously to want to incorporate the new experience into our own store of knowledge" (Iser 37). We merge:

> Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension. And, equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced (Iser 9-10).

---

[14] Ah, so many more surprises to come.
[15] Do not go, but stay here, in the now and now and now and…

But here is where the reader splits from the critic, depending on personal investment. Shall I judge, or shall I critique? Judgment criticizes based on norms external to the text, rather than criticizing aesthetics on its own terms. Merleau-Ponty cites "scientific thinking" as "a thinking which looks on from above" (122); he is naming the judgment that I speak of here. Indeed, he later writes, "We see only what we look at" (124). There is intentionality in an alternative mode of criticism, a way of granting certain attentiveness to things (and texts) in their own right, rather than reading with preconceived notions of meaning and morality. Consider a critique that takes meaning as an experience, rather than an object to be dissected, as a phenomenon that perplexes but resists explanation and classification: "The effectiveness of the work depends on the participation of the reader, but explanations arise from (and also lead to) detachment; they will therefore dull the effect, for they relate the given text to a given frame of reference, thus flattening out the new reality brought into being by the fictional text" (Iser 10). A critique that resists detachment would be an attempt to "multiply not judgments but modes of existence" ("Masked" 323), since we can now see that interpretation is intimately entwined with being. This critique must be a *process* of engagement, since, as Deleuze says, "No one develops through judgment, but through a combat that implies no judgment" (134). This critique grapples with aesthetics, and thus, continually produces. Judgment is reproductive, but safe: the critic evades guilt and complicity by remaining external to aesthetics. Critique, on the other hand, invites the critic within its parameters, so that critique becomes a limitless endeavor, stretching its interrogation over the truths of society, and, indeed, back onto the critics themselves. Critique necessitates the reader's recognition of complicity with the text, that any meaning derived from that relationship comes from the reader's engagement.

And this *process* of critique is *necessary*[16]. Iser tells us:

> If interpretation has set itself the task of conveying the meaning of a literary text, obviously the text itself cannot have already formulated that meaning. How can the meaning possibly be experienced if – as is always assumed by the classical norm of interpretation – it is already there, merely waiting for referential exposition? As meaning arises out of the process of actualization, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product (18).

[16] Even more than the meaning found.

Meaning is always new, born out of interpretation and interaction. It is unprecedented: "The aesthetic effect is robbed of this unique quality the moment one tries to define what is meant in terms of other meanings that one knows. For if it means nothing but what comes through it into the world, it cannot possibly be identical to anything already existing in the world" (Iser 22). And meaning is not exchangeable with anything but itself:

> As a rule there are four main perspectives: those of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader. Although these may differ in order of importance, none of them on its own is identical to the meaning of the text. What they do is provide guidelines originating from different starting points (narrator, characters, etc.), continually shading into each other and devised in such a way that they all converge on a general meeting place. We call this meeting place the meaning of the text, which can only be brought into focus if it is visualized from a standpoint (Iser 35).

Meaning – just as the author-function and the reader – exists at the intersection of a chiasm, an unstable site that nonetheless joins textual perspectives. Note that the author does not explicitly exist as one of these intersecting lines; of course, this shall be complicated with the examination of metafiction, in which the author becomes textual.

Of course, Iser does not completely leave out the author as an ontological being, but he says something very interesting about his or her role. The author produces art, but the reader finds the beauty: "the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" (21). Thus, if we can assume that the text is the art produced, the process of reading is a mode of finding beauty. But again, beauty is not uncovered. It is framed: "Practically every discernible structure in fiction has this two-sidedness: it is verbal and affective. The verbal aspect guides the reaction and prevents it from being arbitrary; the affective aspect is the fulfillment of that which has been prestructured by the language of the text" (Iser 21). Beauty is generated: "the reader receives [the message] by composing it" (Iser 21). Thus, while the author produces the art/text once, the reader continually creates it anew. I shall argue from this point forward that the author is nothing more than a reader after the writing of a text; indeed, *there is reading involved in the process of writing*. Perhaps writing itself is merely reading documented ontologically, in the form of a text – an active form of reading. We have already given up the idea that the author is the

origin or center of a text – while he or she *actualizes* a text for all other readers, it is obvious that the author does not determine the meaning of a text. The text is written once[17] but the text *must continue being read, over and over* in order for meaning to exist. Thus, it is not that the author *creates* the text, so much as the author first constructs the text, and lets go of its control in order for it to survive – to keep being constructed over and over. Therefore, I am not so concerned with the status of the author as I am the reader[18].

Let us return one last time to the idea of 'response'. Iser hypothesizes that reader-response is a sort of meta-response:

> It follows that the meaning of the text does not reside in the expectations, surprises, disappointments or frustrations that we experience during the process of gestalt-forming. These are simply the reactions that take place when the gestalten are disturbed. What this really means, though, is that as we read, we react to what we ourselves have produced and it is this mode of reaction that, in fact, enables us to experience the text as an actual event (129).

We react to ourselves reacting[19]. The reader sees meaning as if it had been there the whole time, even though this experience exists at a very specific intersection of time and place. It is the 'ah ha!' moment. We are fooled into thinking that we have *discovered* the Truth of the text, when really, we have allowed the text to join with us:

> Our schematic description of the constitutive process has revealed the extent to which the reader is involved in composing images out of the multifarious aspects of the text by unfolding them into a sequence of ideation and by integrating the resulting products along the time-axis of reading. Thus text and reader are linked together, the one permeating the other. We place our synthesizing faculties at the disposal of an unfamiliar reality, produce the meaning of that reality, and in doing so enter into a situation which we could not have created out of ourselves. Thus the meaning of the literary text can only be fulfilled in the reading subject and does not exist independently of him; just as important, though, is that the reader himself, in constituting the meaning, is also constituted (Iser 150).

It is in this instant that we see the clear difference between the text and ourselves[20] - this moment in which we unite with it through interaction.

In "What is an Author?" Foucault states "The author's name is not…*fictional*" (123). Oh dear, Foucault. The appearance of metafiction has rendered this statement faulty. Of course, the author's

---

[17] Please do not get nit-picky about editing, etc.
[18] And of course, the author exists within the category of reader, but not exclusively.
[19] Or responding or producing or interpreting or critiquing. Whichever pleases.
[20] Remember that meaning exists through juxtaposition.

ontological status as a body is not fictional, per se. But the author's name *does* become fictionalized: another doubling. Let us not confuse 'non-fiction' with Truth – I am merely designating that which is *not* text. When reading gets inscribed within the text through the characteristics formerly listed by Waugh, something dynamic and perplexing happens. The author is at once fiction and non-fiction. Just as the reader is at once fiction and non-fiction. Just as reading itself becomes both fiction and non-fiction. They exist both within and outside of the text, on either side of the textual boundary. The relationship between author, reader, and texts plays out as an interaction lived in the knowledge of their own oscillations: "This relationship between author, reader, and character is not a reductive, one-to-one allegorical relationship; it is a subtle interplay that features characters as readers and writers of their own textual solutions" (Durante 21). Thus, the fictional characters perform processes parallel to the interpreting reader. Hutcheon notes: "The text's own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader" (7). Thus, the text collapses in on itself in the same moment that it explodes; the text is made known as a text, so that the text itself is fictionalized by its own existence, at the same moment that it is revealed to exist beyond its own boundaries. Let us explore these textual hypotheses by returning to the text itself, through several case studies in metafiction. As Wladimir Krysinski notes,

> Clear-cut definitions of metafiction are difficult to find. Even in critical works dedicated to metafiction, we stumble over numerous affirmations, statements, and quasidefinitions that circumscribe the concept from various points of view without providing an all-encompassing, descriptive, and functionally operational definition. Hence the recognition of the fact that metafiction may be or should be contextualized and only then deeply scrutinized (187).

I have imagined a theoretical outline of metafiction, but such work requires grounding in texts themselves. Perhaps it will become evident that the work already done has always existed in the very form of metafiction itself: "Metafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself" (Scholes 114). On we go, then, to the fiction.

In "The City of Glass," the first story of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, the main character, Quinn receives a phone call asking for Paul Auster: "'Is this Paul Auster?' asked the voice, 'I would like to speak to Mr. Paul Auster.' / 'There's no one here by that name'" (7). Quinn, an author, exists within

the text as a vessel through which Paul Auster – the ontological author – may reference Paul Auster – as a character. Thus, Auster shows how the self gets constructed and split through language:

> If we were to say provisionally that the narrator is { Paul Auster } (bracketing, for now, his ontological status), we could say that the story {Auster} tells has been invented for him by some concerned friends, presumably a real-life Quinn (who would parallel Sancho Panza) and the Stillmans (who would parallel the other three friends). Presumably, {Auster} has been having difficulty with his sanity, and his friends have concocted City of Glass to hold up a mirror to his madness. However, continuing to follow the lines of the Quixote argument, we could argue as well that {Auster} has engineered the entire enterprise and chosen Quinn and the Stillmans as his "saviors," so that he could spew out lies and nonsense for people's amusement. Hence, Paul Auster, the writer in City of Glass, is a character invented by {Paul Auster}, narrator, the same way that the character "Don Quixote" was engineered by Don Quixote. Of course, Don Quixote never existed, but was invented by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra of Spain. By association, {Paul Auster} never existed, but was an invention of the "real" Paul Auster, of Manhattan. Hence, we have three Austers, not two: author, narrator, and character, each ontologically distinct (Alford 20-1).

We cannot locate Auster in one place. And when the written author of the story is located within the text, he is not named: “The account of this period is less full than the author would have liked” (135); “There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from interpretation” (158). The text engages in a game of pronouns: the “he” and the “I” have no referent, and the text makes a clear distinction between these and Auster. What does this tell us about language? Steven E. Alford places the self in language: “Auster's trilogy dramatizes the assertion that the self can gain knowledge only through language because, in a strict sense, the self is language” (Alford 21). Just as the character of Paul Auster is constructed through the language which Paul Auster wields, so too are we, the reader, encoded through signs outside of the text. It is here that the boundaries of the text get confused: when we ask, where is the “real” Paul Auster, we also beg, “At what point am I inside or outside of the text?” Hutcheon states:

> Reading and writing belong to the processes of ‘life’ as much as they do to those of ‘art.’ It is this realization that constitutes one side of the paradox of metafiction for the reader. On the one hand, he is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the ‘art,’ of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience. In fact, these responses are shown to be *part of* his life experience (5).

Let us return to the idea of art as mimesis – as a representation of life, be it cliché or critique. When the author or reader is deliberately encoded in language, we are forced to interpret ourselves, to explicitly involve the self in the process of reflection. Art is the space whereby *we become unfamiliar to ourselves*, and where those things that we assume to be absolute – ie. the author, the text, etc. – become destabilized.

Just as Paul Auster becomes a character, so we are forced to question his authorial authority as the origin of the text and of the text's meaning. This is stated outright when Quinn questions his placement of trust in Auster: "He asked himself why he had taken Auster's word for it" (154); why do we give full power to the author, when we are the benefactors of such a gift? The text references the idea of "function," which recalls both Foucault's and Derrida's theories of the function:

> Not only is an umbrella a thing, it is a thing that performs a function – in other words, expresses the will of man…What happens when a thing no longer performs its function? Is it still the thing, or has it become something else? When you rip the cloth off the umbrella, is the umbrella still an umbrella? You open the spokes, put them over your head, walk out into the rain, and you get drenched. Is it possible to go on calling this object an umbrella? In general, people do. At the very limit, they will say the umbrella is broken. To me this is a serious error, the source of all our troubles. Because it can no longer perform its function, the umbrella has ceased to be an umbrella. It might resemble an umbrella, it might once have been an umbrella, but now it has changed into something else (93).

When the author stops writing, is it right to continue to call him or her an author? Perhaps this explanation of function proves that the author becomes nothing more than the reader after the text is done being written. The author has no secret insight, at least, no more than anyone might have in the reading of a text. Thus, "The City of Glass" shows the lack of authority concerning the author, and how the author *should not* retain said authority.

Quinn talks about the classic detective story, and its connection to linearity and teleology:

> Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the center of the books shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end (9).

In contrast to the traditional detective story, where we find a stable mode of "uncovering" meaning by reliance on the center, "The City of Glass" offers no such safety. The text subverts this classification of the detective novel by refusing to grant a stable, conclusive ending:

> As a genre, the detective story is end-dominated, and its popularity attests to Western culture's obsession with closure. By denying closure, and by sprinkling his trilogy with references to other end-dominated texts, Auster continually disseminates the meaning of this detective story. The detective story also necessitates a movement backward in time, from the corpse to the crime, so to speak. In City of Glass, Quinn's quest for an ultimate referent leads him into an investigation of the origin of logos; his quest becomes a pursuit of paternal authority associated with creation and also a quest for his own identity (Russell 73).

The text has no center because it has no end. Or a known author. As Derrida postulated, "The City of Glass," opens itself to play by virtue of these absences; for the majority of the book, Quinn roams the city, following a man who may or may not be his intended target. All is uncertainty. These decenterings force the reader to make up for the lacks found within the text. The reader is empowered in the way that the author has been disempowered. And yet, the reader cannot take up the center based on these same uncertainties. It is this play based on the absence of the center that Alison Russell cites:

> As the novel 'ends,' City of Glass illustrates Derridean dissemination. Quinn literally vanishes from the text when he runs out of space in his red notebook, seemingly imploding into the text of City of Glass: 'It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city' (178). Similarly, Peter Stillman and his wife have disappeared, while the elder Stillman has supposedly committed suicide. In City of Glass, characters 'die' when their signifiers are omitted from the printed page. All that remains is the cryptic conclusion of the narrator, who claims to have received Quinn's notebook from his friend, the writer Paul Auster… The narrator's conclusion shows this fiction to be a game against itself. His assertion deconstructs itself through references to the indeterminacy of the red notebook. City of Glass is a paranoid text in its uncertainty and contradictory frames of reference (75).

While doubling exists in the text – the multiples Stillmans, the multiple authors, the multiple Paul Austers – the text renders these paradoxical, since they, in turn, *cannot* exist. Paul Auster cannot be the writer of the text within the text, yet his name flashes across the cover of the book. Russell continues, "By the end of the novel, fiction is piled upon fiction, negating any one meaning or solution to the mystery of City of Glass" (75).

Indeed, the text acknowledges these doubles without choosing between them. *This is not the issue at hand*. Allow the text to speak for itself in an example: "Whether it might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the first word that came from the stranger's mouth, is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell" (3). The question of the text is not an either/or; the proper question cannot even be answered by the text – it is for the reader to interpret. In confirmation of this, let us turn to the meeting between Quinn and Stillman: "She took his right hand in her two hands and kissed it. 'Thank you, Mr. Auster. I really do think you're the answer' "(38). Could this answer be the answer to the question of the text? If this is true, the answer is multiplicity – at once Quinn and Paul Auster-character and Paul Auster-being.

This answer looks very much like Foucault's tripartite, confirming that meaning exists in juxtaposition and in the in-between[21] generated by multiplicity.

A text exists to be multiple – it is irreducible. There is no clear-cut solution as found in the classic detective story, even though the text plays on those conventions. Thus, the text dismantles textuality from within itself; "The City of Glass" displays the in-betweens through contradictory doublings:

> As each character in 'City of Glass' splits and disintegrates into fragmentary doubles of himself and/or disappears, as impersonators become the figures they impersonate, the narrative virtually doubles back on itself, threatening to cancel itself out. The title image thus suggests not so much a transparent surface as an opaque glass or the glass of a distorting mirror; alternatively, glass connotes a fragile material susceptible to shattering into multiple pieces, all of which reflect the same (multiplied) image (Rubenstein 251).

For example, the text excavates the notions of fate and free will without deciding on either choice as an absolute; it does not deal in either/or binaries, but shows that meaning exists in its fullest in this gray area. Quinn aligns the notion of fate with 'is-ness':

> Was 'fate' really the word he wanted to use?…Fate in the sense of what was, of what happened to be. It was something like the word 'it' in the phrase 'it is raining' or 'it is night.' What that 'it' referred to Quinn had never known. A generalized condition of things as they were, perhaps; the state of is-ness that was the ground on which the happenings of the world took place (132-3).

I will argue with Quinn on this point; fate implies pre-determination, a lack of will. Yet, this is-ness, this sense of happening, has no name. Quinn's impetus to name forces him to rely on a pre-existing word which is inadequate for meaning. Fate is caught up in the future, while is-ness is concerned with the present, a temporal in-between that lingers amidst the past and the future.

Quinn tries following Stillman, to find that he cannot rightly choose when faced with a doubling:

> Directly behind Stillman, heaving into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman's…Quinn froze. There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made – and he had to make a choice – would be arbitrary, a submission to chance (67-8).

Just as Quinn's choice is limited by his situation, so the reader is limited by the words of the text. There is no absolute 'free will' because 'choice' is always contextualized in a framework; in the same way,

---

[21] Do you see the in-between here? Note Quinn's hand *between* hers.

there is a problematized notion of fate – one *must* decide, although fate requires no such participation. The reader must interpret the text, even though his choice is limited by language.

So the text does not hesitate to lie to us: "This is not a story, after all" (47). *But it is*[22]. The fictional text cannot deny itself as a story without negating itself. Thus, the text deals in contradiction; the story at once confirms and denies itself, just as the characters confirm and deny their names: "All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name" (49). Listen to me: I am everything and nothing. Thus, the reader is forced to choose, to interpret, to participate in reading.

Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* dismantles the notion of the fixed self, as a static being with an unchanging core. Miguel Mota notes, "In Winterson's repudiation of master narratives and in her attempts to give voice to alternative ones, one of her most consistent targets, not surprisingly, has been the Enlightenment subject: the fixed, unitary, coherent individual" (193). Instead of a being, the subject is depicted as a becoming, a process that has no set teleology, but unfolds as an end in itself.

Winterson starts by destabilizing corporeality and physicality as reality. In the opening quotation, she states: "Matter, that thing the most solid and the well-known, which you are holding in your hands and which makes up your body, is now known to be mostly empty space. Empty space and points of light. What does this say about the reality of the world?" Is reality that which is solid? What we can touch? Here, she juxtaposes fiction and so-called reality; why is fantasy less valid as a truth than the world around us? We have already seen the definition of fiction through cliché and critique; there is no direct correlation between a fiction and a lie. Thus, *Sexing the Cherry* displays the way in which fiction generates new truths, and thus, asserts its validity. Christy L. Burns states:

> If, then, Winterson's most fantastic novels--*Boating for Beginners, Sexing the Cherry*, and *The Passion*--have led her toward a critical reconsideration of the indulgence of fantasy, rather than abandoning fantasy, she incorporates it more completely into her critique of contemporary desensitization and alienation, directing attention toward its application to the reader's own "real" political and social context. Winterson achieves this by disrupting the reader's escape from reality, persistently haunting her characters' voices with references to reading, writing, and the impact of art."

[22] This denial recalls Magritte's painting entitled, "La trahison des images," (trans: The treachery of images) of the pipe under which is written, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (trans: This is not a pipe).

Fiction is an integral part of critique; indeed, it exists as the embodiment of critique through its state as art. Thus, fantasy becomes political. On her website, Winterson says something quite interesting about the classification of metafiction: "I saw myself as a shape-shifting person with many lives, who didn't need to be tied to one life. So it's not been difficult for me to use myself as a fictional character. Other writers do it. Milan Kundera does it, Paul Auster does it. Of course when they do it, it's called 'metafiction'. When women do it, it's called 'autobiography'. Unfortunate." What is at stake in referring to a text as a metafiction versus an autobiography? A metafiction renders the author anonymous, while the autobiography exposes the author. Thus, metafiction is unbounded; through depersonalization, the title of metafiction opens up the text to infinite possibilities, while the autobiography claims authority and closes the text. Thus, this gender classification of which Winterson speaks is a dynamic of power in textuality – classification as non-metafiction in this case ties the author to the text as a 'real' person, and thus, limits the potentialities that the text might contain. So we can see how people use metafiction as a classification for political use. I would superficially call this its external politics: its manipulation as a text becomes a power struggle between who can claim it and who cannot. Let me make it clear that in this case, metafiction *is being used* for political ends. But we can see another mode in its internal politics, that is, its very form. By virtue of its multiple destabilizations, metafiction subverts stability and thus, a locatable authority. Do you see now *why* the external politics operate as they do? It is an attempt to reclaim the power that the text itself dismantles through its very structure. We can see why external politics feel the need to assert metafiction as a genre: to classify that which unclassifies. If we realize metafictionality as a tendency, as something inherent to all texts, then all texts become politically active in the sense that they work against centralized power. Its internal politics have tremendous implications, then, for the understanding and subversion of any unequal power structure, be it gender, class, race, sexuality, age, etc. Indeed, it critiques the notion of history as well: "Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional; no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (Waugh 7).

Metafiction is especially political through its characteristics; Joseph Tabbi declares reflexivity to be a form of connection between fiction and the external world:

> Reflexivity in contemporary fiction…is not a shutting out of the world; it is rather a way of establishing an identity that is better able to connect with the world at particular points, when one is able, while writing, to re-cognize and put on hold one's own literary distinctions and categories long enough to see how they might answer to distinctions in the environment. (Tabbi 80)

Fiction becomes submergence within critical consciousness. In fact, storytelling becomes a part of the everyday, even unconsciously, through the redevelopment of memory, as Winterson shows in the novel: "Everyone remembers things which never happened. And it is common knowledge that people often forget things which did. Either we are all fantasists and liars or the past has nothing definite in it" (102). The text exposes the reader as the author of his or her own life, editing and rewriting where points are less satisfactory. The past is unstable, because people are not static. So we return to the individual as a becoming. And we cannot limit this to the idea of an individual progressing as a cohesive whole; rather, Winterson postulates a doubling within the individual. The character Jordan spends much of the novel in daydreams: "To escape from the weight of the world, I leave my body where it is, in conversation or at dinner, and walk through a series of winding streets to a house standing back from the road" (11). This is not dualism in the traditional sense, but a splitting within the self between reality and fantasy. In his fantasy, words are physical in themselves, taking up the same amount of power as the objects: "Their words, rising up, form a thick cloud over the city, which every so often must be thoroughly cleansed of too much language" (11). In such a way, the self splits:

> Thinking about time is to acknowledge two contradictory certainties: that our outward lives are governed by the seasons and the clock; that our inward lives are governed by something much less regular – an imaginative impulse cutting through dictates of daily time, and leaving us free to ignore the boundaries of here and now and pass like lightning along the coil of pure time, that is, the circle of the universe and whatever it does or does not contain (99).

So this doubling of the soul at once unifies notions of fantasy and reality by rendering them similar (in power, in existence, etc.), in the same moment that it splits into two versions of existence *which both have equal weight*. These two lives multiply and go on generating doubles – of time, of space, of reality – so that the possibilities are at once endless and contradictory.

Sexing the Cherry reveals itself as a textual artifact by placing stories within stories, having stories refer to other stories both within and outside the text, and by exposing its characters as fictions. Jordan visits the Twelve Dancing Princesses, who each tell him a story: ie. "'It is the penalty of love,' sighed the princess, and began at once to tell me the story of her life. / We all slept in the same room…" (47-8). In another instance, Jordan retells a story to the Dog-Woman, which was told to him by Fortunata: "Jordan was staring out to sea. 'It was a day like this she described, when she told me the story of Artemis and why she was in her service.' / 'Tell it to me,' I said. 'It is only just light.' / *Fortunata's Story* / The goddess Artemis begged of her father…" (149-150). The origin of story cannot be located: for who told the tale to Fortunata? At the very beginning of the text, Jordan states, "Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are the journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time" (2). The characters within the text are storytellers in their own right, but they surpass the relaying of known realities; rather they uncover other unknown truths, which may or may not have happened. In this way, *Sexing the Cherry* separates reality from truth once again. Meaning has no attachment to whether something has occurred or not; everything *can* happen in fantasy, so it might as well have already come to pass. Rather, the text is concerned with how we, the reader, attach meaning to those happenings.

Sexing the Cherry both confirms and denies its authority as story by referencing well known mythology: "What of Orpheus, who pursues his passion through the gates of Hell, only to fail at the last moment and to lose the common presence of his beloved?" (38). Both ancient mythology and the modern text exist as stories constructed through readers: the same reader interprets both texts, and thus, generates meaning anew. Thus, *Sexing the Cherry* is concerned with the fact that something is happening[23], not only its content. Thus, in many ways, the text tells a story to reveal storytelling as this happening, as a process that opens the reader up to infinite possibilities of meaning.

But the text is careful to remind the reader that she or he is not the center of those meanings: "Winterson repeatedly celebrates the decentering of the fixed subject in her fiction, largely through what

[23] Recall is-ness.

is for her the deeply political act of making stories" (Mota 193). The reader cannot be the center, because the self gets dispersed in the process of reading / becoming:

> The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body. The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once (87).

Just as we cannot catch visibility or reading, so the text reveals the self to be uncatchable. Recall the movement back and forth between cynicism and affirmation, between object and subject, between past and future. The reader – the self – is the in between. Do not mistake this for the center; there can be no center in order for the system to play. And we are playing. Jordan confirms himself as fiction by referencing the reader: "If someone is thinking me, then I am still free to come and go" (113). And yet, he also references himself as a character who daydreams himself into possibility. Winterson confirms this distinction by doubling the characters: the Dog-Woman and the modern chemist are doubles of each other, just as Jordan and Nicolas Jordan. In fact, the text begins and ends with this doubling: "I began to walk with my hands stretched out in front of me, as do those troubled in sleep, and in this way, for the first time, I traced the lineaments of my own face opposite me" (2); "For a second the fog cleared and he saw that the stranger was himself" (166). The self exceeds the confines of the body, and the impression of a coherent, single individual. And remember, there is also an internal splitting: "Are we all living like this? Two lives, the ideal outer life and the inner imaginative life where we keep our secrets?" (115)

But before we turn to the cynicism that this dismantling may produce, let us consider this doubling and splitting a mode of reaching possibility:

> I have set off and found that there is no end to even the simplest journey of the mind. I begin, and straight away a hundred alternative routes present themselves. I choose one, no sooner begin, than a hundred more appear. Every time I try to narrow down my intent I expand it, and yet those straits and canal still lead me to the open sea, and then I realize how vast it all is, this matter of the mind. I am confounded by the shining water and the size of the world (115).

And so, doubling cannot produce a solid unified ending; this difference cannot be resolved. The text returns to its opening quotation as a way of "ending": "And even the most solid of things and the most real, the best-loved and the well-known, are only hand-shadows on the wall. Empty space and points of

light" (167). The text loops back on itself, which is to say, question even what you are reading now – do not assume that this ends here.

Next, we move to Italo Calvino's text, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. "You" are in the novel. The author, Italo Calvino[24], makes both the reader, who is exterior to the text, and the fictional Reader the main characters in the text. What then, is the function of the reader / Reader? It seems that they /us are on a search to find the end of the novel, though both are disrupted by Calvino's sly interruptions, which amputate each new story at its climax: ie. the rest of the pages are blank, the novel is confiscated by a foreign government, etc. Patricia Waugh states the metafictionality of the novel:

> Throughout we are reminded of the status of the book as an *artefact* through references to missing pages, pages stuck together, disordered pages. We are reminded also of its *intertextual* existence through the fragments of novels, stories and narratives embedded within the outer frame (47).

The text is not a place of safety or stability – reading is not an escape from a meaningless and chaotic world, but an injection into another one. Rather, the text presents the reader / Reader, who is afraid of this life, with a way to re-see it all, a new way of "reading" the world. At the beginning, the Reader (and presumably the reader as well) is disrupted by the fractured narrative, fighting with nightmares of circularity and seeking "an exact, taut trajectory" (27): "The thing that most exasperates you is to find yourself at the mercy of the fortuitous, the aleatory, the random, in things and in human actions – carelessness, approximation, imprecision, whether your own or others" (27). This false sense of control becomes ruptured by the realization that not even the text is a predictable, measurable structure. The reader / Reader engages in a search to find the continuation of the interrupted text, driven by the need for resolution[25]. The text intentionally tests the reader / Reader's comfortable notion of reading and the reader's presumed attachments to order, structure, and completeness:

> Gentlemen, first I must say that in books I like to read only what is written, and to connect the details with the whole, and to consider certain readings as definitive; and I like to keep one book distinct from the other, each for what it has that is different and new; and I especially like books to be read from beginning to end (256-7).

---

[24] Who is also a character in the novel, though that's another story…

[25] We think, there must be an underlying, unifying principle. Or a summarizing punch line to this scattered joke, right?

The novel permutates from a singular narrative to a fractured conglomeration of narratives. The novel itself is made up of many beginnings that remain unresolved, woven together by the reader / Reader's quest to find their individual completions. Reading cannot be passive, isolated by the opening and closing pages. Rather, the reader is forever infused by the text once participating in the story; thus, we find the story's end in its various mutations within ourselves, the readers. Is the reader / Reader, then, the real end of the novel? We are the lead characters in the stories of our lives – to be extremely clichéd – and therefore, each text constitutes the changing and becoming of the reader in our potentialities.

Even though the ontological words of the novel stop on the last page of the text, *If on a winter's night a traveler* is not easily packaged. For the Reader, the "end" is seemingly revealed in a source outside of text: in the marriage to the Other Reader – the full actualization of a cliché, a stick-on ending – occurring simultaneously with the reader's approach of the last chapter. This "ending" is misleading. Consider the last sentence of the novel: "I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino" (260). Both the reader and the Reader are suspended in the act of finishing the text, but neither is allowed to reach the end itself. Again, the text disrupts the notion of linearity by subverting the idea that there must be an end for the journey to be a success. Reading has no end: "This is why my reading has no end: I read and I reread, each time seeking the confirmation of a new discovery among the folds of the sentences" (255). We cannot find truth in the finalization of story, but in the developments around and within and because of the text:

> The smugness of Calvino's reader belies his assumption that if the interpreter behaves as a kind of antigeometer, breaking apart the text, isolating its 'minimal segments,' and observing its 'lexical peculiarities,' he will have access to the book's inherent truths via these 'apertures'…[the relation of reader to text] yields a difference between rather than an identification of the reader and the text…the act of reading takes place within and as the perception of this difference (O'Donnell 146-7).

Thus, the act of storytelling is unbounded by its attachment to continuous juxtapositions:

> I'm producing too many stories at once because what I want is for you to feel, around the story, a saturation of other stories that I could tell and maybe will tell or who knows may already have told on some other occasion, a space full of stories that perhaps is simply my lifetime…" (109).

The fragmentation of narrative lends its attention to mutation, while their incompleteness shows the room for potential in any story; there are infinite labyrinths of choice that the text presents simply by making no

definite choice. The Reader finds resolution in the Other Reader, as a result of the journey through text; he creates a conclusion in her that he could not find within a text. It comes to this: he chooses because the text cannot choose for him. The text is redefined, then, not as an end in itself, but as a means to the reader / Reader's end: "Does this mean that the book has become an instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous? This does not mean its reading will grip you less: on the contrary, something has been added to its powers" (32). This is the addition: the acknowledgment of the reader for meaning.

The novel mocks scholastic forms of interpretation and analysis through the Other Reader's sister, Lotaria, who does seek to engage with text, but only through the *objective* Absolute Meaning and Truth (she speaks in capital letters): "Now she is inviting you to a seminar at the university, where books are analyzed according to all Codes, Conscious and Unconscious, and in which all Taboos are eliminated, the ones imposed by the dominant Sex, Class, and Culture" (45). This is *not* the most productive approach, particularly when dissecting a text that subverts absolutes and determinates. The reader who seeks right and wrong walks a winding and deceiving path; this text shuts down notions of Truth. Thus, the Reader transitions from the ideologies of Lotaria to the Other Reader, one who works outside of existing frameworks – she is idealized by several sources, including the Reader and Silas Flannery, *simply because she knows how to read*:

> For this woman…reading means stripping herself of every purpose, every foregone conclusion, to be ready to catch a voice that makes itself heard when you least expect it, a voice that comes from an unknown source, from somewhere beyond the book, beyond the author, beyond the conventions of writing; from the unsaid, from what the world has not yet said of itself and does not yet have the words to say (239).

For the Other Reader, the mode of reading is a perpetual attempt to move beyond signs to the ineffable: what exists beyond and between words that cannot be said? How does it reveal the world in ways that facts and logic cannot? The Other Reader dwells in the in-between, in the place between texts and between words: "The truth of literature consists only in…the physicality of existing" (190-1).

Lastly, let us investigate the work of Jorge Luis Borges. Consider "The Library of Babel[26]." Borges aligns the universe with encompassing of texts: "The universe (which others call the

[26] Though there are many more to consider…

Library)…"(51). This Library is the materialization of the textual possibilities within language: "He deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite): in other words, all that is given to express, in all languages" (54). Thus, while the Library exists and encompasses everything that is, it does not contain everything that will be: "The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms" (58). The Library is process, though the narrator concludes that it is both "unlimited and cyclical" (58) – in each book there are limitless possibilities, as in language, although the inscribed signs limit it:

> Literary discourse á la Borges is the brilliant confirmation of its infinite imaginary potentialities. It confirms, within the realm of metafiction, the idea of playful manipulation of such open-entities as literature, story, plot, history, character, meaning, point of view, and interpretation (Krysinski 192).

The Library is cyclical in the same way that all things textual must be resolved within the reciprocity of the reader and the text.

Borges ends with affirmation: "If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope" (58). The narrator seeks meaning in pattern, in the confirmation that the universe is planned, and thus, teleological. He hopes in the fashion of the Derridean-Nietzschean affirmation. He searches for the cliché in this overwhelming aesthetic endeavor, just as the reader seeks to find the familiar in the unfamiliar:

> Literary texts tend to function by preserving a balance between the unfamiliar (the innovatory) and the familiar (the conventional or traditional). Both are necessary because some degree of redundancy is essential for any message to be committed to memory. Redundancy is provided for in literary texts through the presence of familiar conventions (12).

While metafiction as an artistic medium or tendency seeks critical consciousness, some piece of the text must be cliché – whether its form, its pattern, or its language. As a human, the reader needs repetition for memory, and so, this fiction plays on the patterns already fashioned by genres in order to subvert these redundancies from within the text itself. Here we come back to doubling: metafiction parodies the

necessity of repetition through doublings that are, at base, contradictory; thus, repetition across genre and across texts produce contradictory truths that cannot be resolved.

I do not wish to say that Borges, or any text, can be reduced in such a fashion: indeed, there are limitless possibilities beyond this interpretation[27]. But, for the purpose of the study of reading through metafiction, these critiques should suffice for the moment.

Even though we have been implicitly talking about it all along, I must once again call it by name: come, beauty. Metafiction exists as art by resisting the tyranny of tripartite – the segregated realms of author, reader, and text – by continually imploding and exploding, rendering the intra-textual to be extra-textual, and vice versa. Fiction is always limited by way of being constructed by language, thus metafiction exposes this state both as weakness and strength. Words shall never have a direct correlation with meaning, but, as we have learned from Derrida, the system of language allows room for play.

In her book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry says, "Beauty brings copies of itself into being" (3), and that "It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication" (3). She describes this call to replication through Leonardo Da Vinci:

> A beautiful face drawn by Verrocchio suddenly glides into the perceptual field of a young boy named Leonardo. The boy copies the face, then copies the face again. Then again and again and again. He does the same thing when a beautiful living plant – a violet, a wild rose – glides into his field of vision, or a living face: he makes a first copy, a second copy, a third, a fourth, a fifth. He draws it over and over, just as Pater (who tells us all this about Leonardo) replicates – now in sentences – Leonardo's acts, so that the essay reenacts its subject, becoming a sequence of faces: an angel, a Medusa, a woman and child, a Madonna, John the Baptist, St. Anne, La Gioconda. Before long the means are found to replicate, thousands of times over, both the sentences and the faces, so that traces of Pater's paragraphs and Leonardo's drawings inhabit all the pockets of the world (as pieces of them float in the paragraph now before you) (3-4).

Metafiction is beautiful because it reminds us that reading is beautiful, that texts are beautiful, that the status of being a reader is beautiful. It does this, as we've discussed, by virtue of doubling – like Scarry's replication – into infinity. The reader and the text will continue reversing *in perpetuum*, so that metafiction exists as the site of infinite replication *within itself*. Of course, we can see how this sentence is faulty – it is obvious now that a text requires a reader for meaning, just as it does for beauty. Let us not conflate the beauty of the text with the beauty of reading (and writing), though, since the beauty of a text

[27] Why don't you read the primary texts for yourself?

is subject to the reader's interpretation, while the reading process merely exists as beautiful in its status as interpretation. We can see this division clearly, when we turn to Scarry's notion of attachment: "it is much more difficult to say what 'Beauty' unattached to any object is" (9); "Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down" (18). The beauty of a text is attached to that text, while the beauty of reading is attached to the reader. Therefore, we may see reading as a way of realizing the reader's beauty – a mode of self-affirmation. To avoid cliché, the self is always a particular[28], so that beauty of the reading process is never unattached to the particular. Of course, metafiction allows this by exposing the process of reading, though it is unclear whether the reader will ever be able to see him or herself reading[29]. Scarry's notion of beauty is, therefore, cognitive, though I do not wish to outlaw its other forms. In fact, I cannot. If anything, metafiction teaches us that meaning and beauty exist in juxtaposition – and because reading itself is attached to an ontological, physical being – be it the text or the reader – beauty *must* exceed the cognitive. Either way, Scarry confirms beauty to be "unprecedented"(23), just as Iser told us that different meanings emerge with each reading: "Thus, no two readings, however much they accord with or resemble one another, are ever precisely the same or can ever uniformly agree – that is, no two readings ever yield the same text as the product of a particular combination of reading strategies, beliefs, etc. from one or more reading formations" (Machor 1141). Every reading of a text is unprecedented, and therefore, beautiful. It is not for me to judge the difference in cliché and critique; each reading has the potential to be either or both. But because metafiction exists as mimesis, unhinged and unlimited, though always turning back on itself, interpretation can go both ways. Beauty survives in either mode, in contestable forms – be it the sublime or the grotesque.

So we return to reading itself, and its place as the in-between:

> The remainder of what I have to say will be directed toward an understanding of the reader's relation to the book being read. This relation can appear, at one extreme, as a labyrinthine inwardness that traces out only the reader's solipsistic reflection and, at the other, as an untenable objectification of the text and of the reader as a relation of observer to specimen. In between the extremes, I will suggest, the reader finds a place and a being as reader (O'Donnell 138).

[28] Like every unique, individual snowflake.
[29] You are welcome to experiment. Perhaps you may catch yourself for an instant, only to lose it again, and find it again, and lose it again, and…

The awareness of reading as an in-between uproots the existence of other betweens: the reader is both being and becoming, just as the text itself is both object and process. We find beauty in these juxtapositions, these sites of movement and instability. To read is to change, and thus, to make it new[30], whether the "it" be the text, the reader, or reading itself.

So, let us stop here, while we still can, before we end up beginning again[31].

[30] As the aesthetes used to say.
[31] Or maybe we already have. Will you continue thinking about this text? Will you remember it?

Works Cited

Alford, Steven E. "Mirrors of madness: Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*." *Critique.* 37.1 (1995): 17-33.

Auster, Paul. "City of Glass." *The New York Trilogy*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. 1-158.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: selected stories and other writings*. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, eds. Buenos Aires: New Directions, 1962.

Burns, Christy L. "Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern Word". *Contemporary Literature*. 37.2 (1996): 278-307. *Literature Resource Center*, University of Rhode Island Libraries, Kingston, RI. < http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.helin.uri.edu/servlet/>.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a winter's night a traveler*. William Weaver, trans. San Diego: Harvest, 1979.

Deleuze, Gilles. "To Have Done with Judgment." *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Durante, Robert. *The Dialectic of Self and Story: Reading and Storytelling in Contemporary American Fiction.* Routledge, 2001.

Foucault, Michel. "The Masked Philosopher." *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Paul Rabinow, ed. New York: The New Press, 1997.

---. *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon, 1970.

---. "What is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: selected essays and interviews.* Donald F. Bouchard, ed. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Gracia, Jorge J.E., Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Rodolphe Gasché, eds. *Literary philosophers : Borges, Calvino, Eco.* New York : Routledge, 2002.

Hutcheon, Linda. Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox. Methuen, 1980.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

"Jeanette Winterson: Profiles & Interviews – Vintage Living Texts." 14 Sept 2002. *Jeanette Winterson*. 15 April 2006. <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=210>.

Krysinski, Wladimir. "Borges, Calvino, Eco: The Philosophies of Metafiction." *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*. Jorge J.E. Garcia, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Rodlphe Gasche, eds. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Machor, James L. "The object of interpretation and Interpretive Change." *MLN*. 113.5 (1998): 1126-1150.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Eye and Mind." *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Galen A. Johnson, ed. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993. 121-149.

Mota, Miguel. "What's in a Name? The Case of jeanettewinterson.com." Twentieth Century 50.2 (2004): 192-206.

O'Donnell, Patrick. *Passionate Doubts: Designs of Interpretation in Contemporary American Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986.

Oxford English Dictionary Online. 2nd ed. 1989. University of Rhode Island Library, Kingston, RI. <http://0-dictionary.oed.com.helin.uri.edu>

Rubenstein, Roberta. "Doubling, Intertextuality, and the Postmodern Uncanny: Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*". *Literature Interpretation Theory*. 9.3(1998): 245-262.

Russell, Alison. "Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti--Detective Fiction." *Critique*. 32.2 (1990): 71-85.

Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and being just.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Scholes, Robert E. *Fabulation and Metafiction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

Tabbi, Joseph. *Cognitive Fictions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Sexing the Cherry*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.