What Makes Fiction "Meta"?

A comparative study of literary self-reflexivity from Sterne to Winterson

Malin Strømberg

Masteroppgave i Allmenn litteraturvitenskap ved ILOS

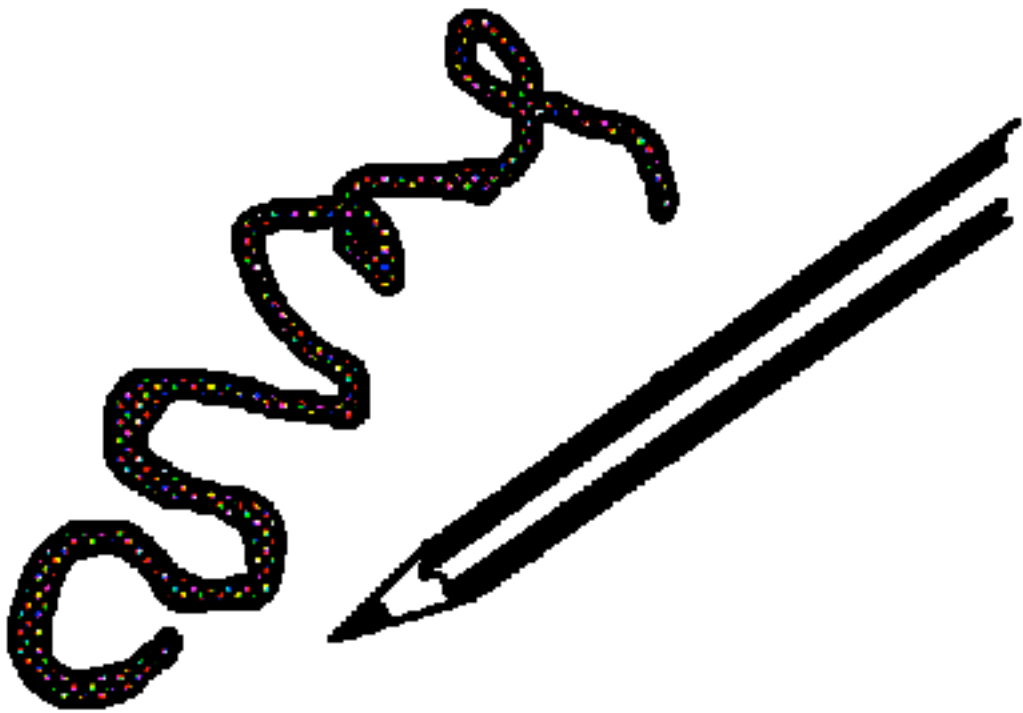60stp

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III

Abstract

This thesis seeks to develop a multi-perspective account on the complex aesthetic phenomenon that is *metafiction,* and aims to nuance those broad definitions of the term that focus exclusively on its critical potential to question narrative and linguistic structures from the inside. Definitions of this kind characterise metafictional novels as deliberately inverting the generic conventions of *realism*, exposing their own artificiality and putting their fiction-making devices on show, in order to criticise the mimetic function of literature and point towards those fictive structures that lie beyond the works themselves. Due in part to the near simultaneous coinage of the terms *metafiction* and *postmodernism*, the former has gained a reputation as the novelistic enactment of the latter's ontological and linguistic scepticism. A theoretical problem occurs, however, when one considers earlier examples of fiction that employ many of the same reflexive strategies that postmodernist novels do. Commonalities include the *mise-en-abyme* technique; metaleptic jumps; parodic allusions; conspicuous narrators; and highly fragmented narratives, all of which have the potential to undermine the aesthetic illusion. The question then arises: *Is metafiction a transhistorical function of literature or is it an exclusively postmodern phenomenon?* By comparing *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* from the eighteenth century with *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Sexing the Cherry* from the twentieth century, this thesis aims to clarify what distinguishes *metafiction* from other kinds of self-reflexive fiction, and offers an exploration of its various functions. Chapter One examines current definitions of metafiction, and considers how literary self-reflexivity grapples with mimesis. Chapter Two looks at different manifestations of self-referentiality in their historical, philosophical, and critical contexts. Chapter Three asks if the metafictional mode is activated by certain textual qualities or if it is primarily a result of the reader's interpretative role. It also tries to narrow down the scope of the metafictional mode by distinguishing its object of attention from that of other self-reflexive forms like metanarration. Chapter Four dives more fully into the works themselves with revised classification criteria, and analyses them against their respective historico-critical backgrounds. Chapter Five concludes by arguing that metafiction is a phenomenon that stretches before and beyond postmodernism, and that its general definition should therefore

be divorced from postmodern critical theory. That is not to say, however, that contemporary metafiction does not share a number of postmodernism's concerns about fiction and reality, but a nuancing of the term is in order so that we avoid limiting the functions of this kind of writing to metaphysical scepticism and the critical deconstruction of all narratives.

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Karin Kukkonen, for her continuous support, enthusiasm, and invaluable guidance throughout the entire process of writing this thesis. A special thanks to Cecilie, who told me one night over dinner: "Malin, it seems perfectly clear to me what you should write your thesis on. All you ever talk about are strange books that talk about themselves as books!" I also want to thank Hakan for his unparalleled optimism, and Marie for her help and encouragement. Finally, my sincerest thanks to my family and friends for all their love and support.

Table of contents

VIII

Abbreviations

TS: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy: Gentleman*, Laurence Sterne. *The Text* [1759-1767]. Vols. 1 and 2. Eds. Melvyn New and Joan New. University Presses of Florida, 1978. Print.

JF: *Jacques le fataliste*, Denis Diderot. [1796]. *Œuvres*. Ed. André Billy. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, n° 25. Paris: Gallimard, 1951. Print.

AS: *At Swim-two-Birds*, Flann O'Brien. New York: Pantheon Books, 1939. Print.

SC: *Sexing the Cherry*, Jeanette Winterson. London: Bloomsbury, 1989. Print.

OED: *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online). http://www.oed.com

X

Introduction

> "… a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham
>
> to which the reader could regulate at will the degree
>
> of his credulity." (*AS* 25)

Amid the plethora of terms designating literary self-consciousness – fabulation, metafiction, surfiction, anti-mimetic fiction, metanarration, postmodernist fiction, auto-representational fiction, romantic irony, et cetera – metafiction is by far the most widespread. The term began to circulate[1] in literary theory during the 1970s as a response to the increased self-consciousness of English and American fiction in the 1960s. Despite its popularity, the term is a slippery one that holds a variety of definitions, some of which are in direct opposition to one another. Tom Wolfe argued in 1989[2] that the American novelists of the 60s and 70s, inspired by the fashionable European idea of "the death of the novel" (47) had abandoned what he considers to be the real and most pertinent function of literature, namely that of "reporting." (50). Writing, he states, had turned into a high-brow, navel-gazing activity at a time in American history when the opposite was most needed: "a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him," that is, a social realism in the manner of Dickens or Balzac (50). In his view, metafiction is a kind of writing which is essentially anti-mimetic and anti-realistic, and which arose out of contempt for the norms and conventions of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism.

The term "metafiction" appeared on stage around the same time as "postmodernism" came to stand for a number of partially connected political, social, philosophical, and cultural changes during the latter half of the twentieth century. Postmodernism is perhaps most often thought of as a "condition", or a new paradigm of thought and knowledge in Western societies, following Jean-François Lyotard's influential essays "Note on the Meaning of

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[1] The term was either coined in William H. Gass' essay "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction" (1970) or in Robert Scholes' essay "Metafiction" (1970).

[2] "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the new social novel."

1

'Post-'" and "The Postmodern Condition". This condition is characterised, according to Lyotard, by a shared scepticism towards the principles and ideals of modernity, and a particular interest in re-evaluating concepts such as reason, truth, history, knowledge, and progress. Its visible counterpart was a heightened self-reflexive attitude that pervaded nearly all disciplines in the arts and sciences (Marshall 172; Dupuy 491). Because metafiction similarly relies on a number of self-reflexive textual strategies, it is considered by many as the true literary expression of postmodernist concerns. We will return to this in the next chapter.

A number of theorists, however, would contest this historically limited view of metafiction by tracing literary self-reflexivity back to the works of Cervantes or Sterne. Here arises one of the main issues in this field of study, and one which will occupy a central position in this thesis: is metafiction a transhistorical function, or possibility, of all literature, or is it primarily a postmodern phenomenon distinct from the self-consciousness found in earlier works, particularly those of the eighteenth century? This question is complicated further by the sheer number of definitions and closely related terms attached to metafiction. Many of the terms mentioned above encompass a wider or narrower part of the literary corpus of self-reflexive texts, but metafiction has often functioned as an umbrella term for all self-reflexive utterances in literary studies, making it difficult to point out its specific characteristics (Neumann & Nünning 204). This proliferation of terminology has been dealt with in recent studies by German narratologists on the variety of different levels on which self-reflexivity can be situated in a text, and its diverse functions. Nünning and Fludernik both advocate the need to distinguish between "metafiction" and what they prefer to call "metanarration" ("On Metanarrative" 14; "Metanarrative" 15-16).

How is one to navigate through the myriad of theories and definitions of self-reflexive fiction? Is metafiction a device, a genre, or a mode of writing (or reading)? Moreover, are metafictional novels, as Wolfe seems to suggest, essentially disengaged and anti-mimetic? No attempt will be made at arriving at one singular and comprehensive theory nor definition of metafiction in this thesis; but rather, we will explore the range of self-reflexive devices with the intention of demonstrating how their narrative and historical functions go beyond that of inverting mimetic strategies of representation. In Chapter One we seek answers to why metafiction is often posited in an antithetical relation to literary realism and mimesis. Chapter Two investigates different kinds of literary self-reflexivity (parody, irony, linguistic- and

historical reflexivity). Chapter Three asks whether it is primarily textual or contextual factors that contribute to the activation of the metafictional mode. Chapter Four examines the different self-reflexive devices at work in our selected texts, and asks whether or not they serve metafictional functions. Chapter Five outlines the potential problems with many current definitions of metafiction, arguing that this kind of reflexivity possesses a variety of functions — not just a critical one.

Chapter One: *What is literary-self-reflexivity? Metafiction, mimesis, and the aesthetic illusion*

1.1. Definitions of metafiction: *What is literary self-reflexivity?*

> "Fiction in which the author self-consciously
>
> alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work
>
> by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions"
>
> ("Metafiction, n." *OED*)

"…the metafictionist begins with the assumption that we are forever

locked within a world shaped by language and by subjective (i.e., *fictional*)

forms developed to organize our relationship to the world in a coherent fashion."

(Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse* 6)

Before we enter into a discussion about metafiction, it is necessary that we clear up what is meant by 'fiction,' since the prefix 'meta-' implies that self-reflexive fiction does something different from, or even moves beyond, traditional fiction. If we accept the *OED* definition quoted above, metafictional works actually set themselves against their own conventions, more specifically, those of the 'realistic' or 'conventional' novel. According to Wolfe, the primary function of literature should be that of "reporting," by which he means that it should provide a truthful account of the world, and the relationship between man and society. The novel is often linked to *realism* because the literary movement and its techniques flourished not long after the supposed birth of the novel form (Fludernik, *An Introduction* 53). The

realist novel rests on the concept of "verisimilitude,"[3] or the assumption that art can render a faithful imitation of reality. Therefore, a realistic narrative attempts to sustain the illusion that the world of the novel is a credible version of external reality. Realism functions most effectively if the reader agrees to temporarily believe ("'suspended belief'") that what the novel presents is real, "on condition that the author makes the illusion as convincing as possible." (Nicol 25). Works of metafiction, supposedly, do not exhibit the same interest in the storyworld. Rather, they concentrate on the way in which the story is rendered, and as such constitutes a two-sided narrative.

The two most notable theorists in the field, Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon, both hold a far more positive view of metafiction than Wolfe. Their extensive studies were also written at the height of self-consciousness in fiction during the 1960s-80s, but they view this literary trend both as a response to the contemporary postmodern context *and* as a stylistic continuation of the self-reflexivity found in Cervantes and Sterne. Waugh's comprehensive definition is perhaps the most famous, as well as the most contested, and it is thus worth quoting here in full:

> "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text." (2)

Her definition thus encompasses all texts that consistently expose their fictionality, engage with literary conventions, and are conscious of their own process of becoming. However, Waugh does not consider metafiction a purely self-absorbed and navel-gazing form of literature. Rather, she argues that metafictional novels engage outwardly both with the ontological status of external reality, and with the ability of language to refer to objects in the real world (3). In response to those concerns often raised over the implications of metafiction – that nothing can be represented and that the novel has essentially become a dead genre – Waugh states that literary introversion instead led to the realisation of the

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[3] "The fact or quality of being verisimilar; the appearance of being true of real; likeness or resemblance to truth; reality, or fact; probablility" ("Verisimilitude, *n.*"*OED)*

similarities between the structures of fiction and our perception of reality. Metafictional novels thus provide "extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems." (9). Although these concerns mirror those frequently attributed to postmodernism, structuralism and poststructuralism, Waugh does not restrict her definition to twentieth-century novels, but actually stresses that "the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself" (5). This, she argues, is because the novel form is particularly prone to introspection due to its inherent "tensions and oppositions," that is, its simultaneous integration of representation and a demonstration of its narrative and linguistic means of doing so (14). Roland Barthes similarly said of this paradox that: "in the West … there is no art that does not point a finger to its own mask" (qtd. in Alter 34). In Waugh's view, metafiction is a transhistorical potential of the novel which manifests in certain periods of literary history when these "tensions and oppositions" become the dominant preoccupation and concern of literature. Leaning on the studies of the Russian Formalists, and Viktor Shklovsky's term "defamiliarization"[4] in particular, she traces the origins of modern metafiction back to moments of generic crisis. Shklovsky and the Formalists argue that parody was employed in historical moments like these as a means of exposing outdated literary conventions, self-reflexively commenting on their artificiality in order to provoke aesthetic renewal (Waugh 65). Waugh concludes that *Tristram Shandy* can rightly be called a forerunner of postmodernist metafiction, but it is a 'one-off' — self-consciousness does not become the dominant mode of writing until the late twentieth century (68). What distinguishes narrative self-reflexivity found in nineteenth-century novels from individual works like Sterne's is that these techniques do not play the dominant role here; there is no sense of a crisis. In the era of 'realism' the novel suppressed its "tensions and oppositions" in an effort to achieve a truthful representation of reality (Waugh 31-2). A common structural dynamic in metafictional works, conversely, is first of all to create a fictional universe, and then secondly, to destroy the illusion that maintains that world in the mind of the reader (Waugh 6). In postmodernist literature this can be done in a number of ways, either through an "explicit dramatization of the reader"; the use of "overtly arbitrarily

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[4] He introduces the term in the essay "Art as Technique" (1917) to demonstrate what he sees as both the nature and function of literature: to make the habitual strange, so as to avoid a passive and uncritical perception of familiar objects. Literary genres are thus born in a natural, dialectic development of old forms being exposed and altered through parody.

6

arranged structural devices" or "Chinese-box structures"; the narrative may contain "critical discussions of the story within the story" or "explicit parody of previous texts whether literary or nonliterary"; and sometimes it displays a "total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization." (Waugh 22). These are some of the traits by which we usually recognise postmodernist literature, but they are also characteristic of metafiction, according to Waugh.

1.2. A first look at metacommentary

What is it about *Tristram Shandy* that has stirred such interest among literary critics (postmodern ones in particular)? It is evident from the novel's first few pages that it does not intend to adhere to any pre-existing literary conventions. The narrator-hero Tristram promises to tell his readers the complete and unabbreviated history of his life and opinions "*ab Ovo,*"[5] despite the fact that Horace warned poets against starting a narrative in this manner: "—for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived." (*TS* 1.4: 5). Tristram devotes his first two chapters to giving an elaborate account of the events surrounding his conception, including his mother's marriage settlement and the story of how his future midwife got her license. The strikingly detailed and digressive nature of the narrative, however, is not the most curious aspect of the novel. Arguably, it is the sheer number of passages where Tristram discusses his own narrative choices and concerns, often by demonstrating how he deliberately breaks contemporary conventions. That does not necessarily mean that he is deliberately challenging *novelistic* or *realist* conventions. One might just as well say that Tristram is experimenting with the sequential conventions of the autobiographical genre, as well as those of various literary and oral traditions. For instance, he justifies placing the "Author's Preface" well into the third volume by stating that this is the first opportunity he has had to write it, and in the ninth volume he omits chapters 18 and 19, only to insert them later at the reader's request. When we are talking about the reader in *Tristram Shandy*, it is important to note that we are actually talking about an "implied reader" or "narratee": the textually internal agent whom the narrator addresses (Rimmon-Kenan 87-90). Although the

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[5] Latin: "*from the egg*"

distinction between the real reader and the fictional one is a modern narratological distinction (made by Gerald Prince, Wayne C. Booth, and various others), it is of great value in the analysis of Sterne's novel. The narrative largely follows a dialogic structure where Tristram converses with one or more narratees on a variety of topics, including the manner in which he tells his story. The text itself is highly fragmented, due to the strange use of punctuation: dashes of various lengths, hyphens, and lines of asterisks are scattered throughout the novel, all of which serve to draw attention to the materiality of the book (Fanning, *Small Particles* 362). Waugh treats Sterne's novel as an early example of metafiction that "systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact," consequently breaking the aesthetic illusion. But if *Tristram Shandy* qualifies as a metafictional text, then what is the essential difference between the linguistic self-consciousness found in Sterne and that found in O'Brien? The Sternean scholar Thomas Keymer disapproves of Shklovsky's (mis)reading *Tristram Shandy* "as [a] parodic anti novel or sophisticated meta novel," deeming it an "unabashedly ahistorical" interpretation that avoids the novel's historical context (*Sterne, the Moderns* 21-22). The same criticism is applicable to Waugh's argument, though on a much larger scale, since she is concerned with metafiction in general. The novel does indeed stray from what we today would recognise as typical novelistic conventions, but is difficult to pinpoint the conventions that the novel supposedly breaks or challenges at a time when the novel genre was itself in development. Additionally, *Tristram Shandy* exhibits many of the same illusion-breaking traits that characterise postmodernist literature, as listed by Waugh, but do they serve the same ends? Another problem with Waugh's definition is that it includes two motivations: first, that metafiction deliberately questions the relationship between art and reality, second, that it stresses how the latter actually resembles the former. Although this likely holds true of a number of novels, it might be reductive to suggest that this is the main aim of *all* metafiction. Literary self-consciousness, as we shall see, has a variety of different functions. A third problem is how to distinguish between works in which metafiction is the text's dominant function and those in which it plays a minor, or even implicit role.

8

1.3. Writing about writing; reading about reading.

In *Narcissistic Narrative* Linda Hutcheon presents a more typological study than Waugh, detailing and distinguishing between several forms and functions of metafiction. To her, this type of literary self-consciousness is essentially "fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity." (1). Like Waugh, she warns us against thinking of metafiction purely as a postmodern phenomenon, despite the prominence of self-consciousness in twentieth-century literature. Instead, she is of the opinion that metafiction has its roots in parodic and self-reflexive works of the eighteenth century and the early Romantic period. Drawing on metafictional categories and functions formulated by Robert Scholes and Jean Ricardou, Hutcheon proposes her own distinction between different types of self-reflexivity: *diegetic* (narrative) self-consciousness and *linguistic* self-consciousness, which can again be sub-divided into overt and covert forms of metafictions. Whereas "[o]vertly narcissistic texts reveal their self-awareness in explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves," in covert metafiction "this process is internalized, actualized; such a text is self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious." (*Narcissistic* 7). These are helpful distinctions which illustrate the variety of metafictional forms. They imply that works of art that do not necessarily flaunt their artificiality and that narrative processes can be considered metafictional. They also illustrate how self-referentiality can be situated on more than one level in the text (discourse-, structure-, plot-level, etc.). Tristram's frequent comments on his own narrative: "—A sudden impulse comes across me—drop the curtain, *Shandy*—I drop it——Strike a line here across the paper, *Tristram*—I strike it—and hey for a new chapter!" (*TS* 4.10: 336), would qualify for Hutcheon as an early example of overt, diegetic narcissism.

Unlike Waugh, however, Hutcheon does not include a preoccupation with the fictionality of the external world in her definition. Whereas Waugh believes that the link between metafiction and reality is maintained by the structural parallels between the two spheres (fiction//reality) and through the critical reworking of existing genre conventions, Hutcheon focuses more on the playful nature of metafiction. To her, it is the semantic openness of such texts that makes them metafictional. Not only do metafictions advocate a

plurality of meanings, but invite (and sometimes demand) readers to become actively engaged as co-producers of meaning. That is not to say, however, that Hutcheon agrees with Wolfe's verdict of metafiction as closed in on itself. Rather, she sees the necessary reader involvement as what connects self-reflexive fiction to the outside world: "… I would not argue that in metafiction the life-art connection has been either severed completely or resolutely denied. Instead, I would say that this "vital" link is reforged, on a new level – on that of the imaginative process (of storytelling), instead of on that of the product (the story told). And it is the new role of the reader that is the vehicle of this change." (*Narcissistic* 3). To Hutcheon, metafiction shows an acute interest in the novel form and the writing process, but this is not its distinguishing feature. This is partly because a narrative interest in the reader is not exclusive to postmodernist or late eighteenth-century novels, and can equally be observed in a number of nineteenth-century and modernist novels. To Hutcheon, the difference between metafiction and the self-reflexive narrative utterances found in, say, Dostoyevsky, is that the former also shows a keen interest in the way a text is equally actualised and constituted by the reader. The openness of modern novels can be traced back to those techniques developed by Sterne, in parodic response to the way earlier writers such as Henry Fielding instructed his readers in how to read his works. According to Hutcheon, *Tristram Shandy* instead gives its readers the freedom to fill in the blanks, and the reading process itself thus becomes one of its main thematic concerns (*Narcissistic* 141-142). This is particularly evident in those sections of the novel where readers are explicity invited to use their imagination, namely on the two black and the two marbled pages (*TS* 1.12: 37-8; 3.36: 269-70). Tristram also starts one chapter by encouraging his readers to draw their own version of Widow Wadman, and leaves the two following pages blank (*TS* 6.38: 566-67). This narrative openness, Hutcheon claims, is what makes *Tristram Shandy* "narcissistic in a modern way."(*Narcissistic* 142). She does, however, make a functional distinction between eighteenth-century and postmodern narcissism: "This earlier kind of thematizing and structuralizing of the reading role is close to that of overt narcissism, but without the necessary mirroring (the reflecting, as of mirrors, in reverse) of the reading process in that of writing." (*Narcissistic* 27). By this she means that in postmodernist metafictional novels the reader is more forcefully bound to operate autonomously in the co-creation of the

fictional universe, but by her own definition, she would nonetheless characterise *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* as metafictional.

1.4. The problem of mimesis

For Hutcheon, this openness also works against the notion of metafiction as anti-mimetic, and calls for a modification of the traditional understanding of artistic imitation. The difference between the realist novels of the nineteenth century and the self-reflexive ones of the eighteenth- and twentieth centuries, she argues, is that the former aims at a mimesis of *product* (or story, i.e. the classical understanding of mimesis), whereas the latter focuses more on a mimesis of *process*, or *diegesis* (i.e. the narrative act of storytelling) (*Narcissistic* 4-5). Hutcheon gives two possible explanations for the fact that even the earliest of novels displays such a high degree of self-reflexivity. First, diegesis was acknowledged as a part of the mimetic act as early as in Aristotle's *Poetics*, second, classical poetics accepted that the 'reality' created by works of art was a fictional and self-contained one (rather than one which faithfully mirrors the external world) (*Narcissistic* 10; 39). This is not suggest, she argues, that art has no mimetic value: "In antiquity, this notion of recognized fictionality was not used to negate ties between the literary and the empirical" (*Narcissistic* 40). The awareness that art could never be analogous to reality did not impinge on its instructive, entertaining, or cathartic functions. In a similar manner, Tristram defends his narrative thus: " ——Writers of my stamp have one principle in common with painters.—Where an exact copying makes our pictures less striking, we choose the less evil; deeming it even more pardonable to trespass against truth, than beauty…" (*TS* 2.4: 104). To Hutcheon, the realist tradition can actually be seen as a deviation in the history of the novel; a misunderstanding of mimesis which dictates that the object of literature should be the external world, and its purpose to achieve truth. This argument is undeniably aimed at naturalising metafiction, as well as defending it against criticism (such as Wolfe's) that judges its value in relation to realist ideals, or deems it a simple parody of realistic conventions. But her argument makes the valuable point that literary criticism too often equates novelistic conventions with those of realism. In

11

accordance with Waugh's argument of the inherent "tensions and oppositions," Hutcheon too aims at demonstrating how the novel has always been aware that it is fiction.

1.5. Conclusion of chapter: *Where does this leave metafiction?*

All of the definitions of metafiction mentioned above are general enough to encompass a larger part of the literary corpus, ranging from the self-consciousness found in *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* to that found in the novels of Fowles and Beckett. Waugh, (Scholes), and McCaffery argue that metafiction primarily assimilates literary criticism and fabulation in order to critically interrogate the relationship between the fictive and the factual, while Hutcheon instead concentrates on the development of self-reflexivity in the novel in order to demonstrate how metafiction is not necessarily an anti-representational form of writing. A text's continual emphasis on its narrative or linguistic identity (explicit or implicit), as well as its willingness to let the reader partake in the making of the work, are two of Hutcheon's criterions for a work to qualify as metafiction, or "fiction about fiction." So where does this leave metafiction? The common denominator in leading theories of metafiction is that this kind of writing, in one way or another, thematises fiction(ality) and the processes involved in the making and/or reception of a literary work. What they do not specify, however, are the textual features that distinguish metafiction from other kinds of self-reflexive writing, nor do they give us tools to determine whether those works can be classified as *wholly* or *partially* metafictional. Despite the fact that theorists of literary self-reflexivity often mention *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* as forerunners, or even early examples of metafiction, they rarely address the question of whether their forms and functions essentially differ from their postmodern counterparts. Do Tristram's narrative comments serve to undermine the aesthetic illusion (implying that his narrative is nothing but fiction), are they a parodic comment on outdated literary conventions, or are they a meditation on the act of narration and the difficulty of structuring experience into a coherent whole? The German narratologists Nünning and Fludernik would argue that not all examples of extensive diegetic self-consciousness should be labelled metafiction. For Nünning, at least, *Tristram Shandy* is not so much "fiction about fiction" as it is a "narrative about narrative" because, he argues, Tristam's

frequent addresses to the narratee and comments on his own narrative choices serve to create an "illusion of a 'teller'" ("On Metanarrative" 18). The implication of this is that Tristram's narrative prominence does not necessarily break the aesthetic illusion, i.e. the suspended belief that what is written on the narrative is real, but actually serves to maintain it. For Nünning and Fludernik, a text needs to explicitly underline or reveal the fictionality of its own narrative in order to be considered metafictional. The function of metafiction may vary greatly from one epoch to another, and it is only recently that *Tristram Shandy* has been investigated exclusively from the point of view of metafiction (Christensen 15). There is a risk that any theorist who tries to link two separate literary movements runs, namely, the risk of distorting the one in order to fit the other. Mark Currie notes that this has particularly been the case with theories of metafiction: "… when postmodern retrospect discovers proto-postmodernism in this way it produces a spurious self-historicising teleology [where] postmodern discourses are seen as the endpoint of history and all prior discourses are construed as leading inexorably towards the postmodern." (5). It is not necessarily the case that all metafictional novels conceive of the real world in fictional terms, encouraging the reader to be equally critical of those stories that lie beyond the text, nor that their chief aim is to thematise the reader's creative and interpretative role. In the next chapter we will delve into various manifestations of literary self-consciousness and explore some of their forms and functions.

Chapter Two: *Manifestations of literary self-reflexivity: metafiction, parody – or what?*

2.1. Self-reflexivity in the eighteenth century

In *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, Fletcher and Bradbury investigate the distinctiveness of the "modern" or "modernist" novel, in comparison with the novel form in previous centuries. To them, there is a functional difference between the self-reflexivity of eighteenth-century and twentieth-century novels. Although these texts appear to be similar, Fletcher and Bradbury argue that one needs to make the distinction between a "mode of self-conscious narration" and "narrative introversion." *Tristram Shandy* serves as a perfect example of the former with its valuation of the role of the narrator. Unlike Hutcheon, who celebrates the openness of its narrative, they view Tristram as vigorously exercising power over his readers, often by cheating them of the expectations he sets up. They argue: "… most of the earlier devices served to draw attention to the autonomy of the narrator, while the later techniques drew attention to the autonomy of the fictive structure itself." (395). Self-reflexivity in works of the eighteenth century, they claim, chiefly served a parodic function and worked towards creating a "comic effect." (395). A prominent narrative voice was not uncommon in literature at the time, and as Wayne C. Booth's study [6] has shown, neither was the self-conscious narrator.

Partly, this trend can be explained by the changing reading habits of the century. Reading had increasingly become a solitary – rather than a public – activity. The development of novel form, then, can be seen as a response to new modes of reading that required a different narrative shape: "The readership modulated from a known collective group familiar with the canons of taste and acquiescing in them to an amorphous assortment of individuals whose reading competence could not be taken for granted and

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[6] "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before Tristram Shandy" (1952)

whose paths of access had to be incorporated into the narrative itself." (Furst 46).

Consequently, this new type of narrative anticipated the need to teach its audience how to

read. Conrad sees the novel genre as adapting forms that "aim […] to educate the reader

out of the desire to be a spectator of events into a mood of patient understanding." (18-19).

One manifestation of the greater valuation of reader involvement was the increased amount

of explicit addresses made to the reader (fictional or otherwise) in popular fiction (Keymer

Sterne, The Moderns 34). As we saw earlier with *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator frequently

invites his readers to engage their imagination, but he also prepares traps for the passive

ones: "——How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter? […] I do

insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full

stop, and read the whole chapter over again." (*TS* 1.20: 64). Arguably, with its numerous

digressions from the main storyline, the novel presents a perfect exercise in sustaining

concentration as well as in educating the mind. And this requires a certain degree of self-

reflexivity. Studies that approach *Tristram Shandy* or *Jacques le fataliste* in their socio-

historical context often treat them as examples of parody or romantic irony. Their aim is to

place these works within a larger generic history, rather than to treat them as

unconventional exceptions to the norm or peculiarly modern. But does this entail that

eighteenth century fiction is more interested in the autonomy of the narrator than in the

fictiveness of the narrative structure?

2.1.1. Parody

Starting with parody, then, a common view of *Jacques le fataliste* is that it parodies

Tristram Shandy, which in turn parodies the techniques of earlier works such as Cervantes'

Don Quixote and Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (Keymer *Sterne, The Moderns* 23-25; Bridgeman

21). This is due to their incorporation of either intertextual quotations, overt references to

the parodied works mentioned, or an adaptation of similar narrative techniques. The

question here is whether or not parody, due to its constitutive intertextuality and "comic

effect," verges upon metafictionality. The *Oxford English Dictionary (Online)* defines

parody as "[a] literary composition modelled on and imitating another work, *esp.* a

composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are

satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect."[7]. If one accepts this definition of parody, it is not immediately clear how parody works self-reflexively, or potentially metafictionally. If one follows Shklovsky's line of argument, however, the parodying of a certain style or established conventions can certainly result in the realisation of a work as fictional, in the way that it intertextually breaks out of the narrated situation by referring to a different work ontologically situated in the real world. Further, the explicit reference to a different, but yet incorporated, aesthetics makes a work point self-reflexively back to itself.

In her study Margaret A. Rose points out parody's metafictional quality by pointing to its "use of incongruity" (22). By incongruity she means that the parodying work, unlike satire and other forms of self-reflexivity, not only imitates but actually incorporates and reworks the parodied object. It does so in such a manner that both the parodying and the parodied text appear strange in their conjunction. The parodied object becomes a constitutive element of the former, and thus any reference to the target text simultaneously refers self-reflexively to the source text. This aspect of "doubleness" in parody, she holds, "has served to bring the concept of imitation itself into question," because it simultaneously destabilises the ontological status of the primary text and its source (22). Both parody and metafiction, further, work on a metalinguistic level because they essentially refer to a different discourse than their own. To a certain degree, however, and especially in those parodic texts that do not specify their target object, it is the task of the reader to identify what is being parodied. Not only that, but the reader has to be able to spot the text as a parody in the first place (Rose 51). This, again, could be seen a means of enhancing the reader's involvement with the text. Rose argues that both parody and irony, due to their respective play plurality of meaning, complicate and thematise like metafiction "the processes of communication [because] they reflect on the communicative function of literary language as a vehicle of the transmission of messages…" (61).

Rose thus sees metafiction as an effect of parody, but it is not clear whether or not she believes that all parody is metafictional. Hutcheon, in her own study of parody, thinks Rose's line of argument wrongly presents the dynamics of parody as "part of a relationship of art to reality," and not one of "art to art" (*A Theory* 20). Arguably, a parodic work can

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[7] ("Parody, *n.*2" *OED*)

self-reflexively refer to its own use of literary conventions and discourses, but it does not necessarily metafictionally "pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." An example from *Tristram Shandy* would be Walter Shandy's various books on the subject noses. The serious tone of these treatises parodies scientific and philosophical discourses in their application to the unlikely subject of noses (*TS* 3.35-42). Although the parody employed here might bring about a questioning of the usefulness of certain non-literary treatises situated in the real world, this does not necessarily entail that this passage qualifies as "fiction about fiction" or as a parody of literature in general. The parodied object can take a number of forms: it can be a specific work; a genre; an author; a style of writing; the novel; or even literature in general. If parody is to be equated with metafiction, a large number of both ancient and modern works would have to be generically reconsidered. It is therefore necessary that we distinguish between parody and parody that works metafictionally.

2.1.2. Irony

Other critics, while acknowledging the parodic and satiric quality of *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*, view them primarily as exercising irony, or even as model examples of "romantic irony." The theory of romantic irony, however, is usually attributed to the writings of Friedrich Schlegel from 1797 onwards, i.e. decades later than the publication of Sterne and Diderot's novels. Lilian Furst sets out to investigate the traces of both irony and romantic irony in the two novels, arguing that we need not restrict the latter term to the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century (ix-x). She identifies the publication of *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) as the historical moment when irony practically took hold of the European novel, and continued to flourish all the way through to the following century. Irony, following *The Oxford English Dictionary (Online)*'s definition, usually signifies "[t]he expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect."[8] It can also take the form of a mode or an attitude of "[d]issimulation, pretence; *esp.* (and in later use only) feigned ignorance and

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[8]Def. 1. a. org. *Rhetoric* ("irony, *n.*" *OED*)

disingenuousness of the kind employed by Socrates during philosophical discussions."[9] One can even speak of structural irony in works that present: "[a] state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected."[10] Although irony is often posited alongside parody as linguistic usage that does not have a single referent and/or meaning, they differ in how they function. Parody works "by combining two codes," i.e. two texts, where the first code works to defamiliarize the second, and irony by "juxtaposing at least two messages in one code," that is to say, the apparent message of a word, phrase, or longer section of a text, and the hidden one (Rose 61). Irony is related to self-reflexiveness in that it can direct the attention of reader elsewhere, i.e., away from the story. Furst illustrates one of the central problems with irony (either as a verbal expression or a more extensive mode of discourse) with the idea of the mask: it potentially hinders the reader's recognition of the hidden meaning (7). For irony to function, she argues, "the object should not be too readily spotted nor so thoroughly hidden as to be irretrievable," and since the reference point(s) of an ironic statement or stance often lies beyond the text, the socio-historical context must also be considered if one is to arrive at the understanding of the hidden meaning (14; 16). Consequently, the reader is required to read actively and critically, besides watching out for signs indicating an ironic stance. These signs may take many forms, and according to Furst an unreliable narrator exhibiting "[s]elf-betrayals, disparities, extravagant claims, conflicting signals, paradoxes, and gaps" is a chief indicator of a deliberate move to make the reader aware that something is not quite what it seems (18). Consider this passage from *Tristram Shandy*: "These unforeseen stoppages, which I own I had no conception of when I first set out; --but which, I am convinced now, will rather increase than diminish as I advance, -- have struck out a hint which I am resolved to follow; --and that is, --not to be in a hurry; …" (*TS* 1.14: 42). Tristram talks about his tendency to stray into digressions in his narrative, resulting in a slow progression of the main storyline. Arguably, the reader is likely to question Tristram's naivity here due to the considerable self-consciousness he shows about his own style of writing elsewhere in the narrative. These "stoppages" do in fact increase as the narrative unfolds, and end up permeating the whole book. Despite claiming to have "no conception" of how the story of

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[9] Def. 2. ibid.

[10] Def. 3. ibid.

18

his life and opinions would be written at the onset, and that he is merely dealing with subjects and interruptions as they arise along the way, this passage could just as well be read as an example of "feigned ignorance." With *Tristram Shandy*, despite the apparent haphazardness of its structure, one gets the sense that the narrative is carefully planned, and perhaps even the impression that Tristram is fully aware of the inventedness of his story. There are thus at least three possible "meanings" one might extract from this passage. We as readers might believe that Tristram was unaware of his digressive inclination and the narrative challenges he would encounter as he sat down to write his autobiography, or we might read this passage as rhetorical irony, as a humorous apology, or a joke on his unconventional narrative structure and style of writing. These two interpretations (the latter being ironic) are both compatible with the mimetic illusion. A third, however, sees Tristram's statement as true and actually underlining his powerlessness over the narrative as it is not written by him, but by Sterne. Furst notes that one source of irony in the novel is the ambivalent relationship between Sterne the extratextual author and Tristram the narrator-author[11]. As the former's presence is rarely perceptible except for his printed name in a few dedications and editor's footnotes, we are bound to Tristram's subjective perspective throughout the narrative (190-91). This makes it difficult to distinguish between Sterne's and Tristram's voice in the text, and thus between textually internal and textually external irony. Irony in itself is not necessarily self-reflexive, but holds the potential of turning back on itself by virtue of meaning becoming multi-levelled. According to Furst, the use of irony in *Tristram Shandy* functions to present a variety of different, yet equally valid interpretations: "Irony becomes not a matter of reconstructing a covert intended meaning but of confronting a bewildering multiplicity of possible meanings." (200). One of these possible meanings, as we saw with the example above, is an ironic stance towards the supposed truthfulness of the narrative. That is why Furst considers both *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* as examples of a more obviously self-reflexive irony, namely romantic irony.

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[11] During the years of publication, readers would often confuse Sterne with his character Tristram and Yorick: "Because Sterne was not just an author posited by a text, but himself a celebrity phenomenon in 1760, the public could respond to both the fictional and the real author figures. […] Indeed, Sterne created for himself something of a fictional persona, signing correspondence with the names of his characters, Tristram and Yorick, and deliberately blurring the lines between his biological self and his literary creations." (Fanning in *Cambridge*, 126).

19

As previously mentioned, romantic irony tends to be attributed to Schlegel's articulation of a different kind of irony that went beyond its traditional "rhetorical, satirical, polemical, and parodistic" functions (Furst 25). His concept of irony is a difficult one to grasp, partly because he never published a comprehensive treatise nor theory on the subject. His ideas are scattered across his works, most notably in his *Lyceum*, *Athenäum*, and *Ideen* fragments. Partly, also, because his concept of irony is philosophically anchored in his view of the world as essentially contradictory and paradoxical. Furst identifies three key aspects of his definition of irony: "the role of consciousness, the assent to mobility, and the notion of paradoxicality…" (27). The valuation of consciousness amongst the Romantics stems from an acknowledgement of the unattainability of absolute truth and knowledge, as all humans are inevitably trapped in their own limited and subjective perspective. Romantic poetry, therefore, shows an awareness of the limits of both consciousness and aesthetic representation, while putting forward a representation nonetheless. Not only that, it revels in that creative act[12]. It is in this sense one must understand Schlegel's notion of the romantic poet as simultaneously "involved in and detached from his creation" and of romantic irony functioning as a "constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction" (Furst 28). This does not, as Furst notes, simply mean that the romantic ironist presents a narrative only to expose it as fictitious. If the aesthetic illusion is broken, that is rather the effect of the poet's effort to demonstrate his autonomy, freedom, and power over his creation. Because the world in itself is contradictory, chaotic, and always changing (i.e. *mobile*), it is impossible for a "static representation" to incorporate or reflect it in its totality, but romantic irony, in acknowledging its representational shortcomings and opening up to a dynamic plurality of meaning "serves as a sign and symbol of the Infinite." (Bishop 3; 9). Romantic irony, in this sense, becomes an attitude or stance which embraces paradoxicality, as well as a tool to transcend the limits of consciousness and the world.

Schlegel was heavily inspired by *Don Quixote, Tristram Shandy*, and *Jacques le fataliste* which he read and celebrated as early literary manifestations of "romantic irony." (Garber 8; 23). The structure of Sterne's novel, in particular, encapsulates his notion of paradoxicality in the way that it combines chaos and structure. Instead of having

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[12]"19th Century Romantic Aesthetics", *SEPO* par. 5.3.

an omniscient narrator providing coherence and stability of meaning, it presents us with a single unreliable and digressive consciousness which, in Wayne C. Booth's words, "creates order out of seeming chaos" in *Tristram Shandy* (164). Further, the shortcomings and limits of consciousness are frequently illustrated by the false beliefs held by many of its characters. Tristram carefully guides his readers through the birth and gradual development of Walter Shandy's firm opinion that noses and names determine the outcome of a person's life, emphasising how quickly an innocent idea can grow into a concrete and unyielding belief. A similar encouragement not to take anything at face value is made in the scene where Trim reads out Yorick's sermon, and believes it to be a true account of the fate of his brother: "[Oh! 'tis my brother, cried poor *Trim* in a most passionate exclamation, dropping the sermon upon the ground, and clapping his hands together […] —Why, *Trim*, said my father, this is not a history,—'tis a sermon thou art reading…" (*TS* 2.17: 162). This mirror of the difference between appearance and reality is one of the chief sources of irony in the novel. Tristram's narrative, however, although mediated through a single and fallible consciousness, transcends its own limits by flaunting them, and by adapting a sufficiently open and indeterminate structure as to mirror the chaos of the external world: "What the ironist offers is a skillful mimicry of that anarchy which is always out there, ready to swallow up all the fixities of human experience. In so doing he shows how the mind can turn the threat of disintegration into the matter of high art." (Garber 38). The art of romantic ironists, according to Brian McHale, was to turn the traditional mimetic situation around. A "finite" mind struggling to interpret an infinite universe, was replaced in art with an "infinite" mind creating its own finite universe (30). Writers like Cervantes, Sterne, and Diderot demonstrated their artistic freedom by showing themselves at work within their works, and the result being that "… [since] the fictional world now acquires a visible maker, its own status must inevitably change, too: it has become less the mirror of nature, more an *artifact*, visibly a *made* thing." (McHale 29-30).

Furst also argues that one source of the irony at work in novels like *Tristram Shandy* was that the eighteenth century witnessed a "growing scepticism" about the supposed transparency of language (39). A pivotal event in this development was the publication of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). In this essay Locke discusses how the unsteady meanings of words often lead to errendous

understanding, and Furst argues that this insight grew into the awareness that "[this] uncertaintly might reside in the ways in which individuals use worlds." (42). She is quick to note, however, that this does not mean "that the eighteenth century has a theory of meaning in the modern sense. [...] However, the late eighteenth century was amply aware of the discrepancy between the sign and what it might signify, and of the hazards of language as an unreliable mediator of meaning." (42).

Self-reflexivity, as shown, was neither new nor uncommon in eighteenth-century literature. It was frequently the result of the use of parodic or ironic devices, and these hold the potential to self-reflexively mirror the creative act of writing or even emphasise the fictive nature of the work created. Arguably too, we find all of these traditions at work in both *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*. What then, should be their proper generic label (if there can ever be such a thing)? While Fletcher and Bradbury believe that the notoriously autonomous narrator in *Tristram Shandy* served a comic function, the effect of that same humorous autonomy might easily jeopardise the mimetic illusion. In the case of romantic irony, one even finds the deliberate emphasis on the autonomy of a narrative as a created microcosm. Is there really a difference between Waugh's notion of metafiction as "systematically draw[ing] attention to its status as artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" and Schlegel's ideal of romantic poetry as a flaunting its devices because neither language nor consciousness can adequately grasp or incorporate an infinitely chaotic and transient world? Both traditions raise similar questions, but does this mean that modern metafictional novels have simply borrowed their techniques from a long-standing tradition of parody and irony? Are they all variances of the same phenomenon? A self-conscious narrator could instruct readers in the art of reading, but he could also point to the discrepancy between fiction and reality by virtue of his unreliability or excessive use of ironic devices. Parody and romantic irony share with metafiction a divergence from the classical understanding of mimesis because their referents are not singularly and unproblematically situated in reality (although they often appear to be). However, the question still remains whether or not we are dealing with two (or more) distinct and different types of self-reflexive literary modes in *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*. This is because the above-mentioned traditions share a number of similarities with the term metafiction, at least if we follow Waugh and Hutcheon's

definitions. Does that mean that metafiction is a transhistorical phenomenon, belatedly named, and now functioning as a collective term for a number of self-reflexive modes that happened to resurge and converge in the literature of the late twentieth century? Alternatively, is metafiction – or at least some forms of metafiction – strictly postmodern? The stress on form, possibly at the expense of content, found in these works might lead to metafictional issues, but might be accidental outcomes rather than the main thematic concern of novels such as *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste.* Whether or not parodic and ironic novels work self-reflexively is something that is determined by their object, and the extent to which these mirroring devices are employed**.** A word of precaution before we proceed: if we go looking for the specific targets of imitation, mockery, or admiration in *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* could potentially trap us in the net of "the intentional fallacy"[13]. We can never know for sure if their authors were having a go at fiction "in general," or whether their use of self-reflexive techniques, as Fletcher and Bradbury believe, were primarily employed in order to underline "the autonomy of the narrator." In order to answer our initial questions, then — *What self-conscious utterances qualify as metafictional ones? Is metafiction a transhistorical function of all literature?* — we need to have a closer look at manifestations of typically postmodern metafiction. In comparing the different forms of literary self-reflexivity, we might stumble upon a difference in narrative *function* rather than *intention* or *motivation*.

2.2. Postmodernist metafiction

We rediscover many of the elements that typify self-reflexive eighteenth-century literature in postmodernist fiction. Both parody and irony are frequently at work, especially in an early wave of metafiction in Europe and the United States (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 11). A general feeling amongst fiction writers at this time was articulated by John Barth in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967). In Waugh's terms, a "crisis" of forms could be felt, expressing itself in the sense that the experimental narrative techniques and radical aestheticism of modernist literature had, literally, been exhausted. Where could the novel

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[13] Expression popularised by Wimsatt and Beardsley in an 1946 essay with the same title: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27537676?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

form go on from modernism? And what should its function be in the rapidly changing twentieth century? A number of novelists writing around 1910 and onwards renounced some of the most fundamental conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel. In disrupting logical and chronological narrative structures, replacing the omniscient narrator with voices more closely tied to their characters, and continually stressing the division between art and life, Barth felt that "certain forms or … certain possibilities" in fiction had been "used up" by the modernists (qtd. in Nicol 50). Following Waugh's line of argument then, the literature that followed on from modernism was bound, by the logical development of literary history; had to valorise and employ parody. The response of early postmodern (sometimes referred to as avant-garde) writers to this problem was in part to take the modernist experimentations to their extreme. A famous Beckett quote from *The Unnamable* illustrates the will and necessity to move on despite generic difficulties: "I can't go on. I'll go on" (382). Scepticism towards realism and the idea that all fiction is necessarily self-referential (auto-representational) prevailed (Nicol 51-2) The French *nouveau* and *nouveau nouveau roman* advocated a complete departure from of traditional constitutive parts of a novel such as plot, characters, and causal series of events (Crosthwaite 308) the result often turning out pastichical and parodical. Alain Robbe-Grillet, at the forefront of this movement, noted optimistically:

> "it seems that we are more and more moving towards an age of fiction in which the problems of writing will be lucidly envisaged by the novelist. […] Invention and imagination may finally become the subject of the book." (qtd. in Stevenson 201)

These novelists' intense preoccupation with genre, convention, and the act of fiction-writing itself, had a great influence on the American self-reflexive fiction of the 1960s and 70s; the kind of fiction which William H. Gass labelled "metafiction." (Nicol 72-73). This wave of self-referential fiction, also known as "American surfiction," was what Wolfe denounced as disengaged and navel-gazing literature. American novelists turned inwards during a time of significant political and social turmoil (the Cuban Crisis; the war in Vietnam; militant Feminism; etc.), partly because they "tended to conceive of the realist novel as the literary equivalent of official structures of power and oppressive social convention." (Nicol 72). Metafiction was thus not simply engaged with fictional structures,

24

but functioned as a means to make people think more closely about the social institutions surrounding them, and the novel being one of them. With this in mind, we can clearly see the contextual background for both Waugh and Hutcheon's definitions of metafiction. The question still remains, of course, whether or not they "fit" earlier self-conscious novels such as *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*.

Not all kinds of postmodern metafiction are outwardly engaged, however, according to Hutcheon. She identifies two different strands of metafiction in the twentieth century: "one that is non-mimetic, ultra-autonomous, anti-referential, and another that is historically *engagé*, problematically referential." (*Poetics* 52). The former, she prefers to call "late modernist extremism," while opting for limiting the tag "postmodernist" to the latter kind (*Poetics* 40). Although still highly parodic, metafiction published after the initial avant-garde and New Novel waves, is more acutely engaged with its contemporary historical and political surroundings. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* she introduces the term "historiographic metafiction" (5) to encompass fiction which juxtaposes past and present, history and fiction, in order to critically investigate all of these concepts. We will return to this later in this chapter as we look into the role metafiction has played in the rewriting of history by feminist and postcolonial novelists, in particular. Hutcheon views postmodernism as inherently "paradoxical", and "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" in the way that it simultaneously resists and incorporates modernist strategies (*Poetics* 5; 4; 43). In Bran Nicol's words, Hutcheon's definition "does not mean [that] postmodernism is oppositional or dialectical, but that it is *double* or contradictory, that is comfortable with doing two opposing things at the same time" (16). That postmodern fiction parodically recycles modernism is not to say, however, that postmodern writers had run out of ideas, or that there was nothing new to be written. The problems faced by postmodern writers were rather caused by the fact that the very core concepts underlying both fiction and reality had been considerably shaken over the course of the twentieth century, especially in the field of language. Although our focus here is on postmodern fiction, a short introduction to its contemporary zeitgeist will be illuminating for our study, and that entails trying to get a grip of what postmodernism really means.

2.2.1. Postmodernism

Postmodernism, although a highly disputed and complex term, is often ideologically contrasted with modernity. Both in the field of literary studies and beyond the prefix "post-" has raised innumerable debates about how to define the postmodern (Docherty 36). Some view it as a radical break with modernism; others a continuation of some of modernisms values and ideals and techniques of modernism – or as Hutcheon prefers to view it – as doing both. In the broadest sense of the word, it denotes a range of partially connected political, social and cultural reorientations in Western societies during the latter half of the twentieth century. Initially, the term was coined by the British historian Arnold Toynbee to describe the period which succeeded the modern (Connor 1-2). The term became central in formulating contemporary theories of architecture and literature in the 1940-60s, and grew increasingly widespread in the 1980s as a phenomenon present in most areas of the arts and the humanities, before finally gaining autonomy as "a general horizon or hypothesis" in the 1990s (Connor 2; Docherty 1). The general notion of postmodernism partly stems from the technological advances, expanding globalisation, and economic 'late' capitalism affecting every area of society after WWII (Nicol 3). The effect of this development, Lyotard notes, was a global cultural concoction: "one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong" (*The Postmodern* 76). Frederic Jameson, similarly defined postmodernism in his *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984) as "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (qtd. in Hutcheon, *Poetics* 26-27).

2.2.2. Lyotard and "historiographic metafiction"

Postmodern critical theory has, since the 1960s, provided a radical critique of "the project of Enlightenment" which was seen as still affecting modern society (Dochery 5). The shared optimism in the progress of humanity, however, has arguably declined over the course of the 20th century, due in part to its destructive manifestations (Lyotard, "Meaning of Post-" 48). Two World Wars; the Holocaust; the development and use of atomic

26

weapons; bloody and tumultuous colonial secessions, had all challenged the faith in material science and the progress of humanity. Hence, a sense that there might be something fundamentally wrong with this ontological outlook haunts postmodern thinkers, critics and writers. Jean-François Lyotard famously articulated one of the prime concerns of postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). Here he describes postmodernity's shared scepticism towards Enlightenment thinking as an "incredulity toward metanarratives." (xxiv). According to Lyotard, both the period of Enlightenment and modernity in general were governed by their faith in metanarratives, i.e. overarching explanatory models of the world and humanity (Malpas 36). Metanarratives assemble the discourses of various institutions (science, religion, politics) in coherent, logical structures, thus achieving the status as trustworthy providers of universal truth and knowledge. In his view, however: "[m]etanarratives are a form of ideology which function violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of 'totality' and 'universality' on a set of disparate things, actions, and events." (Nicol 11). Postmodernity is characterised, according to Lyotard, by the awareness that all discourses in society – be they historical, scientific, or fictional – are shaped as narratives, and thus necessarily resting on an ideology. And as narratives, they bring together elements and events that are not necessarily connected in order to create a coherent, logical framework legitimizing their authority and exercise of power (Nicol 11). For instance, the Marxist metanarrative explains historical development as primarily driven by the tensions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in modern societies, which will (naturally or by force) culminate in a revolution ending capitalism. Such narratives are intrinsically teleological, and often make 'emancipatory' promises (Lyotard 36-7). It is this Hegelian notion of history as a dialectical process that comes under scrutiny in Lyotard's study. In the "postmodern condition" knowledge is no longer viewed as universal and potentially emancipatory, due to the declining legitimacy of metanarratives. Postmodernity, according to Lyotard, favours local and provisory knowledge; the "little narratives [*petit récit*]" that are relative to their given context (*The Postmodern* 60). Literature, which is *par définition* founded on narrative structures, is usually structured in a logical, consequential and teleological manner. This is perhaps one of the reasons why metafiction has been linked to postmodernism, because it comments upon narrative strategies and proceedures.

27

The techniques of postmodernist fiction, which Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," mirror Lyotard's critique of Enlightenment thought. By either rejecting or parodying traditional realistic narratives, or self-reflexively pointing to the fictionality of all narratives, they scrutinize such humanist concepts as "autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, [and] origin." (*Poetics* 57). Postmodern literature and art are especially preoccupied with history: they question the extent to which we can take historical records and accounts as truthful, and whether or not we can know the past at all, seeing as narratives are our only way of accessing it (*Poetics* 16). In her own words, historiographic metafiction is extremely aware of both itself and of history as "human constructs," i.e. they are not *natural* (*Poetics* 5). But that is not to say that postmodernist fiction necessarily dismisses history; it is both uses and abuses; criticises and cherishes it as a creative and imaginative force.

2.2.3. Feminist historiographic metafiction

Jeanette Winterson's 1989 novel *Sexing the Cherry* can help us exemplify how historiographic metafiction supposedly works. Most of the novel is set in seventeenth-century London, before and after the English Civil War. The text freely appropriates historical figures and events within its own fictional narrative, for instance when the main protagonists Jordan and the Dog-Woman witness the trial and execution of King Charles I (*SC* 73-75). Moreover, the novel has a significantly fragmented temporal structure, jumping back and forth between the Renaissance and the present day. In the final "1990" section, the text self-parodically mirrors the preceding two-thirds of the novel, by presenting two new narratives that transpose the stories of Jordan and his mother by offering present-day versions of the two characters. The obvious subversion of historiographic temporal sequence in the narrative, shows its scepticism towards both time and history as objective entities. In Jordan's narrative, especially, we find an emphasis on the subjective and perceptual nature of time. In the section titled 'The Nature of Time', for instance, he states: "We have dreams of moving back and forward in time, though to use the words back and forward is to make a nonsense of the dream, for it implies that time is

linear, and if that were so there could be no movement, only a forward progression." (*SC* 99-100). This statement both provides a critique of positivism and implies that relationships between points in time are to do with *linguistic*, rather than factual, tenses. By subverting traditional temporality, the text reveals the past, as well as history, to be contingent and provisional stories. These concepts can be amended and re-appropriated in fiction, however. In mixing fictive and factual language, the text also demonstrates that these discourses, in fact, employ the same language. If postmodernism is identified by an "incredulity towards metanarratives," then that scepticism is perhaps most perceptible in Jordan's list of lies:

> "*Lies 5*: Any proposition that contains the word 'finite' (the world, the universe, expe
>
> rience, ourselves)
>
> *Lies 6*: Reality as something which can be agreed upon.
>
> *Lies 7:* Reality as truth." (*SC* 90)

There are numerous other elements of the novel that demonstrate its historiographic self-consciousness, especially the "Twelve Dancing Princesses" section. A number of postmodern metafictional novels take on well-known narratives like myths or fairy tales, but modify them substantially. This is not simply a parodic move: it is a political act. One of the fairy tales that gets re-told in *Sexing the Cherry* is the story of Rapunzel. Here, she does not willingly let down her hair from her tower in order for her prince to climb it and rescue her. Instead, it is her older, female lover she lets climb the tower with the help of her hair. One day, the prince next door manages to break in, and kills Rapunzel's lover and marries her (*SC* 52). As Marshall points out, postmodernist literature asks: "Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose?" (4). Feminist and Postcolonial theory share many concerns with postmodernism, especially in their ceaseless effort to challenge and expose hidden ideologies in the dominant discourses of society. In his search for the dancer Fortunata, Jordan decides to dress up a woman and work amongst other women at a fish stall. Here, he discovers that "women have a private language", distinct from the masculine and rational language of science and history (*SC* 28). Sabina Lovibond points out that although feminism partakes in postmodernism's questioning of grand narratives, it also

29

needs narratives and a claim to truth in order to establish their own minoritarian identity: "How can anyone ask me to say goodbye to "emancipatory metanarratives" when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?" (395) For feminist and postcolonial writers historiographic metafiction proved a valuable arena from which to propose counter-narratives, or "little narratives", while still remaining sceptical towards *all* narratives. There is not necessarily a contradiction here, or – there is – but it is in line with Hutcheon's notion of postmodernism as intrinsically paradoxical. Feminist historiographic metafiction questions both past and present, self-reflexively mindful of its own, equally ideologically charged myth-making: "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological." (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 110).

2.2.4. Derrida and intertextuality

Formalism, structuralism, and particularly poststructuralism are of particular relevance to the study of postmodernist metafiction. Ferdinand de Saussure's and Roman Jacobson's studies in the fields of linguistics and semiotics heavily affected mid-twentieth century critical theory. Structuralism presented the kind of analysis which examines individual cultural and linguistic entities as constitutive of larger structures. Saussure's claim that a word is never organically linked to the object it is meant to represent, eventually broadened to the more extensive theory that language is essentially what constitutes our culture. But this language is in itself arbitrary and separate from the world, and can thus not be said to accurately represent it (Nicol 6). Language, according Saussure, is made up of signs that function through the combination of a *signifier* (a word; an image; a sound) and the *signified* (the idea; the concept that the signifier is meant to represent). The relationships between *signifier*, *signified*, and the *referent* (the object in the real world that the sign is meant to represent) are all arbitrary, but necessary in order for communication to function. Hence "language doesn't *need* the world to function; it works independently of it." (Nicol 7). Mark Currie attributes postmodern literary self-consciousness to the realisation that meaning does not emanate from the referent in the real world; rather, meaning derives from binary oppositions within the linguistic structure (6). One understands the word "cat"

because it is distinct from other signifiers such as "dog" or "horse", not because there was once a "first cat" that was assigned that name. It is in this sense that language is self-referential, although it may hide its underlying structure where "meaning [relies] on difference rather than on essence." (Marshall 20). Structuralism in literary theory works from the premise that narratives are made comprehensible by virtue of reoccurring patterns in their narrative and generic structure. For instance, Vladimir Propp's study of Russian fairy tales and Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myths served to show how narrative prose from a variety of cultures and times often consist of the same story-components, and a few variations of the same archetypal story-line (Rimmon-Kenan 20-22).

In poststructuralism we find the same preoccupation with signs, structures, and the view of language as largely self-contained. The difference between the two critical movements lies rather in their understanding of "center"; fittingly articulated in Jacques Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (1970). He claimed that there had recently been a rupture in intellectual life involving a "decentering" of the prevailing logocentric system of thought (Natoli & Hutcheon 226). Western metaphysics, science and philosophy have always, according to Derrida, been anchored in the notion of a centre, a "point of presence, a fixed origin," at the heart of any structure (Natoli & Hutcheon 227). According to Marshall, poststructuralism is acutely aware that "… language is not an 'innocent' vehicle to express thought; rather, it moulds thought into its own conceptual categories which replicate a logocentric pattern." (21). Both in linguistic structures and structures of knowledge this centre is thought of as stable, yet throughout history different transcendental concepts have repeatedly replaced the previous centres, be it "essence, existence, substance, subject" or "consciousness, or conscience, God, [or] man" (Natoli & Hutcheon 225). However, Derrida argues that the understanding of a governing centre is intrinsically paradoxical because it must both be located inside and outside of its structure, therefore he concludes: "The center is not the center." (Natoli & Hutcheon 224). Similarly, and returning to literature, if one conceives of the author as the centre, the creator, and the source of meaning of a literary work (with the implication that the task of the reader/literary critic is to decipher the author's original intention), then the meaning of that text is fixed. Derrida strongly resists this kind of logocentric thinking, but acknowledges that the way in which the language we are bound

to use is structured makes it difficult to escape – and even structuralism is guilty of longing for a centre (240). Marshall explains that although the signified and the signifier are arbitrarily connected in Saussure's theory, their relationship is still one "where meaning rests, if only for a hypothetical moment" (66). Poststructuralism surpasses structuralism in rethinking this relationship, a signifier no longer smoothly points to a singular and stable signified, the signifier can create a number of related or unrelated signifieds. Furthermore, the function of a signifier can change depending on the context in which it appears. Derrida introduces the concept of "freeplay", or the "disruption of presence" to explains what happens when we stop searching for a centre, and accept instead that meaning can only be generated from within language (Natoli & Hutcheon 240). With an absent centre and stable anchoring, language becomes an open system where movement is possible through "a slippage from signifier to signifier, rather than from signifier to the absolute signified." (Marshall 69). This is because the sign both represents and takes the place of absence, or "différance."[14] This is one explanation of why pregressive *mise-en-abyme*-structures and open-ended narratives abound in postmodernist literature, because it enables fiction to criticise its own linguistic structures from the inside. The Derridean critical stance towards logocentrism and deconstructivist discourse analysis had a huge impact on literary theory and the humanities more generally in the 1970s and 80s. A playful preference for interpretation, and multi-signification over closed, immobile meaning is distinctively postmodern, notes Marshall, but we must be wary of equating poststructuralism and postmodernism (69-70). Although the two schools of thought share a number of concerns, she posits that the latter is more engaged with political, cultural and historical discourses.

Another central idea in poststructuralism is "intertextuality," which was introduced to literary theory by Julia Kristeva in her study of Mikhail Bakhtin. Intertextuality does not simply entail the explicit quotation or even the covert allusion to a different text, but the idea that all discourses of society, be they "cultural, literary, historical, [or] psychological," inevitably blend together (Marshall 122). The classical understanding of "text" as a completed and semiotically closed work, was replaced by the idea that any text is part of a

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[14] Another of Derrida's closely related terms: an amalgamation of both senses of the French verb 'différer', i.e. 'to defer/postpone' and 'to differ.' It thus highlights that not only is meaning produced by difference in language, but that meaning is continually being deferred.

vast network where individual works cannot be distinguished from one another. In Derrida's terms, this network – or structure – of course, has no center. Bakhtin argued that in any piece of prose there are echoes, or underlying structures of societal discourse (everyday discourse; authorial or narratorial speech; philosophical, moral, scientific language; etc.), and famously defined the novel as "a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized," or "heteroglossia" ("Discourse in the Novel" 1078-79). Kristeva's — and also Roland Barthes' – contribution to the term "intertextuality" was that the semiotic plurality of a text necessarily devaluates the traditional role of the author, and places greater emphasis on the interpretative role of the reader. Barthes argues that this is because it is essentially "language which speaks, not the author" ("The Death of" 143). It also implies that all texts are essentially plagiaristic, and postmodern novels often borrows freely from other works and discourses (Federman, "Imagination as" 564), as we saw with historical facts in Winterson's novel. Intertextuality is not just symptomatic of texts, however, it is also affects both reader and author. The human subject, according to poststructuralism, is equally bound by the system of language, and must him or herself also be intertextual, thereby challenging a stable notion of identity (Barthes, *S/Z* 10).

We will return to the notion of the absent author in Chapter Three, but for now let us concentrate on how the poststructuralist concepts' "decentered structure" and "intertext" are fruitful in our study of self-reflexive fiction. They reflect many of the central concerns of metafiction as articulated by Waugh and Hutcheon, especially the mimetic relationship between text and world, language as a Möbius strip-system, and the fictive/discursive nature of reality. Without going as far as arguing that postmodernist metafiction is the creative execution of a poststructuralist theory of language, it does serve to illuminate the fragmentation, multiple voices, breaks of narrative levels, and repetition often found in postmodernist literature.

Thus far, our working definition of metafiction is based on at least five criteria: 1) The text comments on the fictionality of the narrative (as Hutcheon notes, this can be done both overtly and covertly); 2) The text qualifies as "fiction about fiction", i.e. that the central focus and theme is fiction, and not story and/or content; 3) There are a number of self-reflexive comments within the text that obviously do not have their referent in the reality, but rather thematises its own linguistic structure; 4) The text invites or demands the

reader to take an active interpretative role; 5) The text breaks the aesthetic illusion. It would be easy at this point to conclude that metafiction should be viewed as a strictly postmodern phenomena, because of its correlating concerns with postmodern and poststructuralist theory. For instance, Jeanette Winterson's novel falls, with its publication date, perfectly under the rubric of postmodern metafiction. But what about Flann O'Brien's 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*? Historically, it belongs to the period of literary modernism, but somehow the novel does not quite fit its generic context. One finds a significant degree of self-reflexivity in modernist literature too, but modernist novels are rarely labelled works of metafiction.

2.2.5. Derridean loops in Irish fiction

An initial difficulty that arises when one approaches *At Swim-Two-Birds* for the first time is to navigate through its confusing structure. The novel presents a number of narrative levels, but not as hierarchically ordered frame stories. An unnamed Dublin student of literature spends his leisure time writing stories which all intertwine, and where characters are allowed to cross the boundaries between them. Even the primary narrative setting is highly disjointed and jumps between diary entries, notes to the reader, extracts from (fictive) newspaper articles and dictionaries, letters in their entirety. Already before the narrative starts, the novel fulfils the first criteria of metafiction by blatantly proclaiming in the epigraph: "All the characters represented in this book, including the first person singular, are entirely fictitious and bear no relation to any person living or dead." (*AS* 6). We are met by the first-person narrator who describes putting bread in his mouth, only to interrupt that first narrative action a moment later with a reflexion on the process of story-writing: "One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings." (*AS* 90). In its explicit defiance of traditional conventions of unity, the narrative appears to share Derrida's rejection of logocentrism and semiotic closure. Further, the student-narrator's many stories are written in a number of different literary styles, from epic poetry to fairy tales and contemporary novels on vice. This is especially visible in the mid-section of the

novel where we learn that the student-narrator is in fact writing about an author who, in turn, has written the stories of Finn MacCool, King Sweeney, John Furriskey, the Pooka, Lamont and Shanahan from the Red Swan Hotel. At this point in the narrative, many of the characters from the different story-levels meet in the same hotel as their author and begin reciting poetry. Shanahan interrupts Finn's archaic recital of the story of King Sweeny: "You can't beat it, of course, said Shanahan with a reddening of the features, the real old stuff of the native land, you know […] But the man in the street, where does he come in?" (*AS* 75) He then goes on to praise and recite the contemporary (fictional) poet Jem Casey (*AS* 77). In a way, the novel becomes a kind of heteroglossic anthology of Irish literature and poetry, but also a great deal of literary theory. For instance, the student-narrator tells his friend in a discussion on literature that "a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity" and that "characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. […] The modern novel should be largely a work of reference," thus discrediting both artistic originality and mimetic ideals (*AS* 25). Further, the interweaving of narrative levels serve to destabilise the notion of authorship. Trellis is humorously described as an author with godlike powers by the press in the section where he creates the character John Furriskey:

> "The birth of a son in the Red Swan Hotel is a fitting tribute to the zeal and persever-
> ance of Mr Dermot Trellis, who has won international repute in connexion with his re
> searches into the theory of aestho-autogamy. The event may be said to crown the sa-
> vant's life-work as he has at last realized his dream of producing a living mammal from
> an operation involving neither fertilization nor conception." (*AS* 40).

Trellis' powers are inversed, however, when all of his characters decide (literally) to plot against him. Free to do as they please when their author falls asleep, they make his semi-real son (the offspring of an affair Trellis had with one of his characters) write a painful death for him. *At Swim*'s self-reflexivity largely takes the form of a playfulness with the novel genre, stressing the imaginary nature of its characters (as well as their narrators), focussing on the creative process of writing a story. The student-narrator works on, revises, rewrites, and summarises his book, while his characters are equally engaged in

storytelling and writing. One objection against the seemingly never-ending *mise-en-abyme* structure might be to argue that O'Brien, the *real* author sits firmly and steadily on top of the hierarchy of narrative worlds. But Flann O'Brien, the printed name on the novel, is actually one of Brian O'Nolan's many pseudonyms, which serves to divert and resist semiotic closure even further (Brooker 4). The novel displays a tendency towards non-closure, and slips easily from one discourse to another, but can we effectively call it proto-Derridean?

2.3. Conclusion of chapter

Looking back at these historical variations of self-reflexive literature, some commonalities emerge between Sterne, O'Brien and Winterson: these novels incorporate a plethora of stories and rarely stick to one storyline; they about authors and storytellers, and the difficulties they face in writing and/or narrating the story; they include explicit comments on the process of writing/narrating, the story or its characters, and sometimes to or about the reader; contain typographical oddities (dashes, blank spaces, asterisks, ellipses, images, drawings, etc.) and/or an excessive amount of author's footnotes and editorial comments drawing attention to the text as a physical object; they contain a number temporal and spatial discrepancies disturbing the linear logic of the story, sometimes triggered by metaleptic jumps made by the narrator or his characters, or by complex *mise-en-abyme* structures destabilising the "hierarchy of worlds"; utter paradoxical statements, make satirical or parodic allusions to other literary works, genres, or styles, or include unrealistic – even magical – events, all rendering the narrator unreliable, and potentially challenging the truthfulness of the story.

Yet, it is more difficult to answer the question "*What is metafiction, and what isn't?*" by lining up and comparing its historical variations. Like many theorists of metafiction have pointed out, *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* appear strikingly similar to (post)modern novels, and employ many of the same self-reflexive narrative techniques. Many of our provisional characteristics of metafiction might just as well be applied to some definitions of parody and (romantic) irony. Parody imitates, and often exaggerates, its literary or linguistic object, while authors and narrators of romantic irony

remain detached from their work, thus foregrounding the act of creation and de-creation. There are, moreover, a range of functional variations between and within these novels. For instance, two central figures of twentieth-century metafiction emerge from our study: the linguistically/semiotically engaged, and the historically engaged metafiction. Of course, the two are not entirely different, and share a preoccupation with intertextuality, an aversion towards closed structures, a devaluation of the author and a valorisation of the reader, and split, fragmented subjects. Can we keep calling all kinds of self-reflexive fiction (or self-reflexive instances in a text) metafictional? The spectrum is vast, and we need alternative approaches to determine what essentially characterises metafiction *vis-à-vis* other forms of self-reflexivity if the term is to have any meaning. A number of questions remain unresolved: *Is metafiction a term that only makes sense in a postmodern context? Is metafiction in the eighteenth century basically the same as in our time, or are we talking about (at least) two different kinds of metafiction? What does metafiction do that other self-referential modes do not do? Does it make sense to speak about "partially" or "fully" metafictional works?* We obviously will not find, and certainly should not go looking for postmodern historiographic concerns, or the Derridean idea of the absent centre in *Tristram Shandy* or *Jacques le fataliste*, but does that suffice as an objection against classifying them as metafictional works? Neither parody nor irony are exclusive features of eighteenth-century self-reflexive novels, and linguistic concerns are not only found in postmodern works.

Fletcher and Bradbury claim that pre-twentieth-century novels do not so much thematise the reading experience and incite active interpretation of the text, as they seek to demonstrate the autonomy of the narrator for instructive or comic reasons. This might have been a beneficial point of separation, but it is difficult to argue in the case of Sterne, due to the fact that Tristram frequently leaves things to his readers' imaginations, as for example when he invites them to draw upon the blank pages of the book. And again, should we exclude O'Brien from the group of postmodern writers of metafiction purely because his novel was published decades earlier than Derrida and Kristeva's critical essays? We could, of course, avoid this question by stating, as Linda Hutcheon does, that "theory should be derived from (and not imposed upon) art" (*A Theory of* xi). Perhaps the term metafiction

should be distinguished from other kinds of self-reflexivity by the kinds of questions it asks?

Chapter Three: *What makes it metafiction?*

3.1 *Postmodern or transhistorical phenomenon*?

> "——That whatever resemblance it may bear to half the chapters which are written in the world, or, for aught I know, may be now writing in it—that it was as casual as the foam of Zeuxis his horse: besides, I look upon a chapter which has only nothing in it with respect; and considering what worse things there are in the world——That it is no way a proper subject for satire———" (*TS* 9.25: 785).

In Jerome Klinkowitz's entry on metafiction in *Encyclopedia of the Novel,* he explains that one of the reasons why modern writers of metafiction have frequently referenced Sterne and Diderot's novels. In their deviation from the realistic, representational novel, their works were criticised as "illegitimate forms of fiction," and thus they found themselves in need of an anti-illusionist genealogy in order to defend their literary practices. Yet, he argues, there is a significant difference between old and modern forms of metafiction: "Even in *Tristram Shandy* the illusion is maintained that the narrator is telling a 'real' story, one that is represented as having happened in the world," whereas with contemporary novelists, "writing becomes truly metafictional, practicing no illusion whatsoever." (836). As such, it is tempting to suggest that pre-postmodern forms of literary self-reflexivity do not disclose their fictionality to the extent that postmodern novels do, and consequently they do not qualify as metafictional. Alternatively, this might mean that we are essentially talking about two different kinds of metafiction: one that is born simultaneously with the novel and its conventions, and that is not necessarily at odds with representational ideals; and another that

shares its concerns about language, narrative, history, and reality with postmodernism. On the other hand, Lissi Athanasiou-Krikelis argues that it is in fact because the term metafiction has been identified with postmodern theory and literature that it has become such a confusing term:

> "Metafiction and postmodern fiction are associated to the point of convergence, but it is important to underscore that although they may connote similar references, at times they may be completely dissociated. It is unquestionably established that the practice of meta-fiction predates postmodernism, with examples like Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605/1615), Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) or Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796). What has not become equally clear, however, is metafiction's independence." ("Metafiction in the Post-Technological" 92-93).

While Klinkowitz opts for a contextualised, particularly *American,* understanding of metafiction, Athanasiou-Krikelis believes that we should instead look for the things that characterises metafiction independently of postmodernism.

Now, we could have entered into the long and ongoing discussion between the schools of criticism favouring an intrinsic approach to literature (Formalism; New Criticism) and those who prefer to take extra-poetic material into account when analysing a literary work (Marxism; New Historicism). For the purposes of this study, however, it suffices to say that we shall not yet favour either, because both critical approaches are potentially fruitful in our attempt to elucidate metafiction. If refusing to read a text in its historical and cultural context, one runs the risk of severe misreading, or missing out on the complexity of the works. At the same time, however, it might not be necessary to situate the *term* metafiction in the postmodern era if it turns out that it is both possible and more appropriate to regard it as a transhistorical phenomenon. A postmodern framework can certainly give us a more profound understanding of individual metafictional works written in the twentieth century, but if there can be said to be a difference between postmodern and metafictional concerns, perhaps the two terms need to be separated even further. It will become clear that the term metafiction is particularly prone to change according to the perspective we choose to view it from, and so we need to be mindful of the implications of each critical approach.

3.2. The ontological dominant: *A metafictional or postmodern concern?*

Following Klinkowitz's assumption that literary self-reflexivity in the two centuries essentially has different functions, none of the foregoing definitions nor manifestations of metafiction have helped us clarify how to successfully distinguish between them. This is partly due to the difficulty in determining whether or not fiction-making is the central thematic focus of novels like *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste,* and whether or not these novels consistently break the aesthetic illusion or remain within its boundaries. One way of approaching this issue could be to investigate what kinds of questions a text asks, or invites us to ask. This is Brian McHale's approach in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), where he makes a convincing argument about what essentially distinguishes postmodernist literature from its modernist predecessor. He borrows Roman Jakobson's concept of the "dominant" in order to demonstrate how one literary period gradually transitions into another. Jakobson defined the "dominant" as the focal point of an artwork that "rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components," so that the work as a whole is kept stable[15]. Change happens when the "dominant," i.e. what was of central thematic concern in the literature of a certain period, moves into the background and makes way for a new element to come to the fore. McHale sees modernist literature as being dominated by "*epistemological*" questions, that is, questions of *knowledge*: ""How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" […] What is there to be known?; Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?"(9). Postmodernist fiction, on the other hand, chiefly concerns itself with questions of an "*ontological*" nature, i.e. questions of *being*: ""Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" […] What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured?" (10). Epistemological and ontological questions are not necessarily spelled out explicitly by the narrator or the

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[15] ("The dominant" [1935] Readings in Russian Poetics, Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971, pp 105, qtd. in McHale, 6

characters in the story, but these questions might equally arise in the reader as a consequence of the narrative structure (McHale 9-10). At the same time we should be wary of the kinds of questions we ask of the text, as McHale notes, "there are many dominants, and different dominants may be distinguished depending upon the level, scope, and focus of the analysis." (6). In this study, obviously, we are not interested in categorising all self-reflexive novels of the eighteenth century and identifying their dominant, that falls beyond the scope of this thesis. Our aim is to look at two particular cases that have often been called prototype postmodern; if and how they differ in their concerns from twentieth-century metafiction. It is important to keep in mind that McHale's theory is both derived from, and aimed at postmodern fiction, but might nevertheless work to our advantage insofar as a defining characteristic of metafiction, we know, is that it thematises its own status and making. Hence, it keeps asking ontological questions about itself, and about its relationship to the world beyond.

McHale uses the phrase "metafictional gesture" when talking about frame-breaking between the ontological level of the author and his fictional world, but does not specify any further what he means by the term, nor does he consider the question of whether metafiction is essentially an old or new phenomenon (197-198). What he does acknowledge, however, is the fact those questions that became dominant in postmodern fiction lie latent in *all* literature (27). Like Hutcheon, McHale argues that the potentially problematic ontological basics of fiction were recognised much earlier than in the twentieth-century. First, a recognition that art is *heterocosmic*, that is, it is separate and different from the real world, and has its own internal logic; secondly, that this *heterocosm* has a creator situated on a different, higher ontological level. However, McHale claims that neither of these aspects of fiction become problematic until the Sterne, Diderot and the German Romantics altered the role of the author (29-30). Because they thematise the author's creative powers and give him a visible presence in their novels from start to finish, they consequently also fictionalise him. The ontological line is trespassed, and in doing so, there occurs a multiplication of authorial levels: "behind Jacques and the world he occupies stands "the author," and somewhere behind "the author" stands the real Diderot. There is a possibility here of infinite regress, puppet-master behind puppet-master *ad infinitum*." (30). In other words, all fiction could potentially become ontologically problematic if its boundaries are pushed too far.

41

At first glance, it appears that McHale singles out these specific works as sharing an ontological dominant with postmodern novels when he says that "The poetry of romantic irony as about poetry — about itself — as much as it is about a world…" (30). He goes on to argue, however, that although they do present a certain ontological instability, it remains textually external, i.e. about the relationship between the work and its author: "They added little […] to our understanding of the internal ontological constitution and articulation of the fictional text and its world. The shift of attention to internal ontological structure does not come about until the twentieth century… (30). McHale's point here is that postmodern fiction, fuelled by postmodern "possible worlds" theories and observations made by Roman Ingarden (and others) about the role of the reader in the meaning-making processes, is more internally aware of itself as a construction; as an independent world and autonomous reality. It more forcefully *projects* worlds, and is at all levels ontologically unstable. This is particularly visible if one looks at the role of the implied author or narrator in modernist *vis-à-vis* postmodernist literature. The fictional world of many modernist novels may appear unstable and contain a number of paradoxes, instabilities (temporal, especially) and appear highly fragmented (just think of the opening pages of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), as do postmodern novels.

But the emphasis on subjectivity found in modernist texts, often mirrored in their use of unreliable narrators, does not in fact challenge the ontological stability of the fictional world. It is the observing subject, rather, who shatters the order and logic of the narrative, but the "projected world of the text" itself remains orderly (101). McHale argues that in postmodern novels, one cannot "reconstruct" a stable fictional world. He illustrates this with William Faulkner's novel *Absalom! Absalom!*, which he argues "tip[s] over" the edge from the modernist to the postmodernist dominant when Quentin and Shreve give up on playing detectives, having weighed all the evidence and accounts of what happened to the Sutpen family, and start making up their own version of the story (9-10). The shift occurs when the focus is no longer on what is to be known in a world, and instead it becomes more "urgent" to ask what it means to create a world (11). Further, determining the presence of an ontological dominant is also a matter of frequency: "*Hamlet*, with its single interruption by the play-within-the-play, is unproblematic in its ontological structure; the relatively frequent interruption of the primary diegesis by the film-within-film in *The French Lieutenant's*

Woman make it somewhat more problematic," McHale argues (113). All worlds, identities and statements are rendered equally suspicious in postmodernist fiction, often to the point where the reader is forced to fill in the gaps him or herself. This is what McHale views as distinctly postmodern, and perhaps this is a beneficial point of separation between – if not between eighteenth-century self-reflexive fiction and metafiction – then perhaps between two different kinds of metafiction.

3.2.1. Signs of ontological worry

Are ontological questions raised in the same manner or to the same degree in *Jacques le fataliste* as in postmodern novels such as *Sexing the Cherry*? If they are, then the frequency by which these types of questions and issues are raised in the text, or prompted by the narrative structure as a whole, might serve as a useful tool for determining the degree to which the metafictional element "rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" of a work. If they are not, that does not necessarily imply that there are no metafictional elements to be found in *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*, but that these textual elements do not play the dominant role. A text can, and often does raise a number of questions (including *epistemological* and *ontological* ones) at the same time, McHale admits, but he still holds that the dominant is discernible by its decision of "which set of questions ought to be asked *first* of a particular text, and delays the asking of the second set of questions" (11).

In *Jacques le fataliste,* as we saw, there is an ontological instability to be found in the relationship between the unnamed narrator and the story he tells — but is the ontology of the fictional world recoverable? What are the kinds of questions that are asked explicitly by the text itself? It is interesting to observe here how the novel opens with a dialogue between the narrator and the fictional reader:

> "Comment s'étaient-ils rencontrés ? Par hasard, comme tout le monde. Comment s'appelai-ent-ils ?
> Que vous importe ? D'où venaient-ils ? Du lieu le plus prochain. Où allaient-ils ? Est-ce que l'on sait où
> l'on va ? Que disaient-ils ? Le maître ne disait rien ; et Jacques disait que son capitaine disait que tout ce

qui nous arrive de bien et de mal ici-bas était écrit là-haut." (*JF* 475)

This series of questions asked on our behalf are epistemological in nature, and concerns the basic elements of the *histoire* or *story*[16]. Instead of guiding us smoothly into the fictional universe the narrator leaves out significant details such as names, time and location of the two riders on horseback, and the events leading up to the moment when we first encounter them – details we would expect to be given by someone who claims to have all the facts at hand. Instead we're given unsatisfactory and vague answers. As readers we rely on spatial and temporal designators in order to properly immerse ourselves in the story, and it is evident that the reading experience is being thematised by the fact that these are demonstrably being withheld. Epistemological questions of this kind does not necessarily destabilise the ontological status of the fictional word, if anything our curiosity about the details of the story reinstate its reality. However, these questions are symptomatic of the narrative as a whole. Most of the initial questions are never answered, although they show up again and again through the increasingly frustrated Master and fictional reader: "Mais pour Dieu, l'auteur, me dites-vous, où allaient-ils ?… Mais, pour Dieu, lecteur, vous répondrai-je, est-ce qu'on sait où l'on va ? Et vous, où allez vous ? […] — Mais, qui était le maître du maître de Jacques ? — Bon, est-ce qu'on manque de maître dans ce monde ?" (*JF* 512-13).

Increasingly, the questions "Which world is this?" and "What is to be done in it?" become more relevant as we are continually being misled, our questions are mocked, and the story of Jacques' amours continues to be deferred. From the outset the narrator presents the tale as "une histoire" rather than "un roman," denouncing novelistic elaborate descriptions and unlikely coincidences in favour of cold facts (*JF* 670). Paradoxically, he devotes a substantial amount of narrative space to painting hypothetical storylines before revealing them as fictional, and mocks the fictional reader of his want of adventure tales (*JF* 492-493). As such, Diderot's novel perfectly illustrates the dynamics of "self-creation and self-destruction" in fictions of romantic irony. Initially, statements of this kind are meant as *trust-inducing*, i.e. to verify the truthfulness of the (hi)story, but abandoning traditional *illusion*-inducing devices such as logical and causal sequences of events, a temporally and spatially anchored setting, and a narrative focus on the central plot and characters, arguably makes it more difficult for

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[16] I use Rimmon-Kenan's distinction between "story", "text", and "narration" (3).

the fictional world to properly come to life and function autonomously. Lilian Furst argues that the frequency of narratorial interruptions emphasising the fact//fiction dichotomy impedes the aesthetic illusion because it entails that "[e]mpirical reality and fictional reality are played off against each other as the existential status of fictional reality is constantly thrown into question." (179). In this sense the question "What kinds of worlds are there?" also becomes pertinent. There is a world of *romance*, and there is a world of *facts* – "How are they constituted? How do they differ?" – Jacques' metaphysical conviction mirrors how the narrator views the workings of fiction. The world of the fatalist is governed by an internal structure and logic with a teleologically secured beginning and ending by virtue of being "écrit là-haut" on a "grand rouleau qui se déploie petit à petit…" (*JF* 476; 480). The actual narrative, by contrast, is marked by an extreme haphazardness, foregrounding the disorderly and paradoxical nature of empirical reality which is constituted differently than fiction.

Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* immediately asks – or rather invites us to ask – "Which world is this? What is to be done in it?" in the way that the novel defamiliarises familiar reality. Against the backdrop of seventeenth-century England, historical events and personae are juxtaposed with fictional and magical ones. The ontological dominant reveals itself as the narrative shows us a recognisable world whose rules and boundaries we are familiar with, only to break them. For instance, laws of physics are defied by the incredible size and weight of the Dog-Woman, who broke both of her father's legs when sitting on his lap as an infant, and even outweighs an elephant at a circus (*SC* 20-1). The rules of gravity are both established and simultaneously broken at the house with no floors: "It is well known that the ceiling of one room is the floor of another, but the household ignores this ever-downward necessity and continues every upward, celebrating ceilings but denying floors, and so their house never ends and they must travel by winch or rope from room to room, calling to one another as they go." (15). Linear temporality is both explicitly disputed ("LIES 2 : Time is a straight line") and narratively violated as Jordan's present-day double Nicolas-Jordan suddenly encounters John Tradescant onboard a ship saying "they are burying the King at Windsor." (*SC* 90; 137). Magical events of this kind are incorporated in such a way as to make them appear natural and habitual. Magical realism, in contrast to fantasy, deliberately juxtaposes fiction and reality within the fictional universe so that their respective ontological boundaries and rules are played off against one another. McHale notes that in science fiction

novels "the character's failure to be amazed by paranormal happenings serves to heighten our amazement […] this 'banalization' of the fantastic actually sharpens and intensifies the confrontation between the normal and paranormal."(76-77). This is equally, and perhaps even more true, of magical realism. Linda Hutcheon pointed out in *Narcissistic Narrative* how fantastical fictional universes, although they inevitably borrow elements from the real world, can still remain within the aesthetic illusion because "[f]rom the point of view of the reader it is no easier to create and believe in the well-documented world of Zola than it is for him to imagine hobbits or elves: the imaginative leap into the novel's world of time and space must be made in both cases. Any literary landscapes, inhabitants or events can be made credible." (*Narcissistic* 78). Consistency is essential, and realistic fiction and fantasy fiction alike must form their own sets of rules which then the reader learns and accepts underway in his reading, or s/he might already have prior knowledge of the conventions and rules of its specific genre, which further facilitates his or her "suspension of disbelief" (Hutcheon, "Metafictional Implications" 2). Modern metafiction, says Hutcheon, often borrows the fantasy model, but goes beyond it by "self-evidently" underlining and thematising the process of imagining a world (*Narcissistic* 76).

In *Sexing the Cherry*, neither the realistic fictional world nor the magical one are allowed to function autonomously, because they are constantly placed in confrontation. The mixture and violation of these two sets of generic rules can block the reader's full immersion in the fictional universe, which can lead to the realisation of the narrative as fictional. What, then, "is to be done" in this strange world? Jordan's reflections on time and memory illustrate this point rather neatly: "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. I have heard people say we are shaped by our childhood. But which one?" (*SC* 102). He realises that as everyone inhabits a plurality of memories, and since there is really no way of ever accessing the past to check the truthfulness of any those memories, all one can ever do is ficionalise. The novel, likewise, imagines a world that is quite different from the real one – not only that, it re-imagines its history. In doing so it also invites its readers to ask: "What is a world?" and "What kinds of worlds are there?" because it simultaneously stresses its narrative world and the empirical one as constructs whose facts, laws, and histories should never be taken as a given. There are

histories of male dominance, and then there are feminist ones. When placed in confrontation, their 'constructedness' (or fictiveness) is revealed. Placing the narrative at a spatial and temporal crossroads between the Renaissance and present-day also serves to highlight the instability of those concepts we often accept uncritically: "The earth is round and flat at the same time. This is obvious. That it is round appears indisputable; that it is flat is our common experience, also indisputable." (*SC* 81). In Patricia Waugh's words: "such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text." (2).

3.2.2. Tipping points

Do the metaphysical questions asked by *Jacques le fataliste* similarly "tip over" the edge to ontological ones? The narrative's insistence that fiction is ontologically constructed differently from reality point towards metafiction, but whether or not it is characterised by an ontological dominant depends on its reconstructability. Firstly, the ontological boundaries are not explicitly violated or trespassed, but frequently made visible. For instance, a confusion of the narrative time of telling and of story occurs when the narrator incites a dialogue with the fictive reader to pass the time whilst Jacques and his master are asleep (*JF* 634). Secondly, the relationship between story and narrator is complicated even further as the narrator alternately acts as though he is writing *Jacques le fataliste* ("«— Et votre *Jacques* n'est qu'une insipide rapsodie de faits les uns réels, les autres imaginés, écrits dans grâce et distribués sans ordre. — Tant mieux, mon *Jacques* en sera moins lu … »") (*JF* 656); as if he is merely recounting a pre-existing manuscript ("Après quelques lignes ponctuées qui annoncent la lacune, on lit : « Rien n'est plus triste dans ce monde que d'être un sot… »") (*JF* 659); and as if he is retelling a story he heard once in Paris ("…tel fut le récit que j'en avais entendu faire aux Invalides, je ne sais en quelle année….") (*JF* 525). The truthfulness of the story becomes increasingly questionable as its origins are attributed to a variety of sources. The novel ends thus: "… eh bien, reprenez son récit où il l'a laissé, et continuez-le à votre fantaisie, ou bien faites une visite à Mlle Agathe, sachez le nom du village où Jacques est emprisionné ; voyez Jacques, questionnez-le…" (*JF* 708). As the narrator admits to having no knowledge of what happened with Jacques' amours, he instead encourages his readers to either seek the truth for himself or

47

else to make up his own account and ending to the story. A hitherto unknown editor enters, adding yet another ontological level to the novel, who claims to have found the manuscript as well as three different accounts of what happened to Jacques. Robert Alter argues that in *Jacques le fataliste* "the reader cannot escape participation in the processes of fabulation…" because we are constantly encouraged to fill in the gaps for ourselves (62).

When we are either presented with no answers to our epistemological questions, or, alternatively a range of alternatives to choose from, what is to be done but fictionalise? Of course, it is possible to argue that the fictional world containing the *true* story of Jacques' amours remains ontologically stable – though it has been communicated through an extremely unreliable and vexatious narrator – because it does not overtly proclaim its fictionality. But its status has arguably been seriously challenged on more than the author-story level, and a number of McHale's postmodern ontological questions seem to be raised by the form of the text itself. But what counts as evidence? Some of McHale's ontological questions are obviously articulated against the backdrop of poststructuralist and postmodern theory ("Which of my selves is to do it?"), and herein lies the difficulty of separating metafictional concerns from postmodern ones. Clearly, the fleeting identities of the narrators in *Sexing the Cherry* contribute towards an even greater internal ontological instability of its fictional world than the one in *Jacques le fataliste*. As Jordan and the Dog-Woman's consciousnesses travel through time, fairy tales, dreams, magical and historical events, the ontological boundaries of fiction are metaleptically trespassed, and the narrative becomes increasingly impossible to reconstruct.

As McHale notes, fiction has more or less always known that it is ontologically different from the real world, but a fictional universe does not become mimetically problematic unless its boundaries are frequently foregrounded or violated. But is the internal ontological instability that characterises postmodern fiction also demanded of metafiction? *Jacques le fataliste* arguably tips over, either knowingly or unknowingly, into accentuating its own ontological structure. Its narrative invites us to ask many of the same questions we would ask of Winterson's novel, by interrogating how a narrated world is structured in comparison to the real one. Although the novel's ontological boundaries are not violated to the extent that they are in *Sexing the Cherry* (where they positively collapse), they are foregrounded. Returning, then, to our list of provisory metafictional parameters, McHale's ontological

questions can help us clarify our second point: whether or not the text qualifies as "fiction about fiction." If it is both necessary and urgent to ask questions like "What world is this? What is to be done in it?" and "What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" of a text, then it is probable that fictionality plays the dominant structural and thematic role. However, as our analysis demonstrates, it is perhaps necessary to keep postmodern concerns about history, temporality, and identity (and the added suspicion that these concepts are themselves fictional constructs) separate from a definition of metafiction.

3.3. Comparative studies: philosophical zeitgeist *versus* universal linguistic troubles

Should we then understand all metafiction as a thematisation of general literary ontological concerns, or should we separate different kinds of self-reflexivity by their respective historical and theoretical context? Further, how do we distinguish metafiction from the self-referential potential of fictional language? In his study *From Romantic Irony to Postmodernist Metafiction*, Christian Quendler investigates these questions as he traces the similarities and differences between eighteenth-century and twentieth-century novels (23). He begins by arguing that a number of fictions of romantic irony indeed do qualify as metafictional because they fulfil a set of criteria that distinguishes them from other self-reflexive modes. As apparent from the title of his study, Quendler nevertheless prefers to keep the self-reflexivity of the two centuries separate: "the difference and specificity of romantic irony and postmodernist metafiction lie not so much the use of different literary devices and modes of aesthetic textualization than in the theoretical and philosophical implications they are meant to evoke" (22). Although his study focuses on literary manifestations of romantic irony post-Schlegel, the set of characteristics and functions Quendler pinpoints here for Romanticism are equally applicable to *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*, if we accept that they share this particular kind or irony prior to its philosophical articulation.

He makes use of Werner Wolf's notion of "fictitiousness" to classify metafictional works, that is, works that bring attention to both their "fictionality" (i.e., "the ontological status of fiction") and "fictivity" (i.e., "the (implicated) referential deviations from pragmatic or reporting discourse") (24). He does so partly in order to avoid the functional trap he sees in

Patricia Waugh and Larry McCaffery's definitions of metafiction. Quendler thinks they both overplay the critical and anti-realist potential of metafiction in order to demonstrate how it can point to the potential fictionality of the empirical world, an emphasis which potentially limits metafiction to postmodernist fiction only (24). In comparison with general literary self-reflexivity which primarily comments on the proceedings of the narrative or makes judgements about its characters, fictions of romantic irony and postmodernism alike refer to their own fictitiousness either explicitly, implicity, intertextually or parodically — "to the extent that the references made to pre-texts draw the attention to the fictional status of the work." (24). Quendler's argument involves showing how implicit forms of metafiction being the dominant form of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century reflexive works, point a finger at their own "fictitiousness." "Implicit metafiction," he explains, can foreground its fictionality either on the narrative level, "through conspicuous forms of mediations such as typographical innovations", or on the story-level, "through equally conspicuous, improbable or impossible diegetic elements such as double or multiple endings." (33). Immediately then, we should recall that the first form is a central aspect of *Tristram Shandy*, whereas the second is the case in *Jacques le fataliste.* In order to prove the presence of implicit metafiction, however, a relative frequency of these self-reflexive instances is necessary, and preferably the work should also contain other self-reflexive devices like *mise en abyme* or instances of explicit metafictional commentary (32).

Although both Sterne and Diderot's novels would qualify as (implicitly) metafictional works for Quendler, he sees a functional difference between them and their postmodern successors in their respective philosophical anchoring. The (nineteenth century) romantic novel and its reflexive use of irony, he claims, is best viewed in light of the ideas of Schlegel, Kant and Hegel, while the postmodern novel should be understood in relationship to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Derrida. The two main similarities between the literary movements are an increased focus on form and artistic production, and a scepticism towards both language and knowledge:

> "The radical contestation of an aesthetic of *mimesis* and its correlating concept of truth in
>
> postmodernist metafiction has a striking anticipation in the 'aesthetic revolution' of early
>
> German romanticism […] Similar to the "autonomous reality" attributed to postmodernist

metafiction, romantic irony seeks, through its poetic reflection, the very limits of aesthetic autonomy." (14)

The scepticism of romantic irony has heavily influenced both modernist and postmodernist thought, but although it stresses the unrepresentability of the absolute and the contradictory, chaotic world, it is nevertheless is rooted in an idealism which presupposes the existence of an absolute which can be reached indirectly through the use of irony. (Quendler 160). Postmodern metafiction, on the other hand, is characterised by a "loss of a [metaphysical] transcendental referent" altogether following Nietzsche and Derrida (Quendler 161). Thus, for Quendler, romantic and postmodern kinds of metafiction essentially have different functions, but share an insistence on the difference between art and reality (160).

Inger Christensen, on the other hand, believes the similarity between the two types of metafiction lies elsewhere. Her 1981 study *The Meaning of Metafiction*, an investigation into the nature and function of metafiction, is either mentioned or referenced in nearly every book and article on the subject. In her introduction she writes against the distinction drawn by Fletcher and Bradbury: "To me, *Tristram Shandy* appears to bring into focus not only the autonomy of the narrator but also that of the narrative as well as of the narratee. I find greater likeness than dissimilarity between 18th and 20th century metafiction…" (10). She finds the existing definitions of metafiction too broad and formal, and claim that they are overlooking its central characteristic: "the novelist's message" (10). To her, metafiction is "fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making" and where the author is not "merely displaying his technical brilliance." (11). This intentional approach is one that is rarely chosen these days, in the wake of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author", but if we assume that her definition implies something similar to Hutcheon's distinction between auto-representational fiction primarily parodying representational figures, and critically engaged historiographic metafiction, it becomes less problematic. In that sense, Christensen's second criterion (13) naturally becomes that the fictional author and his relationship with his fictional reader, or narratee, plays a preeminent structural role in this kind of fiction. This relationship, she argues, essentially mirrors everyone's struggle to convey their experiences and thoughts in a satisfactory narrative format (both orally and verbally): "In this situation man will find how words very often do not give

an adequate expression to what he wants to say. In addition, every user of words knows how frequently others misunderstand one's utterances. The metafictionist deals with these fundamental issues of communication…" (13-14). The individual metafictional responses to questions of the relationship between art and reality, the function of literature, and the limits of communication, account for the use of different self-reflexive devices. Of course, metafictional authors are influenced by their philosophical and theoretical zeitgeist, she argues, but they share the core characteristic of wanting to say something about mimesis and communication (154; 151). Sterne's dual message in *Tristram Shandy*, says Christensen, is that no art can faithfully and truly imitate reality, and that conveying one's thoughts and intentions successfully is a constant struggle (25).

Although one can easily disagree with Christensen's assumption that the novelist's intention is unproblematically detectable in fiction that problematises its representational means, she does highlight an important aspect of self-conscious fiction: the narrators often discuss aesthetic theories, or express their own opinions on literature in the diegetic dialogue with the fictional reader. Tristram, for instance values literary originality, and asks the reader: "Tell me, ye learned, shall we forever be adding so much to the *bulk*—so little to the *stock*? / Shall we forever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another?" (*TS* 5.1: 408). The narrator of *Jacques le fataliste* frequently articulates his distaste for romances, and the student-narrator in *At Swim-Two-Birds* believes a good novel should expose its fictiveness, or else its runs the risk of turning "despotic" (*AS* 25). Should we argue, then, as Christensen does, that all metafiction shares the function of problematising human (i.e. linguistic) interaction? Or should we do what Quendler does, despite the strictly formal and technical devices at work in metafictional novels, separate the function of literary self-reflexivity in the eighteenth- and twentieth century in light of their respective philosophical zeitgeist?

3.4. *Reading strategy or textual quality?*

There is another concern to be taken into account in the case of metafiction. Language by its very structure, and, as Patricia Waugh has already argued, narratives by virtue of being forms of framing a story, can easily tip over from mimesis to self-reflexivity (14-15). From this

perspective, there is a possibility that the reader plays a significant role in activating, or choosing not to activate a 'metafictional reading'. In the same way that every sentence can be read ironically, independently of whether it was intended to be ironic or not, language can arguably be read in a metafictional mode by its receiver. Linda Hutcheon discusses this issue in a 1987 essay, where she claims that metafiction and novels like *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote* "ma[de] explicit what is a truism of all fiction: the overdetermination of novelistic reference," that is to say that they showcase the possibility that poetic language has fictive, and never real, referents (1; 2). This poses an interpretative problem in our effort to map out signs of metafictionality. The possible self-referentiality of *all* fictional works (novels especially) introduces a difficulty of distinguishing between self-referential utterances referring to elements of fictional heterocosm, and (implicit) meta-reflexive utterances made on either the fictionality of the narrative or the fictivity of its referentiality. In both cases, the mimetic function of language is being contested.

The poststructuralists accentuated how the autonomous and self-referential nature of language opens up a semiotic field for readers. In what is perhaps his most famous essay, "The Death of the Author" (1967), Roland Barthes destroys the myth that author has the ability to communicate with the reader through his text. The essay opens with the following example taken from Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*: "'*This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.*'"(142). He proceeds to asks whether it is the main character, narrator or writer Balzac who utters these ideas about femininity, before he concludes that the sentence cannot be assigned a single person's consciousness. This, he argues, is because the text is necessarily "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin," and consequently "it is language which speaks, not the author…" (142; 143). With this insight, the real task of the modern reader is not to decipher the meaning of a text, but to play with it.

In Barthes' next essay "From Work to Text" (1971), he elaborates on the necessity to distinguish between the *text* as an open process and the *work* as a closed product: "the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example, the Text is a methodological field." (157). The former is a semiotically closed entity, whereas the other an open, and limitless web. Barthes does not, however, equate the latter with (post)modern kinds of literature: "there may be 'text' in a very ancient work, while many

53

products of contemporary literature are in no way texts…" (156). At the beginning of the essay, he notes that there has been an epistemological shift in how we view language, which has contributed to our lessened interest in searching for origins, but herein lies a difficulty in his theory. His logic in "The Death of the Author," particularly, should conclude that it is the reader who determines whether or not a novel is a "work" or a "Text," as s/he can limit him or herself to the denotative or connotative levels of a text, or choose to open it by playing with its signifiers. This is what he does himself to *Sarrasine* in *S/Z* (1970). Barthes insists, however, that there are semiotically closed novels (for instance, those written by Proust, Flaubert, Balzac, and Dumas), but he cannot have it both ways ("Work to Text"163). We know, equally, that a reader can choose to do a "feminist", a "Marxist", a "postcolonial", and a "metafictional" reading of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and they would all open up a different semantic field. This possibly poses a problem for viewing metafiction as a transhistorical phenomenon. If we follow the Barthean/poststructuralist line of argument through, metafiction possibly falls under what they would call a modern epistemological and interpretative shift, where scepticism of linguistic structures weighs heavily. There is an obvious pitfall here, as the reader – "postmodern" ones, especially, with their understanding of language as a web of citations and their learned critical, deconstructivist stance towards narratives – can easily read a text *metafictionally*, even if it is not intentionally so. And again, it is the poststructuralist/postmodern reader's right to disavow any such original intention. Melvin New wittily illustrates this point when he argues that the modern reader (himself included) cannot help but to read Sterne through the filter of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics and theories: "I have, for example, written about Sterne and Proust, Sterne and Nietzsche, Sterne and Svevo, but have continued to believe all along that Sterne is […] neither an anticipation of Joycean stream of consciousness nor a foretaste of a Derridean breakdown between signified and signifier…" (160). Consider this example from *Tristram Shandy*:

> "When this story is compared to the title-page, - - -Will not the gentle reader pity my fa
> ther from his soul? - - -to see an orderly and well-disposed gentleman, who tho' singular,–
> –yet inoffensive in his notions,—so played upon them by cross purposes;—to look down
> upon the stage, and see him baffled and overthrown in all his little systems and wishes; to

behold a train of events perpetually falling out against him, and in so critical and cruel a way, as if they had purposedly been plann'd and pointed against him, merely to insult his speculations." (*TS* I.19: 63-4)

A metafictional reading of this passage would probably stress that the narrator is pointing to the physicality of the book, thus underlining the fictionality of the narrative as a whole; foregrounding the fictionality of Walter Shandy by playfully pointing at the "stage" he appears on; and mirroring the self-referentiality of the text in theatrical terminology. But it is equally possible to read this passage in line with the general self-referentiality of all literary texts. The reference made to the title page can simply be interpreted as referring to an object situated inside the fictional heterocosm, consequently it does not necessarily provide a meta-commentary on the artificiality of the text. In its context, further, the reference to the title-page comes right after Tristram has told us how much his father abhors the name "Tristram", and is equally a witty foreshadowing of the comic tale of how he ends up being baptized in this very name. The theatrical references, too, can equally be read as a humorous analogy to the tragic unfolding of the human fates in the Shandy-household. Because implicit or *structural* metafiction, especially, depends on the reader for picking up on the clues to understanding that what is really being referred to in the text is its "fictitiousness," it also becomes his or her task to determine the presence of metafiction. Does this mean that only explicit self-reflexive utterances made on the ontological status of the fictional text can be affirmed as metafictional, and that its implicit counterpart depends on the interpretation of the reader? If we want to argue that a text can show an awareness from *within* the fiction that it is fiction, we need new conceptual tools.

For it to even make sense to talk about metafiction, the phenomenon at least needs to have some textual anchoring. It is nevertheless useful to keep in mind that from our (post)modern perspective, it is easy to *read* postmodern concerns into highly self-conscious texts of older times, partly because our existing definitions of metafiction are heavily influenced by postmodern theory. Arguments from the postmodern context are not only difficult for *Tristram Shandy*, and *Jacques le fataliste*, but as saw in the previous chapter, O'Brien's novel perfectly illustrates the Derridean concept of the absent centre, seemingly before its time. We could of course argue, as Christensen does, that postmodernism has

theorised and further developed universal communicative issues, which is why we "recognise" modern concerns in eighteenth-century texts. However, what is needed if we are to understand metafiction as a transhistorical phenomenon is perhaps to divorce the term from its postmodern concerns and view it purely from a narratological perspective. Narratological studies of metafiction allows us to side-step the issue of readers interpreting texts differently because they aim to locate the specific referents of metalinguistic commentary.

3.5. Metafiction, metanarration, and the aesthetic illusion

In recent years yet another distinction has been proposed between different types of self-reflexivity. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Nünning and Fludernik point to a weakness in contemporary narrative theory (and in English literary theory, especially). These theorists pick up on one of the most common forms of discourse in the novel, self-reflexive narration, and mistakenly named it "metafiction." "Metanarration, i.e. the narrator's commenting on the process of narration," encapsulates those self-reflexive comments that direct the reader through the structure of the text; those that discuss artistic or narrative problems encountered in various digressions; and addresses made to the narratee (Nünning, "On Metanarrative" 12). The prevailing confusion between metafiction and metafiction, they argue, is caused by a lack of clear categories for both terms, and their studies are committed to demonstrating the functional difference between the two, and to map out various forms of metanarration. As both terms are based on the concept of metalanguage, i.e. "a language (system) situated on a level above the ordinary use of words for referential purposes", Fludernik argues that the two can easily be separated by the objects of their reference ("Metanarrative"15). The object of metanarration, as mentioned earlier, would then be narrative or story-telling, whereas metafiction refers to fiction or fictionality. They also clear up the rather loose employment of the terms "self-conscious" and "self-reflexive" texts. The "self-conscious" implies an awareness of the narrative or story as fiction, and is therefore metafictional, whereas the "self-reflexive" merely reflects back on itself and does not necessarily break the aesthetic illusion ("Metanarrative" 5).

Nünning adopts Werner Wolf's categories of metafiction to distinguish between *formal*, *structural*, and *content* or *subject-related* metanarration. Using the first category one can separate between metanarration situated on the *diegetic* level (that is, within the story and

metanarrational comments made by its characters) and that on the *extradiegetic* level (i.e. comments made primarily by the narrator) ("On Metanarrative" 22). In *Jacques le fataliste*, Diderot frequently makes use of both these types of metanarration. The narrator frequently dramatises dialogues with the reader, and explicitly mocks his (or her) inquisitiveness: "L'aube du jour parut. Les voilà remontés sur leurs bêtes et poursuivant leur chemin. — Et où allaient-ils ? — Voilà la seconde fois que vous me faites cette question, et la seconde fois que je vous réponds : Qu'est-ce que cela vous faites ? Si j'entame le sujet de leur voyage, adieu les amours de Jacques…" (*JL* 476). In this passage the narrator explains to the reader why he should not be made to answer questions about the setting of the plot by pointing out how, structurally and temporally, expanding in detail on Jacques and his Master's current voyage would be at the expense of Jacques' romantic adventures in the narrative as a whole. In essence, this passage thematises narration in the way it functions to justify the choices made about what to include or exclude, and to underline the impossibility of incorporating *everything* into the time-space frame of a single novel. It also serves to create suspense about what is to come, without breaking the aesthetic illusion. Fludernik names these types of narratorial comments "*metacompositional*" as they concern themselves with the choices made and devices employed in the narrative ("Metanarrative" 24). Nünning argues that metanarrative comments of this kind are "realistically (e.g. psychologically) motivated mainly in those novels in which the narrative process is foregrounded anyway so as to create the illusion of a personalized narrator or 'teller'…" ("On Metanarrative" 27).

Likewise, Fludernik's "*metadiscursive*" comments incorporates directive statements like Tristram's when he says: "…here am I standing with my bridle in one hand, and with my cap in the other, to tell my story.—And what is it? *You shall hear in the next chapter.*", and considers them purely metanarrational (*TS* 4.20: 354-357; my emphasis). Another crucial distinction between metanarration and metafiction, she notes, is the distinction between those statements or passages that underline the "constructedness" of the narrative and those that stress the "inventedness" of the story ("On Metanarrative" 28). The metacompositional and discursive statements quoted above do not, then, underline the fictionality of the narrative. However, in the case of Diderot's novel, as we know, the story of Jacques' amours is continually interrupted by the adventures and misadventures that befall Jacques and his Master. The embedded stories and the narrator's digressions that make up most of the

narrative, and Jacques never gets around to recounting his amours. With this in mind, the metanarrrational passage above actually foregrounds the outcome of the novel, and, in hindsight simultaneously stresses the inventedness of the narrative.

The metanarrative comments in the novel also appear implicitly on the diegetic level where characters frequently hint at extradiegetic narrative situation. Jacques, deemed a fatalist or determinist, often exclaims "cela est écrit là-haut" in the face of his misfortunes (*JF* 511). His metaphysical motto serves as a double play on the philosophy of determinism and on the fact that *Jacques le fataliste* is an invented narrative, literally "écrit là-haut." It is clear, then, that metanarrational comments can serve a metafictional function, too.

Structurally, the frequency of metanarrational comments, according to Nünning, helps us distinguish between works that are dominantly and marginally metanarrational, i.e. whether or not the process of narration is of central thematic concern. In most nineteenth century works, for instance, metanarration only appears occasionally, and serves to verify the truthfulness of the narrative (26). If Jacques' deterministic comments are accepted as pointing towards the fictionality of the narrative itself, because they are repeated at such high frequency, we could argue that metanarration in the novel borders on metafictionality. Again, metanarration does not necessarily break the aesthetic illusion, but this type of self-reflexivity might in some cases (accidentally or intentionally) point to the fictionality of the narrative itself.

The content-related category is useful in this case, and can further help us identify the various historical functions of metanarrative commentary. Nünning's Fig. 3 ("On Metanarrative" 40) arranges various functions of metanarration according to the degree to which they either support or destroy the aesthetic illusion. Those functions that are compatible with the diegetic illusion include (in descending order): *authenticating function*; *function of inducing coherence*; *mnemotechnic function*; *phatic function*; *communicative function*; and *function of creating suspense.* Those functions that work towards destroying the aesthetic illusion include (in ascending order): *didactic function*; *comical function*; *parodistic function*; *poetological function*; *metafictional function*; *anti-illusionistic function*. Although Nünning uses these terms to map out a dominant tendency of metanarration that supports the diegetic illusion in the seventeenth-, eighteenth–, and nineteenth century, any text may display a variety of these functions, as we saw with *Jacques le fataliste.*

58

The passage quoted above may be said to carry the function of inducing coherence and creating suspense, and there are several instances where the narrator refuses to furnish his story with romantic details on account that it would be contrary to the truth: "Il est bien évident que je ne fais pas un roman, puisque je néglige ce qu'un romancier ne manquerait pas d'employer. Celui qui prendrait ce que j'écris pour la vérité, serait peut-être moins dans l'erreur que celui qui le prendrait pour une fable." (*JF* 484-485). Passages like these are authenticating and trust-inducing, thus working towards maintaining the diegetic illusion, but there are also those that do the exact opposite: "Qu'est-ce qui m'empêcherait de marier le maître et de le faire cocu ? d'embarquer Jacques pour les îles ? d'y conduire son maître ? […] Qu'il est facile de faire des contes !" (476). Although the narrator continually maintains that he is being faithful to the "truth," these playful passages serve to destabilise his reliability and to thematise fiction-making, especially since some of them (at a later point) turn out to be true. Again, the question of frequency, structural positioning, and subject matter of these metanarrative passages will have to be considered further in order to determine whether or not *Jacques le fataliste* and *Tristram Shandy* can be considered metafictional. This we will return to in our discussion of the two novels in the following chapters.

An additional term which might benefit our investigation of the functions of both metanarration and metafiction is Gérard Genette's "metalepsis." He defines it as follows: "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe […], or the inverse…" (234-235). Metalepsis thus implies a transgression of two or more narrative levels, usually between the extradiegetic and the diegetic levels. There are several types of metalepsis outlined by Genette and later narratologists like Fludernik, most notably *ontological* and *rhetorical* metalepsis, neatly summarised by Karin Kukkonen: "'Ontological metalepsis'" occurs when character, author or narrator are relocated across the boundary of the fictional world; "'rhetorical metalepsis'" when they only glance or address each other across this boundary." (2). Genette also uses Diderot's *Jacques* to illustrate what he calls *author's metalepsis*, i.e. the author demonstrating his power on the outcome of the story (234). As we saw earlier, the narrator's hypothetical warnings about not having enough time to recount Jacques' amours and the threat of turning the Master into a cuckold are both realised, and Monica Fludernik sees these passages as giving the text a "metafictional quality" ("Scene Shift" 384). This is not to say, however, that all forms of metalepsis are anti-

illusionist.

Fludernik demonstrates how ontological metalepsis does not necessarily destabilise the boundary between the story and narrative discourse, but can (like metanarration) "draw the reader more closely into the fiction" ("Scene Shift"385). Rhetorical metalepsis, similarly, does not necessarily undermine the narrative boundary. When Jacques believes that the outcome of his life has been "écrit là-haut", he does not transgress, but merely "glances" across to the extradiegetic level. However, Fludernik points to anti-illusionistic qualities of both *Jacques le fataliste* and *Tristram Shandy*. Especially when Tristram slows down the action of one part his story in order to elaborate on another, she argues that he is moving towards "author's metalepsis" because he is essentially "interfering with his story much like Diderot's narrator." (387). It is useful to have the concept of metalepsis in mind when distinguishing between various forms of metanarration, as the use of metalepsis arguably increases the likelihood of breaking the aesthetic illusion. This is the case because "[w]ith metalepsis […] readers are reminded either that someone is telling the story or that there is a reality 'outside' the fictional world " (Kukkonen 5-6).

Nünning similarly acknowledges the potential anti-illusionist qualities of *Tristram Shandy*, when he says that the use of metanarration before the publication of Sterne's novel mainly served authenticating functions, but "from the late eighteenth-century onwards, [metanarration] began to play a more central role, developing in the direction of metafiction." ("On Metanarrative" 42). On the next page of his essay, however, he seems to express an uncertainty about whether or not *Tristram Shandy* qualifies as dominantly metafictional or metanarrational: "Instead of situating Sterne's novel in the tradition of a "hard anti-illusionism", one can just as well call it a milestone in the history of the 'mimesis of narrating' […] on the basis of a reception-oriented and functional analysis of the act of narration and metanarration." ("On Metanarrative" 43). The plethora of metanarrative passages (even whole chapters) in *Tristram Shandy* might enhance the illusion of a 'teller' and underline the process of narration, but it is not clear if he considers these to outdo the metafictional ones that point towards the fictionality of the narrative or that of the narrator.

The studies of Nünning and Fludernik have shown the great variety of both forms and functions of self-reflexivity, not only from one literary period to another, but within individual works themselves. As we have seen, the formal, structural, and content-related distinctions,

the metadiscursive, and metacompositional functions, as well as the concept of metalepsis, can help us identify whether or not metanarrational utterances remain within the aesthetic illusion, and what their essential functions are. There is neither an easy transition nor a clear break to be found between eighteenth-century self-reflexive fiction and postmodernist literature in this respect. The self-reflexiveness of authors like Sterne and Diderot is yet to be ruled out from the list of novels where fictionality has become the main subject. Although metanarration might be the dominant form of self-reflexivity in the eighteenth century, both Nünning and Fludernik admit that there are clear metafictional elements in both Sterne and Diderot's novels.

Werner Wolf's influential studies on the techniques and factors that induces and maintains the aesthetic illusion also gives us a good conceptual tool for identifying metafiction by virtue of it being the opposite of "illusionist", or realistic, fiction. Wolf too, sees metafiction as a transhistorical phenomenon, but stresses the importance of critical reception for their generic identification as such: "Historically, anti-illusionism is almost as old as illusionism. In addition to the cultural context, the individual recipient and the work (and its performance) are as much factors in the breaking of illusion as in its formation." (344) For their fictional universes to come to life, illusionist fictions must first of all furnish their heterocosms with sufficient material (characters, events, settings, objects) in order to facilitate the reader's aesthetic immersion (338). Secondly, the internal laws of the fictional universe must remain stable. Although this is not a requirement, these laws are often "compatible, or identical, with the rules governing real life" (339). Thirdly, a relatively stable narrative perspective of a single consciousness, whether a third-person omniscient narrator, or preferably a first-person subjective one "which enhances the illusionist effect of 'immediacy.'" (340). Fourthly, they should try to encourage the reader's emotional involvement with the characters or events of the story, and lastly they should aim at concealing the ontological framework as well as narrative devices at work in creating the fictional universe (341-42).

Anti-illusionist fiction – or metafiction – by contrast breaks or parodies these principles. Characteristically, they demonstrate a devaluation of the story-level in favour of the discourse/narrative-level, display a "tendency toward comic content and comic

61

representation", in addition to being highly self-referential and reflexive.[17] The benefit of using Wolf's disctinctions in our analyses is that they do not refer to the narrative devices of realist fiction exclusively, but general illusion-inducing characteristics.

Chapter Four: *Four fictions about fiction(s)*

4.1. Tristram Shandy: *Illusion-inducing or illusion-breaking? —* and hey for a new chapter!

> Sterne's interest in the gulf between biological and clock time makes him '
> contemporary of Proust and Bergson. […] In his concern with personal identity,
> he anticipates the Heideggerian concept of being thrown into existence
> and the Derridean stress on 'trace'.[18]

Laurence Sterne was born in 1713, in Ireland, but spent most of his adult years working as a clergyman in Yorkshire, and did not embark on his literary career until he had reached his mid-forties. He was locally reputed for his sermons, but it was the unexpected publication of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* that threw him into a fame that spanned across the European continent. A total of nine volumes were published at regular intervals between 1759 and 1767, and both work and author increasingly became the talk of London literary circles and beyond. What struck contemporary readers about *Tristram Shandy* was its unusual combination of a "laudable morality with whimsical bawdy," as well as its odd structure (Ross 12). Sterne's contemporary and fellow novelist, Samuel Richardson, described the novel as an assemblage of "[u]naccountable wildness; whimsical digressions; comical incoherencies; uncommon indecencies; all with an air of novelty…"[19]. The novel was

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[17] Drawn from Fig. 3, 346

[18] Pierce, "Introduction" 8.

[19] Samuel Richardson's letter to Bishop Mark Kildesley (Jan-Feb 1761), *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (1964): 341-2. Rpt. in *Laurence Sterne: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Alan B. Howes. London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 128-129. Print.

equally praised for its humour and wit, the fine feeling of characters like Uncle Toby, and the morality found in segments like Yorick's sermon upon 'The Abuses of Conscience' (*TS* 2.17). The two latter qualities, in particular, satisfied the current literary taste of sentimentalism that dominated the latter half of the eighteenth century. Conversely, *Tristram Shandy* was equally condemned for its lewdness, and Sterne had angered critics further by continuing to include suggestive and indecent pieces (Ross 13). The book was not unlike any other, however. His contemporaries recognised stylistic and sometimes plagiaristic borrowings from Cervantes, Burton, Rabelais, and various others[20]; generically it was by some received as a "comic romance"[21], while for others it showed every sign of a satire[22]; narratively it imitated, perhaps even parodied, the early novelists Richardson and Fielding[23]; and stylistically it echoed Menippean satires and the fragmented texts of the Scriblerians Swift and Pope.[24] The innumerable literary traditions, philosophical, theological, medical, and scientific discourses that run through *Tristram Shandy* have, ever since its publication, inspired a vast number of critical approaches and theories about its influences. Thomas Keymer and Alexis Tadié have both noted the tendency in Sternean criticism to lean either in the direction of emphasising the author's originality and modernity or, conversely, to place him in a long line of literary predecessors whose techniques he borrowed and reworked (Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns* 15; Tadié 3-5). Both camps aim to place him elsewhere than in an eighteenth-century context.

4.1.1. Narrative idiosyncrasies

Edmund Burke said of *Tristram Shandy* that "the story of the hero's life is the smallest part of the author's concern. The story is in reality made nothing more than a vehicle for satire on a great variety of subjects."[21]. It is true that very little is revealed about Tristram's own life. The narrative instead follows his every whim, narrative concern, and intellectual fancy. These

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[20] Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns* 18

[21] Folkenflik 49.

[22] Edmund Burke's review of *Tristram Shandy* in *Annual Register,* iii (1760). 247. Rpt. in *Laurence Sterne: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Alan B. Howes. London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 106-107. Print

[23] Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns* 17; Booth 64.

[24] Fanning "Small Particles" 360-61.

digressions range from explanatory documents and scholastic disputes to treatises on names; noses; military strategies; narrative *versus* biological time; and childhood education, to Trim and Toby's love affairs. As Tristram struggles to recount the events of his life and those that befall the Shandy-household down to the tiniest detail, he eventually realises the futility of trying to make his real and written life coincide temporally. As a result, his autobiography turns out rather talkative, and his opinions – rather than his life – end up constituting the majority of the narrative.

These opinions often take the form of metanarrative comments on the progression of the narrative; often they work towards creating suspense. After having briefly introduced his uncle Toby, a retired soldier who was wounded at the siege of Namur, he teasingly abandons the story of how he aquired his "hobby-horse"[25]: "And in this, Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form the least judgement or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page,—I would tear it out of my book." (*TS* 1.25: 89). Tristram then ends Volume 1, and resumes the topic in the subsequent book. He is pointing to the physicality of the book the reader is holding in a number of similar passages, but strictly speaking they do not break the aesthetic illusion because Tristram is well aware that his book is being serialised, and even plans his narrative thereafter (*TS* 1.14: 42). The material existence of his book does not challenge his reality nor the truthfulness of his story, rather these metanarrational comments increase the reader's interest in the (fictional) world of the Shandy's. Elsewhere in the disorderly book, the moments of self-reflexivity also serve a metacompositional purpose: "I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going…" (*TS* 1.22: 81-2). The narrative function of this passage is to create a sense of overall coherence, despite the haphazardous turns of Tristram's mind. There is no structural irony here; the work is both progressive and digressive throughout. Furthermore, Tristram's high level of insight actually renders him a fairy reliable narrator. Nevertheless, both Rose and Alter view the wandering narrative of *Tristram Shandy*, and especially the embedded stories that form the subject of many digressions, as deliberate parodies of the inadequacy of representational systems (Rose 67; Alter 31). Alter not only thinks Sterne is

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[25] That is, a person's favorite topic of conversation.

64

partaking in the Cervantic tradition of parodying romances, but that he is actually "one of the shrewdest literary critics of his century," his *Tristram Shandy* being a dynamic demonstration of how "any literary convention means a schematization – and thus a misrepresentation – of reality." (33). For Nünning, however, the sheer quantity of metanarrative passages in *Tristram Shandy* makes an art of "narratorial illusionism," and makes it the true subject of Sterne's novel ("On Metanarrative" 42).

So what, then, is the true thematic concern of *Tristram Shandy*? The embedded stories in question, notably Slawkenbergius's Tale, Walter Shandy's theories, and uncle Toby's military hobby-horse, are not *mise-en-abyme* reproductions of the primary narrative setting (i.e. Tristram sitting at his desk writing his autobiography *ab Ovo*). Rather, as Inger Christensen pointed out, they share a thematic preoccupation with the discrepancy between systems of belief and external reality — which of course can easily reflect back on the whole narrative as not corresponding to real life either (23-5). In Slawkenbergius' story, a stranger with an abnormaly large nose appears one day in the city of Strasburg and causes great disturbance amongst its inhabitants. They subsequently spend many a sleepless night pondering the question of whether or not his nose is a real one; the matter being virtually "perched upon the top of the pineal gland of [their] brain[s]." (*TS* 4:301). For all their philosophies, sciences, theories, and reason, they are simply unable to account for the unnatural phenomena, and they cannot undertake an empirical investigation of the nose because the stranger had left for Frankfurt. Meanwhile, as they anxiously await his return, the town of Strasburg is invaded by the French, and the enigma of Diego's nose is never resolved. In a similar vein, Toby finds himself unable to properly express exactly what happened to him when he was wounded. During the time of his recovery he starts obsessively digging into history books, studying maps and military strategies in an effort to arrive at a faithful reproduction of the scene: "The more my uncle *Toby* drank of his sweet fountain of science, the greater was the heat and impatience of his thirst […] with almost as many more books of military architecture, as *Don Quixote* was found to have on chivalry…" (*TS* 2.3: 102). The direct reference to Cervantes' hero here, who famously loses his sanity after reading too many chivalric romances, supports Christensen's theory that Sterne deliberately sets out emphasise the limits of a finite mind. None of his characters are conscious of the deep-rooted subjectivity of their versions of reality, and they show an unwavering faith in the

65

accumulating "knowledge physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, ænigmatical, technical, biographical, romantical, chemical, and obstretrocal," which Tristram comically asserts "cannot possibly be far off" perfection (*TS* 1.21: 72). Similar to Waugh's definition of metafiction, Christensen thinks that in works like *Tristram Shandy* "the concept prevails that art can never become a true copy of reality," which is also the case for all human systems of belief and interpretation. (22). Like Furst, she believes Sterne's epistemological dealings are greatly indebted to Locke' *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a text that Tristram frequently refers to throughout the narrative.

From a purely narratological perspective, however, the embedded stories remain within the boundaries of the aesthetic illusion, and Locke's philosophy on the arbitrary association of ideas in the mind equally serves to add psychological meat to bone in his character descriptions. According to Wolf, Nünning, and Fludernik, a self-reflexive utterance or device needs to point towards the fictionality of either the narrative or the story in order to qualify as a metafictional one. *Tristram Shandy* might well thematically or allegorically about the failure of human consciousness to grasp or schematise reality in all its complexity, but the above- mentioned stories and instances of metanarration are arguably devices which promote narrative illusion and coherence.

Yet, there are metanarrative comments in Sterne's novel that arguably lean towards foregrounding fictionality because they involve metalepsis. Owing to Tristram's urge to trace every new element of the story back to its origins, he frequently interrupts storylines, character descriptions, even dialogues, and throw himself into a new digression. He realises that in doing so, he needs to "take care to order affairs so, that my main business does not stand still in my absence." (*TS* 1.22: 80). It is in these moments especially that the supposed truthfulness of the story starts to fracture: "Holla!—you, chairman!—here's sixpence—do step into that bookseller's shop, and call me a *day-tall* critick. I am very willing to give any one of 'em a crown to help me with his tackling, to get my father and my uncle *Toby* off the stairs, and to put them to bed.—" (*TS* 4.13:340-41). In one sentence Tristram violates the ontological boundaries between extratextual (where the reader is situated), the extradiegetic (where the adult Tristram is writing his autobiography), and the diegetic levels (where he has barely been born) by presenting them as occuring simultaneously. This passage effectively hints at the fictionality of Tristam and Toby because their actions are presented as dependent

upon Tristram's authorial decisions, and in extension this kind of ontological metalepsis destabilises the mimetic illusion of the whole narrative. The function of this type of metacommentary in *Tristram Shandy*, however, is not clear-cut. If we recall McHale's notion of the ontologically recuperable plot, Tristram and Toby are only presented as fictitious in so as far as they feature as characters in Tristram's autobiography. Their 'objective' existence is not explicitly questioned here, and neither is the truthfulness of Tristram's life story. As Fludernik points out, "there are metafictional comments by the narrator that tend to enhance the illusion of realism," and read as a rhetorical pun on the difficulties of narrative temporality, this passage is not necessarily anti-illusionistic ("Metanarrative" 19-20).

4.1.2. Lines and marbled pages: traditions of orality and the printed text

Typographical experiments in the postmodernist novel ranges from drawings and illustrations, like the 'O' shapes in John Berger's novel *G.* (1972), to the excessive use of italics and bold type in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981). Novelist and critic Raymond Federman said in 1975 that experiments like these were motivated by an urge to challenge conventional modes of reading and writing because they centre around the processes of ordering and deciphering, which are not only wrongheaded but semantically closes a text. Fragmented texts that foreground their textuality, instead, "give the reader an element of choice (active choice) in the ordering of the discourse and the discovery of its meaning." (Federman, "Four Propositions" 9). Stylistic and syntaxical idiosyncrasies of many late twentieth-century novels are manifestly inspired by poststructuralist theories, and like Barthes' "writerly text" they aim to prevent their readers from becoming uncritically immersed in their fictional universes and — above all — remind them that fiction is made up of words.[26] The typographical experiments in *Tristram Shandy* look very much like the ones we find in the above mentioned novels, but since we cannot claim that they break with the conventions of literary realism ahead of their time, is their function still to expose the text as fictitious and underpin the role of the reader? Apart from the hyphens, dashes, asterisks, and blank spaces he scatters across the text, Tristram engages with the physical aspects of his book to the point of obsession. In

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[26] Larry McCaffery thinks the typographical experiments in *Tristram Shandy* serve the same function as they do in Joyce's *Ulysses*, that is, to parody "language's traditionally imposed rules of syntax, diction, and punctuation." ("Art of Metafiction" 186).

67

an attempt to sell his dedication about hobby-horses, he boasts of its stylistic qualities:

> "The design, your Lordship sees, is good, the colouring transparent,—the drawing not amiss;—or to speak more like a man of science,—and measure my piece in the painter's scale, divided into 20,—I believe, my Lord, the out-lines will turn out as 12,—the composition as 9,—the colouring as 6,—the expression 13 and a half,—and the design,—if I may be allowed, my Lord, to understand my own *design*, and supposing absolute perfection in designing, to be as 20,—I think it cannot well fall short of 19." (*TS* 1.9: 16).

At one point he even tries to paint the progression of the narrative in the five first volumes to keep track of his major digressions (*TS* 6.40: 570-71). Scenes like these convey the sense that we are looking *at* language, and not *through* it. Christopher Fanning believes this was something Sterne learned from the Scriblerians, who in turn borrowed their self-reflexive techniques from ("Small Particles" 363). According to him, the Scriblerians' acute "performative textuality" developed in response to the growing print culture with its valorisation of verbal communication, which they found to be an inadequate medium for transmitting thoughts and emotions ("Scriblerian Sublime" 658). Fanning sees Sterne's text as overtly grappling with the epistemological uncertainties introduced by the Cartesian separation between the mental and the physical sphere, just as much as it "forces the reader's sublime recognition of the inadequacy of language to convey thought…" ("Scriblerian Sublime" 663-63). But does this entail that Sterne, like Barthes two centuries later, gives up on the mimetic function of language and the notion of textual authorship? Tadié argues instead that Sterne does not so much reject narrative and linguistic structures as experiment with their audio-visual capacities. In Sterne's century, "[written] language took precedence over images in aesthetic debates as much as in cultural practice." (Tadié 14). An immediate consequence of this development was that the sounds, moving images, and bodily gestures of theatrical performances and oral recitals no longer played a significant part in popular (written) forms of art. These increasingly became internalised functions of reading, the reader now having to engage his imagination to make the printed letters come alive. The layout of Sterne's novel might seem to work against the aesthetic illusion, or appear parodic in its abundance of punctuation marks, to a modern reader with knowledge of established novelistic

conventions, but arguably they play an important theatrical role too. When Tristram orders the reader to "——————— Shut the door. ———————" before recounting the scene in which he was conceived, he is adding an auditory sphere to his narrative by acting as a story-teller (*TS* 1.4: 6; Tadié 85). Tadié's study is convincing in that it demonstrates how *Tristram Shandy*'s oddities can have a mimetic function beyond that of parody. Its theatrical gestures, although they reflexively point towards the physicality of the book situated between author and reader, do not always challenge the aesthetic illusion.

4.1.3. The (post)modernity of Sterne: *Does it qualify as metafiction?*

Structurally, formally, temporally, and typographically *Tristram Shandy* looks distinctively modern. So much so, indeed, that a scholarly conference was held at The University of York in 1993 devoted to the relevance of the novel in modern and postmodern critical theory, later published as a collection of essays entitled *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*. While Sterne's novel might share many formal and seemingly thematic features with modernist and postmodernist texts, *Tristram Shandy* was published at a time when the novel was still a yet to be defined genre. Modernist and postmodernist texts alike set themselves against the customary narrative practices of realism, especially, deeming them epistemologically misguided or mimetically biased and naïve. Critics claiming that *Tristram Shandy* is dissenting from, or even parodying, established novelistic conventions, therefore face the problem of explaining how it is supposed to have done so before those conventions even became the norm (Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns* 20-21). Some have tried to bridge the near three-hundred-year gap by arguing that *Tristram Shandy* and postmodernist novels share a scepticism towards Enlightenment thought, or that postmodernism is not in fact a historical period without precedent, but should instead be thought of as a reoccurring critical ethos (Gurr 20-1; Platt 9-10). In extension, it seems less improbable for postmodern-looking concerns to show up in *Tristram Shandy* — but the primary question in this chapter has been whether or not the novel qualifies as metafiction. Even those scholars linking Sterne's novel to parody, romantic irony, Renaissance 'learned wit' and Menippean satire tend to emphasise the self-reflexive disposition of those traditions. In other words there is no doubt that *Tristram Shandy* reflects back on itself, but does it do so primarily in order to parody earlier literary

practices and social discourses, or satirise "modern learning"[27] and demonstrate the flaws of reason and consciousness? Or do the many self-reflexive instances in the novel dominantly serve a communicative function?

Up until now, I have not addressed the genre tag 'novel' which I have used for *Tristram Shandy* throughout. There are a number of scholars who would contest this label. Marcus Walsh thinks Sterne was not "much inclined to take stories seriously" on account of his Rabelaisian heritage, and his text should instead be thought of as a Menippean satire (26-27). Folkenflik prefers to place Sterne in the parodic tradition of "comic romance" because of Sterne's valorisation of 'opinions' over 'adventures' (51). Keymer, on the other hand, does not take issue with the novel-label. To him, *Tristram Shandy* is highly engaged with its contemporary debates about the new genre and its conventions: "Although I dispute identifications of *Tristram Shandy* as a solitary postmodern anctication or a Renaissance/ Scriblerian throwback, I do indeed see it as heavily conditioned by satirical traditions that culminate with Swift, and I also see it as a self-conscious exercise in metafiction." (*Sterne, the Moderns* 7). Relocating his text to its immediate eighteenth-century context does not, in his eyes, rule out its metafictional qualities. For Keymer, Sterne's text is not metafictional by virtue of critically denouncing and/or parodying the representational abilities of the brand new novelistic conventions, but in its playful exploration of them. And it is perhaps in this poetological sense that we should conceive of *Tristram Shandy* as a work of metafiction. Our narratological analysis showed that the novel is dominantly metanarrational, and the marginal instances of metafiction do not necessarily run the risk of undermining the aesthetic illusion. The novel's intertextual associations with numerous works and traditions can of course self-reflexively destabilise the ontology of the narrative, but I prefer to view *Tristram Shandy* in light of Hutcheon's (rather than Rose's) theory of parody as the relationship of "art to art," rather than one of "art to reality." (*A Theory* 20).

4.2. *Jacques le fataliste*: Parody of romantic forms or early metafiction?

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[27] de Voodg, "How to Read *Tristram Shandy*" 9.

"JACQUES. – Tous les deux étaient écrits l'un à côté de l'autre. Tout a été écrit à la fois. C'est comme un grand rouleau qui se déploie petit à petit… Vous conceves, lecteur, jusqu'où je pourrais pousser cette conversation sur un sujet dont on a tant parlé, tant écrit depuis deux mille ans, sans en être d'un pas plus avancé." (*JF* 479-80)

Denis Diderot was a prominent philosopher of the French Enlightenment, alongside such figures as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. He was also a versatile author who, besides his philosophical treatises, wrote a number of dramatic works, essays, and even co-edited the *Encyclopédie* with d'Alembert. Even in his own time he was reputed, and at one point imprisoned, for leaning towards materialism and religious scepticism in works like *Pensées philosophiques* and *Lettres sur les aveugles* (Hobson 36-37). Similar philosophical issues about the implications of determinism on free will are raised in his *Jacques le fataliste,* written somewhere between 1773 and 1775, before it was finally published posthumously in French in 1796.[28] Owing in part to its explicit adaptation of the scene in *Tristram Shandy* where corporal Trim's knee is massaged by a Beguine nun (*TS* 8.22: 701-4), it has long been common in Diderotian criticism to pair the two texts, focusing on *Jacques le fataliste*'s parodic and/or celebratory relationship to Sterne's book (Bridgeman 38; Whiskin 2; see also Alter's treatment of *JF,* 57-8). The two writers also met during one of Sterne's longer stays in Paris, and Diderot openly expressed his delight with the clergyman's witty volumes (Ross: 14-15). *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* are jostled together in twentieth-century criticism too, but here they most often appear alongside *Don Quixote* as parts of a tripartite model of early works displaying a significant degree of self-reflexivity (see Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 9). Despite their many communalities, however, Federman finds Diderot's text far more radical in its mimetic rejection than Sterne's:

"Though Sterne disrupts chronology with digressions and opinions, he anchors events firmly in time and

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[28] Billy, "Notes", *Œuvres* 1412.

place. His characters may be odd, but they are nonetheless saddled with everything necessary to make the reader believe in their actual existence in a somewhat real world. Diderot creates a space never before seen in the landscape of the novel: a timeless stage without scenery…" ("Self-Reflexive Fiction" 19).

Diderot's narrator certainly does not spend much time fleshing out the storyworld of *Jacques le fataliste* (which is central to a reader's immersion into a storyworld according to Wolf). What Federman seems to be implying above is that the philosopher is critically targeting the novel's representational capabilities, i.e. it would qualify as an 'anti-novel.' Alter takes the argument even further, stating that "[t]he informing insight of *Jacques the Fatalist* […] is that language can never give us experience itself, but must always transmute experience into récit, that is, into narration, or, if you will, fiction." (65). The narrative prefers dialogue over story and events, but the question still remains whether or not this primarily provides a vehicle for literary or philosophical discussions. Even if the aesthetic illusion might be seriously undermined in Diderot's text (even Fludernik thinks so[29]), the narrative as a whole need not decisively work towards emphasising the separation between art and life.

4.2.1. No man's land

The narrative is structured around two main dialogues. The first develops on the extradiegetic level between a unnamed narrator and his narratee. The second dialogue, which takes place on the level of the plot, contains the conversations and stories of two riders on horseback, on their way to an unknown destination. Where they came from, how they met, what they look like, and the purpose of their journey, are details which remain undisclosed throughout the narrative. Then there are the stories and anecdotes that are told by various other characters Jacques and his master meet along their way. The vagueness that hovers over the details of the storyworld, John Brogyanyi argues, serves to direct the reader's attention towards what he considers to be the novel's principal thematic occupation: storytelling (550). Much like in *Tristram Shandy,* the narrator revels in digressions. Most often, he abandons his story in order to comment on the way in which the story is told, or *could* have been told. Jacques and his master are themselves digressive storytellers who often interrupt one another in order to

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[29] *An Introduction* 62.

72

clarify certain elements ("— Mais qu'est-ce que ton frère Jean était allé chercher à Lisbonne?"), which sends the conversation off in a new direction, and away from Jacques' amours (*JF* 507). Federman compares *Jacques le fataliste*'s "timeless stage without scenery" to that of a Beckett play, and argues that the characters' voices appear disembodied, which gives the reader the impression that they are "talking from inside a book rather than from reality." ("Self-Reflexive Fiction" 19). Béatrice Didier, however, argues that the dialogic form of *Jacques le fataliste* is neither unnatural or unrealistic: "Le « réalisme » du roman au XVIIIe siècle ne s'embarasse pas de la description minutieuse des lieux. […] Chez Diderot, c'est la forme même du dialogue qui accentue cette économie des éléments descriptifs." (100). She notes that Diderot's narrative is not in need of systematic description because it takes advantage of theatrical gestures and conventions (101). If that is so, the talkative narrative need not impinge on the believability of the storyworld and characters.

Each turn in the travellers' route, which also interrupts the story of Jacques' amours, is caused (or rather, determined "là-haut") by chance encounters and a series of unfortunate events that befall Jacques in particular (his horse decides to run off; he forgets his purse at one of their lodgings; he is falsely accused and imprisoned for the murder of the knight of Saint-Ouen; etc.) (*JF* 525; 494; 707). On one such occasion Jacques' recital is interrupted by a terrible storm, which forces the pair to seek shelter. The narrator refuses to reveal where they eventually spent the night, and instead dramatises his reader's (narratee's) response in the form of a dialogue: "— Où ? — Où ? […] que diable cela vous fait-il ? Quand je vous aurai dit que c'est à Pontoise ou à Saint-Germain, à Notre-Dame de Lorette ou à Saint-Jacques de Compostelle, en serez-vous plus avancé ? Si vous insistez, je vous dirai qu'ils s'acheminèrent vers … oui ; pourquoi pas ? … vers un château immense…" (*JF* 492). He teasingly presents a series of elaborate alternatives, not favouring one over the other, and implores his reader to "choisissez celui qui convient le mieux à la circonstance présente." (*JF* 494). These alternative scenarios are obviously *fictional*, because the narrator makes them up on the spot. As previously discussed in Chapter Three, when the narrator presents hypothetical plot developments in metanarrational comments, it causes significant ontological tension in the storyworld. This is because he demonstrates considerable authority over the story, which he can choose to tell in any way he likes. Fludernik believes these metanarrative passages serve a metafictional function in *Jacques le fataliste*, foregrounding both the 'constructedness' of the

73

narrative and the 'inventedness' of the story: "When the narrator […] declares that it is up to him how the plot develops, he is emphasizing the fact that the story is made up." (*An Introduction* 62). Structurally, there are very few segments of reported speech and action that are unaccompanied by narratorial comments. Most often, however, the passages where he indulges in hypothetical storytelling are followed up by a statement clarifying what 'really' happened: "… il ne tiendrait qu'à moi de donner un coup de fouet aux chevaux qui traînent le carrosse drapé de noir […]; mais pour cela il faudrait mentir, et je n'aime pas le mensonge, à moins qu'il ne soit utile et forcé. Le fait est que Jacques et son maître ne virent plus le carrosse drapé…" (524). The narrator actually insists that the story of Jacques and his master is true, and that he intends to stick to the facts as he knows them. Thomas Kavanaugh claims, however, that Diderot's narrator presents a pile of alternative storylines from which he then chooses whichever one suits him best: "… a choice must be made. At some point this arbitrary diversity must be sacrificed to a single direction. Authorial disponability must be actualized toward narratorial determination" (26). Lilian Furst is also of the opinion that everything that happens in the story of Jacques and his master, for this reason, appears abitrary (i.e. fictional) to the reader (178).

4.2.2. Ceci n'est point un roman

Statements like "Vous allez croire"; however, do not explicity point towards the fictional status of the story. Instead, they express the extravagant plots or meticulous scene descriptions that the narrator believes his reader would *want* him to provide: "Vous allez croire, lecteur, que ce cheval est celui qu'on a volé au maître de Jacques : et vous vous tromperez. C'est ainsi que cela arriverait dans un roman, un peu plus tôt ou un peu plus tard, de cette manière ou autrement ; mais ceci n'est point un roman, je vous l'ai déjà dit, je crois, et je vous le répète encore." (*JF* 505). A few pages earlier, the master's horse had been stolen, and when the pair meets a traveller with a horse the next day the narrator mock's his narratee's belief in "hasards singuliers" (*JF* 509) It is important to note here that Diderot is not necessarily attacking novelistic conventions; "roman" in French can mean both "novel" and "romance" (Folkenflik 50). Thus the metanarrative passage above simultaneously serves a parodic function and an authenticating one; the first being potentially non-compatible with

the aesthetic illusion, whereas the second actually enhances it. From beginning to end, the narrator maintains that the story of Jacques and his master is not an invented one, but a "histoire", and that his narrative, therefore, should not be furnished with romanesque adventures: "Je vous fais grâce de toutes ces choses, que vous trouverez dans les romans, dans la comédie ancienne et dans la société." (*JF* 544; 468). What Federman considers to be the anti-novelistic qualities of Diderot's narrative might paradoxically be realistically motivated. The narrator is poking fun at his reader's tendency to consider fantastical stories (be they romances or novels) more believable and interesting than non-fictional ones: "— La vérité, me direz-vous, est souvent froide, commune et plate ; par exemple, votre dernier récit du pansement de Jacques est vrai, mais qu'y a-t-il d'intéressant ? Rien." (*JF* 503).

Ironically, however, there are instances in the narrative which contain implausible coincidences of the same kind that the narrator initally criticised. When Jacques realises that he has forgotten his purse at the previous inn, and turns back to search for it, he passes a market stall where he discovers, coincidentally, the exact same watch his master had lost the night before (*JF* 495). If the parodic elements of *Jacques le fataliste* are targeting literary conventions that remain outside the work itself, be they those of the sentimental, picaresque, or epistolary novel (Bridgeman 19) or adventure romances, they do not necessarily work self-reflexively. However, when the very same devices that are being criticised are incorporated in Diderot's text, parody works self-reflexively and exposes the fictionality of the story. There are also a few instances of metacommentary that seem to emphasise the 'inventedness' of the story and its characters, more so than their 'constructedness.' On a number of occasions, the narrator speaks of Jacques and his master as existing simultaneously with himself and his narratee: "Mais Jacques et son maître se sont peut-être rejoints : voulez vous que nous allions à eux, ou rester avec moi ?…" (*JF* 527). Another time, Jacques' sore throat slows down the tale of his first love on both the story-level and the narrative-level: "… mais les amours de Jacques ? — Les amours de Jacques, il n'y a que Jacques qui les sache ; et le voilà tourmenté d'un mal de gorge qui réduit son maître à sa montre et à sa tabatière ; indigence qui l'afflige autant que vous. — Qu'allons-nous donc devenir ? — Ma foi, je n'en sais rien." (*JF* 658). These passages can, of course, be read as rhetorical jokes about the narrator not knowing how to proceed in his telling of the story. In Fludernik's words, when narrators arrest the action in this manner, they are essentially "manag[ing] a scene shift" which neither makes these

passages wholly metanarrative nor metafictional ("Metanarrative" 21). If these passages are read as "scene shifts," they, like the passage in Sterne's novel where Tristram leaves his father and his uncle suspended on the stairs, do not have to destabilise the validity of the story itself. Again we encounter the difficulty in judging what qualifies as implicit metafiction, and what does not. The accumulation of metanarrative commentary in *Jacques le fataliste* can effectively lead to a rupture in the aesthetic illusion, especially because the truthfulness of the story is questioned through the figure of the narratee from beginning to end ("Tandis que je vous faisais cette histoire, que vous prendrez pour conte…") (*JF* 554). Paired with the explicit parody of romance conventions, intertextuality with *Tristram Shandy*, and the numerous literary illusions to works by Cervantes, Voltaire, Rabelais, Molière and others, there is no doubt that this is a highly self-reflexive text. Although Federman argues that *Jacques le fataliste* is as much an anti-novel as *At Swim-Two-Birds* (20) and Alter believes it effectively demonstrates the mimetic failure language (64), the text arguably does not show signs of refusing the novel form in itself. Rather, the narrator contemns fantastical stories and poor literary taste, which obviously bestows the narrative with a critical function — not necessarily a 'modern' one, however.

4.3. *At Swim-Two-Birds*: Metafictional modernist or postmodernist?

> "I mean to say, said Lamont, whether a yarn is tall or small
> I like to hear it well told. I like to meet a man that can take
> in hand to tell a story and not make a balls of it while he's at it.
> I like to know where I am, do you know.
> Everything has a beginning and an end." (*AS* 63)

Flann O'Brien's – or rather, Brian O'Nolan's – novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* has in recent years gained a reputation as an archetypal postmodernist metafictional novel.

Such a description is surprising, perhaps, when one takes into account that the novel was published in 1939. Even Brian McHale, who is eager to differentiate between literary modernism and postmodernism, frequently uses *At Swim* to exemplify figures of the ontological dominant (58; 109; 211). The Irish writer's first novel did not receive much attention at the time of its publication. It sold badly and the reviews were largely negative, deeming it an "anti-novel" on the grounds of its deviation from traditional narratives (Hopper 6-7). *At Swim* regained critical recognition after the Second Word War, however, from those who then found it filled to the brim with postmodern characteristics: "irony, playfulness, parody, pastiche, pun, metafiction, intertextuality…" (Villar Flor 62). It is hardly surprising, considering that the novel includes conversations on the subject of literature at every level of its patchy, labyrinthine narrative, that it satisfied the literary taste of later generations. After an exploration of the kinds of self-reflexive utterances and techniques at work in *At Swim*, a discussion of whether or not the novel's dual affiliation with modernism and postmodernism has an impact on its aesthetic function will follow.

4.3.1. Self-reflexivity on the (extra)diegetic level

The only example of overt metafiction in the novel is present in an introductory statement: "*All the characters represented in this book, including the first person singular, are entirely fictitious and bear no relation to any person living or dead.*" (*AS* 6). As such it does not qualify as *diegetic* metafiction, as the utterance is, strictly speaking, situated outside the narrative itself. Although this story about a student writing a story, in which its characters also write stories and tell tales, thematises fictionality at a frequent rate, it does not straightforwardly foreground the fictive status of the primary narrative level. The "autodiegetic"[30] student's comments and concerns about his "spare-time literary activities" (*AS* 9) are largely metanarrational and compositional in nature. In terms of structural frequency, passages like these constitute the majority of the narrative: "*Biographical reminiscence, part the first:* It was only a few months before composing the foregoing that I had my first experience of intoxicating beverages and their strange intestinal chemistry." (*AS* 20). The novel's primary plot is structured around these

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[30] That is, his joint status as narrator and protagonist (*Handbook of Narratology*, 296)

77

biographical reminiscences that contain excerpts from the student's life and extracts from his story about Dermot Trellis. These passages mainly recount confrontations with his uncle who constantly lectures him on the pitfalls of idleness, and *rendezvous* with his college friends in the pub drinking beer, reciting poetry, and discussing good literature. The rest are "metadiscursive" and "metacompositional" worries about his manuscript, like the time he supposedly loses a larger portion of it:

> "It happens that a portion of my manuscript containing an account (in the direct style) of the words that passed between Furriskey and the voice is lost beyond retrieval. I recollect that I abstracted it from the portfolio in which I keep my writings – an article composed of two boards of cardboard connected by a steel spine containing a patent spring mecanism – and brought it with me one evening to the College in order that I might obtain the opinion of Brinsley as to its style and the propriety of the matters which were the subject of the discussion set out therein" (*AS* 50)

In Fludernik's words, passages like these serve to underline the 'constructedness' of the narrator's novel. It is important to remember, however, that there is a vital distinction between the narrator in, for instance, Diderot's novel and the student in *At Swim*. The objects of their metanarrative reference are the same (i.e. their stories), but whereas the student-narrator explicitly states that his story is fictional, in *Jacques le fataliste* the story remains ambiguously suspended between 'true' and 'false'. Thus the metanarrative comments made here also point to the 'inventedness' of Trellis, Furriskey, the Pooka, etc. If the story of the author of the Red Swan Hotel was to be considered as taking place on the *diegetic* level, the novel would obviously be an obvious example of overt metafiction. However, it is rather difficult to pin-point the narrative level of the student-narrator frame story. In her study of metalepsis, Debra Malina actually proposes a narrative division where the fictional author Flann O'Brien is situated on the extradiegetic level, whereas the student should be considered an inhabitant of the diegetic level (12). One of the reasons for this is not only the fact that the student-plot constitutes a large bulk of the narrative, but because it is arguably a book in itself. Following the lost section of his manuscript, the student decides to compose a lengthy summary of its characters and events, "*FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS*" (*AS* 60). Who are these "new readers"? His novel is not being been periodically published, the only one who has read

78

the extracts from his manuscript is his friend Brinsley, who serves as his literary critic. Fourty-three pages later we encounter this brief extract: "*Note to Reader before proceeding further:* Before proceeding further, the Reader is respectfully advised to refer to the Synopsis or Summary of the Argument on Page 60" (*AS* 103). The page number referred to is the one in the physical book the extratextual reader is holding, not the student's manuscript on Dermot Trellis. By extension, this passage also blurs the object of reference of all the previous metanarrative comments because the narrative level collapses into the diegetic and hypodiegetic ones. The manuscipt the student is actually writing, by extension, is *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

The plethora of meta-references made to the narrative's "*fictio*"-status, i.e. its 'constructedness' arguably increase the reader's impression of its 'inventedness' too. Although they only reveal the fictionality of the hypodiegetic Red Swan-plots, there are a number of other self-reflexive techniques at work in the novel that underpin their illusion-breaking potential. Firstly, the novel's engagement with everything literary. As previously discussed, all of the student's characters parodically mimics a style, a genre, or a tradition: "*Extract from my typescript descriptive of Finn Mac Cool and his people, being humorous or quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology…*" (*AS* 13). Parody, as we know, threatens the mimetic illusion – explicit parody even more so. *At Swim* also engages with the contemporary literary scene. The narrator praises the works of "Mr Joyce" and "Mr A. Huxley" (*AS* 11), vehemently supports the novelist's right to plagiarise (*AS* 30), and reflects on the mimetic status of literature: "…the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters." (*AS* 25). Thematically, *At Swim* qualifies as fiction about fiction(s) because it interrogates the role and value of literature in general, and that of specific authors and traditions. It is on the interweaving hypodiegetic levels, especially, that metafictional utterances and self-reflexive techniques abound, as discussed in Chapter Two. The *mise-en-abyme* structure duplicates the story of an author writing a

book (at least) three times over;[31] its many sub-plots devaluates the consistency and centrality of the primary story-level, which Wolf considers essential for the aesthetic illusion to function;[32] the hypodiegetic characters both reflect on their fictive status and make metaleptic jumps between narrative levels; the italicised headings of each fragment contribute to an awareness of the linguistic materiality of the text; and the mixture of realistic, mythical, and fantastical elements destabilise and expose the novel's ontological boundaries. Although we could argue that the ontological stability of the frame story is recoverable, the self-reflexive elements that display the inner and outer workings of fiction in *At Swim-Two-Birds* collectively and undeniably points towards an activation of the metafictional mode. Does that necessarily entail that the novel should be considered as a postmodern?

4.3.2. Metafictional, modernist, or postmodernist functions?

Apart from the fact that the novel's high degree of intertextuality and nonchalant plagiarism of other texts easily lends itself to Derridean readings, O'Brien's play with the author-figure and patchwork characters has attracted numerous postmodern readings of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Brooker 7). Notably, Keith Hopper's study *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* argues that the novel's true value is overlooked if one shuffles it together with modernist ones:

> "While modernists may well have envisaged the world as a chaotic flux, they still believed that meaning could be salvaged and inscribed in words; filtered and negotiated through the prescience of the author-god, the ultimate arbiter of meaning. The modernist interest in the heteroglossic text and the possibilities of intertextuality in the heteroglossic text and the possibilities of intertextuality remained firmly rooted on an aesthetic rather than ontological plane." (17)

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[31] "We have, then, thee books in all: the narrator's book about Trellis, Trellis's book about sin, and Orlick Trellis's book about his father. If we add O'Brien's book about the narrator and his mind we have four narratives…" (Clissman, Anne, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His Writings*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975: pp. 84-5. Rpt. in Bohman-Kalaja 51-52.)

[32] 346

To him, ontological scepticism is what distinguishes *At Swim-Two-Birds* from its modernist predecessors. Hopper argues further that a postmodern critical framework is necessary for the understanding of how metafiction works in this novel. To him, metafiction essentially foregrounds the "essential 'writtenness' of all discourse" in the hope of teaching its readers how to "be more critical of the interpretative codes we usually employ and take for granted." (8-9). In doing so, Hopper endows *At Swim* with a function not so different from the one found in McCaffery and Waugh's definitions of metafiction. This is a view shared by many, for instance Neil Murphy reads it as "a perpetual assault against all forms of human knowledge" (9). Now, we have already established that metafiction has functions beyond mimicking the fictionality of all metanarratives and discourses, or demonstrating linguistically how we are "forever locked within a world shaped by language," as McCaffery argues (*Metafictional Muse* 6).

No doubt, metafiction can serve as a valuable tool for producing a Brechtian distancing effect, as can be seen in the extract containing the Medical Correspondent's newspaper article in response to Dermot Trellis's successful attempts at create living (albeit *fictional*) characters through his writing: "It is noteworthy that Mr Tracy succeeded, after six disconcerting miscarriages, in having his own wife delivered of a middle-aged Spaniard who lived for only six weeks." (*AS* 41) Here, the student-narrator's novel demonstrates, in a similar vein to Tristram Shandy's discussion on noses, how scientific language can just as easily be applied to describe nonsensical contents: "Some amusement was elicited in literary circles by the predicament of a woman who was delivered of a son old enough to be her father but it served to deflect Mr Tracy not one title from his dispassionate quest for scientific truth." (*AS* 41). Further, it also makes sense to talk about *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a novel that addresses and defies realistic narrative conventions, but we should be wary of limiting the function of reflexivity here to the systematic criticism of systems of knowledge alone.

Certainly, the novel was written at a time when previous explanatory models of reality were gradually falling away, and structuralism had spread a growing sense of scepticism towards language, anticipated by literary modernism's rejection of realism's chronological narrative structures and omniscient narrators (Stevenson 73-74). Against theorists who claim that metafiction's primary function after *Finnegans Wake* (1939) was

to support the sceptical 'zeitgeist' of the twentieth century, I would argue that this is just one of many purposes its serves. Moreover, the metanarrational and metafictional instances and techniques in *At Swim* have various functions too. One of them, as Brooker notes, should be viewed in light of Ireland's newfound independence, on the heels of which a nationalistic cultural wave followed (8). Faced with the challenge of (re)creating an Irish identity after years of British rule, artists and poets looked both backwards and forwards for inspiration. It is this cultural milieu, Brooker claims, that is represented in the intertextual sections of *At Swim*. When the novel situates a fairy and a contemporary (fictional) poet on the road to the Red Swan Hotel, this does not automatically mean the text pursues a Derridean play of signifiers due to the inevitable intertextuality of all texts: "Poetry is a thing I am very fond of, said the Good Fairy. I always make a point of following the works of Mr Eliot and Mr Lewis and Mr Devlin. A good pome is a tonic. Was your pome on the subject of flowers, Mr Casey? Wordsworth was a great man for flowers. Mr Casey doesn't go in for that class of stuff, said Slug." (*AS* 120). The passage equally serves as a poetological meditation on literature past and present. The metafictional act of breaking ontological frames allows for literary styles, genres, values, and figures to coexist simultaneously in a possible world where, more importantly, they are allowed to *communicate* with one another. Brooker argues that paradoxically "the novel's play with styles is also a politics of style. In its demystificatory deployment of the mythic, *At Swim* can qualify as an unlikely and perverse kind of realism." (41-2).

In conclusion, the literary self-reflexivity in *At Swim-Two-Birds* largely takes the form of metanarrational utterances, but achieves the metafictional mode by the support of a number of implicit metafictional techniques that foreground the 'inventedness' of the narrative as a whole. Although the novel both narratively and thematically concerns itself with all aspects of fiction-writing, the narrator remains at all times separate from his fictional universe; he never makes any of the metaleptic jumps his many characters do. As such, *At Swim*'s reflexivity can equally be said to create the illusion of a "teller" who "celebrat[es] the act of narrating"[33] by composing as many and as varied stories and characters he possibly can. Published at the historical junction between literary modernism and postmodernism, the theories about the function of the novel's self-

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[33] Neumann & Nünning on the various functions of metafiction, "Metanarration and Metafiction" 207.

reflexivity vary greatly. The problem with many definitions of metafiction, again, is that they tend to one-sidedly emphasise its critical function. They also fail to recognise that many of the meta-reflexive moments within a work can have a range of different functions.

4.4. *Sexing the Cherry*: Historiographic metafiction.

> "The Hopi, an Indian tribe, have a language as sophisticated as ours, but no tenses for past, present and future. The division does not exist.
> What does this say about time?
>
> 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?" (*SC*, epigraph)

Jeanette Winterson has long been an outspoken critic of conventional perceptions of time, history, and identity — in interviews as well as in her books — something which has contributed to her reputation as a postmodern feminist *par excellence* (Onega 2). Although her critics generally approach her work from either or both perspectives, she finds herself more closely affiliated with literary modernism (Andermahr 6). Her 1981 novel *Sexing the Cherry* is the only one of our selected novels that is historically situated in postmodern times, but it is perhaps the least explicitly metafictional one. The narrative is neither concerned with books nor novelists, and it contains only a few instances of metanarrative commentary. It is concerned, however, with stories and storytellers, and is frequently hailed as a prime example of "historiographic metafiction." (Grice 27; Onega 76). Recalling Linda Hutcheon's observation that such novels "are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages…" and display an awareness of fact and fiction as artificial linguistic constructs (*Poetics* 5), their

primary function becomes to demonstrate how all our accounts of the past are always transmitted through a narrative (i.e. fictional and structured form). These novels gain their metafictional status by simultaneously commenting on their own 'inventedness'. We have previously discussed how the novel is conceivably marked by an ontological dominant, resulting from the fact//fiction dichotomy produced by strategies of magic realism. What other elements of the text refer to the 'invented' status of the narrative, and how can the text be said to break the aesthetic illusion?

4.4.1. Signposts of artificiality

We encounter the foundling Jordan and his adoptive mother, a giant who goes by the name of the Dog Woman. The pair take us on a journey through history, fairytales, time, and space. The two main narratives of *Sexing the Cherry* are separated by the drawings of a pineapple (marking Jordan's narrative) and a banana (marking the Dog-Woman's narrative). In the third and final section of the novel their narrative identities blend together with those of a third and fourth narrator: an unnamed female environmentalist (marked by a sliced banana), and Nicolas-Jordan (marked by a split pineapple). Firstly, as the drawings that mark the beginning of each narrative-character do not serve an obvious illustrative role of any scene[34], as they do in *Tristram Shandy* when Trim swings his stick,[35] they potentially heighten our awareness of the novel's materiality. Typographical oddities of this kind which serve to accentuate the novel's central themes feature in Wolf's category of implicit metafiction (Fludernik, "Metanarrative" 29). The pineapple and banana drawings play semantically with the title of the novel, and they also serve to underline *Sexing the Cherry*'s perpetual thematisation of the binary relationship between the masculine and the feminine. Susana Onega argues that the banana, with its phallic shape, seems a suitable symbol for the Dog-Woman's masculinity, and conversely, the pineapple symbolises Jordan's process of "feminisation" on his journey to foreign lands (95). Their subsequent splitting of these drawings in the third section further serves to

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[34] Except for at the very beginning of the novel, where Jordan states: "My name is Jordan. This is the first thing I saw." (*SC* 1)

[35] *TS* 9.4: 743

84

thematise issues of gender and identity. Illustrated novels are not uncommon, and do not necessarily have a distancing effect. When images appear in realistic novels they usually accompany the text in painting a detailed scene (Sillars 30). In metafiction, however, they often appear unexpectedly and seem unrelated to the progression or contents of the narrative. In *Sexing the Cherry* the drawings of fruit do not mimetically refer to pineapples and bananas in reality, nor do they accompany scenes in the novel where there is fruit involved. They are linked thematically, however, to objects within the fictional universe, and reflect back on the work as a whole.

4.4.2. Illusion-inducing qualities

The closest thing we get to an instance of overt diegetic metafiction in *Sexing the Cherry* is when Jordan is experiencing a moment of existential doubt upon parting with his beloved dancer Fortunata:

> "I thought she might want to travel but she tells me truths I already know, that she need not leave this island to see the world, she has seas and cities enough in her mind. If she does, if we all do, it may be that this world and the moon and stars are also a matter of the mind, though a mind of vaster scope than ours. If someone is thinking me, then I am still free to come and go." (*SC* 113)

This passage serves a similar function to the "écrit là-haut" philosophy in *Jacques le fataliste*. Jordan's reference to the possible fictionality of Fortunata, himself, and his world remains a philosophical hypothesis. But whereas Jacques' statement appears with regular frequency in Diderot's novel, the metatextual references in *Sexing the Cherry* are rare. On a few occasions Jordan indicates that his story is a written narrative ("she wrote me a rule book of which I will *list* the first page" ; "The scene *I have just described to you*") but these metanarrative comments are 'discursive,' and so do not have a metafictional function (*SC* 29; 104, my emphasis). Jordan does, however, make one crucial 'compositional' comment on the way he wishes to tell his story in his first narrative section: "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*

85

made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time." (*SC* 2, my emphasis). Jordan possibly renders himself unreliable here, but the narrative does not explicitly state if the imaginative journeys he is about to write are the ones featured in his subsequent narration of his life, or if they are the ones he keeps track of in the log-book he writes onboard Tradescant's ship (*SC* 115). Moreover, none of these statements are directly aimed at the 'inventedness' of the story as a whole, at best they are an expression of the relativist philosophy according to which he places the stories that he *does* tell against those he *could* have told. None of the other narrators express this kind of self-reflexivity about the manner in which they tell their stories, nor do they question their own ontological status.

On the whole, there is no "devaluation of story" in favor of "the level of discourse,"[36] the two levels are closely tied together. The novel also displays a number of illusion-inducing qualities that can be elucidated through a comparison with modernist strategies of narration. Literary modernism preferred narrative voices which were closely tied to their characters' consciousness over omniscient and distanced ones (*Narcissistic* 26). Virginia Woolf argued in her famous essay "Modern Fiction" that nineteenth-century writers were too "materialist[ic]" in their approach to life (2088). The Edwardians in particular, she argues, paid excessive attention to detail and tried (from a distanced standpoint) to make their characters believable by demonstrating the influence of socio-geographical factors on their lives. Woolf insists that the conventions of the traditional realist novel do not capture the essence of "life or spirit, truth or reality," which "refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments" (2089). Instead, she encourages new novelists to lay focus on "The mind [which] receives a myriad of impressions" (2089). She does not deny that the novel can be mimetic or even realistic — in fact she argues that this is the purpose of literature — but that conventional narrative techniques do not provide access to consciousness, the medium through which we experience reality. Werner Wolf argues likewise that realist fiction does not hold exclusive rights to aesthetic illusion. While the objective perspective of a distanced third-person narrator can provide order and coherence to a story, "the 'subjectivity' of the internal focalizer" can actually "enhance[] the illusionistic effect of 'immediacy'" (340). *Sexing*

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[36] I refer here to the potential illusion-breaking devices Werner Wolf lists in Fig.4.:346

the Cherry's narrative anchoring in consciousness does produce significant spatial and temporal gaps because the narrator's inner thoughts ("How hideous am I?"; "How could they live without space?") (*SC* 21; 27) and reflexions (LIES 2 : Time is a straight line) (*SC* 90) blend nonsequentially with the situations and events of their lives. Jordan's narrative, especially, jumps from one adventure to another without any transitional spatio-temporal explication. However, as Jordan notes, the mind rarely experiences time divided successively as on the clock. Instead, "[o]ur inward life of pure time is sluggish or fast-flowing depending on our rate of conductivity," he claims (*SC* 100). The perspectives of the four subjective narrators of *Sexing the Cherry* remain relatively stable and can arguably produce a 'realistic' and rendering of their respective states of consciousness. Jordan's fantastical journeys to cities of words and places where love is forbidden, which blend with his historically anchored ones, can be read as "adventures of the mind" rather than physical ones. His introductory metanarrative statement (*SC* 2) conceivably invites such a reading. In modernist fiction, narrative focalisation on states of consciousness functions as means of emulating how the subject views and shapes its object of attention (Stevenson 49), whether it is time, reality, memory, or experience. Is *Sexing the Cherry* commenting on its own 'inventedness' or is it engaging in what might be called a 'mimesis of consciousness'? Because the novel displays relatively few instances of narrational self-reflexivity, we have to consider the potential evidence of non-narrational (i.e. implicit) narcissism in order to argue that it qualifies as metafictional. One example of reflexivity at the story-level is when the Dog-Woman's description of her own weight shows up in the thoughts of the contemporary environmentalist: "I imagine I am huge, raw, a giant." (*SC* 138). This kind of "horizontal *mise-en-abyme*", where the dublication of imagery does not occur *within* the same narrative, but rather, the same imagery is repeated in two distinct narratives, "will perhaps call attention to the repetitive, 'un-lifelike' nature of the plot…" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 54). A doubling of the narrative situation can, and often does, signal the unreality of one or more parts of the narrative. The environmentalist, however, introduces a potential explanation for this structural oddity when she admits to have had "an *alter ego* who has huge and powerful, a woman whose only morality was her own and whose loyalties were fierce and few. […] Of course it was only a fantasy, at least at the beginning…" (*SC* 142). At this point in *Sexing the*

Cherry it becomes pertinent to ask: is the entire Dog-Woman narrative one of the environmentalist's dreams or fantasies? If so, the same can be said of Jordan's narrative: that his journeys are the imagined stories of present-day Nicolas-Jordan, who also longs to explore the world at sea. If this interpretation is chosen, then the self-reflexive utterances and devices of the novel do not point towards the fictionality of the narrative as a whole; the fantastical stories of Jordan and the Dog-Woman become ontologically recuperable in the sense that they have their origin in two present-day consciousnesses. It is in many ways more difficult to identify obvious explicit or implicit metafictional elements in *Sexing the Cherry* that (in Patricia Waugh's words) "systematically draw[] attention to its status as an artefact" than it is to argue that the novel asks "questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." Perhaps its is primarily in its historiographic concerns that it becomes metafictional.

4.4.3. Historiographic self-reflexivity

I have like many others, argued throughout this thesis that *Sexing the Cherry* is an example of historiographic metafiction. Ansgar Nünning, however, disagrees with this view in an article on the value of narratological concepts in the cultual analysis of literary texts. He suggests a division between five different types of historical novels: the "documentary," "realist," "revisionist," "metahistorical" historical novels, and the explicit or implicit types of "historiographicmetafiction." ("Where historiographic" 361). To him, *Sexing the Cherry* is a "revisionist historical novel" because it blends the factual with the fantastical in order to rewrite the past from a feminist vantage point, but it does not fulfil the criteria of "historiographic metafiction" ("Where historiographic" 363). To do so, it would need to contain "elements that break the aesthetic illusion," i.e. the narrative must "address[] the problems related to the writing of the history through explicit metafictional comments" ("Where historiographic" 361-2; 364). I would counterargue, however, that *Sexing the Cherry* does this both explicitly and implicitly, and that it is in those parts of the text that refer to history as storytelling that the narrative reflects back on its own fictional status. The epigraph to *Sexing the Cherry* quoted above poses two important challenges to the writing of history. The first paragraphs asks what it means to say that

points in time can only be distinguished by the linguistic markers "past," "present," and "future." For Jordan, this means that language structures time in an artificial, non-natural way. In itself, time cannot be "a straight line," but only exists as it is subjectively experienced (*SC* 90; 99). The second paragraph asks what it means to say that reality is not of solid matter. For the historian, it would mean that any attempt to describe or explain an event or phenomena would inevitably involve imposing form on essentially formless matter, i.e. it would involve a process of fictionalising. *Sexing the Cherry* thus explicitly denies the two most fundamental principles of history: first, that the objects and events of reality can be truthfully described, and secondly, that these can be situated chronologically at specific points in time. Because parts of the novel, the Dog-Woman's narrative especially, itself takes the form of a historical narrative, Olu Jenzen argues that it points self-reflexively back to its own process of fictionalising and at the same time constitutes "the most outright criticism of dominant historiography" (35).

In the case of *Sexing the Cherry*, the contextual background of postmodernism actually plays a more significant role in determining whether or not the novel qualifies as "dominantly" or "marginally" metafictional. It employs unnatural narrative elements, projecting strange worlds in which fact, fiction, and fairytales blend and clash. The narrative balances between textual elements that trigger and those that threaten to puncture the aesthetic illusion. Its metanarrative comments do not directly point towards the fictionality of the story and its narrators, but they become metafictional within a postmodern/feminist critical framework. It arguably breaks the aethetic illusion in this context because it openly questions the validity of traditional explanatory models. By referring to time and history as fictional linguistic constructs. *Sexing the Cherry* also incorporates and subverts temporal and historical narratives by allowing its narrators to move into fantasy and create their own "petits récits." Their retropective life stories are presented as no more or no less valid than any historical account of the past – which is always inaccessible.

Chapter Five: *Towards a concept of metafiction*

Initially, this thesis suggested that a number of accepted definitions of metafiction were too broad and sometimes heavily influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist theories. The critical aspect of metafiction is often brought to the fore by theorists like Waugh, Alter, Federman, and McCaffery, who argue that the phenomenon's distinguishing feature is that it reflects an ontological and linguistic scepticism. This is by no means an unreasonable assumption, because self-reflexive novels did flourish in or around the same time as reality increasingly came to be understood as constituted by language. If language cannot effectively reflect reality, so the argument goes, neither can literature. Its primary function, therefore, has changed: "The most authentic and honest fiction might well be that which most freely acknowledges its fictionality." (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 49). Metafiction, in this view, deliberately positions itself between the creation of a fictional world in the traditional sense, and the critical exposure of the techniques involved in the making of that world. Alternatively, it foregrounds its own linguistic identity by radically subverting traditional conventions of storytelling. *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* are particularly interesting to modern literary scholars because they employ many of the same self-reflexive devices that (post)modern novelists do. Both novels feature a prominent author and reader figure, dramatised in a dynamic relationship between the narrator and the narratee; their narrators constantly fuss and worry about how to tell their stories; they feature a number of regressive structural devices like *mise-en-abyme*; they imitate, parody, or critically discuss other texts, styles, and authors; and, most importantly, they explicitly refer to themselves as books. All of the above-mentioned critics cite *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* in their studies, but they do not address the difficulty in defining metafiction as a transhistorical phenomenon if it essentially provides an attack on the mimetic function of literature.

There are a number of flaws with Patricia Waugh's definition, especially, in that it suggests that metafiction poses questions about the relationship between fact and fiction in

order to foreground the fictionality of reality. In doing so, she projects an attitude of ontological and linguistic scepticism onto writers of metafiction, and reduces the functions of self-reflexive works to the critical exposure of arbitrary systems. This might very well be the primary function of *some* works of metafiction, however, especially (post)modern ones. In American surfiction or those works which Linda Hutcheon considers as examples of "historiographic metafiction," self-reflexive devices can become useful critical instruments to comment upon the way language and narratives structure experience. The problem occurs when, as is the case in Waugh and Alter's studies, postmodernist and/or poststructuralist concerns are attached to earlier examples of self-reflexive fiction. If metafiction is terminologically confused with postmodernism, I would argue, one runs the risk of (unknowingly) looking for what makes *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste* postmodern in their outlook, not what potentially makes them metafictional.

The main question which this thesis grapples with is whether or not metafiction is a term that only makes sense in a postmodern context, and whether or not it can effectively be understood as a transhistorical phenomenon. In order for metafiction to achieve its status of indepencence, it needs to be defined more clearly in terms of the textual qualities that it portrays. If metafiction is defined as "fiction about fiction" or fiction which invites the reader to engage more fully in the semantic creation of a text, dominantly parodic, ironic, or metanarrational works would also qualify as metafictional. This thesis has tried to show how neither of these self-reflexive forms function metafictionally in and of themselves, but have the potential of doing so by explicitly or implicitly point towards the fictionality of work in which they appear. The value of a narratological study of self-reflexive devices and utterances is that one is able to distinguish more clearly between their respective objects of reference. Metafiction then, can be recognised as those comments or structural twists (metalepsis; *mise-en-abyme*) that explicitly reveal the fictionality of a narrative and breaks the established contract of 'suspended belief' between author and reader. Athanasiou-Krikelis similarly argues that "metafiction does not simply polarize the relation between fiction and reality but more forcefully demolishes the aesthethic illusion, the imaginary wall between reader and text." ("Twisting the Story" 106). That is not to say, however, that the introduction of a metafictional comment in a narrative automatically destroys the aesthetic illusion, especially when they occupy a marginal position in the text. The illusion-breaking potential of both

91

metafictional and metanarrative commentary can be measured according to their frequency of occurence, structural positioning, and their subject matter. In the case of implicit metafiction, which is commonly signalled through typographical oddities, repetition of story-elements, or excessive intertextual references, it would also be useful to measure the occurrence of such phenomena alongside other self-reflexive devices that might be at work in the text, in order to decide whether the text qualifies as partially or dominanty metafictional. Again, there may be a number of different self-reflexive devices with different functions at work within the same text at once, which goes against the notion of understanding metafiction as a genre.

The activation of the metafictional mode is also largely dependent on the critical reception of a work, as well as the interpretative role of the reader. Arguably, all fiction has the potential of referring back to its own formal and linguistic structures, but — and metafiction perhaps demonstrates this even more forcefully than ordinary fiction — it needs an observer in order to do so. One needs to be mindful, however, of the fact that any reading of any text from a particular critical perpective has a tendency to highlight those particular aspects that are relevant to its study and suppress those that are not. This thesis has tried to avoid *reading* metafiction into self-reflexive eighteenth-century works like *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*, but also into *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Sexing the Cherry*. Instead, the focus has been on identifying textual features and qualities that could potentially activate, or often do activate an awareness of a work as fictional. It has tried to do so without focusing exclusively on the critical potential of metafiction, and instead explored the functional range of self-reflexive devices and utterances. We must, in any case, remember that terms like "metafiction" and "metanarration" are critical terms which are constructed (i.e. arbitrary; fictional) in order to understand the workings of narrative fiction. No text is parodic, ironic, metafictional or metanarrational in and of itself. Arguably too, then, metafiction can be conceived of as a phenomenon that stretches beyond postmodernism.

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