

October 2015

Metafiction as Genre Fiction

Jeremy A. Levine
Clark University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.clarku.edu/surj>

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Levine, Jeremy A. (2015) "Metafiction as Genre Fiction," *Scholarly Undergraduate Research Journal at Clark*: Vol. 1, Article 8.
Available at: <http://commons.clarku.edu/surj/vol1/iss1/8>

This Manuscript is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Collections & Academic Work at Clark Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Undergraduate Research Journal at Clark by an authorized administrator of Clark Digital Commons. For more information, please contact celwell@clarku.edu.

Metafiction as Genre Fiction

Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to Professor Meredith Neuman, Professor James Elliott, Joel Helander, Nick Porcella

Metafiction as Genre Fiction

Jeremy Levine



Jeremy Levine is an English major and Political Science minor from Long Island, New York. He is the Editor-in-Chief of Clark's student newspaper, *The Scarlet*, and a Student Coordinator and Diarist for Clark's Admissions office. Jeremy interns for *The Worcester Journal*, an online creative nonfiction journal and works at Clark's Writing Center as a writing consultant. This is his first major research project and is complementary to his Honors Thesis, which is a full-length metafictional novel. He does not know what he wants to be when he grows up, but he knows he wants to work with writing and reading.

Abstract

Realism, the genre in which literature is expected to reflect reality, tends to act as the default setting for establishing the worth of a given piece. This paper contends that metafiction, a post-modern genre characterized by a work's awareness of its own fictional nature, has been damaged by realism's standards. Using a case study of two metafictional works, John Barth's "Life-Story" and David Foster Wallace's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* against a historical and theoretical backdrop, the paper both isolates metafiction from realism while describing its deliberate artistic mission. This identity is based on open acknowledgement of the reader's involvement in the text and metafiction which is not only self-aware but also able to deliver meaning outside of itself. These findings are significant because they liberate a new field from old criticism, contributing to the academy's acceptance of experimental art.

Depending on who you ask, metafiction either sounded the death-knell of literature or is the latest innovation in an ever-changing field. Many of the genre's detractors purport that a story that refers to its fictional nature cannot appear "real," while others contend that metafiction does not have to be bound by the constraints of realism and should therefore not concern itself with appearing "real." These critics contend that, just like any other non-realist genre, metafiction is still able to deliver effective stories which to a degree discard verisimilitude, or the appearance of being true or real. Unlike other non-realist genres, like science fiction and fantasy, the current literary climate requires that metafictional elements of stories be justified. This paper seeks to unpack this notion and determine more precisely what makes metafictional elements resonate with

readers, in order to discuss criteria by which metafiction can be judged as metafiction, without the burdens of realism. It will define and, as a result of various complications, continuously redefine the term "metafiction," in order to arrive at a broad standard against which metafiction may be judged as genre fiction. Without such standards, we may continue to classify metafiction according to priorities and values with which it is incompatible, effectively stymying the progression of literature as a whole.

Metafiction in History

Realist fiction has a rich metafictional tradition. Classic works such as Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* have metafictional elements, despite being largely thought of as realist. While the term "metafiction" is relatively new, the concept is as old as the novel itself. Critics like

Mark Blackwell discard "the notion that metafictional play is the twentieth-century's cheeky challenge to the hegemony of the realist novel," citing the "metafictional experimentation before the advent of 'realist imperialism.'" Blackwell, among others, claims that early fiction felt a need to call attention to its fictional nature because there was a lack of trust in concept of fiction. Cervantes is often given credit for inventing the modern novel. Aware of the newness of the form, Cervantes created an elaborate ruse within *Don Quixote*, detailing the adventures of the narrator (whom he refers to as a translator) in a marketplace, who stumbled upon the text's "original" Arabic incarnation at an outdoor market and translated it into Castilian, so that the text could still appear to be nonfictional. This discussion of the narrative is one of *Don Quixote's* more obviously

metafictional moments, as the narrator is discussing how the text came to be.

While a modern reader might be satisfied with classifying this incident as metafiction, Grossman points out in a footnote that multiple narrators telling the same story is a common feature of chivalric romance, the very genre that Don Quixote parodies. By referencing legendary texts, Don Quixote alerts the reader of its own fictiveness, thereby making the situation metafictional in two separate ways. A modern reader who is not using Grossman's translation may miss this small part of Cervantes' parody, rendering the text less effective, an issue to be discussed below. For now, we will remain with Blackwell's idea of metafiction as more than a reaction to the "rules" established by realism (as is the accepted narrative regarding metafiction in the twentieth century), but as a genre as old as the novel itself, dating back to when there were no "rules" governing fiction. By classifying these works as realist stories with metafictional elements, scholarship can limit metafiction as an offshoot of realism which has to play by realism's rules. In reality, metafiction is its own genre which must be considered on its own merits.

Metafiction in Theory

The inflexibility of realism-based scholarship is damaging to metafiction. Linda Hutcheon argues that art should never attempt to conform to scholarly expectations; criticism must follow art, not try to precede it. She writes that the "largely negative reviews of much new metafiction on the basis of it being... 'unrealistic' might suggest that certain categories of novel criticism are being revealed as inadequate."

Hutcheon's statement suggests that we create new categories of criticism, ones that can address metafiction as metafiction. It is important to liberate this proposed field of criticism (i.e. the subject of this paper) from the assumptions of realism, namely that any element which disrupts the illusion of fiction is a detriment, so that these works are evaluated fairly and not rejected out of hand.

John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* refers to the "vivid and continuous dream," the notion that a piece of fiction should ensnare the reader's attention and, ideally, cause the reader to forget that they are reading a story. This is good advice for a writer who must learn to create a continuous narrative, but can be dangerous if it leads to a dependence on realism. No reader could ever be completely bamboozled into believing that the story they are reading is actually playing out before their eyes. In fact, according to Hutcheon, "the narrative act itself is, for the reader, part of the action," and so ignoring the narrative component of a story seems to be folly. Some genres have taken advantage of this lack of a recognition of complete continuousness, knowing that the presence of a wizard or an alien will not upset a reader a great deal. What readers require is that these wizards and aliens behave in ways which psychologically and emotionally reflect the goings-on of real humans. As such, mimesis does not concern the accurate representation of the world as it physically exists, but rather, "truth of sensation and environment... [requiring] sociological and psychological concepts of behavior and mental processes." Under these definitions, fiction can still be mimetic while ignoring the idea of continuous dream, but these disruptions must

not ruin the mimetic properties of the story. This is the primary condition under which metafiction must operate.

Louis D. Rubin considers the often-used phrase "authorial intrusion" refers to a moment in which "the author's presence... instead of helping us to take part in a fictional situation... impedes us from doing so." He refers to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an example, arguing that the story's ending relies too heavily on dumb luck to be convincing, and that Twain intruded into the story by abusing his power as the sole agent capable of creating events in Huck and Jim's world. At the end of the novel, Jim is being held captive at Phelps' Farm, and Huck is trying to break him out. Tom Sawyer, who is not a character in this novel until this point, arrives on the scene and saves the day. At first, Tom Sawyer's arrival can seem like the kind of discrepancy with the physical world which is forgivable according to our discussion of psychological over physical mimesis. This is not the case, however, as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* necessitates an ending by which Huck and Jim solve their problems using their own friendship and wits as their only tools. The ending involving Tom Sawyer is emotionally irrelevant and shortchanges the psychological virtue that a reader expects to come from a novel. A physical intrusion has become a mimetic intrusion.

Deciding whether metafiction can be judged independently of realism requires deciding whether an author's presence may be asserted within a work in a way which does not belittle its mimetic properties: in short, whether the author may be explicitly present without "intruding." If a story's metafictional elements

can actually contribute to the story's search for truth, make the story more honest, heighten the action, or make a thematic contribution, then it will not detract from the storytelling process. We can then arrive at the following preliminary hypothesis: that metafiction in which the author's presence is felt, or the fictional nature of the text is called into question, functions well when the author does not actually intrude, but is simply present as another organic element of the text.

Of course, this hypothesis is dubious in its subjectivity. What, after all, qualifies a "intrusion" or an "organic contribution"? All judgment is subjective, but metafiction is in a difficult spot in that it often demands the reader's buy-in in order for the author's presence to become a contribution. Wolfgang Iser writes that "the fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perceptions of what is written." Each reader contributes to the text by bringing an individual set of ideas, sympathies, and life experiences, thereby altering its meaning and the level of intrusiveness involved in authorial presence. For example, a reader who read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* might not object to Tom's arrival as much as someone who had not read the earlier novel. A strong metafictional work must realize the creative process which occurs between reader and writer and take advantage of it. Rubin refers to this exchange as the "transaction of storytelling," which is to persuade "the reader willingly to suspend his disbelief in the reality of the story being recounted, and thereupon [reward] him by giving him a

representation of reality that furnishes order and meaning." Metafiction does not then seek to merely take advantage of the work's fictional nature, but rather acknowledge this transaction and exploit it.

The Transaction in Action

A prime example of this transaction is in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. The novel is structured uniquely, in three parts: an introduction by Charles Kinbote, a poem by his neighbor, John Shade, and Kinbote's commentary on the poem. The reader quickly learns that Kinbote is incredibly wrong about the poem's meaning, and so the story does not become an analysis of a fictional poem, but rather a character study of a narcissistic, unreliable narrator. Much of *Pale Fire*'s energy comes from conclusions drawn by the reader through a series of juxtapositions that Nabokov deployed, but a reader who is not actively making conclusions about Kinbote will find little joy in the book. What *Pale Fire* specifically capitalizes on is the reader's perceived distance between the author and the narrator. Any reader will realize that the narrator and the author are not the same, and one can then conclude that the author may try to sneak ideas (or, in *Pale Fire*'s case, entire plots) past the narrator and to the reader. Fiction in which the author makes an "appearance" is then in an interesting position, in that the author appearing is still a projected version of the author, not the actual author. The real author uses this projection in order to contribute to the work's meaning by further manipulating the transaction of storytelling.

Barth's "Life-Story," from his ground-breaking, metafictional short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*, is a worthy example of the

"author's presence." While the text is certainly a playful exploration of a metafictional device, the story itself is actually quite sad. It begins with the main character's (referred to only as "G") exhortation that he wants "to be in a rousing good yarn... not some piece of avant-garde precociousness. I want passion and bravura action in my plot, heroes I can admire, heroines I can love" etc. In actuality, he is in a story which is not at all like that. To be found in a story which is actually much more mundane than the life story that one was looking for is a hugely disappointing notion. G's predicament also speaks how fiction tends to be more interesting than real-life, and thereby not an accurate portrayal of life at all, and any attempts to conflate the two (as is Don Quixote's constant mistake) will be both dangerous and absurd. G is then caught in a paradox: he wishes to be in a fictional story which is exciting, but knows that he does not want to be in a fictional story at all. When G realizes that fiction requires a reader to operate, the story's projected author eventually steps in, and asks the reader to stop reading so that the character's tormented existence can end. The reader is now complicit in propagating the terrors which haunt this character, which makes the reader feel guilty, which contributes to the story's emotional impact. These moments, while metafictional devices which disrupt Gardner's fictional dream, still call into question how a reader can be responsible for the well-being of another person, how one searches for meaning in the world, and what it means to have a meaningful life story—ideas which are not at all useless. Using an author-character, he is able to express this idea of the intensity of sadness. Based on what has been said above,

it is clear that “Life-Story” fits our current definition of metafiction, in that “author’s” presence constructs thematic meaning, which is accomplished by way of the reader’s understanding of the relationship between reader, author, and character.

This definition is rather limited in how broad it is. Under it, one could consider a work of satire to be metafiction, as it takes advantage of the transaction between author and reader. A reader who pretends that a novel like *Catch-22* is a completely real account will only feel sympathy for Yossarian for stumbling into a squadron with such an unreasonable supervisory staff. Instead, when the reader reads about Clevinger’s trial, in which “Lieutenant Scheisskopf was one of the judges... Lieutenant Scheisskopf was also the prosecutor. Clevinger had an officer defending him. The officer defending him was Lieutenant Scheisskopf,” the reader does not weep because a real man is in such a no-win scenario; the reader laughs at the silliness of the situation because she knows that it is not real. The work is completely ineffective if the transaction between reader and writer is not exploited. Similarly, if a reader were to read a science-fiction story and think that it was real, they might panic because of an impending alien invasion. While these works do depend on the reader knowing that the story is fictional, it would be ridiculous to classify all satire, science fiction, fantasy, etc. under the umbrella of metafiction. The term would be overgeneralized, and so it is clear that metafiction must not be defined merely as fiction which takes advantage of the transaction.

Fiction About the Field of Fiction

In the essay in which he coined the term metafiction, Wil-

liam Gass wrote that, as a result of history, novelists are able to use experimentation of form in order to make commentary on the art of fiction, thereby making commentary on humanity. In writing that “the novelist now better understands his medium,” he calls attention to the element of the post-modern turn in which writers and readers have tacitly agreed that the form of the novel is well-understood. When you pick up a novel at a bookstore, you know what you’re getting: a made-up story in which there is a conflict, characters with competing needs and motivation, and a resolution. Many post-modern novels contend that these readerly expectations are somewhat narrow, and we can begin to do away with some of them. Barth spoke of this saturation in his 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion.” In “The Literature of Replenishment,” he clarified his position, writing that a great many people... mistook me to mean that literature, at least fiction, is kaput; that it has all been done already; that there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium — exactly what our critics deplore as postmodernism. That is not what I meant at all... [Writers are creating] not the next-best thing after modernism, but the best next thing: what is gropingly now called postmodernist fiction; what I hope might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment. The replenishment is the process of recognizing the transaction of story-telling between reader and writer, as well as the transaction between reader and the field of literature, to create new forms of writing which are as psychologically mimetic as its modern and premodern ancestors. More simply, “replenishment” refers

to channeling post-modern cynicism into innovation. Sadly, metafiction as a field is often judged by a few pieces which do not use the relationships between reader and author to create the same thematic impact as “Life-Story,” and many critics claim that metafiction severed the connection between aesthetics and mimesis.

Metafiction, then, takes for granted this readerly awareness of the field of fiction and uses this understanding in order to make its thematic points. This definition is cautionary, in that these works still must not experiment merely for the sake of it. In referring to the effect of works which speak to the art form of fiction, Gass writes that he [does not] mean those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some of the works of Borges, Barth, and Flann O’Brien, for example, in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafictions.

Under Gass’ definition, metafiction has an obligation to use its commentary on fictional forms in ways which bring meaning to the text. This definition follows Barth’s implication that individual works of literature are part of a global field which is constantly changing and expanding, and metafiction can call attention to these various forms. Just as any figurative language should, this interaction with the field must serve some purpose for the piece as a whole. Sometimes, however, the metafictional elements of the story (i.e. the components which can only function by virtue of readerly understanding of the field), assume rather liberally what the readers have in their literary arsenal, or are too cloistered to make significant commen-

tary on the world outside of fiction.

David Foster Wallace's metafictional novella *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way* spends significant energy discussing the field of metafiction. It seems to understand exactly where it falls in the literary spectrum in that one character, D.L., "actually went around calling herself a post-modernist. No matter where you are-, you Don't Do This. By convention it's seen as pompous and dumb." *Westward*, then, implies post-modern literature is something to be ashamed of—something the novella itself never fully escapes. Not long thereafter, our narrator writes "As mentioned before—and if this were a piece of metafiction, which it's NOT," which is clearly a lie. The trouble with the lie is that it's so obviously a lie that it does little to analyze the aforementioned taboo against work classified as post-modern. Essentially, it is not interesting because isn't complex enough to teach us anything new—it is difficult to imagine this kind of statement of hesitance to fit within the paradigm of metafiction that Gass established. Wallace spoke to this point in an interview, saying that he "got trapped just trying to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that had come before it. It was a horror show. The stuff's a permanent migraine."

This speaks to one of *Westward's* overall struggles, which is keeping one unified story together. The novella seems to have two main operations: the story about the characters in the world, and the narrator's struggle with metafiction. These two ideas are tied together loosely in that one of the characters with whom the narrator reacts is the

aforementioned self-professed post-modernist—but this connection lends little to the text. Toon wrote that "The novella indeed fails to surpass post-modern self-reflexivity," in that the metafictional elements seem to exist on their own. Combine this with *Westward's* self-ashamed (versus self-conscious) nature, and you have a novel which is apologetic of using a device which it does not use to the full capacity that we have seen it used, like in "Life-Story." The story's real value, according to a somewhat older Wallace, is to "[show] the kind of pretentious loops you fall into now if you fuck around with recursion." *Westward's* problem, according to Wallace, seems to be that its self-reflexiveness is in fact too self-reflective. While metafiction should actively position itself within the existing field of fiction, *Westward* does this at the expense of the psychological mimesis (or, more bluntly, effective storytelling) that readers expect.

This quality of fiction which should use its relationship with other fiction to create some kind of emotional or human truth, is how works like *Catch-22* are disqualified from the category of metafiction. Recall that we sought to classify this literature of authorial presence as fiction in which it was necessary that readers become aware of the transaction of fiction, but that this awareness should not impede the reading. But in order to limit the wide berth we have given the term "presence," we must consider it as authorial interest in the storytelling act. Metafiction which refers to other fiction has taught us that fiction can make commentary on the art of storytelling, which can either be done by referencing this broad field or by referencing itself. "Life-Story" performs the latter, using storytelling as its

narrative device, while also drawing attention to its own form. Let us return to the author's desire to be "in a rousing good yarn... not some piece of avant-garde precociousness" if he is in fact the subject of a story. This sentence at first may elicit a sympathetic chuckle from the reader, who knows that the protagonist is in exactly the kind of story he claims to dislike. However, the reader who keeps this sentiment in mind throughout the story at the end will realize that avant-garde literature like "Life-Story" can involve a hero a reader can admire, but also all of the emotional and psychological power as any epic. In this moment, the novel makes comments both on its fictional nature both by referring to itself directly and referring to other pieces of fiction.

The effectiveness of readerly participation then depends on the reader's involvement with fiction itself. If Gass positions the genre as one which comments on the field of fiction and its state of affairs, then a reader who is interested in this subject will find metafiction like "Life-Story" interesting. But someone who is unfamiliar with literary trends who picks up a copy of *Lost in the Funhouse* at the bookstore because they saw it on the "Classics" table or they liked the cover might not even know what kind of avant-garde precociousness is in question. Considering this idea of readerly knowledge of the field can be clarified by examining metafictional television, such as NBC's *Community*.

"Community" and Readerly Familiarity with Fiction

First aired in 2009, *Community* relies heavily on references to other television shows and movies, and much of the show's humor relies on the reader's recognition common

tropes. In an episode of the PBS YouTube series *Idea Channel*, Mike Rugnetta states that “Many if not most episodes of *Community* are send-ups or pastiches of well-worn narrative forms: the western, the love story, the action film, the sci-fi, the heist, the feel-good movie, the documentary, the morning show,” etc. While it may seem that *Community* seems to make these references for the sake of humor (e.g. an all-school pillow fight which is an homage to the Ken Burns series *The Civil War*), *Community* also challenges the notion of a culture oversaturated with culture. “Much of postmodernism,” according to Rugnetta, “has found its way into our everything-is-a-remix comment-as-content media practice,” and *Community* positions itself within this paradigm, demonstrating how reference-heavy contemporary culture has become, but also calls its own metafictional tendencies into question. In the episode “Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples,” Abed, a character responsible for many of the popular culture references throughout the series, attempts to make a “Jesus movie for the post-postmodern world” when approached by his Christian friend, Shirley. Shirley wants him to create a film that will be relevant to modern culture, Abed recognizes that the story of Jesus “has been told to death,” and that he “wants to tell the story of Jesus from the perspective of a filmmaker exploring the life of Jesus... in the filmmaker’s film, Jesus is a filmmaker trying to find God with his camera... And the movie’s called ABED. All caps. Filmmaking beyond film. A metafilm. My masterpiece.” Shirley states that she doesn’t like it, and that it “sounds very appealing to filmmakers.” After Shirley calls him “an egotistical, filmmaking lunatic,” Abed watches his

movie and calls it “the worst piece of crap I have ever seen in my entire life... it’s a self-indulgent, adolescent mess.” Here, *Community* derides solipsistic metafiction, rather than that which contributes to conversations about form and its place within society.

Community’s reference-heavy metafiction functions well in today’s environment because film and television are so entrenched in contemporary culture. Alan Sepinwall writes that “the show did a note-perfect homage to [*Goodfellas*] in which the study group became an organized crime syndicate controlling the supply of the school cafeteria’s beloved chicken fingers.” Even if a viewer has not seen *Goodfellas*, they can appreciate the trope of mafia politics and its constant portrayal in film and television. Similarly, even if they are unfamiliar with solipsistically self-reflexive metafilm, they understand the concept from the classic image of the pretentious filmmaker. In this sense, work which is “meta,” be it film, literature, etc., is most illustrative of reality, because it chooses to embrace art’s stronghold on everyday life.

Of course, not all literature which contains allusions can be classified as metafiction; this would be another useless, overgeneralized statement. For the most part, “allusions are... used to summarize broad, complex ideas or emotions in one quick, powerful image,” not devices which seek to situate a text within literary context. Usually, this metafiction of allusion, like *Mason & Dixon*, *Don Quixote*, or *Community*, relies heavily on the field of literature as part of its over-arching meaning. In order to qualify an allusion as a metafictional allusion, a reader may consider whether one of the text’s main readings would be

invalidated if the referent text did not exist.

Limitations of Form about Form

Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way focuses on a very narrow field of fiction with which many readers are unfamiliar. Legendarily sketched out in the margins of Wallace’s copy of *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Westward* features Ambrose, the protagonist of three stories from Barth’s collection, as a character. While the debate rages as to the nature and purposes of Ambrose’s inclusion, it is well-established that Ambrose represents Barth. The very existence of this debate, though, verifies the cloistered nature of Wallace’s story. Barth’s presence in *Westward*, which inspired critics to consider whether the relationship between Wallace and Barth is “agonistic rather than antagonistic,” is only interesting to those readers who care about and are knowledgeable of not only Barth, but metafictional work in general. It encourages a paradigm in which a text is only for people who are interested in the whole field, and such a paradigm will squeeze metafiction into a narrow readership, incomprehensible by those who are simply looking for a good read. Since *Westward* has little to it outside of this literary conflict, an uninterested will be alienated. John Barth is not as culturally pervasive as *Goodfellas* or eighteenth-century writing. Even for a reader like Harris, who is aware of *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Westward* still does not provide much psychological mimesis as a story; it is more of a term paper on Barth in fictional form. This moment, as well as the presence of Grossman’s *Don Quixote* footnote, opens up inquiry as to how much of a reader’s knowledge ought to be assumed by a text, and

whether the average reader's ability to accurately position a text within the context of John Barth or chivalric romance is a burden on the text or a reader. Unfortunately, this line of inquiry is somewhat outside the purview of this paper.

Even as such, metafiction which is heavily indebted to one field will still stay limited within that one field. Its commentaries will be only as deep as the body of work on which it comments. Community is successful because it comments on so many genres of film and television, and it can expect readers to be familiar with that diversity. If culture and day-to-day life are inseparably intertwined, as they appear to be, then Community is able to capitalize the reader's place within that culture. Post-modern fiction, however, is a small part of that culture, and if that fiction continues to be self-reflexive only, then it will continue to stay isolated. Barth, in his 1967 essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," refers to this cloisteredness in describing the tendency of post-modern art of "[eliminating] not only the traditional audience... but also the most traditional notion of the artist: the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect." Barth seems to worry that works like *Westward*, which only focus on what the traditional reader may not understand, may fail to deliver on literature's goal of delivering meaningful narrative which is emotionally or psychologically relevant.

For some, this narrowness is not a crisis. *Westward* is a story written for someone like Harris, who is interested in John Barth and perfectly satisfied to read novellas about him. *Westward*, like other pieces of genre fiction, is not looking to appeal to every reader. The

reader's proclivities are a critical part of the storytelling process. Jorge Luis Borges' story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" focuses on the position of the reader and how that position affects the meaning of the text. In Borges' tale, a man named Pierre Menard seeks to write (not copy, but actually reproduce by his own ingenuity) the full text of Cervantes' novel. The fictional narrator-critic attests to the differences between the texts (which contain identical words), including the command of language. He calls Menard's style "archaic," and "[suffering] from a certain affectation," (not unlike Pynchon's in *Mason & Dixon*), whereas Cervantes "handles with ease the current Spanish of his time." The purpose of this comparison is that *Don Quixote* is read differently by modern readers and by Cervantes' contemporaries, who apply different cultural ideals and understandings of history to the texts. Perhaps a reader forty years from today, encountering both "Lost in the Funhouse" and *Westward* in her Norton Anthology of Twentieth-Century Metafiction or something similar will find the relationship between the two delightful, as Harris has.

Metafiction as Genre Fiction

Evidently, different readers will classify different texts differently. One which is overly self-reflexive to one reader may not be overly self-reflexive to another. Tastes between individual readers vary, and some will find metafiction interesting and others will not, just as some enjoy science-fiction and others do not. Metafiction, then, is not responsible for readers being in on the joke, but it does run the risk of alienating a large chunk of its potential readership. This is not a new problem for experimental fiction; Rubin writes

that "if Joyce's final work, *Finnegans Wake*, survives its century, that will in large part be because of the amusement the book affords English professors." Experimentation often requires a degree of indecipherability, and since metafiction seems to invite such various forms of experimentation, this impenetrability seems to be here to stay.

Each of the works explored here has consciously commented on form, and commenting on form requires conceding to readers that the work is fictional. Discussing narrative devices and genres of fiction will inevitably cause the reader to contemplate how the work they are currently reading plays into the paradigms being discussed. Someone reading *Westward* would likely analyze its commentary on metafiction with the story's own metafictional tendencies in mind, which invariably calls attention to the story's fictional nature. So even if the narrator never steps in and says "This work is fictional," as Barth does in "Life-Story," the story may still call attention to itself as fictional. In such a case, the critical juncture is how the reader positions himself within the text.

It is then close to futile to say that texts like *Westward* are too self-serving (or rather, metafictionally specific) to be broadly useful. Individual readers like Harris might find significant joy in them, but other readers may pan the work because of their unfamiliarity with Barth, or because they feel that the novel's focus on Barth makes it unenjoyable. Based on what has been discussed above, we can classify metafiction as fiction which makes commentary on forms of fiction (or itself) in order to not only comment on forms of fiction, but also to impact the work and expand its meaning. Whether a particular reader will find the refer-

ences at hand or the allusions to the field of fiction interesting is that one reader's prerogative. If we allow this rule to govern the criticism of metafiction, metafiction will be focused on psychological mimesis while still keeping true to form.

The reader's placement returns us to the consideration of genre fiction. Many readers enjoy genre fiction because they are the sort of person who thinks wizards, pirates, or aliens are interesting. The audience is often limited to that group. If we have succeeded in liberating metafiction from realism and branding it as literary genre fiction, then we can conclude that metafiction is designed for people who think that metafiction is interesting, like Harris. The new issue at hand is that genre fiction is often held in low esteem by academics, likely making them apprehensive to include metafiction within its ranks, even though it is genre fiction written for them and people like them. If we begin to judge metafiction based on the preferences of those who enjoy it, rather than the constraints of realism, then perhaps the rest of genre fiction can begin to be appreciated more seriously. In today's academic circles, non-realist fiction is still struggling to be appreciated; only in the past twenty or thirty years have scholars begun to pay attention to the literary quality of the likes of *Dune*. Ignoring the kind of fiction which is most popular among readers (as not many people are clamoring to the bookstore to get their hands on the new Barth novel) is one of the most serious flaws in literary studies today, and classifying metafiction as genre fiction may continue to push academics to give all non-realist genres their due consideration.

Footnotes

¹Broadly defined as fiction which draws attention to its own fictional nature. This is achieved by a narrator addressing the audience directly and discussing to the text itself (often referred to as "breaking the fourth wall"), or a work make consistent reference to the field of literature. Perhaps the most commonly-read example of metafiction is Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

²The genre in which writers attempt to demonstrate real life in text. Novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* qualify as realism, which is often (problematically) seen as the default genre, as we will discuss further on.

³This is a catch-all term for non-realist fiction. Readers of specific genres expect certain story elements; a reader of fantasy expects wizards and elves, but not aliens. If we classify metafiction as genre fiction, we must begin to construct the kinds of readerly expectations on which genre fiction thrives.

⁴First coined by William Gass in his essay "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction," published in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf) 1970, 25.

⁵Mark Blackwell, "Extraordinary Narrators: Metafiction and It-Narratives," in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, ed. Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 230.

⁶Like Linda Hutcheon, who calls *Don Quixote* "not only the first 'realistic' novel but also the first self-reflective one" in *Narcissistic Narratives: The Metafictional Paradox*

(Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 4.

⁷Blackwell 231

⁸Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Ecco, 2003), 67.

⁹*Ibid*, 65.

¹⁰The kind of work which values verisimilitude above all else

¹¹Hutcheon, 37.

¹²John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 87.

¹³Hutcheon, 5.

¹⁴The act of rendering reality into text.

¹⁵Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13.

¹⁶Louis D. Rubin, *The Teller in the Tale* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1967), 11.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 18.

¹⁸Tom is included in the novel's beginning, but does not go on Huck and Jim's adventure. While readers know about Tom Sawyer because *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was released before *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the relationship between Huck and Jim is the focal point of the novel Rubin is discussing, and he argues that inserting Tom is disruptive of the chemistry of the relationship that Huck and Jim develop.

¹⁹Ibid, 19.

²⁰Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 279

²¹Rubin 7.

²²Corn, Peggy Ward, "'Combinational Delight': The Uses of the Story within a Story in 'Pale Fire,'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 17, no. 1 (1987): 83-90. Accessed December 16, 2014. JSTOR.

²³John Barth, "Life-Story" in *Lost in the Funhouse*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1968), 119.

²⁴My point here is not the analysis itself; rather that "Life-Story"'s self-awareness clearly presents thematic content which can be analyzed, and so it seems that the metafictional elements are worthwhile.

²⁵Ibid; 128.

²⁶Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, (New York: Simon and Schuster: 2004), 75

²⁷Besides, we already have the term "genre fiction" which takes care of it nicely.

²⁸Gass 24

²⁹John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," in *The Friday Book*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), 205-206, emphasis original.

³⁰In his 1973 essay "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough," George Graff summarizes the work of critics Leslie Fielder, Susan Sontag, George Steiner, Richard Poirier, and Ihab Hassan as seeing "the death

of our traditional Western concept of art and literature a concept which defined 'high culture' as our most valuable repository of moral and spiritual wisdom" in the advent and proliferation of postmodern literature. Published in *Triquarterly* 26: 383-417.

³¹ Gass 25

³²David Foster Wallace, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, in *Girl with Curious Hair*, (W.W. Norton, New York, 1989), 234, emphasis original.

³³Ibid, 264.

³⁴David Foster Wallace, interview by Larry McCaffery. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (Summer 1993), 127-150. Reproduced online by the Dalkey Archive Press, accessed December 12, 2014, http://web.archive.org/web/20071017042632/http://www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview_wallace.html.

³⁵Staes, Toon, "'Only Artists Can Transfigure,' Kafka's Artists And The Possibility Of Redemption In The Novellas Of David Foster Wallace," *Orbis Litterarum*. 469

³⁶Wallace, Interview.

³⁷Scholes et al. draw a distinction between teller and tale and specify that "by definition, narrative art requires a story and a story-teller" (240). Since this distinction exists, we can conclude that the "storytelling act" is what unifies the story and story-teller. Our interest relies in the relationship between these actors, as well as the reader.

³⁸Barth, "Life-Story," 118

³⁹PBS Digital Studios, "Is Community A Postmodern Masterpiece?" Idea Channel. YouTube. April 3, 2013.

⁴⁰The episode in question is "Pillows and Blankets," first aired April 5, 2012. When the series' third season was released on DVD, a documentary about the making of the episode (so a documentary about a fake documentary) was included as a bonus feature.

⁴¹PBS

⁴²Community, "Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples," October 21, 2010.

⁴³The episode in question is "Contemporary American Poultry," first aired April 22, 2010, discussed in Sepinwall, Alan, "For 'Community,' How Much Meta Is Too Much?" *HitFix*: May 5, 2010. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.hitfix.com/blogs/whats-alan-watching/posts/for-community-how-much-meta-is-too-much>.

⁴⁴This awareness of the spirit of the work in broad perspective applies to literature as well. Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997) is written in eighteenth-century English grammar and spelling (e.g. "twould take a harder Case than Mason not to struggle with Tears of Sentiment" (202)), which creates an immersive environment which Paul Skenazy referred to in his April 27, 1997 *San Francisco Chronicle* review as "rich with suggestion and idea, stuffed with the minutiae of another time and world." Even if a reader has never read any eighteenth-century prose, she will

recognize the grammar's role in immersing her further into the world.

⁴⁵Singletary, Ann, "Allusion," *Glossary of Literary Terms*. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www2.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/general/glossary.htm>.

⁴⁶In a footnote in which he juxtaposes his own position on the nature of the relationship between Westward and Barth's work with Connie Luther's and D.T. Max's, Charles B. Harris states that Ambrose is "clearly based on Barth." "The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55, no. 2 (2014), 122.

⁴⁷Harris 103

⁴⁸This notion is reinforced by Harris, who is clearly interested in Barth's work, calling Westward "underrated" (122). While Westward is weak, as Toon points out, Harris can find it somewhat compelling because of his familiarity with the literary conversation at hand.

⁴⁹The curious reader, however, may want to consider, within the context of reader-response criticism, whether a misreading, or an uninformed reading of a text, can still be a valid reading. One might decide to start with Bloom, who writes in *A Map of Misreading*, that all readings are actually misreadings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3.

⁵⁰John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *The Friday Book* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), 65, emphasis original.

⁵¹Borges 43

⁵²Rubin 145

References

Barth, John. "Life-Story" in *Lost in the Funhouse*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1968.

Barth, John "The Literature of Replenishment" in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984.

Barth, John "The Literature of Exhaustion" in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984.

Blackwell, Mark. "Extraordinary Narrators: Metafiction and It-Narratives." In *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, edited by Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes, 230-245. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Bloom, Harold. *A Map of Misreading*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1961, 159.

Borges, Luis Jorge. "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." In *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. New York: Modern Library, 1983.

Cervantes, Miguel De. *Don Quixote*. Translated by Edith Grossman. New York: Ecco, 2003.

Community. "Modern Warfare." May 6, 2010.

Community. "Messianic Myths and Ancient Peoples." October 21, 2010.

Corn, Peggy Ward. "'Combinational Delight': The Uses of the Story within a Story in 'Pale Fire'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 17, no. 1 (1987): 83-90. Accessed December 16, 2014. JSTOR.

Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

Gass, William. "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction." In *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 3-26. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.

Harris, Charles B. "The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55, no. 2 (2014): 103-26.

Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narratives: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

PBS Digital Studios, "Is Community A Postmodern Masterpiece?" *Idea Channel*. YouTube. April 3, 2013.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Mason & Dixon*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

Rubin, Louis D. *The Teller in the Tale*. Seattle: University of Washington, 1967. 11.

Scholes, Robert, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Sepinwall, Alan. "For 'Community,' How Much Meta Is Too Much?" HitFix. May 5, 2010. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.hitfix.com/blogs/whats-alan-watching/posts/for-community-how-much-meta-is-too-much>

Singletary, Ann, "Allusion," Glossary of Literary Terms. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www2.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/general/glossary.htm>.

Staes, Toon. "'Only Artists Can Transfigure'. Kafka's Artists And The Possibility Of Redemption In The Novellas Of David Foster Wallace." *Orbis Litterarum*. 459-480

Wallace, David Foster. *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, in *Girl with Curious Hair*. W.W. Norton, New York, 1989.