

## Lissi Athanasiou Krikelis - Speaking and Remaining Silent about the World Beyond

Due to their self-reflexive propensity, postmodern fiction and metafiction, in particular, have been relentlessly criticized of solipsism and of an indifference to relate to the extralinguistic world. While the novel is deemed to pause in its trajectory to examine itself, to examine its conventions and rejections of them, to address its future uncertainties and its at-present struggles, it has become a misprision that all it can bestow to its readers is an understanding of itself. The basic argument unravels as follows: language is devoid of reality, therefore, literature does not contain reality either; now more than ever, fiction recognizes that it is a self-contained artifact which can only engage in a representation of itself, having no interest in proffering its readers anything but an understanding of itself. The novel in the postmodern period has faced the crisis of representation, when linguists and theorists alike unmask the insufficiency of language and its inability to represent reality. Under the scrutiny of language, metafiction emerges; a fiction which is more than ever aware of the inadequacies of its medium, and which is conscious of its subsequent inability to represent the world; hence the conclusions that all its pronouncements can only be about itself. This view delimits the possibilities of (meta)fiction, whose nature is apparently more intricate: while recognizing the distance between itself and reality, while shifting the emphasis from reality to itself, literature can never only be about itself; even if it attempts to repudiate the world, the world will forever be part of what makes literature possible.

Many metafictional novels have plot lines whose interpretations move beyond the text's representation, reaching the realm of the reader's ontology. Metafictional novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Salvador Plascencia's *People of Paper*, apart from thematizing their own work as a text, are also underpinned by more traditional motifs of human interrelations, subjugation, the metaphysical quest for the impossible and improbable. Other metafictional novels link the novel's quest for identity with subthemes of identity about the self, where the searching of identity becomes twofold: through metafictional devices, the novel speculates its own identity, while concomitantly the protagonist undergoes a similar process. Oftentimes, the text or the protagonist, or even both, arrive closer to self-recognition through finding a double. This is the case in *New York Trilogy* by Paul Auster, in *Yiantes [Wishbone Memories]* by Amanda Michalopoulos and in *Indian Nocturne* by Antonio Tabucchi. If metafiction does not make extravagant claims about reality, it can certainly say much about the reader's relation to fictional texts, as John Barth's *Chimera*, or Mark Danielwaskie's *House of Leaves* so eloquently do. Metafiction plays with the idea that even though the stories novels narrate are fictitious, the characters are made of paper and the narrators are not authors, books are part of the reader's reality and their effect can be transferred from something that is not real to something that is, because it can be felt by the reader. These examples surely illustrate metafiction's innovation in the literary tradition, for it is both mimetic and anti-mimetic, both introverted and extroverted, both within itself and outside of it. To argue that fiction with metafiction is so self-revolving that everything outside of it fades is a reductive statement, which does disservice to both fiction and metafiction. At the very least, metafiction, in the words of Larry McCaffery "implies... we can find the key to unlocking the complexities of self-definition," and thus allows fiction to see beyond itself (6).

It is true that although metafiction has come to define postmodern literature, its genesis is not located in postmodernism. In fact, metafictional aspects have been scattered throughout the literary tradition leading to the consensus that metafiction is an integral part of the novel since its birth with its most notable examples being Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>[1]</sup> Even before the novel came to be, the theater harbored metafiction in such plays as *The Spanish Tragedy*, Aristophanes's *The Clouds*, and in various Shakespearean plays. Nonetheless, metafiction has been attached to postmodernism because the coinage of the term happened then, and due to the proliferation of such novels during this literary period. Metafictional novels thrive in postmodernism; they find their most fertile ground, they become its most conspicuous feature.

In its most general and recent definition, metafiction "designates the quality of disclosing the fictionality of a narrative" (Neumann and Nunning 204). It is fiction aware of its own fictional composition; fiction that talks

about itself. Self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-reflection, self-containment, self-absorption, self-indulgence, self-disclosure, self-commenting, self-love, self-obsession connote metafiction, and have been repetitively used in relation with the term throughout the forty years since its inception.[2] The prefix "meta" denotes that this fiction refers to none other than back to itself, imitating the composition of similar compounds, such as the linguistic usage of metalanguage, which means the (technical) language employed to describe (human) language(s); or Frederic Jameson's metacommentary, which is the language of interpretation about interpretation and criticism; or Leonel Abel's metatheater, etc. Metaization, as explained by Werner Wolf delivers a secondary, hierarchically superior level of self-reflection from the first cognitive or communicative level, be it thought or language (2). Within this purview, metafiction remains attached to language and interpretation. But if we were to understand the term based on the etymological morpheme it carries, the Greek prefix "meta" does not mean "about something" but "beyond something." [3] Aristotle's metaphysics does not refer to physics about physics, but what lies *beyond* the terrain of physics. Metafiction is undoubtedly fiction about fiction, but it is also fiction beyond fiction and hence the ways we have looked at metafictional novels hitherto may need some modification in order to incorporate its transcendental aspect; for, what lies beyond the limits of a self-contained text with its own universe and reality is none other than the reader's reality. [4]

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The profound emphasis on the introversion of literature portrays metafiction as the moment of self-knowledge for the novel. Roland Barthes notes that up to this point "[literature] spoke but did not speak itself" ("Literature and Metalanguage" 97). Patricia Waugh argues that with metafiction the novel recognizes the need to theorize about itself: "Only in this way might the genre establish an identity and validity within a culture apparently hostile to its printed, linear narrative and conventional assumptions about 'plot,' 'character,' 'authority' and 'representation'. The traditional fictional quest has thus

been transformed into a quest for fictionality" (10). This inward turn is often interpreted as literature's aspiration to shake off the burden of carrying a representation of the outside world and thus reach its "defeat and death, or victory and freedom" (Barth, "Literature of Exhaustion" 171). Since most critics agree that the novel with metafiction is *not* headed towards its decline, the underlying assumption is that it is seeking victory, freedom and reality's emancipation. [5]

In a poetic metaphor regarding literature and reality, Roland Barthes compares their convoluted relation to that of Orpheus and Eurydice:

One could say that literature is Orpheus returning from the underworld; as long as literature walks ahead, aware that it is leading someone, the reality behind it which it is gradually leading out of the unnamed - that reality breathes, walks, lives, heads toward the light of a meaning; but once literature turns around to look at what it loves, all that is left is a named meaning, which is a dead meaning. ("Literature and Signification" 268)

Barthes's elaborate analogy can better be illuminated if one has the realist novel and the metafictional novel in mind. In the realist novel, according to Barthes's proposition, literature leads the way to reality; it is as if literature is assured of reality's possession; it is as if reality belongs to literature indisputably. However, the very moment literature turns to gaze at its obedient follower - which is what metafiction attempts by turning back at itself, at what it is made of - reality dissipates. It is at this crucial moment, according to Barthes, that fiction realizes it cannot and does not contain reality; only by being oblivious of itself, can literature cherish the belief that reality follows it at all times.

This Barthean axiom, along with Derrida's "there is nothing outside of the text," or there is no transcendental signified (158, 20), and de Man's "fiction [...] asserts itself as pure nothingness" (19), have been adopted as the normative views in postmodern theory, [6] generating positive reactions which promulgate the position that literature may give its readers nothing but a picture of literature.

If illusionistic fiction, in conjuring up a world, can teach us things about the real world, about people, their emotions and manners, anti-illusionistic fiction [7] too teaches us things: that the only life that counts is our life and not, say Tom Jones; that Tom Jones or, for that matter, Lord Jim can teach us pretty little to help us come to grips with our existence; that a novel, like any other work of the imagination, is not reality; that it is no more than a man-made object, an artifact, whose rules, normally kept secret by a writer, we have a chance to learn through anti-illusionistic fiction; and because we know these rules, we can liberate ourselves, even if the process may be painful, from the deceptive influence of the illusionistic novel. We obtain thereby an idea of art and its function totally different from the notion we held when equating art with reality; we come to appreciate art as a

fabrication, capable of inducing in us, first and foremost, an aesthetic experience, and not as one designed primarily to help us, by a distribution of associated wisdom, get along in life. (Imhof 25)

The classical didactic quality of literature as presented by Horace and Longinus is transformed by Rudiger Imhof to another form of didacticism: that of teaching about the impossibility of teaching about life, and that of teaching about literature. Imhof decrees that with metafiction life experiences are set aside; not even vicariously can readers learn from a protagonist's predicaments and (mis)adventures, because literature can only discuss and project itself. Not many readers would plunge into a novel in order to discover possible ways to solve their problems, nor would they consider literature a "user's manual" (to evoke George Perec's ironic title) for learning how to lead their lives. Nonetheless, even in the most absurd and incongruous fiction the reader projects an image, equally absurd perhaps and highly subjective, of himself and of the world. Every aspect that Imhof names as being exposed in metafictional novels (that it is a work of the imagination, an artifact, a man-made object) lie dormant in the back of the reader's mind ever since she read the word "novel" on the cover of the book, any book, metafictional or otherwise. One would agree with Imhof when he asserts that "metafiction all but assists us in our escapist desires" (25). Instead of letting the reader forget the phrase "a novel" on the cover page, it thwarts her attempts to immerse herself inside the fiction of another world by mainly keeping her on the surface, always alert, always flashing before her in numerous ways: this is a novel. Punctuating its fictiveness and constantly interpolating the reader's illusion of disbelief is, however, inconclusive evidence that metafiction does not contain inside itself a form of the empirical reality with which the reader can identify or view as familiar. As Marcel Cornis-Pope writes: "To interpret [metafictional texts] as narrowly self-referential is to miss the ideological impact that a self-critical focus on articulation can have;" it questions "our perceptual and discursive systems, reinventing the rules by which reality is projected" (262, 259).

Reality will always be part of the reader's (and author's) schemata - that is, the universal knowledge they carry to the act of reading (and writing) - never allowing fiction to break free. Barthes and Imhof never deny that the reader brings to the text something of his own; but while they argue that the reader reconstructs and recreates the text anew through the act of reading and mentally interpreting, the reality that she accesses is not the same as the one fabricated by the author, neither is it the same as the reader's empirical reality. It is a reality always fabricated and re-fabricated with every reading. It is a reality always fabricated and re-fabricated with every reading. But, *however many and however dissimilar these realities are, they are grounded upon empirical reality*. For Linda Hutcheon, the text initially depends upon the reader's knowledge of reality, but the more the reader flips the pages, the deeper she descends to a world which is little by little separating itself from the outside and arrives at a point of self-sustainment (*Narcissistic Narrative* 92). The irony, however, is that the self-sustaining world of literature is unremittingly fed by empirical reality. It is a vicious circle one cannot escape. "[The] novel is, in fact, related to life experiences in a very real way *for the reader*: that is, the novel is a continuation of that ordering, decoding, naming, fiction-making *process* that is part of the reader's normal coming-to-terms with experience in the real world" ("Metafictional Implications" 5-6). If the reader, who is acknowledged as the *co-author* of the text, is constantly and incessantly clashing the two worlds in her attempt to construct the text, is it not implicit that her empirical world, or at the very least, a form of the empirical world would inescapably find its way into the fiction? Due to the fact that reality's existence in literature is so rudimentary (unless, for example, we know what a lighthouse is, we will never be able to imagine its penetrating light into Mrs. Ramsey's dining room, even though we cannot touch or feel the lighthouse in the text), it almost allows one to perceive their relationship as imperceptible.

Literature draws from the elements of our empirical reality - a reality which is undoubtedly chaotic, amorphous and incomprehensible - in order to conjure its own version of another reality, fully dependent upon the first one, no matter how different. Even the most remotely realistic novels encompass a form of reality - that of 'non reality' - because in order for the reader to apprehend the context of the fictive reality, she needs to know, however imperfectly, the reality we all share. It would not be improbable to argue that the prison-house of language is in fact the prison-house of the most basic and fundamental forms of reality. On the one hand, the most imaginative and improbable unrealities ineluctably imbibe the empirical world and, on the other hand, "existence is just as much an image in the mind's eye as in the beholder's" (Whiteside 179).

Possible world theory has tried to account for the reality contained in fiction by creating another intermediary universe, where every literary referent points to an equivalent secondary, fictive referent. This secondary referent subordinates the primary, "real" referent thereby not only delineating their interdependence, but also preventing the literary sign from turning back at itself, nullifying the claim "literature can only be about itself" - "The name *Hamlet* is neither empty nor self-referential; it refers to an individual of a fictional world" (Dolezel 16). In an illuminating article regarding the fictive referent of the metafictional novel, Linda Hutcheon identifies four levels of reference, only one of which points inside the text. The outer mimetic level of reference is the linkage to

the world outside the novel in the sense of the "inevitable and presupposed knowledge" necessary to the creation of the fictional world ("Metafictional Implications" 9). It is this level which is mainly neglected and allows scholars like Imhof to reach the conclusion that metafiction can only denote its fictionality.

The chain of argumentation moves from the awry concept of ontology to the equally awry concept of epistemology: can the reader extract *something* from fiction? If, according to Imhof, when reading metafiction, one learns the tricks of the trade, what is the reason for reading such novels? In order to become metafictional novelists? Imhof recognizes the imperative need to address the issue:

The profit one gains from knowing how fiction works is like the profit one gains from discovering how, say, a beloved toy operates. One's concept of art and literature is corrected and enlarged. But it is not only fiction's workings, whose secrets are revealed; what is also, and probably more importantly, at stake is the response to fiction. Metafiction teaches us that the aim of realist fiction for instance is wrongheaded and that our old reaction is inadequate... Since [metafictionists] are aware of the inability of man to tell the truth about the world, because any such statement to this effect is bound to be subjective, they do not consider it worth their efforts to try and do so in the first place. Instead they tell purely fictional stories, and, in the attempt to withhold nothing and tell it all, they even show *how* they go about their business. (26)

Does Imhof imply that metafiction is headed the right way, in opposition to realist fiction which is wrong? Is metafiction deemed superior because it escapes the "lie" of all other types of fiction by acknowledging it may only be self-referential?

Although in the evolutionary road of literature certain periods demonstrate a reaction to previous ones, its overall

progression is not one of comparison-of-parts, but one of

developmental transformation. In the excerpt, Imhof overtly

maintains that in metafiction one can only discover the whereabouts of fiction and should seek nothing further;

however, would this impertinent remark not point to a loss? As Brian Stonehill affirms, the reader loses

something essential, which probably drew her towards fiction in the first place, when novelists sacrifice too much

of the traditional narrative values: "The most engaging and rewarding self-conscious fictions [...] manage to

combine a story that we care about with reminders that it *is* a story; and the best of these will be those in which

the appeal of the art and the reminders of artifice are both developed to their fullest possible extent" (16). With

metafiction, literature self-reflexively problematizes its relation with both language and the world and recognizes

that, no matter how hard it tries, it will always carry a form of language and an objectified, processed and perhaps

constructed form of the empirical world; moreover, under no circumstances does it neglect to give something

more than a panoramic self-portrait.

Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, and Michalopoulou's *Wishbone Memories* will serve as audible

examples that manipulate the interplay between what reality offers to fiction and how self-reflexive, introverted

fiction bestows something to the world that engendered it. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is the story of the

reader, a fictive reader none other than the character *you*, who bought a malfunctioning novel responsible for

plummeting him into a consequential series of numerous adventurous readings. Calvino's witty and playful

narration has his character-reader jump from novel to novel in his effort to continue reading the first story he

began entitled "If on a Winter Night's a Traveler" by Italo Calvino. Once the protagonist recognizes that, due to a

publication error, the context of the book he thought he was reading was not from Calvino's book, he sets off on a

journey: on a literary level, he is doomed to read only the beginnings of ten novels of various genres, most of

which end at the moment of climax, while on a fictive-empirical level he is determined to discover who is

responsible for the mix up of the books. From his explorations he gains a girlfriend and co-reader called Ludmilla,

some knowledge about the act of reading and critiquing novels, and the experience of travelling to a mythic

country where he was held prisoner.

The final chapter allows for the entire novel to be interpreted as a Homeric metaphor pertaining to the act of

reading fiction. The novel's final lines are:

Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings.

Ludmilla closes her book, turns off her light, puts her head back against the pillow, and says, "Turn off your light,

too. Aren't you tired of reading?"

And you say, "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino." (260)

The "you" in this passage cannot be entirely conflated with the reader "you" who held the wrong book in his hands.

This "you" is finishing the *right* novel. In terms of framing, Calvino presents at least three levels of fictiveness: a)

the fiction of the various interrupted novels; b) the fiction of the reader who reads the discontinued beginnings;

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and c) another fictive reader, closer to the real one, who reads Calvino's *If on a Winter Night a Traveler*. We may call this reader *implied reader*, since he seems to fulfill the same function as the theoretical concept imagined by Iser Wolfgang.

Identifying the three levels is almost axiomatic, but where is their defining line situated? Ludmilla belongs to the context of the fictive reader (not the implied) because he meets her when he returns the book at the bookstore and is informed that his copy is defective, as is hers. Ludmilla and the fictive reader are never exposed to the story Calvino wrote, but to Silas Flannery's fiction and to the prank orchestrated by Ermes Manara. An ensuing paradox dangles before us, the fourth-level readers: how can Ludmilla participate in two realities? What was Calvino's intention in giving her this metaleptic quality, [8] in raising her from the second degree of fictiveness to the third? Ludmilla is nothing but a metaphor in Calvino's novel. She substantiates the "something," the "je ne sais quoi" that any real reader unplants from the fiction she is engaged in and imports into her reality - the *implied-reader-protagonist* brought her with him from his reading of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Every reader gains something from the act of novelistic reading, thereby smashing the boundaries between fiction and reality, since the very medium of the book she positions in her hands, despite its ungraspability, shares part of itself with the world outside.

In Michalopoulou's *Wishbone Memories*, the influential attribute of fiction is manifested in the trajectory of the protagonist, Athena, who, like the Calvinian character, is also a reader, contributing to the fiction she reads (and translates), while simultaneously obtaining some kind of self-knowledge in reverse. A translator of foreign texts for a Greek newspaper, Athena is asked to translate her brother's, Elias, novella from English to Greek. Unable to find a publisher, mainly because of the brevity of his work, Athena decides to expand his collection of short stories by inserting her own narration, a form of diary about her personal life, which coincides with the timeline of her translating the book. The result is two stories unraveling simultaneously; two distinct voices, one coming from fiction and the other coming from the fiction of the fiction.

Elias deploys magic realism to tell the stories of his family which are narrated by food; a meatball or a soup, as objective observers, document instances of his family's life. But Elias both recreates and invents his family. Initially, Athena reports every diversification he makes accusing him of falsehood: "The entire content of the *Parsley Salad* is nothing but a lie. There is no Alexandra in our family. Uncle Foti is still alive. Aunt Isabel only makes French dishes with béchamel" (89). [9] But gradually she cherishes Elias' putative lies more than the real facts she knows. Not only does she come to admit that his alterations are meaningful in ways she was previously blindfolded, but she also experiences herself slowly sipping into his novel, losing her gravity and being absorbed into the pages she translates. She consciously changes her relationship with every member of her family, seeing each one of them from a new perspective, helping herself to understand them and learn more about herself through them. She quits her job as a translator at a newspaper, having discovered her true love for food, a trade that always ran in the family but, to her, unmasked itself for the first time in her brother's fiction. Her life changes in the true fashion Elias predicts at the end of his novella: "Books are the most dangerous things in the world. They can put in your head a thousand foolish ideas. And then, everyone blames alcohol. No. Twenty bottles of brandy are harmless compared to satanic books" (414). In this way, *Wishbone Memories* reconciles the two opposing worlds, fiction and reality, by requiring that the reader view life as a novel and the novel as life, for, their relation is bidirectional and their influence mutual.

Towards the end of the novel, when Athena becomes a great cook and develops a masterful recipe that lures, she asks the reader to imagine its taste: "Close your eyes. Great. Now chew a wonderful bite from this sweet and sour tentacle. It is soft and warm, despite the fact it remained for days at room temperature..." (363). When she gives an alternative solution for having her readers taste her masterpiece, Athena says: "Another way would be to make a few pounds of this octopus, to cut it in slices and offer it along with the novel. Just imagine what would happen if the novel was distributed along with a tentacle of *Octopus ax-ax-xra* [the name of the recipe] instead of a bookmark!" (363). Into this playful atmosphere, full of humor that attempts to defy the novel's own artificiality, *Wishbone Memories* invites the reader to celebrate this artificiality of fiction, by stretching a hand and delivering a piece of itself to the outside, the true, real world. If Athena became a new Athena after reading her brother's fiction, how will the book *Wishbone Memories* affect its audience? Like Ludmilla, Athena's recipe is the "je ne sais quoi" each reader acquires even after she closes the book shut.

It suffices to say that pronouncements which regard (meta)fiction as uninterested in or devoid of the real world, consequently viewing (meta)fiction as proffering nothing to its readers, are puerile efforts to minimize fiction's significance. It would be exhaustive for literature to escape reality, like a turtle wanting to flee its shell, and concomitantly it would be unprecedented if the reader finished a book without gaining something, like a voyager who travels abroad but returns none the wiser. Unlike other types of fiction, metafiction is cognizant that the reality it contains is not identical to that of the real world - replicas are after all only mere replicas - but it never

ceases to know that it does not simply *take* from the world beyond; it also *gives* to the world beyond. Metafiction does not assert itself as nothingness: while it turns within, searching for its own hitherto undisclosed identity, it simultaneously unravels outwardly, bowing before the reader as the real artifact she holds in her hands.

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[1] See Alter, Currie, Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*), and Waugh on metafiction's central role in the tradition of the novel. See also Nünning for a thought-provoking discussion on metafiction and metanarrative; the second term he reserves for specific and isolated instances, a characteristic that can be identified in almost every novel.

[2] The term was coined by William H. Gass in 1970.

[3] On an interpretation of metafiction in similar terms, see James A. Pearse and Richard Pearce.

[4] The metafictional literary device of mise en abyme demonstrates another way the *beyond* is featured in metafiction: the moving from one layer of fictional framing to another. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, *Wishbone Memories* and *House of Leaves* the mise en abyme unpeels itself like an onion-structure, with the last fictional layer projecting itself to the real world, placing the novel's existence inside the world of the reader.

[5] The representation of reality in literature has for long been an issue of extended and heated discussion, pertaining to the equivocal notion of mimesis. For example, Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality*

in *Western Literature* interprets literature in terms of its mimetic effect, that is the way in which the "reality" of every "historical" period is manifested in every "literary" period. Metafiction, however, explores the problematic nature of mimesis from within fiction.

[6] The problem of reality's representation in literature, a problem traditionally found under mimesis, in the twentieth century became first and foremost a problem of language. By exposing the arbitrariness of the sign and by showing that language is based upon differences, Saussurean linguistics directed structural and post-structural theorists towards the demystification of language: from the steadfast belief that language is transparent, that language effaces itself in order to let the world appear visible to the imagination, to the acceptance that language is an insufficient human construct which intervenes in our understanding of the real. Instead of facilitating our efforts to comprehend the world, to possess knowledge, it constructs its own version of reality and knowledge. Garry Potter and Raymond Tallis among others have convincingly shown, however, that Saussurean linguistics does not reach such dramatic conclusions regarding the relation between language and reality, signification and referent. Saussure never speaks about the arbitrariness of the sign and its referent, but about the arbitrary relation between signified and signifier, (the linguistic form with its mental image), while at the same time he never concludes that meaning is dependent upon differences: he underlines that the *value* of a sign is based upon its position and relation in the system of signification, not upon its *meaning*.

[7] He uses "anti-illusionistic fiction" as an alternative to metafiction.

[8] According to Gerard Genette, metalepsis is the term that allows for objects or characters to wiggle in-between narrative levels by means of disturbing their demarcated domains (235).

[9] All translations from the original Greek are my own.

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