Philosophy and the Future of Fiction

William Gass

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol1/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
I would like to talk about philosophy and the development of the novel and to say something about the direction in which I think the novel will go as it becomes increasingly self-conscious and an object of interest to philosophers. These are extraordinary changes for the novel. When I was in graduate school, philosophers only read Dostoevski, and indeed only read *The Brothers Karamazov*, and indeed only read about Ivan. They did this to furnish very trivial and commonplace philosophical examples. To give you some impression of what I think might be happening in the novel, I want to begin with a quick and very highlighted history of the development of the relationship between philosophy and the novel and then to consider aspects of the novel which I believe are most affected by philosophical interest and treatment.

It is now quite common to expect of novelists both here and abroad a great interest in philosophy, or even professional philosophical training. In this country two generations ago, one did indeed laugh at the combination of novelist and philosopher. Novelists traditionally read; and among the books they may read are the works of philosophers. Sometimes, indeed, ideas fall like the sky upon the novelists themselves. We know, for instance, that Locke was put next to the Bible by Sterne; that G.E. Moore was important to Virginia Woolf and company; that Thomas Mann took in Schopenhauer like a homeless stray; that Proust read Bergson, perhaps like a watch; that Gide was stirred by Nietzsche. But while in each case the influence may have been substantial and profound, it is not clear how philosophy taken in this way, somewhat like pills to calm the nerves, affected the overall development of the disease.

In the eighteenth century the novel was an art fundamentally in search of a soul, a nature, a form. The early novels borrowed their forms from already existing prose works; they are literally
made-up copies of these works or of standard verbal habits and uses of the time. We can divide these forms into the printed and the oral. Diaries and journals were being printed, as were histories and autobiographies, correspondence, philosophy, journalism, as well as oral events like sermons, lectures, and debates. Why would any writer need to make up such material? One reason was that the traditional forms left out all the interesting parts. The letters, for example, would probably have concerned the corn bill, or something of this sort, and would not have contained all the love notes to the chambermaid. Made-up works could therefore include more interesting and agreeable elements for pleasure and uplift.

So increasingly the content of the novels was drawn from ordinary affairs in ordinary life, whereas the forms were drawn from extraordinary affairs in extraordinary life, or from theoretical systems. Indeed, the made-up words were designed to falsify the realities of history by means of the reality of everyday and the romance that came to be housewifely wish.

The main audience for the novel as it developed was the middle class, and a special part of the middle class—the female audience. This audience wanted detail. They were nosy. They wanted gossip and secrets and indeed were basically voyeuristic. They wanted to share other lives, but safely. The novel became progressively an instrument of voyeuristic, and the characters did what you looked in to see—which was, of course, the activities of daily life, because that is what the audience understood and believed to be real. The novel was also a dense fog, incredibly full of facts. By stressing trivia and, unlike classical tragedy, concentrating on unimportant people, it dignified dull and uninteresting lives. A significant consequence was that the novel raised the question of whether or not the lives of unimportant people were actually unimportant; whether so-called everyday things were really trivial. The development of the form had a major effect, I think, on conceptions of historical importance.

The role of philosophy in this early stage is felt with the particular genre of the novel that was popular at its first inception; that is, the education novel—or, as I prefer to call it, the seduction novel. The basic form of the seduction novel is the education of a young woman. One of the greatest of these is Philosophy in the Boudoir by that master of the education novel, de Sade.

First of all, you would think that de Sade was getting preparatory materials for Barth’s great seduction novels—particularly The Sot-Weed Factor, which is a parody of these earlier works. De Sade in the Philosophy in the Boudoir, however, makes an important technical advance. He intermixes pornographic scenes, which are part of the education of the young lady in question, with philosophical harangues generally supposed to be connected with the pornographic events that have just taken place. De Sade discovered a philosophic technique, a new kind of proof, which has not been sufficiently
followed up by philosophers since: that human nature had within it certain impulses, attitudes, and feelings that were generally being denied. How to prove this to the reader? Let us suppose he is the proper male reader: if the writer can produce in him an erection by describing certain events, the writer has shown something about the reader’s character. Then, as the writer gradually increases the outrage and presumably the conventional horror of the events, the reader can keep a kind of metering of how he is progressing when he begins to shrivel up. Now this is, I think, unique in philosophy. It is a kind of show and tell, in which the proof is offered immediately in the argument. If you look at Pamela, a novel about a tease, what you get is a series of “almost” seductions. It is a lurid kind of book, with seduction themes running through continuously and pornography suggested on every page.

The modern novel, then, began as a voyeuristic, class-inflated, gossip-mongering entertainment, with made-up real forms and facts. It was dense, time bound, stylistically plain, and basically realistic. Realism, actually, is a very peculiar thing. But I think if you are trying to get realism, you do not try to render life. (That’s almost impossible anyway.) You imitate prose forms that are usually regarded as factual descriptions. Realism in literature is by and large an imitation of prose forms designed to render the facts of the world. You imitate texts that are presumably about life.

Now as the novel began to be a kind of second life, more real for some readers than life itself, novelists began forming their worlds as they felt the real world might be. Wittgenstein once said that the structure of the true proposition was in a sense a mirror of the structure of the fact. Now whether or not that is true—and I think it is likely not true—it is a literal statement of the way things are in fiction. For there isn’t any real fact corresponding to the facts asserted in the fictional world. The structure of the proposition which sets forth the fact is therefore the only structure the fact can have; so that when the fiction writer is describing the fact, he is inadvertently, and necessarily, setting forth the structure of the world. Thus an examination of the structural principles of a novel would enable you to tell what kind of philosophical system the work is developing.

The novelist then began to play with structural effects. The best writers were comparatively self-conscious from the beginning. Certainly Sterne and Fielding were self-conscious about what was going on; Sterne wrote sentences just to narrow our field of inquiry to something that provided an easy example. That is to say, you cannot give the whole of Tom Jones and read it out as an example, nor can you do all of Sentimental Journey. The sentence “A cow broke in tomorrow morning to my Uncle Toby’s fortifications” is just one such remarkable example. In writing this, Sterne constructed a sentence that even Gertrude Stein would have trouble measuring up to.
The kind of fact that this structures is extraordinary. One can provide not only structures of fact, like that sentence, but structures of thought. This one, I'm afraid, occurs in my work, and I apologize:

Ruth did not realize that, whereas aphids are beloved by ants, love itself is rarely loved by anybody, only occasionally liked a lot. Consequently, its opposite is sought repeatedly as aphids dot the rose, the way the rapist now sought lustless Ruth.

This can become terribly confusing. The illustration proves that form, not content, becomes the big problem as artists become increasingly self-conscious and the novel moves in the direction of art itself.

Form rather than content becomes a further difficulty when no specific philosopher or philosophical system but the philosophy of fiction itself became incorporated and digested in the work. The novelist began to realize that his forms were borrowed. Since these forms were developed for other purposes—a work of history, for example—they had no inherent aesthetic quality. Such quality was accidental. Let us suppose I tried to write a story in the form of a tide table. (Only nowadays would someone try.) This form was not got together for the purpose of a novel or for aesthetic interest. It raises serious questions about so-called aesthetic forms. If you write an autobiography you begin, let's say, with birth and go on through the life, almost to the time of death. This traditional order of birth, going to school, first sexual stirrings, marriage, children, and so forth, consists of socially determined events. What is aesthetically inherent about that organization? What you have to do is overcome the structural character of, let's say, a bundle of letters—a really nasty form to try to deal with; almost as bad as the tide table.

Initially an attraction to a novelist, the letters had the sole advantage of providing all kinds of secrets. But how about the structure? Well, of course, a good novelist working in the epistolary form immediately starts to get interested in that problem. The end of the epistolary novel, which happened just the other day with the publication of John Barth's letters, takes that interest to its final condition. (Indeed, it is doubtful that anyone who ever reads Barth's book will ever write another letter. However, that's not going to endanger letter writing very much because hardly anyone is going to read that book.) Now what happened was that the made-up forms were immediately bent by the inclusion of other verbal forms that never really got written down. They had their own formulation, but it was in social convention—conversation, anecdote, gossip, and the like; trivial facts for the purposes of entertainment. There then developed a dialectical interaction between the original form, whether history or letters or travel, and the made-up travel or history or letters; the curious result of such an interaction was that the historian, reading an historical novel, decided to jazz up
his history book by adopting certain novelistic techniques. He developed a greedy eye for details he might have scornfully passed over before. He had been interested in universals; now he was interested in particulars. Suddenly Lincoln shucks his carpet slippers, paces the oval office, etc.; we are given all kinds of details before we get to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Many kinds of anecdotes creep into history.

The interaction continued: The novelist kept reading history and saw all these anecdotes and new devices, which he then borrowed and which the historian then read and borrowed back. The pendulum swing began to wear down, and it became increasingly harder to discern history from fiction, just as it has become increasingly difficult to discern philosophy from fiction.

Once under way, the search for form itself became the new cliché. Novelists did not recognize the problem, namely, that when they borrowed forms not constructed for their medium, they were taking on forms that did not necessarily have the properties they wanted. If they turned to the arts, they had ready-made aesthetic qualities available; but the novels might be all the worse for that because other aesthetic modes might indeed be antithetic to the fictional mode. If, for example, novelists turned to the poetic novel, they said ridiculous things like something I used to say: the techniques of fiction are simply the techniques of the poem. That really does not work out.

I don't mean to suggest that great works were not written under these difficulties; they were. In fact, the difficulties may have participated actively in the greatness of the work, like the high hurdles or pole vaulting: They are not natural, but they encourage one to amazing efforts. We have a number of great novels that overcome the inherent inaesthetic character of their form. Rilke's notebooks are a beautiful example of a great poetic novel. It is not at all clear, however, that the techniques and devices of poetry are ideally adaptable for a longer work.

There were also many attempts to mimic musical forms. The trouble here was that no one was quite sure what was happening. A great many critics say that Herman Brock's *Nightwood* is orchestrated, that it is a musically organized novel. Some people say this is crazy; the work is just done that way. The most recent fiction I know of that is organized on many musical conditions is Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Crooked*, one of the better works of fiction of our time. It has great sections built up on musical analogies.

The novel also attempted to incorporate the plastic arts. This was sometimes signaled by titles: *Picture of Dorian Gray, Portrait of a Lady, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and so on. The author often had a real feeling that what was going on was the actual creation of a portrait. Certainly Henry James's criticism is filled throughout with two sets of terms related to the plastic arts. One is from painting, for local rendering, particularly impression; he constantly talks about creating scenes and developing characters in terms of painting. The other set of
terms concerns the architecture of the total work and draws its energy largely from structure. In a sense James thinks of decorating rooms in a large structure.

Novelists also turned to drama in their search for form. The most successful example of this also goes to Henry James, in The Awkward Age. After failures of his own dramas on the stage, he turned to the creation of a novel that would be completely scenic and would have enormous advantage over the theater: no actors, no director, no stage setting. Everything would be done by the author himself, who would render the novel as if the reader were sitting in the audience watching the performance. The Awkward Age not only includes a totally scenic picture of the action, the stage directions, and the conversation customs but also contains the ideal critic, who will make sure you applaud in the right places and make the right judgments. The critic, of course, is the author himself. This is the triumph of James's technique. But again, it is a tour de force. James is not working with something natural to the medium of fiction.

The apparent breakthrough in this Pickwickian history was the interior-monologue stream of consciousness coupled with structures, depending on the point of view, as in Ulysses or As I Lay Dying or The Sound and the Fury. Almost immediately, this was seen to be another made-up copy—but a copy of our interior talk. Now this interior talk was first thought to be more fluid and without form, a stream of consciousness, and the novelist could mold it to his own designs. It was also first felt to be much more realistic and dense in detail and, from the author's point of view, more satisfactorily voyeuristic.

So the novel came to be composed of extraordinary streams of consciousness that nobody ever had. There were all kinds of traps involved with this, one being the fact that our stream of consciousness is already cast into various structures. I suggest that these structures are borrowed from the outside. The first clue that I had to this enormous truth came one day when my eldest son was about fourteen. I left the house to go to the university and I saw several dandelions growing in the yard. I rushed over to kill them. My son came out of the house, didn't see me among the bushes killing dandelions, and was getting ready to mount his bicycle. He was saying to himself, "Well, folks, there's great excitement here today. Richard Gass is coming out for the big race. He doesn't seem to be as badly injured as we had first feared. He is indeed getting into his machine and, yes, they are off . . . ." And Richard rode off on his bicycle. I then realized that Richard Gass's stream of consciousness was a radio sports broadcast, and he was casting his interior talk into that form. I have since discovered that the sports broadcast is a very seductive form, allowing one to be both object and announcer at the same time, to be Howard Cosell and the people on the field. (I suspect Howard Cosell already thinks this is the case.) At any rate, I then asked myself whether there was any predominant form that my own consciousness took. At first, I imagined it would be a lot of
different forms, but then it came clearly to me there was only one; my consciousness was a lecture. I woke up in the morning and I said, “Are there any questions?”

What this shows, I think, is that our own consciousness also borrows forms and modes, including such standard devices as a point of view. A broadcast establishes a point of view through which our stream of verbal consciousness is transmitted. To the degree that this transmission takes place, it does other things such as replace ordinary sensuous experience with talk.

The novel is still imitating structures established elsewhere. There have been lots of imitations of the movies (that hideous crime I will pass over) and imitations of earlier works, as if, by parodying or imitating earlier novels’ structure, you somehow could avoid the problem. And then there is the monster of present-day metafictions. These are works which contain, one way or the other, explanations and references to themselves. They are fictions about fiction; not in the obvious sense in which one of the characters is a writer, for that can be taken up in the traditional form. Rather metafictions are fictions in which the content of the work being structured is the structure of traditional fiction; the way, for example, Gertrude Stein’s sentence “It looks like a garden but he had hurt himself by accident” is really about the nature of the sentence. Now there are a great number of such works in modern-day literature: Mann’s Doctor Faustus; The Counterfeiters; much of Remembrance of Things Past; Finnegans Wake; Orlando; works by Stein, Beckett, or Borges; O’Brien’s At-Swim-Two-Birds; Nabokov’s Pale Fire (a distinguished example); Bob Coover’s Universal Baseball Association; Barth’s Lost in the Funhouse; and so on. None of these, however, has yet really solved the problem (which may be a pseudoproblem) of whether or not fiction can find a form characteristically and fundamentally its own. This desire, in fact, may be misplaced and perverse. But I think something is happening in the analysis of what fiction has already done in certain areas, which allows us now to perceive what fiction itself was all along. I would like to mention several of these areas. They are, I think, the factors that are directing the development of contemporary fiction.

Before I do this, however, I want to point to several elements that permit the continuation of this direction in fiction. One is the fact that literary people are largely members of the academy these days. Furthermore, the novel has become thoroughly international. Thinking of a work as an American novel is just like thinking of a Virginia novel or a North Dakota novel. No real writer wants to be thought of as an “American” novelist. Although novelists pay most attention to their own compatriots, they also study writers in different languages and cultures. Borges, Beckett, and other authors of this stature are as important to American writing as any writers in this country. South American fiction is presently regarded—I think quite properly—as the area of greatest excitement in the whole world.
of prose. The novel has achieved an international status and interest, and novelists are discovering a community of common problems and interests (very much like scientists have already done), which goes quite beyond the locale from which they come. In Infante’s *Three Trapped Tigers*, a great Cuban novel, the same kinds of issues and problems arise that any writer faces in his own work. This has been made possible in part by an increasing philosophical interest in the novel, not as a source of illustration for philosophical views or moral dilemmas but as an analysis of the implications of logical and syntactical structure in the works themselves. A huge apparatus in philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics has been created and is now being dumped on the novel, almost obliterating it at times but nevertheless providing it with a kind of interest it has seldom had before—an anatomist’s interest in the inner workings of its body.

Now to a discussion of those important areas directing the development of contemporary fiction: First we have what might be called the theory of layers, or orders, of fictional texts. Let us make a brief description of these layers. Each one has enormous complications and excitement. The writer can now see all sorts of possibilities laid out before him. First there is the order of imagined things and facts which exists quite independently of the verbal language in question. This is the area in which the author makes up the set of stories or characters and envisions them, before or apart from any linguistic formulation. Now some writers don’t work this way; but it’s perfectly possible to imagine stories and then hunt around for a medium which will render them adequately. A great deal has been done with this kind of order of imagined things and facts.

The second order, or layer, in our theory is the order of narration. This is not simply the ordering of imagined events but the actual narrating of things and qualities that exist simultaneously. Let us suppose you are describing someone’s face. Nose, eyes, ears, teeth, and so forth, exist all at once, but you can’t mention them that way. You must decide which properly you want to discuss first; where you want to put the adjective, and so on. This, then creates an entirely new object—one disclosed or put together in a certain sequence.

The next order (still in our theory of layers) is the inscriptionsal order, which has received some of the most intensive philosophical scrutiny recently, particularly in works like Goodman’s *The Languages of Art*. This is the actual order of the physical signs themselves as they appear on the page. This issue becomes more interesting to contemporary writers as greater interest is taken in the philosophical dimensions of it. The signs have various properties, which people have played with all along. Nowadays the fiction writer is interested not only in questions such as the rhythm of the words but also in things that were once totally neglected, for instance, where on the page his sentences fall. Poets hated to have a stanza cut off right in the middle, but the fiction writer had no control over that sort of thing; the page was something he paid no attention to. Now, increasingly, the whole book including the binding is a physical
part of the fiction. Such things are as interesting ultimately as the syntax of space on a canvas. And there are all kinds of problems here, including notation for new effects.

The next layer in our theory is the phenomenological order; that is, the order of the experience of the text. The experience of most novels is discontinuous, indeed recursive. This fact has had an enormous effect on modern poetry. The poet doesn’t write as if he expects you to read the poem all the way through, just as it is written on the page. He expects you to start with the first lines and to say, “What the hell does that mean?” and then read it again, and then read the first stanza maybe three or four times, and then get a little bored and peek on to the end. What the novelist must recognize, first of all, is that if you sit down to a long work like Remembrance of Things Past, or Finnegans Wake, or Ulysses, you do not remain there continuously and complete the work. You pick up the novel; you open it; you begin to read; the doorbell rings; you answer the door; you come back; you begin to read over the same page; you find great difficulties; you begin to skim and skip; your mind is occupied with other things.

The pioneer in this area was Gertrude Stein. What Stein did was to anticipate the phenomenology of the reading process and give it to you. Instead of your having to go back and reread the first line, she gave you the first line again, and then again. What she did not anticipate was that you would say, “What in the world?” and go back again. But this can be overcome by repeating the line six times; and by the sixth time you don’t care. Then you go on. Stein also played around with notations and made fun of the idea of a page. Poets and fiction writers suddenly realized it may be important that something happens on something called page 15; or that almost nothing happens; or that one word occurs on one page and lots of words on another; or that the type is large, or it’s in italics.

The next order of the text is the ontological one. It is utterly philosophical. One of the interesting things about Beckett is his complete understanding of the epistemological and ontological issues embedded in a single word. For him the sign-sense relationship is in a small way a symbol of the mind-body problem. Beckett is a great student of Descartes and of the occasionalists. For Beckett the basic elements of language (sign, sense, and reference) are beautifully analogous to the elements of Cartesian ontology (body, mind, world—with God played reluctantly by the author). Beckett considers their interaction not only in the language itself but also in actions like riding a bicycle, where the bicycle becomes body and the rider mind; or where the bicycle breaks down, the way the body does, and so on. Eventually the body of the narrator decays, almost disappears; you might find him floating in a jar in front of a restaurant. Beckett considers the entire ontological question in concrete terms; for instance, the room in which the mind is contained is often a cell, usually illuminated by a pitiless light.
The last order in the theory of layers, the conceptual order, interests me the most. This is the way in which the work is conceived to exist by the writer. This conceptual metaphor of the existence of the work is, or may be, quite different from what these other levels suggest. For example, we know that the inscriptive order, and indeed the phenomenological order, leads to a temporal or serial apprehension of the fictional text. But as in music, so in the novel; the artist conceives of the work existing simultaneously as a whole, and the performance may be a passage through it. I think, indeed, this is Joyce's idea in *Finnegans Wake* or *Ulysses*, where the novelist has a spatial and an architectural conception of the work, which he then leads you through as a guide leads you through a building. The idea is to hold the whole work in one's mind at once.

Now this spatial simultaneity can be conceived in quite different ways. Each leads to a different metaphorical conception of the nature of the text.¹ Let's take someone terribly safe, Katherine Ann Porter, in a beautiful story called "The Grave." Its title is a headstone. When you enter the story you leap, as the characters do, into an open grave discovered by wandering children. The symbolic objects which the children find are like the symbols the reader will discover in the text. Lots of things like this are now being done. I'm currently writing a novel called *The Tunnel*, and it is, indeed, a tunnel—a metaphorical one.

What makes all these layers interesting is that they don't have the same properties. They make different demands. The excitement lies not in working out these demands separately but in analyzing the tensions and resolutions of the various levels, as if the layers of a cake were at interesting odds.

There is a second area, beyond the theory of layers, that contributes to the development of contemporary fiction. It is the theory of transformation. This theory involves two conceptions. First, the notion of replacement of life with language: The fiction writer is working with language, not with life directly. His aim is to render the world so that the text will replace it philosophically in a very important way. Here is a simple example that happens regularly in history: Let us suppose there was a Peloponnesian War. It happened only once, like the murder of Julius Caesar, and afterwards the consequences flowed away in historical dimension, becoming less and less important and indeed depending, at a certain point, on a good press. What we needed was the transformation of the Peloponnesian War into Thucydides. Actually the war was a trivial little affair, and we don't know much about it. But in Thucydides we have a great many made-up speeches, beautiful fictions like Pericles' Oration, written so well that we do not care if they are accurate. Thucydides wrote these speeches as they ought to have been delivered, with the characters representing their own interests properly. Aristotle suggests that poetry is more philosophical than history because history is bogged down with

¹I'm guilty of this sort of play myself. I once conceived that the body of the text of one of my books, *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*, was the body of a woman. Thus when you opened the text and entered it, you were entering a woman. Northwestern University Press, the publisher, didn't know what was happening. I thought we should put a condom in as a bookmark so that you would be able to enter the book safely. Since the basic character was a woman of low morals, this might very well have been needed. Northwestern found out about the idea, and it got scrubbed.
just what the novel always was bogged down with—details, facts, accidents.

In Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* the text exists at a different ontological level from the war itself. We can see this immediately; the war becomes a sign, and it repeats itself over and over in terms of the text. People are still reading the book and are being affected by it. Books, then, rescue and transform places. One day, we might even hope, Dublin will disappear and we will only have Joyce.

Joyce once said that *Finnegans Wake* will substitute for your existence. Everybody seems to think that is a joke. I don’t think Joyce was joking. You take a lifetime to read his work; it’s better than life and much more interesting. One of the interesting things about Proust, for example, is that everything makes sense; everything is resonant with meaning. If I can eat an apple, so what? But if someone in Proust eats an apple, the whole world does what Hegel says it ought to do: it changes.

It is an old symbolist notion that language transformed in a new context becomes something quite different from ordinary language. This ontological transformation fascinates me. Let me give you an idea of what it is. The first problem for the poet is to transform the language of ordinary speech into poetry. Let us imagine that we have this man Pablo P., who does composite portraits for the police. These drawings are distributed and used to identify suspects; they are signs. Everybody says, Well, the picture isn’t the important thing; it’s the rapist we’re after. But suppose that, after a half a dozen successful shows, Pablo P.’s composites become so valuable that he establishes the composite school of painting and his works are hung on walls and bought by museums. Now scholars might still hunt the suspect. But they would hunt the suspect to use him to comment on the composite, not the other way around. This is an ontological transformation. The portrait started out as a composite and ends up as the fundamental thing, no longer a sign. Literature overtakes life; it runs over life and leaves it flat in the road. Over and over again we find this happening, as in a charming book written by an Indian raised in Anglo-India on the literature of England; when he went to England he saw it simply as the confirmation of the literature he had read.

Let’s take another kind of transformation, the kind that occurs in surveying. Initially we think we are measuring the earth. But even before Euclid got around to it, Plato perceived that geometry was not about space. (Plato was a very profound mathematician.) There is here an ontological transformation in the process of what starts as measurement of the earth to a purely formal nonreferential system.

Finally I will mention the microcosm-macrocosm argument as an area directing the development of contemporary fiction. The argument here is that the sentence is a microcosm of the structure of the work. There are many structures in any given sentence: the logical, grammatical, rhetorical, musical
structure, and so on. These may be enlarged to encompass the structure of the whole. Let us take a simple example and see how we can begin to develop a microcosm of a certain kind of novel. Let's suppose our core is “She's a whore.” We can put a transform in front of that: “Tis a pity she's a whore.” We can put new words in the interstices—that is, the spaces in the sentences where it is grammatically possible to insert words. This changes the nature of the whole sentence without changing the sentence at all, in another sense. We can go on and on; that's how you develop a Jamesian novel: “Jim felt quite certain that, although Susan only suspected it, Mary might come to be convinced that, once Paul had seen the way Helen lived, he would say in his own firm, pure voice, ‘Tis a pity she's a whore, but I'll marry her anyway.”

One of the basic devices in literature, which has been explored by John Barth probably more than anyone else, concerns the search for the self—the essence of literature. This may have been there all along in the very form of the sentences themselves. Within a sentence, there are other sentences: in short, the frame tale, the story within the story. Now in this device you usually have something like this: I'm telling my life story and how I went to Paris. It is snowing. I'm walking along the street, and I see this poor little match girl. I strike up a conversation and suggest that she would be a lot warmer in my apartment. She comes home with me, and as things are getting interesting she says, “Stop, let me tell you my story.” And then she tells me her story.

It goes on and on, like Scheherezade avoiding the ultimate. In the middle of her story she says, “And then I met my brother Frank, who had just come back from the Orient, and he told me...” And we have another story. Soon you are in the middle of a Faulkner novel. Faulkner gives us a sentence, a very simple sentence, about Sartoris doing such and such. Then he begins to tell the history of Sartoris and then the history of all kinds of people in the middle of that, and so forth.

Now this is the first part of the frame tale. The most beautiful examples in literature are Barth’s great short novel Lost in the Funhouse and his “Menelaiad.” The latter is constructed in a series of seven interior frame tales, with the idea that the conclusion of the seventh is the conclusion of the sixth, the fifth, the fourth, the third, and so on. This allows Barth to structure the work as he always structures everything—spatially. At certain points in story seven somebody will say something exciting like, “Hmm?” It will be given quotation marks, which indicate that “Hmm?” occurred at that very moment in all seven stories simultaneously. This is a kind of shaft that goes all the way through the structure from one level to another, functioning at each level of organization. In the past one could not imagine constructing fiction in this fashion. I think it is such an overwhelmingly rich area that the fiction writer is like someone facing a map of the unknown. Things are just getting going.
I'll mention just one last story by Barth, "The Perseid," the second section of *The Chimera*, which is constructed in a logarithmic spiral—a series of scenes arranged as if you would carve them on Hadrian's Pillar. What this means is that certain sections of the story are related to other sections—not simply serially, temporally, later in the text, but as connections in a sentence. For sentences are incredibly recursive. New information modifies everything that went before, so you go back, constantly looping.

Now imagine that we have the new kind of relationship which Barth has explored with such extraordinary genius. A certain scene appears carved on the pillar and then described as on the left of a previous scene; we have, in other words, a spatial modification in principle instead of a temporal modification. There is fundamentally nothing, except our usual reading habits, to prevent the notation of spatial modification; we do it in sentences all the time.

You will be happy to hear that I am leaving out any mention of the metaphorical relationships of the work to the world. This is in a sense a fundamental subject of the novel, but I have gone on far too long and I do beg your pardon. Thank you very much.