Five Strands of Fictionality

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Punday, Daniel.
Five Strands of Fictionality: The Institutional Construction of Contemporary American Fiction.
The Ohio State University Press, 2009.
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Unlike avant-garde writing in its classic formulation, postmodern fiction in America has developed not in resistance to literary institutions but in the midst of them. As critics have regularly noted, the writers who have come to be considered postmodernists began to write before the term existed and in isolation from each other.\textsuperscript{1} Stephen Koch remarked in \textit{TriQuarterly} in 1967 that “a major obstacle to our movement away from an infantile literary mentality has been the failure to establish a community of artists and readers worthy of the name.”\textsuperscript{2} If a community of postmodern writers

1. Robert Coover remarks about the isolation of postmodern writers at a symposium on contemporary fiction: “We felt that we were all alone. No one was reading us, nor was anyone writing anything remotely like the sort of writing we were doing until, in the little magazines, we began slowly to discover one another. Few of us knew one another at the time we began writing. There was no manifesto, no group, or no school” (”‘Nothing but Darkness and Talk?’: Writers’ Symposium on Traditional Values and Iconoclastic Fiction,” \textit{Critique} 31 [1990]: 233).

developed—and there have certainly been associations between certain writers, such as the founding of the Fiction Collective in the mid-1970s as an alternative to traditional publishing methods—those communities have come after these writers have already launched their careers, after they have taken up at least some role within literary institutions as novelists, editors, and university teachers.3

Remarkably, few critics have looked at this process of the institutional formation of postmodern fiction. The way that institutions have worked to shape our understanding of contemporary fiction is the subject of this book, and the changing fortunes of the term postmodernism is a good example of what attention to the issue of fictionality can do for us. Most critics today still continue to describe postmodernism in fiction through a collection of qualities that certain works have, looking for some underlying family resemblances that define this writing. Other critics have recognized the ways in which postmodernism as a literary concept has been constructed, but attribute the agency in this construction to critics themselves. That is, such studies assume that a large body of writing exists to which critical concepts are applied more or less fairly by critics with particular theoretical and institutional agendas. Brian McHale opens his 1992 book, Constructing Postmodernism, with just this sort of assertion: “No doubt there ‘is’ no such ‘thing’ as postmodernism. Or at least there is no such thing if what one has in mind is some kind of identifiable object ‘out there’ in the world, localizable, bounded by a definite outline, open to inspection, possessing attributes about which we can all agree.”4 Even a sophisticated discussion of postmodernism like McHale’s misses what seems to me most remarkable about postmodern fiction in America: the fact that these writers are not the passive victims of categorization but rather agents themselves within the complex dance of movement definition and canon formation.5

3. Ronald Sukenick’s cultural history of the New York Beat and post-Beat art scene, Down and In: Life in the Underground (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987), for example, treats the Beat movement as the last avant-garde movement and thus the last group of writers unified around a common aesthetic of resistance.


5. The few critics who have recognized the role of the institution in the formation of the concept of postmodernism have tended to use this relationship to dismiss the concept altogether. Mark McGurl concludes The Art Novel: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) by treating Barth’s Lost in the Funhouse as the very embodiment of the institutionalization of writing: “Reading this disillusioning passage, where fiction, as metafiction, has become rhetorically indistinguishable from literary criticism, one is tempted to say that the programmatic ‘technicality’ of the metafictional experiments of American professor-writers such as Barth and Barthelme and Coover should be read, in a sense, as instances of the bureaucratic-technical discourse produced in the postwar American university—even as they must also be seen as aestheticizations of that discourse” (179).
In this opening chapter I will show that fictionality is a lens through which to examine the role of particular literary institutions in the formation of the concept of postmodernism. In particular, I will discuss the issue of fictionality through its construction in John Barth's collection of literary essays, *The Friday Book*. I am interested in how the concept of the fictional is made to do a certain kind of work that transforms the institutions from which this writing emerges. Not only does Barth define one of the principal ways of thinking about contemporary fictionality, but the origins and afterlife of his definition provide a model for the institutional conflicts that will shape all the other definitions discussed in this book.

**Forgetting Fictionality**

When critics describe the aesthetic and cultural impetus for postmodernism in fiction, they usually point to qualities that have more in common with visual art or architecture than with earlier theories of fiction. Typical in this regard is Andreas Huyssen's influential *After the Great Divide* (1986). Huyssen finds his model of genuine postmodern avant-garde in Warhol and pop art. Huyssen wants to distinguish the academic institutionalization of postmodernism within the framework of poststructuralist theory from an earlier period of experimental writing and engagement in popular culture. For him, pop art at its best attempts the classic avant-garde goal of reestablishing links between art and everyday experience; it is "an ally in the struggle against traditional bourgeois culture, and . . . many people believed that Pop art fulfilled Marcuse's demand that art not be illusion but express reality and the joy in reality" (145–46). Huyssen's primary argumentative move is to find a certain strain of postmodernism that critiques literary and art institutions. Drawing on the tradition of Dada and surrealism, Huyssen's central inspiration for this avant-garde definition of postmodernism is Marcel Duchamp (see especially 146–48). To think of postmodernism in fiction within an avant-garde framework has meant, then, to define postmodernism in essentially medium-independent terms.

Such medium-independent definitions of postmodernism have become increasingly prominent. Linda Hutcheon's well-known overview of the concept, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), takes its orientation from architecture rather than from fiction itself, implying that there is an aesthetic

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framework that transcends particular media. Likewise, Fredric Jameson's influential *Postmodernism* is subtitled, after all, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” In such theories, postmodernism is first and foremost a reflection of its culture. Indeed, it is characteristic of most recent work on postmodernism in fiction to see such writing as primarily a response to or product of a particular cultural moment. To find writers who treat postmodernism as a style of writing—as a mode chosen to some extent freely by writers—we must go back to an earlier wave of criticism. Philip Stevick's *Alternative Pleasures* (1981), Alan Wilde's *Horizons of Assent* (1987), and Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) all treat postmodernism in fiction as essentially a style that is chosen, even if that style reflects cultural issues of the time. Hans Bertens reviews such works and notes, “This investment in the political [in recent work by critics like Jameson] goes a long way towards explaining why the relatively few serious attempts to come to terms with postmodernism along formalist lines have had so little impact after the very first stages of the debate.” While none of these books looks at the institutional formation of postmodernism in fiction, all of them remind us that recent work on postmodernism understands such writing first and foremost as a product of a “cultural logic.” When such cultural logics are used to define postmodernism, the specific qualities of fictionality fall into the background.

Writers of postmodern fiction who turn to other art forms like film and music encourage such medium-independent definitions of postmodernism. When Ronald Sukenick describes postmodernism in fiction, he draws on jazz innovation as a model: “It was the genius of Henry Miller . . . to employ for the first time since Rabelais (with—as far as I can recollect at the moment—the possible exception of Sterne) what might be called a free-form style of composition whose main technique is improvisation, and the great exemplar of which is jazz.” Many writers besides Sukenick have turned to

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11. Ronald Sukenick, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 6. In fairness I should note that in other places Sukenick emphasizes the verbal construction of the fictional text. Like Federman, who is discussed later, Sukenick appeals to other media while remaining concerned with issues of written narrative that keep him implicitly if not always explicitly connected to the issue of fictionality.
jazz as a way of thinking about the process of reading and composition. Ishmael Reed remarks in a 1973 interview, “It’s obvious that there’s something different when you come to the fiction of people like Clarence Major, Baraka, Wright, or Barthelme. Major was influenced by painters. Baraka was influenced by music, jazz and be-bop music. And Barthelme certainly uses a different art form in his work. . . . I think what will happen is that more writers will try to collaborate with other fields of art. Maybe this is what the new fiction is all about.”\[12\] Such an interest in other arts and how they might provide a way of organizing writing is quite common in contemporary fiction; Richard Kostelanetz is axiomatic in asserting that “an operational truth is that advanced artists are likely to find their most productive inspirations in sources outside their own medium.”\[13\] While a transmedia aesthetic might have developed in America, and while this aesthetic might be important in its own right as part of the contemporary artistic scene, this aesthetic does little to help us to understand what it means to create fiction instead of, say, poetry or film. Because fiction remains an institution in the broadest sense—a category that shapes everyday readers’ expectations while it also organizes the economics of publishing and criticism—radical experimentation with the page in the tradition of concrete poetry had little sustained effect on American writing through the 1980s and ’90s.\[14\]

What seems to me to be missing in these accounts of postmodernism is an explanation of what it means to be writing fiction today. As I noted in the introduction, New Historicist criticism has made clear that the “rise of the novel” is not the ascendancy of a certain aesthetic goal, but rather the gradual acceptance of principles by which fiction can be distinguished from both the real and the untruthful. As Catherine Gallagher argues, “Before the mid-eighteenth century . . . there was no consensus that all those genres shared a common trait; instead they were classified according to their implied purposes (moral fables, for example), their forms (e.g. epic), or their provenance (e.g. oriental tales). That discursive category we now call fiction was a ‘wild

14. In this regard, Kostelanetz is right to note that much of our thinking about postmodern writing has been hemmed in by narrow definitions of what it means to produce “experimental” or “innovative” writing. His calls for radically innovative fiction that draw more on the tradition of concrete poetry, however, have never gained a foothold either in popular reading or in academic criticism—in part, perhaps, because they so completely reject the institutional conditions in which fiction is produced and read. For his statement of these transmedia principles, see his introduction to Breakthrough Fictioneers; for his analysis of literary institutions, see The End of Intelligent Writing: Literary Politics in America (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1974).
space, unmapped and unarticulated.” Historicist critics like Gallagher and Lennard Davis have shown that the gradual acceptance of fiction depended upon sorting fiction from news, history, and science. Gallagher argues that critics who ask about the sudden interest in realism are making a mistake: “We should ask, not why the novel became the preferred form of fiction, but why fiction became a preferred form of narrative” (164). Critics of contemporary fiction make the same mistake when they look for aesthetic principles in postmodernist fiction that echo Warhol without first asking what contemporary fiction itself means.

It is through a definition of fictionality that the novel becomes an institution in the broadest sense. As Homer Brown has remarked, “If it is part of the business of an institution to attempt to control its own proper contexts, institution also, as Bourdieu has pointed out, institutes or legitimates a difference, an exclusion. Watt’s and McKeon’s institutions of the novel seem set to allow them to use a sort of generic cleansing to exclude it from any contamination by the curiously dreaded term ‘romance.’” And because this sorting function occurs today at the nexus of a number of different institutions—entertainment media, universities, publishing houses—it is a point at which the institutional pressures on contemporary writing are most powerful and productive. We can see just this struggle to differentiate fiction from everything else in Raymond Federman’s definition of “surfiction,” which I discussed in the introduction as a prime example of the use of fictionality to characterize postmodernism:

Just as the Surrealists called that level of man’s experience that functions in the subconscious SURREALITY, I call that level of man’s activity that reveals life as a fiction SURFICTION. Therefore, there is some truth in that cliché which says that “life is fiction,” but not because it happens in the streets, but because reality as such does not exist, or rather exists only in its fictionalized version. The experience of life gains meaning only in its recounted form, in its verbalized version, or, as Céline said, some years ago, in answer to those who claimed that his novels were merely autobiographical: “Life, also, is fiction . . . and a biography is something one invents afterwards.”

Although Federman frequently appeals to other media like visual art and music to define contemporary writing, in this passage we can see him struggling with the concept of fiction and trying to define it against all the changes in how we think of truth and history.

This is why we have failed to account adequately for the emergence of the concept of postmodernism in fiction. If we think of postmodernism in fiction as essentially a written version of a Warhol painting, then we flatten not only the aesthetic differences between fiction and painting, but—and more importantly, I think—the very distinct role that fictionality plays in the contemporary novel and the institutions in which the novel is entangled.

**Barth’s Occasional Writing**

While doing interviews leading up to the publication of his 1966 novel *Giles Goat-Boy*, John Barth repeatedly told the story of how his methods of writing were changed by a critic of his previous novel, the *Sot-Weed Factor* (1960). Here’s how Barth tells the story in a 1964 interview with the then *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*: Barth offers that “It’s quite curious how perceptive people—reviewers, critics, knowledgeable students—will point out things to you about your books and the connection between them and other works that you simply didn’t know about, and yet which, once you’ve seen them, you know that you’re not ever going to make anybody believe you didn’t have in mind when you wrote your book.” He goes on to explain the genesis of *Giles*:

Somebody told me that obviously I must have had in mind Lord Ragland’s twenty-five prerequisites for ritual heroes when I created the character of Ebenezer Cooke in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. I hadn’t read Raglan, so I bought *The Hero*, and Ebenezer scored on twenty-three of the twenty-five, which is higher than anybody else except Oedipus. . . . Well, subsequently I got excited over Ragland and Joseph Campbell, who may be a crank for all I know or care, and I really haven’t been able to get that business off my mind—the tradition of the wandering hero. The only way I could use it would be to make it comic, and there will be some of that in *Giles Goat-Boy*.19

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Barth’s comments on mythic patterns within his writing struggle to define the relationship between what an author creates and what he or she produces accidentally or inherits; in a general way, Barth is concerned here with the limits of his own fictionalizing. Although *Giles* is rarely considered Barth’s best novel—indeed, many consider it his worst—it does mark a transition in his career from the existentialist style of novels like *The End of the Road* (1958) to the more obviously postmodern works like *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), *Chimera* (1972), and *LETTERS* (1979).20 Indeed, if we look back on the publishing history of the short stories that Barth produces leading up to the collection of explicitly metafictional stories, *Lost in the Funhouse*, we notice that the only short stories published before *Giles* are the relatively modernist “Water-Message” and “Ambrose His Mark” in 1963.21 The stories that we most associate with Barth as a metafictionalist—works like the title story, “Menelaiad,” and “Title”—were all published after *Giles*. So when Barth speaks about this review changing his way of thinking about his writing, he certainly seems to be pointing to some genuine shift in his writing style.

What seems especially important in this incident is the way that it gets at the question frequently ignored by so many critics and theorists of postmodernism: what is the nature and purpose of the fictional in writing today? Barth’s account of his own self-discovery finds this answer precisely in institutional frameworks like critical reviews and interviews with academic journals. In other words, when Barth tries to talk about how he developed the particular way that he thinks about fictionality as a postmodern writer, he does so by appealing to the institutional conditions of his career. In this regard, it should be no surprise that the novel that stands at this transition point, *Giles Goat-Boy*, is a satire about an institution—in this case, the American university. The play between mythic fictionality and literary institutions is illustrated well by Barth’s collection of essays, *The Friday Book* (1984). As a collection constructed in the heyday of postmodernism as a concept, organizing material written much earlier (starting in 1960), Barth recontextualizes these earlier statements. We can see him working to reconstruct the rise of the term *postmodernism* in the introduction to a 1963 essay: “Reread-

20. While *Giles’s* elaborate allegory is usually considered to be less effective in raising metafictional concerns than the shorter works that followed, it seems quite clear that *Giles* is the transition point in his writing. Indeed, Campbell’s diagram of the hero’s cycle of events reoccurs thirteen years later in *LETTERS* ([1979; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1994], 647), and it seems clear that the kinds of structural patterns that he discovers in writing *Giles* are important to his subsequent writing.

21. Barth notes in his 1968 introduction to the collection that these two stories are “the earliest-written, [and] take the print medium for granted” (*Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* [1968; New York: Anchor, 1988], xi).
I would like to suggest that Barth develops an understanding of what it means to write fiction precisely by working through the institutional occasions of his writing and by searching for principles that appear within those occasions. Indeed, to read Barth’s 1984 introductions to individual essays is to be struck by the accidental quality of many of the occasions that gave rise to his essays. Asked to write a foreword to a Tobias Smollett’s novel, Barth observes, “I responded that I had in fact neither read anything at all of Smollett’s nor ever written a literary essay. They responded, in effect, Why not try both? I did” (30). Asked to contribute to Book Week, Barth notes, “As I had never tried my hand at a newspaper piece, I agreed to give it a go” (55). Such events are both accidental and deeply institutional—forms of academic and literary production that, while disconnected from Barth’s own immediate interests and studies, nonetheless occur as classic manifestations of the profession to which he belongs. Indeed, remarkable in The Friday Book is the fact that for all the accidental and occasional quality of many of these essays, none of the occasions that give rise to his writing are disconnected from literary activities. While Barth may veer off into politics in one speech, that speech itself is delivered as a commencement address at a university. While Barth’s interest in sailing may lead him to write the foreword to a book on the Chesapeake Bay, that foreword becomes a meditation on representing the landscape. Barth’s essays, then, are always occasioned by institutions of writing, educating, and publishing.

The story that Barth tells about these occasions is always the same one: the discovery of some principle at work within the seemingly accidental. Barth’s send-up of the convention on bookish “front matter” is typical in this regard; his title is The Friday Book, or, Book-Titles Should be Straightforward and Subtitles Avoided. Even in such an innocuous and straightforward parody of the occasion of book titling, Barth’s play with rules and principles for writing is evident, since he appeals to what should happen here. The trend continues as he moves into sections “The Title of This Book,” “The Subtitle of This Book,” and “Epigraphs,” each of which offers a list of rules by which novels should be introduced: “Comic works need not bear comic titles. . . . A catchy title may serve a catchy book. . . . But better a book more engaging than its title . . . than a title more engaging than its book” (vii). The search for principles amid the apparently accidental occasion continues as Barth

moves into more serious and traditionally literary essays. In “How to Make a Universe,” Barth consigns critics the role of “anatomist of literature,” but then goes on to search for principles himself: “The first law of embryology, for instance—that ontology recapitulates phylogeny—is as poetic a fancy as anything in literature. I wish I’d thought of it. And the second law of thermodynamics, the principle of universal entropy, informs the whole show with a splendid dying fall. My point is that this grand and complex entity after all is, as Huckleberry Finn finally is, beyond philosophy, theology, literary criticism, and the sometimes torturing attempts of its inhabitants to understand it and their place in it” (24). Barth’s opposition between the accidental quality of particular literary jobs—the task of the critic to be an anatomist and to seek to explain a book—is finally transcended by the poetic principle embodied in the work. And this play between the accidental occasion and the discovered principle is one that runs throughout Barth’s essays in this collection.

To transcend the occasion of writing is the very thing that defines the fictional for Barth. Indeed, as he is narrating the historical occasions surrounding his writing (the Vietnam War, campus protests) he remarks that his own writing at the time, the cluster of novellas Chimera, “has nothing to do with politics at all” (97). As this observation suggests, Barth is eager to put aside the entanglement of the everyday world in order to define fiction as something that transcends its occasions. Barth repeatedly asserts that fiction arises out of a particular occasion but leaves that occasion behind. His treatment of poetry in The Friday Book, conversely, is quite different. One of the few occasions where he talks about poetry is in the essay titled “A Poet to the Rescue,” which is introduced by stories of poets intervening into political events. Barth’s treatment of poetry here is primarily at the level of the word and phrase—his main focus is on the palindrome—and it is clear that his interest in poetry is quite different from his concern for fiction. Poetry is occasional while fiction transcends its occasions. The other essay in which Barth discusses poetry is equally occasional in its focus. In “The Prose and Poetry of It All, or Dippy Verses” Barth defends his novel Sabbatical from a reviewer who accuses him of inserting “dippy verses” into the work. He does this by relentlessly explaining the occasion from which these poems were created by the novel’s characters. There are no principles for the creation of poetry, no interest in patterns that emerge from them; instead, Barth is content to focus entirely on occasion—why they were created and what they say about their creators. Quite in contrast to fiction, poetry appears to Barth to be inherently occasional.

His denial of fiction’s involvement with its occasion accounts for the con-
troversy surrounding Barth's best-known essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion.” This essay seems to arise clearly and directly out of its cultural occasion, out of the sense that the novel had come to some sort of dead end because of changes in our sense of reality and the gradual diminution of literature's importance amid the explosion of entertainment options after the middle of the twentieth century. This indeed is precisely the way that most critics have understood Barth's essay and have accepted or rejected it as a statement about the “death of the novel.” In his 1984 introduction to the essay, however, Barth is eager to distance himself from this reading: the essay “has been frequently reprinted and as frequently misread as one more Death of the Novel or Swan-Song of Literature piece. It isn't” (64). Indeed, throughout this essay Barth discusses “some old questions raised by the new ‘intermedia’ arts” (64)—in other words, aesthetic issues that transcend the particular cultural moment when he is writing. When Barth finally gets around to Jorge Luis Borges's writing—which provides him with his central example of the literature of exhaustion—he praises it for precisely the ability to escape the “felt ultimacies” of contemporary culture. Writing of Borges's *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Barth asserts, “like all of Borges's work, it illustrates in other of its aspects my subject: how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work—paradoxically, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation” (71). Barth is frustrated by critics who misread his essay as another “death of the novel” argument precisely because to do so reinserts it firmly into the occasion of its composition.

This tension between occasion and transcendence in fiction is especially evident in the novel that Barth wrote while composing most of the essays contained in *The Friday Book*. At various points in his retrospective introductions to each of the pieces included in this collection, Barth is quite explicit in suggesting that the writing of the essays is deeply connected to the topic of *LETTERS*. As he describes one typical essay, “I wound up more or less reviewing My Fiction Thus Far: a kind of self-orientation prompted by the *LETTERS* project, which for better or worse—and against my personal shop rules—happened to involve a character from each of my previous six books” (130). The novel itself is an epistolary narrative organized around letters written by characters from Barth's earlier novels. In organizing all of these characters into a single narrative, Barth is not only connecting the stories and themes of his earlier books but also adopting an explicitly metafictional position, since an important part of his correspondence is exchanged between the author and characters who believe themselves to be real. Indeed, the subtitle of the novel is “An old time epistolary novel by seven fictitious drolls &
dreamers each of which imagines himself factual.” In returning to his earlier novels, Barth is obviously interested in finding underlying patterns within his writing. Doing so is explicitly an occasion for further invention. One of the key phrases that runs throughout the novel is the corporate slogan of Mack Enterprises: *Praeteritas futuras stercorant [sic]* (80), which Todd Andrews glosses as “the past *(a)* fertilizes the future, *(b)* turns into shit in the future, or *(c)* turns the future into shit” (81). This Latin phrase summarizes the ambiguous relationship between past and present that Barth pursues throughout the novel, trying to understand the way in which the future is enabled or foreclosed by its historical occasion. *LETTERS* itself repeatedly invokes the interrelation between fiction and history, focusing in particular on the fictive structures that occur at certain historical moments. Andrews, for example, remarks about events in his personal life, “All of which items, to be sure, have dramatic potential, and are almost fictional in their factual state. But I’m not an *homme de lettres*; my dealings are with the actual lives of actual people, and of my view of them is tragic, it’s not exploitative” (97). The implication is that fiction is exploitive—transcending the particular occasion of this event for the sake of some literary use. It is clear here that Barth uses the historical occasions of his novel in much the same way that he uses the occasions for which his *Friday Book* essays are written: as instances in which structures that transcend the accidental will appear. And for Barth, those structures are inherent to fiction.

In this, Barth sounds Aristotelian, distinguishing between historical accident and the poetic truths of fiction. And yet what is remarkable about Barth’s essays is that such a classical way of thinking about the fictional seems to depend so relentlessly on the occasional. In Barth’s idea that one transcends the occasions for writing to discover deeper principles at work, it is difficult not to hear a kind of anxious struggle to exclude the transient from the genuinely literary. A parallel for Barth’s struggle with and use

23. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle remarks, “The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse—you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars” (“Poetics,” trans. I. Bywater, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984], 1451a39–1451b8; p. 2323).

24. Sukenick remarks about this search for truth amid social constructions in Barth’s writing. He sees several possible responses to contemporary culture: “You become, then, a connoisseur of fiction, the expert in measuring and collecting and judging between and making distinctions among fictions. The other direction was to propose to yourself that fiction could tell some truth beyond your personal vision and beyond literature itself” (Tom LeClair and Larry
of the occasions of his writing is Derrida’s treatment of the occasions of speech in his early discussion of Edmund Husserl, *Speech and Phenomena*. When Derrida describes the opposition between expression of an idea and the particular means of indication that are chosen to communicate this in Husserl’s theory of language, he offers up an image of language that struggles to overcome its occasion. Despite the repeated attempts to define expression as prior to and independent of indication, “Every expression would thus be caught up, despite itself, in an indicative process.”  

We see the same curious dependence on occasion (indication) that Derrida attributes to expression in Barth’s description of his writing. Barth never leaves the accidental behind to create the transcendental truth; rather, he constantly intertwines the accidental and the transcendental. The events of *LETTERS* are not only a repetition of earlier patterns but rather a repetition that reveals a structure within its particular occasion. Barth explains the distinction between reenactment and “mere repetition” in *The Friday Book*: “The spiral reenacts the circle, but opens out—if you’re going in the right direction. The nautilus’s latest chamber echoes its predecessors, but does not merely repeat them, and it is where the animal lives; he carries his history on his back, but as a matter of natural-historical fact, that history is his Personal Flotation Device, not a dead weight carrying him under” (170). While “mere repetition” feels accidental or occasional, the “natural historical fact” of mythical reenactment is more meaningful. But repetition is exactly what we are left with if we forget the occasion of writing. This is a point that Derrida makes when he notes that expression is defined precisely by its possibility of being repeated exactly: ideality, “which is but another name for permanence of the same and the possibility of its repetition, does not exist in the world, and it does not come from another world; it depends entirely on the possibility of acts of repetition” (52). When Barth rejects simple repetition, he is rejecting ideal patterns that are completely independent of their occasion. In other words, repetition is not enough for such facts to become mythical; they must, instead, become part and parcel of their occasion. The image of the spiral is not just a structure that reappears constantly but rather a structure that changes and develops by virtue of its occasion—feeding off its earlier appearances. Myth, then, captures precisely the ambiguity evident in Barth’s definition of fictionality as curiously transcending and dependent on its occasions.

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Myth in Mid-Century Literary Culture

After Barth’s “discovery” of the concept in 1966, myth became an important theme within contemporary fiction. Although Robert Coover’s interest in myth and ritual as a way of giving shape to social wholes is probably the best parallel to Barth’s use, such appeals to myth are common throughout postmodern writing. Thomas Pynchon’s use of mythic patterns is especially prominent in Gravity’s Rainbow, where critics have noted the importance of classical myths like the Orpheus story as well as obscure myths like the Rocketman subtheme. Donald Barthelme appeals to mythic figures in his early Snow White (1967) as well as in his late The King (1990). Although his interest in myth is shared by many writers, Barth’s particular way of defining myth as struggling against occasion works as much to exclude writers from the nascent canon of postmodernism as it does to define his own aesthetic practice. Barth’s decision to frame postmodernism as a matter of transcending the occasional is especially remarkable because he associates fiction concerned with contemporary reality—writing, in other words, concerned with its occasion—with female writers. In his “Literature of Replenishment” essay, Barth dismisses in a single sentence “many of our contemporary American women writers of fiction, whose main concern, for better or worse, remains the eloquent issuance of what the critic Richard Locke has called ‘secular news reports’” (195–96). It is clear from Barth’s essay that he believes that such writing is, indeed, much more for the worse than for the better. But to characterize contemporary writing by women in this way, Barth needs to ignore the rewriting of myth and fairy tale that became the hallmark of feminist criticism, fiction, and poetry in the late 1970s. Despite the multitude of texts written by women that seek to challenge received narrative plots and redeploy myths, Barth continues

28. A number of feminist critics have noted how myth and fairy tales have provided female authors of the 1980s and ’90s with a way to respond to received cultural beliefs; as Susan Sellers asserts, “Deconstruction or the reading of myth to expose its manipulations and suppressions is not enough; we must counter with our own mythopoeia” (Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction [New York: Palgrave, 2001], 32).
29. This is perhaps most obvious in early feminist criticism that analyzes and adopts literary myths, like Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman
to distinguish (male) postmodernism of myth from the occasional writing of women.\textsuperscript{30}

Barth’s definition of fiction as myth represents the most hegemonic way of thinking about contemporary writing—both in the sense that it is the most explicitly connected to established literary institutions, and in the sense that it draws most heavily on already-established ways of thinking about fiction. One of the reasons that Barth excludes from his definition of postmodern fiction a wide range of fiction produced by women is because he develops his theory out of the very (masculine) literary institutions and traditions current at the time of his writing. The shift in style that Barth describes in his writing is not a simple rejection of prior ways of thinking about fiction but rather a particular way of inhabiting conventional definitions of literature that nonetheless produces changes in the framework for thinking about fictional stories. When Barth describes myth in his writing, he defines the term in a way that had distinct currency in late 1950s American literary and popular culture.\textsuperscript{31} One of the central thematic elements of \textit{The End of the Road} (1958) is the “mythotherapy” recommended for Jacob Horner, a way of thinking about himself as the hero of his own life, and making up a grand overall narrative that makes individual choices and events meaningful.\textsuperscript{32} The pages of mainstream intellectual journals like the \textit{Partisan Review}, \textit{The Hudson Review}, and \textit{The Kenyon Review} are littered with such existentialist psychoanalysis, which is perhaps best embodied by popular intellectual studies like Viktor Frankl’s \textit{Man’s Search for Meaning} (trans. 1959) or Jean-Paul Sartre’s work. A good example of this sort of popular intellectual framework is Eleanor Hakim’s 1966 essay in \textit{Salmagundi}, “Jean-Paul Sartre: The Dialectics of Myth.” Reading through Sartre’s recently published autobiography, \textit{The Words}, provides Hakim with an occasion to explore autobiography as an analogy for “the

\textsuperscript{30} This is true even in essays written after this 1984 collection. In his later collection of essays, \textit{Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction}, 1984–94 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), Barth notes the emergence of a kind of realistic minimalism during the 1990s practiced by both male and female authors (72), but defines this style of writing as an alternative to postmodernism rather than using it as an opportunity to reconsider his definition of postmodernism itself.

\textsuperscript{31} In doing so, Barth passes on the opportunity to draw on other traditions that define the term differently. In \textit{Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), for example, Estella Lauter defines contemporary feminist mythmaking based on the tradition of H. D’s mythical poetry.

archetypal dynamics of mythology: the unraveling of the symbol clusters and constellations of those unconscious fantasies that constitute the original project of one's specific inner mythology.\textsuperscript{33} Although published in the mid-1960s, all of the literary/cultural predispositions of the late 1950s are evident in this project: the starting point of existentialist subjectivity, the use of myth to describe psychoanalytic dependencies, and the broad gesture beyond the individual struggles with meaning to larger cultural archetypes.

Myth stands as a transitional concept between such established ways of thinking about literary fiction and the innovations that we will come to associate with postmodernism. A good example of the pressure from innovation exerted through the concept of myth in the 1950s is Leslie Fiedler's well-known \textit{Love and Death in the American Novel} (1960), a work of psychoanalytic cultural criticism of literature that embodies the dispositions of the period.\textsuperscript{34} Fiedler's anti–New Critical thematic reading of the American novel posits an essentially “boyish” quality to American writing, implying in the process its involvement in Freudian psychosexual dynamics: “The child's world is not only asexual, it is terrible: a world of fear and loneliness, a haunted world; and the American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror. To ‘light out for the territory’ or seek refuge in the forest seems easy and tempting from the vantage point of a chafing and restrictive home; but civilization once disavowed and Christianity disowned, the bulwark of woman left behind, the wanderer feels himself without protection, more motherless child than free man.”\textsuperscript{35} Fiedler's implicit understanding of a kind of existentialism is evident here, but more striking is the way that he uses a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity to create thematic links between a wide range of American novels. As Fiedler suggests, the appeal of myth is its promise to step outside of a strictly textual interpretation of the work to consider the larger social and cultural “occasion” of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{36} Indeed,


\textsuperscript{34} Although this, Fiedler's best-known work, was published in 1960, his interest in myth is already well established in an essay like the 1952 “Archetype and Signature: The Relationship of Poet and Poem,” in \textit{The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler}, vol. 1 (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 529–48.


\textsuperscript{36} This is why, while Northrop Frye's influential archetypal theory of literature, \textit{Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957) might come to mind first as an example of mid-century mythical criticism, Fiedler's work is a better example of the trends within 1950s literary culture—he is so much more a transitional figure between academic and popular culture. Indeed, myth seems to mark precisely the possibility of moving between popular and academic culture.
his preface to *Love and Death*, Fiedler remarks that “the ‘text’ is merely one of the contexts of a piece of literature, its lexical or verbal one, no more or less important than the sociological, psychological, historical, anthropological, or generic” (viii).

It is clear here that a psychoanalytically inflected understanding of myth allows Fiedler to emphasize broader social patterns. Nonetheless, as the existential subjectivity that runs throughout his book suggests, he remains committed to a kind of individualism. This paradoxical attempt to marry myth and individualism is evident in other prominent psychoanalytical/mythical theories of the 1950s. Probably the most influential such theory is Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death* (1959). Like Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Brown’s book seeks to link individual psychosexual dynamics with broad cultural patterns. 37 Indeed, the subtitle of Brown’s book is “The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History.” The way in which this link is made is explicit at the outset of the book: “In the new Freudian perspective,” he remarks on the first page, “the essence of society is repression of the individual, and the essence of the individual is the repression of himself.” 38 The balance that Brown, Marcuse, and Fiedler all evidently try to strike is one between the individualism of subjectivity implied by existentialism and the broader social patterns postulated by myth. Mythical patterns evolve in these mid-century theories out of the individual’s contact with the social whole—out of what we can call the occasion of society. All of these stories take a step beyond pure focus on the individual—or the individual text for that matter—and instead try to reestablish a relationship between individual and society. 39

In trying to step outside of the work to its occasion, these mythic theories are also working to change the occasion for the study and discussion of fiction. Ihab Hassan is quite explicit in arguing that the problem of literary change emerges around postmodernism. At the beginning of his well-known

39. In this regard, it is worth noting that myth plays a very different role in other, less traditional literary journals at the time. In a countercultural journal like the *Evergreen Review*, myth is more often discussed as an alternative to existentialist thinking. Indeed, in 1961 it published a translation of Octavio Paz’s “The Dialectic of Solitude,” which uses myth as one component of the dialectic that he discusses. For him, “The dual significance of solitude—a break with one world and an attempt to create another—can be seen in our conception of heroes, saints and redeemers. Myth, biography, history and poetry describe a period of withdrawal and solitude—almost always during early youth—preceding a return to the world and to action” (*Evergreen Review* 5, no. 20 [September/October 1961]: 107–8).
essay, “POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography” (1971), Hassan raises the question of how to imagine change and overcome what he describes as the two urges evident in thinking about literary change: to deny change or constantly to reinvent the past.⁴⁰ An essay published a decade later, “Ideas of Cultural Change,” asserts bluntly that “[w]e speak much of change and have no theory of it.”⁴¹ In trying to imagine literary change, appeals to myth play an important role. Indeed, if we compare Hassan’s Radical Innocence (1961) and The Dismemberment of Orpheus (1971) we can see the same transformation of myth that we can observe in Barth’s essays. Radical Innocence treats contemporary American fiction primarily in the terms that we can recognize in Barth’s early, existentialist period. Focusing on writers like J. D. Salinger and Saul Bellow, Hassan describes the contemporary novel through the representation of “the modern self in recoil.” Myth appears here (Hassan cites Campbell’s Hero with a Thousand Faces, for example) to introduce the issue of the individual bereft of religious values and social meaning.⁴² Although already engaged with myth as an existentialist theme, Radical Innocence is essentially a conservative work of literary history, since it depends on the themes and literary topoi that are well established at the time.⁴³

The Dismemberment of Orpheus, conversely, marks a change in the structure of literary study and definition. In this 1982 “postface” to the work, Hassan explicitly defines the radical challenge to the institutions for studying fiction that he offers: “in the question of postmodernism, there is a will and counter-will to intellectual power, an imperial desire of the mind, but this will and desire are themselves caught in a historical moment of supervention, if not exactly obsolescence. The reception or denial of postmodernism thus

⁴³. In this regard I would contrast Hassan’s work to other early theories of postmodernism that search for continuities between contemporary and earlier American literature by trying to define common concerns and topoi. Tony Tanner, for example, introduces City of Words: American Fiction 1950–70 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) by using Richard Poirier’s A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) to establish a “distinctive American tradition” of creating an environment of freedom apart from the everyday world. Although this type of analysis can be insightful, the urge to place postmodernism within earlier traditions seems to me fundamentally different from the appeal of myth.
remains continent on the psychopolitics of academic life.” Hassan is right to attach this observation not to *Radical Innocence* but to *Dismemberment*, because it is in the latter that he works to change how contemporary writing is studied. He does this by stepping outside of the conventions of literary history that are so clear in *Radical Innocence*, and instead adopting an explicitly mythical style through which he will discuss postmodernism: “The signing body of Orpheus holds, then, a contradiction—between the dumb unity of nature and the multiple voice of consciousness—that the song itself longs to overcome” (6). Along with this mythical framework, Hassan turns to a much wider range of sources that emphasize the larger cultural occasion for contemporary writing. Where in *Radical Innocence* he frames the discussion by reference to psychoanalytic existentialism as the condition for the hero of the contemporary novel, in *Dismemberment*, Hassan draws on a much wider range of contemporary theorists like Barthes and Maurice Blanchot as well as Norman Brown. What seems to me important is that for Hassan the mythical style that he adopts in his writing of the early 1970s challenges the study of contemporary fiction. For him, myth transforms the academic and publishing institutions that surround this writing.

Hassan’s attempt to change the study of fiction is, like Barth’s definition of postmodernism, limited by the traditional roots of his own understanding of myth. Just as I have suggested that Barth’s definition of myth as transcending occasion works to exclude a whole range of contemporary writing by women, so too Hassan’s interest in cultural occasion is limited by his implicit sense of what sorts of materials and theories are relevant to understanding postmodernism. Thus, psychoanalysis and continental philosophy figure largely in his understanding of postmodern culture, but gender, race, or the economics of contemporary writing fail to register as significant issues even within his


45. One way that we can think about this reorientation is how it shifts the locus of discussion of contemporary literature from mainstream intellectual journals like *Partisan Review* to new and more explicitly academic journals like *TriQuarterly*, which was launched in 1964 by explicitly embracing academic culture: “One thing is clear—its [the university’s] scope has been immeasurably increased—not only does everyone end up at college, but as institutions, universities have been made responsible for everything from driver training to the preservation of grand opera… Still, leisure does strange things to people. And the university’s function, most magnificently conceived, has after all been roughly akin to the artist’s, in that it is pledged to the damnation of spurious order, and devoted to questions that society will not, alone, ask itself” (Charles Newman, “Foreword,” *TriQuarterly* 1 [Fall 1964]: 5). Academic culture is imagined here as a locus for the artful and eclectic useful of a wide variety of contemporary issues—precisely the qualities that postmodernism sought to define against the hegemony of mid-1950s literary culture.
wider range of reference. These limitations seem to me implicit in Barth’s essays as well, and the work that he accomplishes in defining postmodernism must be seen as less an expression of some sort of new postmodernist thinking and more a transformation of terms already at work within the various literary institutions through which his career moves. His appeal to myth draws on terms already current within academic and popular literary institutions of the 1950s and ’60s; at the same time, in using myth like Fiedler and Hassan, he is subtly redefining the framework in which fiction is to be understood. Barth’s use of myth in Giles and afterwards certainly embodies some qualities that we associate with postmodernism: the interest in the relativity of knowledge, the problematization of history, the questioning of individuality. It also allows him to think about what we would now call the metafictional quality of his writing—the self-conscious use of past literary models, the tendency for the text to turn back on itself and comment on its patterns, and so on. Because myth draws attention to the occasion of writing, it ultimately raises issues about discourse that dovetail easily with the poststructuralist framework in which so much postmodern writing will be read in the following decades. But it does all these things by using concepts at work within literary institutions and reaccenting them, giving them a different purpose within the writing and discussion of fiction. As a concept for understanding fiction, myth acts on and through institutions to transform and rejuvenate Barth’s writing. In other words, it accomplishes work. In looking at the development of the novel in the eighteenth century, Clifford Siskin uses a similar notion of work to describe how forms of writing create ways of reading and organize institutions around themselves in order to produce more writing: “Writing induced a fundamental change in readers—leading them to behave as writers—which, in turn, induced more writing. Writing’s capacity to produce change, in other words, was, in this basic way, historically crucial to what I have been calling its proliferation—the production of more writing.”

46. This is why, it seems, that definitions of postmodernism that emphasize the breakdown of the separation between popular and literary styles of writing miss the point at least in part. While it may be true that postmodernism does question why some types of writing are valued, it also seems clear that some attempts to integrate more popular cultural materials specifically work to transform the occasion for discussing contemporary fiction.

47. In contrast, we might note criticism by women authors who complain that their inability to inhabit literary institutions in even this partial way has made the acceptance of women’s writing so difficult to achieve. In fact, Joanna Russ argues that it is because science fiction has a different institutional structure (as “outsider” art) and a different set of received literary myths that it has been more accommodating to feminist narrative (To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995], 90).

How Myth Became Passé (for Critics)

In the middle to late 1960s, then, the concept of myth did a certain kind of institutional work in defining the nature of fiction. As I noted in the introduction, some of the most recent work on postmodernism has recognized the pragmatic function of the term postmodernism. John Frow, for example, has recently argued that we should see debates about postmodernism not as arguments about how a neutral object should be defined and categorized, but as “nothing more and nothing less than a genre of theoretical writing.”49 Describing these debates as a form of discursive “game” (23), Frow goes on to argue that “the concept of the postmodern obeys a discursive rather than a descriptive necessity: its function is that of a logical operator, establishing categorical polarities which then allow—in a tautologous and self-justifying circuit—the construction of fictions of periodization and value” (36). It seems clear that the concept of postmodernism, framed using myth, does a certain kind of intellectual work for Barth as he shuttles between his 1960s and ’70s essays and their collection in 1984, and that the nature of this work changes in subsequent uses of the term postmodernism.

To understand what happens to myth as a definition for postmodern fiction in the decades that follow Barth’s essays, we might consider Gerald Graff’s comments about Barth at a conference in 1981. Graff remarks that Barth’s observations about postmodernism in “The Literature of Replenishment” leave largely undiscussed the limitations of our “reasonable working definition of the Zeitgeist.”50 Graff admits that asking for such a definition is unfair: “I wouldn’t put so much pressure on the shorthand (as I’ve been calling it) if it weren’t that we’ve lately been asking this shorthand to carry a great deal of argumentative freight in our discussion of literature and, particularly, in our quarrels about where the contemporary arts are, or ought to be, headed” (156). Graff’s observation seems to me to reflect the spirit of a great deal of the criticism of postmodernity that has followed. Essays like “The Literature of Exhaustion” and Barth’s own struggles toward a mythical basis for his writing ultimately do not answer the questions about contem-


porary culture that most interest academic critics. It would be fair to say, I think, that postmodernism as a concept has shifted in its institutional role as its usefulness has changed. Where Barth saw postmodernism as an occasion to rejuvenate his own writing through a reconceptualization of fictionality, critics of the 1980s and ’90s have seen in it the opportunity to define and critique contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{51} Barth himself has remarked in 1998 about the way that the term postmodernism has drifted in recent years, becoming “stretched out of shape”: “I would say the definitions advanced by such European intellectuals as Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard have only a kind of a grand overlap with what I mean when I am talking about it [postmodernism].”\textsuperscript{52}

The moment that myth emerged in theories of postmodernity, it was already moving away from an account of contemporary fictionality and towards other institutional uses that will become the hallmark of postmodernity in the 1990s. Early in her 1988 synthesis of the various strands of postmodernism—a synthesis that did a great deal to frame the discussion of the concept for the next decade—Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism through Roland Barthes’s semiology:

Perhaps it is another inheritance from the 1960s to believe that challenging and questioning are positive values (even if solutions to problems are not offered), for the knowledge derived from such inquiry may be the only possible condition of change. In the late 1950s in Mythologies, Roland Barthes had prefigured this kind of thinking in his Brechtian challenges to all that is “natural” or “goes without saying” in our culture—that is, all that is considered universal and eternal, and therefore unchangeable. He suggested the need to question and demystify first, and then work for change. The 1960s were the time of ideological formation for many of the postmodernist thinkers and artists of the 1980s and it is now that we can see the results of that formation.\textsuperscript{53}

There are fairly simple ways in which debates about postmodernism draw on this type of Barthesian myth as a primary example. When John Duvall introduces a recent collection of essays on postmodernism and history, he uses

\textsuperscript{51} This essay is especially interesting in comparison to Graff’s comments on The End of the Road thirteen years earlier, “Mythotherapy and Modern Poetics,” where Barth’s concept of mythotherapy becomes the occasion to critique New Critical analysis of poetry (TriQuarterly 11 [Winter 1968]: 76–90).


\textsuperscript{53} Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, 8.
myth as an embodiment of the discursive construction of reality that is taken to be an essential part of the postmodern condition: “Historian Neill Asher Silberman’s embrace of Disney’s America—Jameson’s degraded historicism writ large—fittingly summarizes the mood of recent Republican Congresses: since all public history is mythologizing and commercialized anyway, why not privatize, have Disney do it instead of the National Parks Service?”

Myth as it is being used by Hutcheon and Duvall has some relationship to the cultural occasion for writing in which Barth is interested, but it is less a matter of the usefulness of made-up stories than a lens for reading culture. Because myth does different work for these critics, it should be no surprise that other terms have replaced myth as tools for cultural analysis. Thomas Docherty’s influential anthology, Postmodernism (1993), for example, frames debates about postmodernism through Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment.

The rise of Adorno as a major figure in debates about postmodernity during the 1990s derives from his materialist rather than semiotic definition of culture. As my discussion of Hassan’s early 1970s essays on postmodernism suggest, this shift is implicit within the way that postmodernism as a concept operates on literary institutions at the very outset. If Hassan works to integrate a wider range of materials in order to think about literary change, it is no surprise that attention naturally gravitates towards cultural patterns and away from primarily literary issues like fictionality.

In this chapter I hope that I’ve shown, however, that myth once did real work in helping critics and writers to think about contemporary writing and the institutional distinctions between fiction and history, philosophy, and news. If we go back to the earliest theories of postmodernism in writing, we notice that myth conceived in the Freudian framework discussed in the previous section is an accepted part of such theories. In The Fabulators (1967), Robert Scholes tells a story about the rejuvenation of allegory as a contemporary mode of writing. In a far-off land of Fiction, storytellers decide to borrow their ideas from historians and philosophers. Scholes’s story ends,


56. It is for this reason, I think, that Hassan embraces link between postmodernism and poststructuralism in his 1982 preface to Dismemberment of Orpheus. Deconstruction comes across here as simply one of many cultural sources that Hassan is eager to use to talk about changing literary institutions, even though in other ways those sources ultimately help to hide the work of transforming institutions that he is trying to accomplish in this book.

57. A good example of this struggle from the other side of this line—from journalism and the nonfiction novel—is provided by Mas’ud Zavarzadeh in The Mythopoeic Reality: The Post-war American Nonfiction Novel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).
The Historians and Social Scientists got tired of having other folks put their Ideas into stories. They decided to muscle in on the story racket themselves. So they climbed out of the bog and invaded the fertile fields of Fiction, and everybody who stayed on in the territory they occupied had to agree to write non-Fiction novels. At the same time the Philosophers and Theologians got a whole new batch of Ideas called Existentialism and Wittgenstein which frightened them so much that they lit out for the highest peaks leaving Ideas strewn all over the foothills. But some Philosophers got to like that territory so much that they wouldn’t leave. They were still there when the refugees from Realism started to pour in and take over. Finally, in order to stay, they had to agree to show these refugees a new way to do Allegory with all these new Ideas. A few of the refugees had smuggled some Ideas called Jung and Freud with them, and when the leftover Philosophers saw them they said they weren’t Social Science Ideas anyway, but things those rascals had stolen from Theology and Philosophy to begin with. So they took all the old and new Ideas they could find and began trying to work out a new kind of Allegory.58

Scholes’s story is one that I have been developing in a different way, a shift from existentialism through a new conception of fictional writing that ends—unsurprisingly—with Giles Goat-Boy as the culminating example. It is an unremarkable part of the mid-1960s landscape that critics have largely forgotten that this transformation was imagined as a different way of thinking about the nature and purpose of writing. And, indeed, a yearning for a more satisfying definition of fictionality reappears in surprising places. Kathy Acker’s early writing, for example, was fairly explicit about embracing post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,59 and most of her early novels reflect a kind of fractured and strongly problematized sense of subjectivity that we associate with postmodernism as it came to be defined in the 1990s. Later in her career, however, Acker expressed dissatisfaction with the essentially negative poetics of her early writing, and instead became fascinated with myth as personal and aesthetic principle. In an interview, she describes in Empire of the Senseless (1988), “The search for a myth to live by. The purpose is constructive rather than deconstructive as in [her earlier novel] Don Quixote.”60 Acker certainly seems to be announcing

a turn back to the principles for thinking about fictionality as a form of myth that I have described in this chapter. Acker develops this myth by invoking the traditional image of the sailor, free to travel anywhere on a whim and unbounded by convention or social bonds. In particular, Acker insists that the sailor rejects material possession for the sake of imagination and exploration. Acker’s image of the sailor may seem romantic—and this is no doubt one of the reasons that she refers to it as a myth—but she is well aware of the fundamentally problematic nature of this way of life. Acker notes that the motto of the sailor is “any place but here” (156), a concise statement of how imaginative myths do not translate to stable, pragmatic, political structures. In his discussion of Acker’s novel, Robert Siegle explains this well: “Stability is to be found [not] in the status of intellectual or political mastery. . . . It is found in the constancy of change, fluidity, a very female voyaging in which no preestablished metaphysics, demystified or not, rules. This state ‘occurs only imaginarily’ because it is not a state but an ongoing voyaging that does not stop.” More explicitly than Barth, Acker shows that this myth is unable to transcend time and occasion.

The struggle to define fictionality, then, is an inherent part of the institutional construction of contemporary writing. I hope to have shown that the fate of contemporary fiction and the theoretical debates that have grown up in the wake of the concept of postmodernism have been in large part determined by the way Barth initially framed the subject. This framing, in turn, was made possible and effective in part because he was able to draw upon and reinterpret a concept of myth already current within literary institutions. Alternate definitions have struggled either to reconcile themselves to the model they have inherited from Barth, or to break free and create their own. One way to understand feminist struggles with the concept of postmodernism in fiction is as a dissatisfaction with the available models of fictionality circulating within these institutions and inherited from realism, modernism, and Barth’s quirky definition of postmodernism. In this sense, one of the reasons for Toni Morrison’s extraordinary success in forcing literary

64. On struggles to define the relationship between postmodern fiction and feminist writers, see Hite’s The Other Side of the Story, Patricia Waugh’s Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern (London: Routledge, 1989), and Magali Cornier Michael’s Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post-World War II Fiction (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
institutions to recognize the aesthetic seriousness and sophistication of contemporary women’s writing is her ability to inhabit and redefine conventional definitions of fictionality. In a 1981 interview, Morrison describes the use of myth and folklore in her writing: “I think the myths are misunderstood now because we are not talking to each other the way I was spoken to when I was growing up in a very small town.” These myths are part of the “folklore of [her] life” and appear “everywhere—people used to talk about it, it’s in the spirituals and gospels” (255). We might think, for example, of Morrison’s brilliant critique of authorial omniscience in Jazz, a novel that has met with a mixed reception from critics and reviewers. The most powerful and disturbing element of Morrison’s storytelling is how the narrator admits in the end that she simply did not know her characters as well as she thought she did: “So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle.” Against such a traditional understanding of authorial control and knowledge she offers the gossip that makes up her story. Indeed, the shocking thing about this novel is that the author herself is swept up into the community of the novel, made an object of the characters’ observation and subjected to the same partial knowledge shared by all of the characters in the community: “I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other” (220).

How is this folkloric definition of fictionality different from myth? Most obviously, such an understanding of fiction does not require us to transcend occasion. Based on this understanding of folklore, Morrison defines her writing as “village literature”: “fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people, which is necessary and legitimate but which also allows me to get in touch with all sorts of people” (253). Much as

68. Toni Morrison, Jazz (New York: Knopf, 1992), 220.
Barth inhabits and reshapes conventional definitions of myth in 1966, Morrison molds the association of myth and contemporary writing in a new way to create a “legitimate” village literature. In this dance between writing and category, fictionality and legitimacy, we see the ongoing struggles to define contemporary writing. Just as Barth does, contemporary writers like Acker and Morrison suggest that myth is essential to thinking about the productive uses of contemporary fictionalizing, and makes clear that any understanding of contemporary or postmodern writing needs to ask about the condition of fictionality today.