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Hunchbacks, fat ladies, fools – that no one chose what he was was unbearable. In the movies he'd meet a beautiful young girl in the funhouse; they'd have hairs-breadth escapes from real dangers; he'd do and say the right things; she also; in the end they'd be lovers: their dialogue lines would match up; he'd be perfectly at ease; she'd not only like him well enough, she'd think he was *marvellous*; she'd lie awake thinking about *him*, instead of vice versa – the way *his* face looked in different lights and how he stood and exactly what he'd said – and yet that would be only one small episode in his wonderful life, among many others. Not a *turning point* at all. What had happened in the toolshed was nothing. He hated, he loathed his parents! One reason for not writing a lost-in-the-funhouse story is that either everybody's felt what Ambrose feels, in which case it goes without saying, or else no normal person feels such things, in which case Ambrose is a freak. "Is anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?" And it's all too long and rambling, as if the author. For all a person knows the first time through, the end could be just around any corner; perhaps, *not* *impossibly* it's been within reach any number of times. On the other hand he may be scarcely past the start, with everything yet to get through, an intolerable idea.

JOHN BARTH *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968)

METAFICTION is fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures. The granddaddy of all metafictional novels was *Tristram Shandy*, whose narrator's dialogues with his imaginary readers are

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only one of many ways in which Sterne foregrounds the gap between art and life that conventional realism seeks to conceal. Metafiction, then, is not a modern invention; but it is a mode that many contemporary writers find particularly appealing, weighed down, as they are, by their awareness of their literary antecedents, oppressed by the fear that whatever they might have to say has been said before, and condemned to self-consciousness by the climate of modern culture.

In the work of English novelists, metafictional discourse most commonly occurs in the form of "asides" in novels primarily focused on the traditional novelistic task of describing character and action. These passages acknowledge the artificiality of the conventions of realism even as they employ them; they disarm criticism by anticipating it; they flatter the reader by treating him or her as an intellectual equal, sophisticated enough not to be thrown by the admission that a work of fiction is a verbal construction rather than a slice of life. This, for instance, is how Margaret Drabble begins Part Three of her novel, *The Rebels of Gold*, after a long, realistic and well-observed account of a suburban dinner party given by the more repressed of her two heroines:

And that is enough, for the moment, of Janet Bird. More than enough, you might reasonably think, for her life is slow, even slower than its description, and her dinner party seemed to go on too long to her, as it did to you. Frances Wingate's life moves much faster. (Though it began rather slowly, in these pages – a tactical error, perhaps, and the idea of starting her off in a more manic moment has frequently suggested itself, but the reasons against such an opening are stronger, finally, than the reasons for it.)

There are echoes here of *Tristram Shandy*, utterly different though Margaret Drabble's novel is in tone and subject matter, in the humorously apologetic address to the reader and the highlighting of the problems of narrative construction, especially in respect of "duration" (see Section 41). Such admissions however do not occur frequently enough to fundamentally disturb the novel's

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project, which is to examine the lot of educated women in modern society in a fictional story that is detailed, convincing and satisfying in a traditional way.

With other modern writers, mostly non-British – the Argentinian Borges, the Italian Calvino and the American John Barth come to mind, though John Fowles also belongs in this company – meta-fictional discourse is not so much a loophole or alibi by means of which the writer can occasionally escape the constraints of traditional realism; rather, it is a central preoccupation and source of inspiration. John Barth once wrote an influential essay entitled “The Literature of Exhaustion”, in which, without actually using the word “metafiction”, he invoked it as the means by which “an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimatitudes of our time into material and means for his work.” There are, of course, dissenting voices, like Tom Wolfe’s (see the preceding section), who see such writing as symptomatic of a decadent, narcissistic literary culture. “Another story about a writer writing a story! Another *regressus ad infinitum!* Who doesn’t prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes?” But that complaint was voiced by Barth himself, in “Life-Story”, one of the pieces in his collection, *Lost in the Funhouse*. Metafictional writers have a sneaky habit of incorporating potential criticism into their texts and thus “fictionalizing” it. They also like to undermine the credibility of more orthodox fiction by means of parody.

The title story of *Lost in the Funhouse* traces Barth’s attempt to write a story about a family outing to Atlantic City in the nineteen-forties. The central character is the adolescent Ambrose, who is accompanying his parents, his brother Peter, his uncle Karl, and Magda, a childhood playmate now a teenager like himself, and therefore an object of sexual interest. (Ambrose wistfully remembers a pre-pubescent game of Masters and Slaves in the course of which Magda led him to the toolshed and “purchased clemency at a surprising price set by herself.”) Essentially it is a story of adolescent yearning for freedom and fulfillment, an “exhausted” footnote to the great tradition of the autobiographical-novel-about-boy-who-will-grow-up-to-be-a-writer, such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Sons and Lovers*. It is intended to reach

its climax in a boardwalk funhouse, where Ambrose is to get lost – though in what circumstances, and with what outcome, the author is never able to decide.

In the passage quoted here, the questioning of conventional fictional representation is artfully doubled. First, Ambrose’s romantic longings are rendered through a parody of Hollywood’s wish-fulfillment fantasies: “In the movies he’d meet a beautiful young girl in the funhouse; they’d have hairs-breadth escapes from real dangers . . . their dialogue lines would match up . . .” This is obviously bad art, in contrast to which the rendering of Ambrose’s actual frustrated, tongue-tied, alienated existence seems realistically authentic. But then *that* representation is undermined by a typical metafictional move – what Erving Goffman has called “breaking frame”, an effect also illustrated by the passage from Margaret Drabble’s novel. The authorial voice abruptly intervenes to comment that Ambrose’s situation is either too familiar or too deviant to be worth describing, which is as if a movie actor were to turn to the camera suddenly and say, “This is a lousy script.” In the manner of *Tristram Shandy*, the voice of a carping critic is heard, attacking the whole project: “Is anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?” The author seems to be suddenly losing faith in his own story, and cannot even summon up the energy to finish the sentence in which he confesses that it is too long and rambling.

Writers of course often lose faith in what they are doing, but do not normally admit this in their texts. To do so is to acknowledge failure – but also tacitly to claim such failure as more interesting and more truthful than conventional “success”. Kurt Vonnegut begins his *Slaughterhouse Five*, a novel as remarkable for its stunning frame-breaking effects as for its imaginative use of time-shift (see Section 16), by confessing: “I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time.” In his first chapter he describes the difficulty of writing about an event like the destruction of Dresden, and says, addressing the man who commissioned it, “It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” The personal experience on which it is based was so traumatic and

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so painful to return to that Vonnegut compares his fate to that of Lot's wife in the Old Testament, who showed her human nature by looking back upon the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah but was punished by being turned into a pillar of salt.

I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun.

This one is a failure, and it had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt.

In fact, so far from being a failure, *Slaughterhouse Five* is Vonnegut's masterpiece, and one of the most memorable novels of the postwar period in English.

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The contest was brief. I was frantic with every species of wild excitement, and felt within my single arm the energy and power of a multitude. In a few seconds I forced him by sheer strength against the wainscoting, and thus, getting him at mercy, plunged my sword, with brute ferocity, repeatedly through and through his bosom.

At that instant some person tried the latch of the door. I hastened to prevent an intrusion, and then immediately returned to my dying antagonist. But what human language can adequately portray that astonishment, that horror which possessed me at the spectacle then presented to view? The brief moment in which I averted my eyes had been sufficient to produce, apparently, a material change in the arrangements at the upper or farther end of the room. A large mirror, — so at first it seemed to me in my confusion — now stood where none had been perceptible before; and, as I stepped up to it, in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait.

Thus it appeared, I say, but was not. It was my antagonist — it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution. His mask and cloak lay, where he had thrown them, upon the floor. Not a thread in all his raiment — not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity, *mine own!*

EDGAR ALLAN POE "William Wilson" (1839)