

## THE INFINITE IDIOMS OF THE POSTMODERN: THE POLITICS OF THE PARERAGON

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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to highlight certain areas of critical failure to provide space to the post-postmodern and the need to understand the radical impulses of fiction outside of the theories of Jameson and Hutcheon. I contest both Jameson's theory of 'waning of affect' and Hutcheon's theory of narcissistic metafictionality. I further discuss language theories to better understand the idiom of the postmodern as different from the language of preceding genres of fiction. Moreover, the essay also discusses metafictionality as a corollary to the postmodern condition, and not its defining character and argues that new postmodern fiction is inscribed with an embedded meta-analysis of its own metafictionality that cannot be simply contained by the reductive logic of metafiction. I also take the Kantian category of the *parergon* and interpret its usages, in the Derridian sense, in postmodern fiction as a technique to both defamiliarize the reader and to add to the 'affect' of the text, its reception and depth. I also look at the use of *paratextuality* and *autotextuality* (a category I derive from blocks of auto-text saved in computers) to negotiate the relationship between varying sets of signifiers and their present (or absent) signifieds.

**Key words:** Postmodernism, postmodern fiction, Linda Hutcheon, narcissistic narrative, waning of affect, parergon, empirical cloudiness, paratext, paratextuality, autotext, autotextuality

### The Infinite Idioms of the Postmodern: The Politics of the Parergon

*"Metafiction," as it has now been named, is fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity. "Narcissistic"—the figurative adjective chosen here to designate this textual self-awareness—is not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive, as the ironic allegorical reading of the Narcissus myth which follows these introductory remarks should make clear.*

(Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 1)

Her argument is that, without the attendant pejorative connotations, the novel in the postmodern age is intensely aware of its own existence and—like the figure of Narcissus in the Greek myth—continuously draws attention to itself. In her early writings such as the above, Hutcheon also rejects the term "postmodernism" and consciously chooses to assiduously stick to "metafiction" as a labelling term for this kind of fiction. She also foregrounds the term *diegesis* as opposed to *narrative* since "the term 'diegetic' might be preferable to the simpler and more familiar term 'narrative,' as an adjective to signal this study's rejection of the split between process (the storytelling) and product (the story told)" (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 5). From Hutcheon's notion of the narcissistic narrative, I pick up certain traces of paradox that I mean to interrogate, both here and later on in the chapter.

First is the supreme irony of the term 'metafiction' that has been attributed to a genre which, by Lyotard's definition, is incredulous towards metanarratives. Of course, one is aware that Lyotard means overarching discourses, but it hardly takes away the fact that postmodern fiction did somehow transform into a 'meta-' despite itself. The

paradox, here, lies more in the fact that the term comes with the epithet 'narcissistic' which Hutcheon uses to mean, in her own words, "self-aware" while the Narcissus myth stands to represent someone who is self-deluded. In variations of the myth, Narcissus, cursed by Nemesis for his boundless vanity, falls in love with his own reflection and wastes away from unrequited passion, leaving nothing but a gold and yellow flower, named after him. To understand the kind of self-referentiality and self-awareness a postmodern fiction is capable of achieving, I choose the epigraph from Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977), attributed to Salvador Elizondo:

*I write. I write that I am writing. Mentally I see myself writing that I am writing and I can also see myself writing seeing that I am writing. And I see myself remembering that I see myself writing and I remember seeing myself remembering that I was writing and I write seeing myself write that I remember having seeing myself write that I saw myself writing that I was writing and that I was writing that I was writing that I was writing. I can also imagine myself writing that I had already written that I would imagine myself writing that I had written that I was imagining myself writing that I see myself writing that I am writing.*

(Vargas Llosa, epigraph)

The text is self-conscious, it is true, but does that self-consciousness emanate just from the act of writing itself? It is noteworthy how many times Elizondo uses the subjective 'I'. It is in between these plentiful instances of 'I' that Hutcheon's argument falls apart, as she has consciously chosen *not* to distinguish "between process (the storytelling) and product (the story told)." Postmodern fiction's self-awareness, I propose, definitively distinguishes between the process and the product, in other words, the act of writing and that which is finally written. The product, as in the case of Elizondo, contains references to the act of writing, but always in context of the authorial voice or the 'I'. It is the 'I' that is conscious of the act to which it has committed, and not the narrative itself. This self-aware subject is also a vestige of the modernist stream of consciousness, outlining its mental processes. However, the acting subject is distinct from the ultimate text that is produced in the distance that it acquires from that which becomes written. The 'I' that can see itself writing is, simultaneously, the omniscient narrator-subject, watching over its own actions as it would watch over any other character. However, the writer and narrator, in this brief moment, merging, cannot produce a text that is *just* about the act of writing self-consciously. The self-awareness is one of the many aspects of the postmodern, and while sometimes celebrated, is not as much its *raison d'être* as breaking the fourth wall was in case of Brechtian epic theatre.

Another distinction is important here—that between the author and the narrator. In no way are the two one and the same in postmodern fiction. The postmodern self-awareness tends to be exercised in context of the narratorial voice's agency in having narratorial control and manoeuvring the reader in such a way as to make the manoeuvre apparent. It is a sort of linguistic acrobatics, bedazzling the reader with turns which were once thought impossible in a mimetic genre like the novel. The reader/receiver of the narrative is then perhaps more bedazzled by the *possibility* of

such a manoeuvre than the manoeuvre itself. In other words, the self-conscious act of drawing attention to the *act of writing/storytelling* is not the same as being self-aware to the extent of self-annihilation, meaning, that postmodern fiction is hardly equipped to sacrifice its narrative goals to achieve this self-reflexive auto-referentiality. In post-Brechtian narratological spaces, breaking the wall and letting in the receiver of the text, should not have been such a novel phenomenon, and, as we shall soon see, actually wasn't a novel phenomenon. It could have been done in passing, without much ado. However, this tendency was noticed, and noticed in abundance, by critics, who pointed it out as a 'postmodern' propensity rather than realising that the novel form was perhaps merely responding to its cultural milieu by deconstructing the sham of Aristotelian realism. A lot of the early gamut of postmodern theorisation predated the later writers who actually shaped postmodern fiction. Nicoline Timmer points out this paradox about postmodern subjectivity when she says:

*In the most ambitious literary fiction today, written by a generation of writers born in the sixties or seventies — writers that were still in their diapers or not even born yet when the founding fathers of postmodern writing and theorizing first issued their thoughts and texts — we can detect an incentive to move beyond what is perceived as a debilitating way of framing what it means to be human: the postmodern perspective on subjectivity. Most notable in the work of this younger generation of writers is the emphatic expression of feelings and sentiments, a drive towards inter-subjective connection and communication, and also a sense of 'presence' and 'sameness'. Their texts perform a complicit and complicated critique on certain aspects of postmodern subjectivity, especially on the perceived solipsistic quality of the subjective postmodern experience world, and envision possible reconfigurations of subjectivity that can no longer be framed, I believe, as 'postmodern'.*

(Timmer p. 13)

Postmodern critic Hans Bertens adds to this theoretical 'lag' when he suggests that postmodern theorists were too hasty in developing frameworks for the later stages of postmodernism to hang on to:

*Most of the writers we call postmodern and indeed most postmodern theorists ... were born before the Second World War and grew up in the 1940s and 1950s'; these founding fathers of postmodern thought and literature, that is, already had reached emotional and intellectual maturity before a larger postmodern culture — which began to make itself felt in the 1960s — superseded the far more inhibited, conservative, and comparatively speaking discursive general culture of the earlier postwar period.*

(Bertens p. 37)

This lag is more acutely felt in what became a theoretical obsession with metafiction, to which postmodern's self-referentiality built towards. What Hutcheon and a throng of other critics missed was the postmodern's affective choice in speaking about the act of writing and not its own corpus whereby it articulated the gap between the thought and the *écriture* — the transfer of narratorial information from memory to page. They speak to the reader directly and in such a format of direct address, amplify and

exaggerate their feelings about what they are writing and the way it is being transferred. Instead of a “waning of affect” (Jameson p. 22), it co-conspiratorially draws in the receiver of the text and shares the intimate act of writing in a way that this intimacy is seen, felt and understood in a very intensified, heightened manner. However, for postmodernist writers, this was not a comprehensively developed ‘methodology’ but a cultural expectation in the post-Brechtian satiric universe. In fact, if anything, postmodern fictioneers themselves perceived the postmodern as a responsive cultural condition and not a specific narratorial device. In the words of David Foster Wallace:

*The problem is that, however misprised it's been, what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You've got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language; we're so in it we don't even see that it's one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony's become our environment.*

(Wallace: *A Supposedly Fun Thing* p. 68)

Unwittingly, excessive attention to the postmodern form/structure and its apparent self-awareness, created a frame where all postmodern fiction was expected to fit in, without any critical analyses of where this self-referentiality stemmed from. Says Strinati:

*Relatively few writers appear to have asked the question “can we see postmodernism in the world around us?” There has been a tendency to assume that postmodernism has become widespread in modern societies regardless of the need to demonstrate whether this has happened in deed...this has been matched by excessive attention given to the problem of defining the term itself.*

(Strinati p. 350)

Where critics at all used the term ‘culture’ to delineate certain postmodern tendencies, they did so more out of lamentation and contempt, as in case of Jameson, who calls postmodernism the ‘culture of late stage capitalism.’ Even so, the dominant aspects of that *culture* which he goes on to discuss have been flanked with modernist expectations and regret. In such an atmosphere, to have labelled postmodern fiction as either a ‘narcissistic narrative’ or a ‘metafiction’, is also to ignore such fiction’s own prerogatives and responsiveness. Was Brechtian theatre postmodern in that it continually referred to its own *constructedness* and reminded the viewers that they were watching a ‘production’? Then how is a postmodern work of fiction that draws attention to its constructedness in any way ‘narcissistic’, even if we understand the term ‘suggestively’, following Hutcheon’s advice?

## **I. The Postmodern Pasticheur and Empirical Cloudiness: Beyond Mimesis of the Real and the Reality of Mimesis**

The problem of nomenclature arises from the fact that Hutcheon did not distinguish between the act of drawing attention to ‘oneself’ and drawing attention to one’s ‘constructedness’ and the act of writing itself. If one understands the risks associated

with this act, then one can no longer look at it as a self-aggrandising narcissistic measure. Instead, one is invited to understand that its metaphysical premises lie in the evolution of modern theories of language and the way literary hermeneutics has altered in the centuries following the Renaissance. Roland Barthes points out this alteration in S/Z:

...by an initial rite the writer must first transform the “real” into a painted object (a framed one); after which he can unhook this object, pull it out of his painting, in a word, de-pict it.... All of this opens up a double problem. First of all, whence and when began this pre-eminence of the pictorial code in literary mimesis? Why has it disappeared? Why did writers’ dream of painting die?

(Barthes: S/Z p. 54–5)

In his attempt to understand the nature of contemporary fiction and the historical changes that have accompanied its development, he analyses the act of ‘de-piction’ as an *always already pastiche* and not, in any sense, an adherence to ‘realism’ in the arts as it was once understood, and definitely not something developed during the postmodern era. He elucidates:

...to depict is to unroll the carpet of the codes, to refer not from a language to a referent but from one code to another). Thus, realism (badly named, at any rate often badly interpreted) consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real: this famous reality, as though suffering from a fearfulness which keeps it from being touched directly, is set farther away, postponed, or at least captured through the pictorial matrix in which it has been steeped before being put into words: code upon code, known as realism. This is why realism cannot be designated a “copier” but rather a “pasticheur” (through secondary mimesis, it copies what is already a copy); naïve or shameless, Joseph Brideau has no scruple about painting a Raphael (since the painter too must copy another code, an anterior code), any more than Balzac has in declaring this pastiche to be a masterpiece. Once the infinite circularity of codes is posited, the body itself cannot escape it: the real body (fictionally given as such) is the replication of a model set forth by that code of the arts, so that the most “natural” of bodies... is always only the promise of the artistic code from which it has previously issued...

(Barthes: S/Z p. 55)

The notion that literature suffered from the belaboured primacy of the visual carried forward, according to Allen Thiher, from Neoclassical to Romantic to Modernist, had its roots in the Horatian doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* (a Latin phrase literally meaning, ‘as is painting, so is poetry’). This doctrine, in turn, was propounded some centuries before Horace by Simonides of Keos (c. 556 – 468 BC) who had stated, “*Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens,*” which translates into, “Poetry is a speaking picture, painting a silent poetry.” Here, poetry, of course stands in its widest sense of signifying all imaginative texts.

In explaining the continuity of this linguistic theory, Thiher additionally alludes to David Hume who “like Addison...is assuming that the visual world is somehow translated

through language into an inner visual world” (Thiher p. 1). He also reasons that it became largely accepted that “Poetry is painting, much as seeing is knowledge when ideas are organised on the canvas of the mind. And both are allegorical transpositions of the world” (Thiher p. 2).

This argument becomes central to establishing the fact that language theories had ensured that the seeds of the ‘always already’ matrix of referentiality, a system of codes, had existed for writers to ‘copy’ from, as Barthes astutely points out. This means that self-referentiality, intertextuality, or even the state of being a ‘copy of a copy’ even if they are at all interpreted as postmodern virtues, predate postmodernity. Literary mimesis has indelible links to the representational, or the imitational, and this had been acknowledged long before postmodernism had any founding elements attached to its name. This also becomes clear when we consider Goethe’s reformulation of “the allegorical basis of the primacy of the visual...that would underwrite romanticism and modernism” (Thiher p. 2): “Symbolism/allegory transforms appearance into an idea, the idea into an image, so that the concept in the image remains *unendingly effective and unattainable and, when pronounced in all languages, remains ineffable*” (Goethe quoted in Thiher p. 2, my emphasis).

To such an “unendingly effective and unattainable end” are directed the devices of postmodern fiction and its attempted containment of the “vast and unlimited” (Shaw p. 115) through a system of codes and its referential pastiche of the same. The important part is not the *pastiche* postmodern fiction creates (or *from what*) but to *what end* it creates—its codes no longer correspond to the *always-already-there* world unlike in earlier mimetic stages but surpasses it to create a world that gets signified, as it were, “spoken into being” (Nash p. 17). In the process, it does draw attention to its own storytelling processes and linguistic structures, but no more than the amount of attention a narrative like Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) would have drawn in the eighteenth century, when postmodernism was nowhere in the picture. To say the novel was ahead of its times and a postmodern progenitor (as theorists have, undoubtedly to somehow fit it in into their theoretical framework), is to do grave injustice to the evolution of narratology and its deeper understandings of its own devices, and its consequent ability to refer to those very devices: “Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we forever to be twisting and untwisting the same rope?” (Sterne p. 113).

To acknowledge that *Tristram Shandy* predates postmodernism is also to acknowledge that self-referentiality in fiction, indeed any referentiality in fiction, predates it also. Hutcheon herself, in fact, provides numerous examples of metafictionality which are wholly outside of the postmodern oeuvre. Metafictionality, then, seems far more a *corollary* of the postmodern condition than one of its defining characteristics. This conclusion may also be arrived at by discussing what Joseph Frank calls the spatialisation of form. This idea he first introduced in 1945 to discuss how “at this macro-level of textual organisation” modernist authors like Flaubert already attempted “through the practice of juxtaposition to achieve the kind of iconicity that complements the rhetoric of iconicity he seeks in the use of third-person pronouns” (Thiher p. 4).

This exactly corresponds to the postmodern's intentionality, and indeed, its ability to transform signifiers into iconic emblems, as in case of the previously discussed Warhol silk-screen, *Marilyn Diptych*. As Thiher would have it, the spatialisation of form also inherently produces another level of self-awareness and codified auto-referentiality:

*Flaubert also feels compelled repeatedly, to describe what his characters are seeing at any given moment before allowing them to speak or act. The Flaubertian text is in this way criss-crossed with a network of observation posts from which "one" looks at characters looking at characters who in turn become observation points from which the world is viewed...*

(Thiher p. 4)

Thus far, therefore, one has been able to establish at least two crucial differences in postmodern theorisation and postmodern praxis—one, the fact that metafictionality far predates the postmodern practice, unlike what its theorisation would lead us to believe, and two, that its ability to produce 'affect' is rooted in the role that it is able to accord to the reader, unlike the theoretical 'waning of affect' that precludes its affective functions. The question is, what has postmodernism done with these propensities?

Placed as it is at the fag end of the mimetic linguistic tradition, postmodernism could not have given up the ghost of mimesis in its entirety. Instead, the only radical departure from the Aristotelian mimetic tradition that postmodernism offers up is a position of a *pasticheur* or a counterfeiter making a copy for which there is no original (Baudrillard's *simulacra*) instead of making a copy of an original in Platonic terms—and this it could have been achieved only by embracing and encountering the limits of language and its limited capability of mirroring empirical reality.

In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein explains that the limits of language are immanent within the concept of its being moved and defined by the limits of the empirical reality to which it corresponds, in other words: "Empirical reality is limited by the totality of objects. The limit also makes itself manifest in the totality of elementary propositions" (Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* p. 67). To escape this constriction, I propose that postmodernism has adopted what Ludwig Wittgenstein has called "empirical cloudiness" in order to fully exploit the infinite, indefinite possibilities of a limited structure of signs that is language:

*Thought is surrounded by a halo.—Its essence, logic, presents an order, in fact the a priori order of the world: that is, the order of possibilities, which must be common to both world and thought. But this order, it seems, must be utterly simple. It is prior to all experience, must run through all experience; no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty can be allowed to affect it—it must rather be of the purest crystal. But this crystal does not appear as an abstraction; but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete, as it were the hardest thing there is...*

(Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* p. 26)

Wittgenstein's theory is based on the concept of language being able to represent the order of thought, which, in turn, represents objects/parts that constitute empirical reality. This means that, in an ideal scenario, "in propositional terms, elementary facts,

made up of simple objects in the world, are mirrored by elementary propositions in language that are made up of names. According to the visual metaphor behind the mirroring relationship, language should be transparent” (Thiher p. 12). Yet “empirical cloudiness” does creep into language and Wittgenstein tried to explain “how opacity can find a way into language” (Thiher p. 12). In Thiher’s words, Wittgenstein was at pains to explain “how language can be a deceiver and allow the existence of such aberrations as the propositions of metaphysics” (Thiher p. 12).

Postmodernism exploits these variegated zones of ‘empirical cloudiness’—the ontological lack of language that is ambivalent, ambiguous, and does not correspond to empirical reality—and revels in breaking the mirroring relationship between the system of signs and the system of objects. It mushrooms in the most liminal spaces and takes every opportunity to bend the rules of the language games even while being aware of those rules governing the signifiers it uses. Postmodernism, therefore, gives priority to the signifier over the signified, signalling what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner call the “dynamic productivity of language, the instability of meaning, and a break with conventional representational schemes of meaning” (Best and Kellner p. 21).

In this, postmodernism is dependent heavily on the poststructuralist theory of language where the signifier no longer rests with a corresponding signified but the signified is “only a moment in a never-ending process of signification where meaning is produced not in a stable, referential relation between subject and object, but only within the infinite, intertextual play of signifiers” (Best and Kellner p. 21).

Postmodern fiction adapts to this poststructuralist strategy of textual playfulness, developing what I call the *ironically infinite idiom*, which is predicated, in Derridian terms, upon the premise that “*the meaning of meaning is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signified...Its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest...it always signifies again and differs*” (Derrida: *Speech and Phenomena* p. 58, my emphasis). Derrida terms this process of signification that resists imposed structural constraints a form of “dissemination”—something postmodernism strategically uses to develop a liminal narratological function, destabilising the hierarchy of values immanent in the mirror relationship between language and reality. This ties up with Baudrillard’s concept that the postmodern is able to articulate the *simulacra*—a copy for which there may be no original. The postmodern seeks to escape the Platonic determinants prevalent in the rules governing fiction writing—“what writing is: its function as mimesis and representation, the belief in ideal meaning or essentialist signifieds, the subordination of writing to the metaphysics of history, or the text as the representation of the substantial self” (Thiher p. 159).

## II. Infinite Playfulness: *Différance* and the Postmodern Double-Coding

This ironical, infinite postmodern idiom functions as a play-therapy—“a field of infinite substitutions” (Derrida: “Structure, Sign and Play” p. 260)—perpetually differing and deferred in the sense of Derridian *différance*. *Ironical* since it understands the limited nature of the playing field itself, trapped as it is between the system of signs and the order of empirical reality, and yet *infinite* in its signifiatory allowances and the



permutation/combination of signifieds that may be partially or wholly located outside the said order of reality. This irony or 'double-coding' is central to the realisation of the postmodern idiom, as Umberto Eco says in his essay 'Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable':

*The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it really cannot be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.... Thus, with the modern, anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it, but with the postmodern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously. Which is, after all, the quality (the risk) of irony.*

(Nicol p. 111)

I posit this ironically infinite idiom squarely against Hutcheon's theory of the narcissistic narrative and the four typologies she advances as embodying the kinds of narcissism found in metafiction, which she developed from Jean Ricardou's earlier analysis. Before going into the typologies, it is first necessary to deconstruct the term 'narcissistic'. If one allows the allusions in metafiction to be interpreted as "commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 1), then one also must make allowances for the deliberate exposure of both structures and intentionality to the reader.

I submit that instead of narcissism, this be read as a form of *ironic vulnerability*, like inviting a bystander to take apart one's own building brick by brick. Simultaneously, fiction also uses this ironical vulnerability to deconstruct notions about the finitude of the text, and introduces doubts and playfulness by drawing as much (or more) attention to *what it is not*, or, to be more precise, *how it has not been constructed*. In other words, by drawing attention to *one of the ways it has been constructed*, it defers its interpretations in those *infinite ways it could have been constructed*. In Hutcheon's theory, this ironic vulnerability is read as a brazenness, while I read it as a tendentious exposure that is necessitated by its ironic and infinite idiom. The only other alternative for fiction could have been towing the mimetic line and inscribing itself within the arc of realism—something which would be soon rendered impossible once epic theatre had already broken the fourth wall. Once the tropes of narratology have been *known* and *exposed*, they could not have been made *unknown*: return to the real would not only be impossible but also ludicrous. Concealment and realist masquerading therefore, became out of question.

Thus, it gradually became *necessary* for fiction to open its gates, at first *selectively* (one must notice how Hutcheon's examples are all deliberately pre-postmodern), and then, with arrival of the postmodern turn, as it were, *compulsively*. By the time postmodern fiction was being written, realist pretension was no longer a very viable option, and the postmodern, as suggested earlier, embraced this limitation, which the modern had mostly lamented. The postmodern learnt to articulate liminally, and achieve within that liminality, an ironic (since aware of its liminality) infinite scope of linguistic play.

Another problem then emerges in Hutcheon's supposition that the contemporary novel was still representational, so that "the familiar categories of novel criticism — and in

particular, mimesis — need not be rejected, but merely reworked” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 46). Raucq-Hoorickx explains Hutcheon’s logic when he states:

*For her [Hutcheon], a distinction between mimesis of product (the story told) and mimesis of process (the story-telling) should make it possible to account for the difference between “traditional realism” and “metafiction”. Traditional realism, she says, displays a mimesis of products (character, setting, ...), and demands that the reader simply identify them in the novel. Metafiction, on the other hand, displays a mimesis of process and requires that the reader “be conscious of the work, the actual construction, that he too is undertaking, for it is the reader who, in Ingarden’s terms, “concretizes” the work of art and gives it life”.*

(Raucq-Hoorickx p. 600)

This is problematic on two accounts. The first is Hutcheon’s earlier avowed “rejection of the split between process (the storytelling) and product (the story told)” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 5). If she had indeed rejected that split, then she could not have distinguished between realism and metafiction in terms of their imitation of the product (the story told) and process (the telling of it). The second is the fact that her reductive analysis of metafiction as merely being the imitation of a telling—merely the process or the act—without adequate attention to the *différance* and *deferral* of such an ironic intentionality—takes away from such fiction its power to enunciate that “empirical cloudiness” that Wittgenstein refers to.

Postmodern fiction’s achievement lies precisely in linguistically inhabiting that “cloudiness” and escaping the constriction of being tied down to signifieds in the empirical world. Its signifiers are mobilised not towards *that which is*, but *that which never was, or never shall be, or even that which may or may not be*. In this, its ironic infinite idiom steps away from the mimetic model and into the indefinite and infinite playfulness of Derridian dissemination. The postmodern cannot be simply defined by the mimetic impulse, especially in an age which has heralded the advent of the *hyperreal*. If anything, the postmodern metafiction is the articulator of this hyperreal and symptomises the inability, indeed the unnecessary and superfluity, of *distinguishing what is real from what is not*.

Instead, Hutcheon concludes that metafiction should be looked at as a “significant ‘vital’ form of mimetic literature” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 162), which is only slightly better than her saying that it has more potential than one imagines but only when “not seen as a degenerate version of a moribund genre” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 161). This is not an encouraging distinction to start with. Fortunately, she does warn the readers of the fact that “no attempt has been made to propose a comprehensive theory of metafiction” (Raucq-Hoorickx p. 601) since her typologies seem to bear much of the same problems as her initial conception of the metafictional impulse as “narcissistic.” She develops a four-part description of metafictionality based on four types of self-awareness:

For her metafiction is either *diegetically* self-aware, that is self-reflective about its own narrative processes or *linguistically* narcissistic, i.e. aware of the limits and the powers

of its own language. Similarly, texts are either *overtly* narcissistic when “the self-consciousness and self-reflection are clearly evident, usually explicitly thematized or even allegorized within the ‘fiction’”, or *covertly* self-aware when this process is “structuralized, internalized, actualized”.

(Raucq-Hoorickx p. 601)

If narcissistic narrative is “process made visible” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 6), then the above distinctions are rendered completely meaningless in the face of the new postmodern fiction which are *none of the above* and/or *all of the above*, at once. The last of her typology, it can be safely argued in the lines of Umberto Eco, is something that has been evolutionised into a *given* in postmodern fictionality—the primacy of the active reader, which I have already mentioned in the earlier part of this chapter. The postmodern reader is the new co-imaginator, the co-creator of the text, and to that extent, all postmodern fiction may be said to be involved in a relationship with the receivers of the texts.

The way *overt* diegetic fiction has been categorised as being didactic towards the reader and seeking to teach the reader “his new, more active role” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 53) through uses of *parody*, *allegory* and the *mise en abyme*, demands greater criticism. Hutcheon cites the example of Robert Coover’s ‘The Magic Poker’ as being such an overtly diegetic text, “explicitly aware of their status as literary artefacts” and quotes the author: “perhaps tomorrow I will invent Chicago and Jesus Christ and the history of the moon. Just as I have invented you, dear reader, while lying here in the afternoon sun” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 28). However, upon closer examination, this text is anything but didactic. It poses the author as the “inventor” of histories and of characters—the reader being one of those characters who throng the ringside of the narrative and are invited in to watch more closely. The form of direct address is also critical of this choice. This role that the author accords to himself (as the *inventor and not the discoverer of histories*) is far more important in its authority of signifying the *hitherto-uninvented* than in its enunciation of itself as a “literary artefact.” Literary artefacts are not invented: they are produced/written. The word *invented* changes the process of writing (merely mimetic) to an *act of signification of that which does not exist*, and to that end, it may signify things that have little basis in empirical reality. The *irony* of the statement, however, lies in the author’s articulation of what it is that he could invent—Chicago, Jesus Christ, the history of the moon and the reader—all of which exist and already have a history. And yet, all of these may be ascribed alter-histories, may be signified in infinitely different ways and their presences may be perpetually, wholly or partially differed and deferred. Inherently, therefore, the ironic infinitude of its linguistic playfulness is revealed to the reader even as the text’s vulnerability and the limits of its idiom is disclosed in the failure to name a single thing on that list that hadn’t already been written into being.

Hutcheon’s differentiation between the diegetic and linguistic narcissism seems even more brittle and prone to collapse:

*In diegetic narcissism, the text displays itself as narrative, as the gradual building of a fictive universe complete with character and action. In the linguistic mode, however, the text would actually show its building blocks—the very*

*language whose referents serve to construct that imaginative world. That these referents are fictive and not real is assured by the generic code instituted by the word “novel” on the cover.*

(Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p.28)

The distinction is not only flimsy but highly speculative. According to Hutcheon, labels (such as the word ‘novel’ on the cover) should be enough to make a reader understand that the text is ‘not real.’ Following the above definition, one could easily be the other, flowing from one to the next, then ending in none of the labels. Most importantly, the definitions completely preclude the possibility of having a metafictional text without having either a fictive universe complete with character(s) and action or linguistic referents that pronounce the text to be “the novel as history” or “history as a novel” (Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative* p. 29).

While my paper deals with the predilections of postmodern fiction, it remains undeniable that self-awareness in the metafictional sense can exist outside of the novel form, without plot, character or action. However, even within the postmodern fictional oeuvre, there are numerous instances that would both invalidate the distinction between a diegetic and a linguistic metafiction as well as far surpass it, as, for instance, with David Foster Wallace’s short story, ‘Westward the Course of the Empire Takes Its Way,’ where we find a narrative not only intertextually or self-referentially aware *and* showing its building blocks but also showing, for lack of a better word, a *meta-awareness* of the *metafictionality* that would invariably be ascribed to the *said work of metafiction*. Not just this: the text speaks from this position of meta-awareness and declares itself *non-metafictional* as it avowedly wants to rise above postmodern metafictionality to achieve an intense ‘affect’ on its readers. In effect, it is a story that critiques another metafictional story to suggest that the author (fictionalised as a certain Prof. Ambrose, but based on the actual author, John Barth) of the second (disguised) story (admittedly, John Barth’s ‘Lost in the Funhouse’) has aimed to intellectualise it too far—so far, in fact, as to lose any emotional impact on its readers. This criticism is ensconced within a *metacriticism of metafiction* as it stands. In a story named after another work of art (*Westward the Course of the Empire Takes Its Way* is a mural displayed in the House of Representatives in the Capitol Building in the United States of America), under an abrupt heading that reads ‘A REALLY BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION’, Wallace writes:

*As mentioned before—and if this were a piece of metafiction, which it’s NOT, the exact number of typeset lines between this reference and the prenominate referent would very probably be mentioned, which would be a princely pain in the ass, not to mention cocky, since it would assume that a straightforward and anti-embellished account of a slow and hot and sleep-deprived and basically clotted and frustrating day in the lives of three kids ... but in metafiction it would, nay needs be mentioned, a required postmodern convention aimed at drawing the poor old reader’s emotional attention to the fact that the narrative bought and paid for ... is not in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather in fact an “artifact,” an object ... composed of ...conventions, and is thus in a “deep” sense just an opaque forgery of a*

*transfiguring window, not a real window, a gag, and thus in a deep (but intentional, now) sense artificial, which is to say fabricated, false, a fiction ... this self-conscious explicitness and deconstructed disclosure supposedly making said metafiction “realer” than a piece of pre-postmodern “Realism” that depends on certain antiquated techniques to create an “illusion” of a windowed access to a “reality” isomorphic with ours but possessed of and yielding up higher truths to which all authentically human persons stand in the relation of...*

(Wallace: *Girl with Curious Hair* p. 568–9)

The stunningly diegetically, linguistically and metafictionally self-aware prose directs critical venom at what it calls “this metafictional shit” that is “utter baloney” that is “resting on just as many ‘undisclosed assumptions’ as the ‘realistic’ fiction metafiction would try to ‘debunk’” (Wallace: *Girl with Curious Hair* p. 569). Wallace’s excerpt, positing fiction as an “opaque forgery”, immediately resonates with Wittgenstein’s interrogations about “how opacity can find a way into language” (Thiher p. 12). His sense of deep, almost painfully felt irony about the limitedness of the language and yet his attempt to undertake such a layered narrative composed of infinite gestures of referral, (dis)continuities and his concern with metafiction losing its “affect”, are all critical to the way postmodern fiction needs to be seen. His concern about this affective decline must have been equal to or greater than Jameson himself, as his story is a parodic rewriting of Barth’s ‘Lost in the Funhouse’, with elements inserted to make it more incisive and brutally ironic and sarcastic.

Serious engagement with this kind of fictionality is required, which is not only *not contained* by the very thin lines between various kinds of typology developed by Hutcheon and a gamut of other theorists, but is also being written every day, as we speak (or read or write) and is still inadvertently pursued under the initial few theories of postmodernism developed by theorists even before such a movement (or tendency, if you will) reached its apotheosis. Says Nicoline Timmer:

*... “Westward”... is not simply a parody, a rewriting of “Lost in the Funhouse.” It is an extremely rich text in itself, full of allusions, funny asides, ingenious literary inventions and implicit and explicit critique on metafiction, all cramped in about 140 pages, that seems to be directed at figuring out a new direction for fiction writing, both on the level of discourse and on the level of the story.*

(Timmer p. 106)

The devastating frustration and limitedness of postmodernist writers, be it Wallace or Eggers (quoted earlier), are something of a by-product of theoretically delimiting their works and assigning to them the powerlessness of a neo-modernist stance—forcing them to look at themselves as the unwitting bearers of the chalice of high modernism. Norman Holland points out the problem of premature theorisation when he says:

*Already, by writing papers about it, by publishing books and special issues of journals, we announce we are through Postmodernism and out the other side. Once they can name it, artists can no longer 'do' Postmodernism with the same half-knowing innocence as those who first called into question our relationship to the autonomous structures of the High Modern.*

(Holland p. 306)

Breaking under the mimetic yoke, postmodern fiction needs its ironic idiom, its incessant playfulness, its 'infinite jest', restored to it. It is therefore critical and crucial to develop new theories of postmodern fiction and create a platform where initial, median and later postmodernist fiction can be somewhat aligned.

I submit that postmodernism's (dis)continuity from modernism stems not from its refusal of the histories and geographies of civilisation, but its appropriation in a way as to contain the "vast and the unlimited" (Shaw p. 115). The sublimation of the postmodern idiom lies in the very essence of its ability to appropriate, and appropriate infinitely—bringing back certain mythopoetic storytelling techniques. This is characterised by: (a) extensive and conscious use of the defamiliarisation technique, including but not limited to the use of language, media, framing devices, paratextuality and so forth, achieving (b) exaggerated emotional 'affect' through (c) the creation of mythotopes/mythographies/urban legends and the extension of such mythologies outside the text, in effect (d) extending the scope of the text beyond the text itself, at the centre of which lies (e) an epic romancer/remembrancer who assumes the role of an epic narrator who recounts a version of the mythography to the (f) active reader and (g) the extended reader in the digital age. To expound the theory in its entirety is outside the scope of this paper. However, in the last section of the present article, I shall deal with the first of these, and the way certain extra-daily narratological techniques are used to achieve the postmodern 'affect'.

### **III. Parergon and Autotextuality: Towards a Theory of the Infinite Idiom**

As an entry point to the theorisation, I shall go back to the discussion of Warhol's art and the postmodern tendency to defamiliarise everyday reality to achieve a diegetic distance from them. Art has always used certain forms of the defamiliarisation technique, but nowhere in literature has it reached such a climax as in postmodern fiction. In terms of structure, postmodernism has developed *autotextual* (a category I mean to propose shortly) and especially *paratextual* equivalents of what Derrida refers to as the Kantian "parergon". Parergon, Philip Shaw says, has "several meanings, including 'frame', 'addition', and 'remainder'. Derrida begins by citing some of Kant's own examples, such as 'picture frames, or drapery on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings'" (Shaw p. 117). Derrida reinterprets the concept of the *parergon* in these terms:

*What constitutes them as parerga is not simply their exteriority as surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the ergon [or work]. ... Without this lack, the ergon would have no need of a parergon. [But] the ergon's lack is the lack of a parergon.*

(Derrida: *The Truth in Painting* p. 59–60)

If we consider the oral storytelling model to be the basis of all diegesis, then postmodernism recognises this 'lack' in the form of absences—the absence, for instance, of an 'audience' or 'spectator' which can see, hear and take cognisance of (spectacles, expressions, gestures, asides, soliloquies, ramblings, reminders, repetitions, tonality, detours, diversions, shared jokes, dramatic irony, comic reliefs and so forth). In other words, these absences articulate the limits of *écriture*, along with the limits, mentioned earlier, of language itself as it pertains to empirical reality.

Postmodern fiction creates its own *parergon* to compensate this lack, by developing textual frames, additions and remainders at its own borders, and, in turn, often transforming itself into a *parergon* of other texts/works of art. The first paradigm of creating a *parergon* effect in postmodern fiction is what I term *autotextuality*. I derive the category from what, in computer technology, is known as the 'auto-text'. I shall take recourse to the most widely referred digital encyclopaedia of our age to explain the concept:

*Auto-text is a portion of a text preexisting in the computer memory, available as a supplement to newly composed documents, and suggested to the document author by software...Auto-text can contain a few letters, words, sentences or paragraphs. It can be chosen by the document author via menu or be offered automatically after typing specific words or letters (word prediction or text prediction), or be added to the document automatically after typing specific words or letters (word/text completion). Auto-text saves the time of typists who type many similar documents or serves as an assistive technology...*

Autotextuality, in case of postmodern fiction, I shall use to refer to the phenomenon of postmodernism drawing from a 'cloud' of familiar or unfamiliar semiotic systems certain always already encoded narrative devices or blocks to be used as a frame or *parergon* for its diegetic world, where signifiers may or may not correspond to signifieds. In that too, it complements a lack in the main text. I propose that autotextuality is distinct from intertextuality in that it is inscribed on the boundaries of other text or renders other texts into its own boundaries, and rather than just establishing a reference between 'texts' (as in case of intertextuality), it establishes a relationship of references between two independent semiotic systems. Autotextuality is also distinct in its possibility of using other media or interfaces to translate pre-existing signifiers, especially of a virtual nature, along with their attendant semiotic systems, into its own universe as a frame or an excess, such as, for instance if a novel is framed with additional information from newspapers, internet, sms texts or electronic mails. Previously existing narrative devices, such as epigraphing of texts, I shall include within this practice, since it forms a frame and is located just at the margins of a text. In addition, as in a computer's auto-text, the device is able to prompt the reader in the direction of textual cognition and assist them in realising the text with the aid of those referential semiotic systems.

This enables postmodern fiction to encode *not only other texts but other media* in its title or format/structure, which frames and informs the text from outside. For instance, one may look at David Foster Wallace's short story 'Westward the Course of the Empire Takes Its Way,' discussed earlier. Both the title and the format are *autotextual*,

referring to other works of art in other media and using them as framing devices or receptacles to hold the narrative. What makes the practice all the more *autotextual* is the fact that the painting, hanging in the House of Representatives, is a reference to the cultural and socio-political power structures in the United States—which in itself belongs to a completely different and distinctly encoded system of signifiers.

Moreover, autotextuality in this case is also derived from the fact that Wallace himself says that “parts of ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’ are *written in the margins* of John Barth’s ‘Lost in the Funhouse’ and Cynthia Ozick’s ‘Usurpation (Other People’s Stories)’” (Wallace: *Girl with Curious Hair* p. 3, my emphasis). Therefore, his fiction *is both a parergon to other texts as well as uses texts as a parergon to itself*—becoming both a *surplus* or *excess* placed at the margins of other texts as well as generating an excess in its own margins by framing the fiction with the aid of a previously existing semiotic system.

A second way for postmodern fiction to achieve the impact or effect of a parergon is *paratextuality*. Paratext is typically understood to be the material supplied by the authors, editors, printers, and publishers that surrounds the body of the main text in a book. These extra elements form a frame for the main text, and can alter the reception of a text or its interpretation by the readers. Paratext is most often associated with books, as they typically include a jacket or cover (including cover art), title, front matter (dedication, publishing information, citation, opening information, introduction, foreword, preface), back matter (endpapers, colophon), footnotes, and many other textual materials not crafted by the author. Other editorial decisions can also fall within the category of paratext, such as the formatting or typography.

Interestingly, Linda Hutcheon does recognise the paratext as a postmodern idiomatic tool, referring to it as a primary methodology of historiographic metafiction as, according to her, “paratextuality remains the central material mode of textually certifying fact” (Hutcheon: “Postmodern Paratextuality and History” p. 14). She unequivocally associates paratexts exclusively with historiographic practice, claiming that:

*The postmodernist use of paratexts to insert historical data into fictive design might well be regarded as a highly artificial, un-organic mode of doing what novels have always done. And this would certainly be true. But perhaps it is deliberately awkward, as a means of directing our attention to the very processes by which we understand and interpret the past through textuality—in both history and fiction. History’s paratextual conventions—especially footnotes and the incorporation of documents—are conventions which historiographic metafiction both uses and abuses, perhaps parodically extracting revenge for the historian’s tendency to read literature as only historical documents.*

(Hutcheon “Postmodern Paratextuality and History” p. 12)

She (mis)interprets paratexts as merely either having historiographic impulses or as representative of the “trappings” of realism (p. 28) and metafictional parody and misses its usefulness as a defamiliarisation technique. This means that paratextuality, for her, represents the Ecoesque form of ‘found narratives’, elision of fiction and history



and its curation and masquerade as an ‘authentic’ document, such as in case of Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980, translated in English in 1983) which peddled itself as “Naturally, a manuscript.”

However, paratextual material serves a deeper function—it not only achieves a certain ironic tonality that imbues the work but also stages itself as a parergon—a surplus, an excess—that frames and defamiliarises the text even without historiographic impulses. A relevant example is Dave Egger’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which uses paratext (as also clearly indicates it as an excess) to achieve the two aforementioned effects, in turn affecting the reception of and response to the text. The first preliminary page is a flowchart of surplus sentiments, which he immediately and vehemently denounces in the next page as “uncalled for” or excessive (refer Fig 1.2 and 1.3):

Fig. 1.2: Scanned first page of the 2000 Simon & Schuster edition of Dave Egger’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

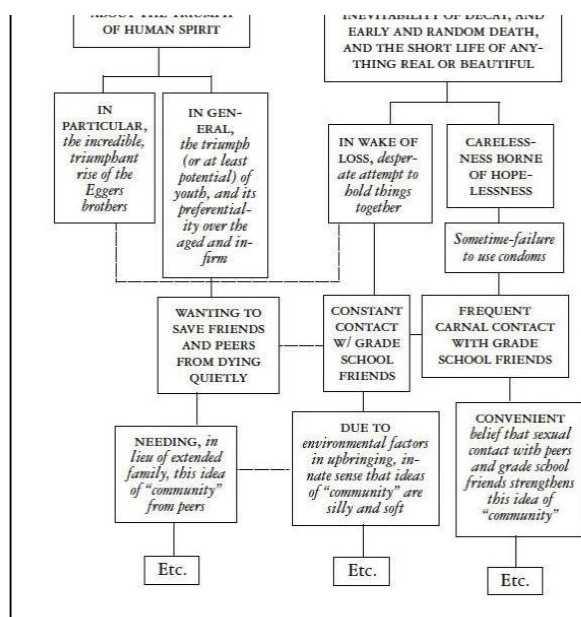


Fig. 1.3: Scanned second page of the 2001 Vintage edition of Dave Egger’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

THIS WAS  
UNCALLED FOR.

Not only is the paratext instrumental in pronouncing the surplus, especially the ironic and emotional surplus, of the text, it also frames this pronouncement in a linguistic model that is extraneous to fiction—as an algorithmic flowchart showing the mechanised loop of feelings. He bends the rules of the language game by providing this algorithm of emotions, and immediately afterwards, disowns it as being excessive to the narrative.

These pages further make each edition unique as there are several changes in the paratext in different editions of the book. For instance, also in the Vintage edition, the

page where usually only the publisher inscribes the legal liabilities of copyright and publishing information, Dave Eggers playfully and ironically inserts the following paratext as both a commentary on the pervasive socio-economic environment and print culture itself as manifest as a product of that culture (refer Fig 1.4):

*All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Vintage books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Random House is owned in toto by an absolutely huge German company called Bertelsmann A. G. which owns too many things to count or track. That said, no matter how big such companies are, and how many things they own, or how much money they have or make or control, their influence over the daily lives and hearts of individuals, and thus, like 99 percent of what is done by official people in cities like Washington, or Moscow, or Sao Paulo or Auckland, their effect on the short, fraught lives of human beings who limp around and sleep and dream of flying through bloodstreams, who love the smell of rubber cement and think of space travel while having intercourse, is very very small, and so hardly worth worrying about.*

(Eggers paratext)

He also energetically and quite (un)necessarily, provides personal information and opinions: “Height: 5’11”; Weight: 175 ; Eyes: blue; Hair: brown; Hands: chubbier than one would expect; Allergies: only to dander” (Eggers paratext). This is obviously both a defamiliarising technique and an ironic identification of the necessity of furnishing physical personal information in a book which self-identifies as a ‘memoir’. He also adds a ‘NOTE’, where fiction usually attaches a disclaimer, to ironically do the opposite—he makes a commentary on the limits of his imagination even while using that imagination to fictionalise his life.

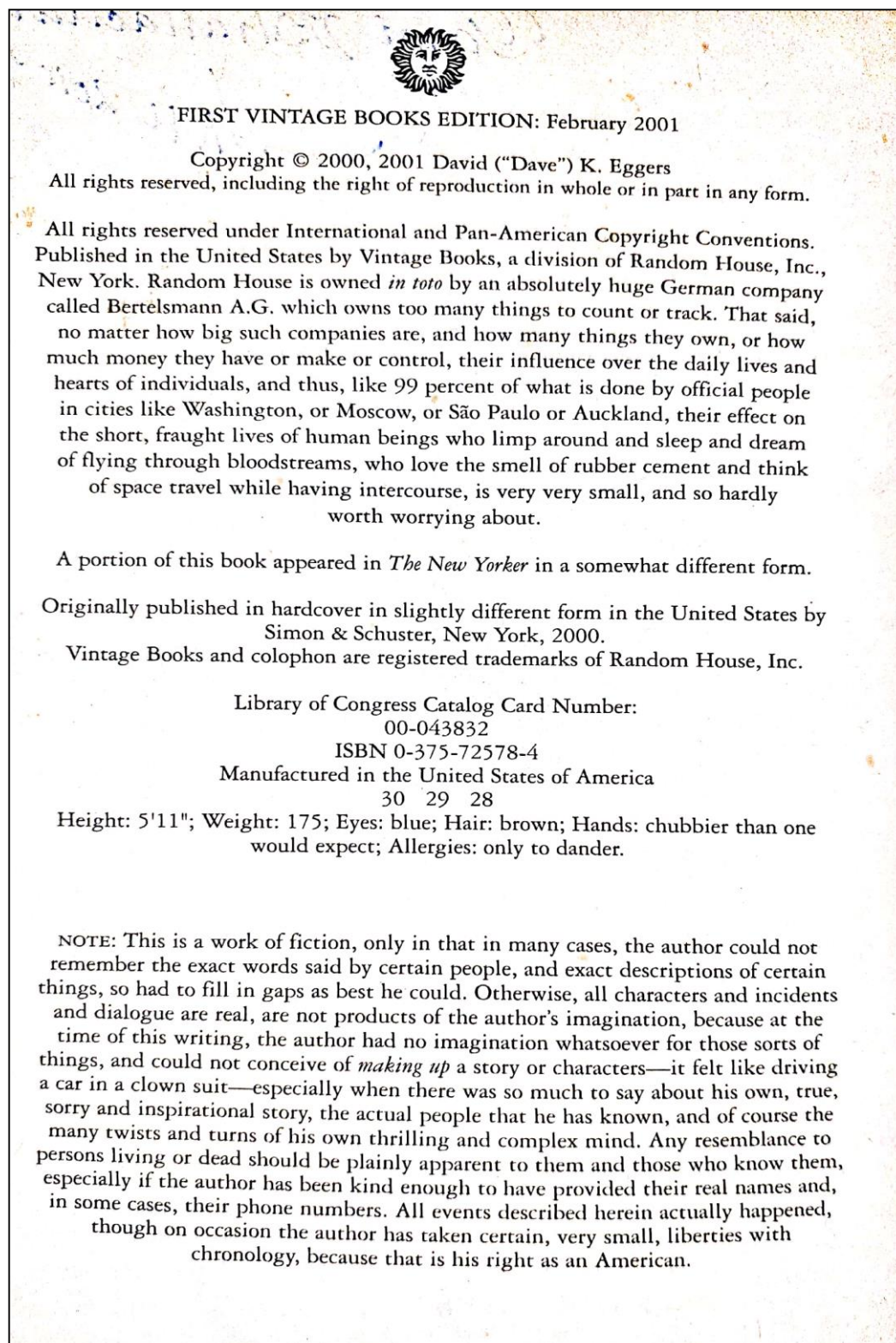


Fig. 1.4: The scanned preliminary page with publishing information and appended notes in the 2001 Vintage edition of Egger's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

In the process, he removes himself (as well as other characters) from reality or distances his life from the realm of realism and defamiliarises himself. I shall come back to this point in the fourth chapter while dealing with auto-mythologisation and its role in developing a sense of self in postmodern fiction. Parergon, the Derridian “limit between inside and outside” is therefore used as “supplement outside the work” (Derrida: *The Truth in Painting* p. 55), and frame it, informing the work with the profound socio-cultural irony of power discourses: “All events described herein actually happened, though on occasion the author has taken certain, very small, liberties with chronology, because that is his right as an American” (Eggers paratext).

Additionally, Eggers appends a ‘RULES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ENJOYMENT OF THIS BOOK’ right after these pages, which, at first glance, somewhat fits in with Linda Hutcheon’s typology of diegetic narcissism. A closer look, however, reveals that the section subversively comments upon the unnecessary length of the “uneven” work and advises the readers to skip most portions. Here, it is the author and the publisher that are in collusion, trying to admittedly trick the reader, and then admitting to the trick: “There is no overwhelming need to read the preface. Really. ...If you have already read the preface, and wish you had not, we apologise. We should have told you sooner” (Eggers paratext). The ‘we’ decidedly posits the author on the heavier side of the power relation between the author/publisher and the reader, and ironically confesses to his wielding the power to have made the reader read sections that may be deemed unworthy, in the process, directing the reader’s gaze.

The parergon, in postmodern fiction, serves an ironic three-fold purpose. The first, that, through deliberate distancing and estrangement—the extra-daily placement of language, context, surfaces, media or characters—it defamiliarises the narratorial subject as well the narratorial world in the extreme. This act is central to its creation, as I shall attempt to elucidate in the next few chapters, of mythographies and mythotopes. The second purpose is to provide a platform where an infinite idiom can work itself out at the borders of the metatext, launching into infinite directions through an innumerable possibility of semiotic systems—like a hive-mind if you will. Its third purpose is to exacerbate or intensify the ‘affect’ such a text has upon its readers/receivers, by both compounding their depth-perception of the text as well as by accomplishing an emotional impact. In this way, though liminally informing the narrative, the parergon complements the *lack* in the ergon, or the body of the text. A better understanding of this phenomenon can be gained from Philip Shaw:

Why do art works require frames? It is impossible to imagine a painting, for example, without one; even the edge of the canvas marks a limit. And the frame does not have to be physical. Art is defined by its institutional context: a bottle rack, for instance, is just a bottle rack when it is located in a bar. If the bottle rack is removed by an artist such as Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and transferred to the setting of a gallery and then given a title, it is regarded as a work of art. The *parergon*, as frame, drapery, column, title, or institution, is not therefore simply peripheral; rather it is directly related to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*.

(Shaw p. 117)

Through this liminal relation, the margins of the text in postmodern fiction continuously inform the corpus of its diegetic world. In an infinite model, one can see the postmodern evolving in such a way as to reverse the roles of the two, and achieve a displacement so as to render the *ergon into the parergon* and vice versa.

This, perhaps, is the next stage of postmodern fiction.

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