Fact, Fiction, and "Reality"
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FACT, FICTION, AND "REALITY"*

In recent years there have appeared several studies—that deal with the points of conjunction between the literary and historical imaginations. Although they vary considerably in their objects of textual investigation, these studies tend to fall into one of two principal categories. One grouping explores and develops the similarities and divergences between two modes of discourse that are routinely seen as qualitatively different in conception and effect. These studies usually conclude that history involves a compositional process more "creative" or "literary" than is ordinarily supposed, and that the novel entails a closer adherence to the object of imitation in the "real world" than is sometimes granted. The other grouping focuses upon works that attempt a blend of history and fiction. The historical novel, previously the exclusive theoretical province of Georg Lukács, has been the subject of some sophisticated new analysis, and the novelistic documentary has also provoked revived critical attention. The first grouping is represented by Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973); Harry B. Henderson’s *Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction* (1974); and Harold Toliver’s *Animate Illusions: Explorations of Narrative Structure* (1974). The second category includes Avrom Fleishman’s *The English Historical Novel* (1971) and William Stott’s *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973).


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The reasons for this concentration upon history and fiction as subject matter for joint study are many, stemming in part from the attempt of some historians to retrieve the experience of the anonymous masses as central to the historical process and in part from the fascination of some contemporary novelists with fact in its rawest form. As recent "media events" demonstrate, too, this contemporary interest in the interpenetration of the imagined and the real is by no means confined to literary production and scholarship. The producers of such television extravaganzas as *Roots, King,* and *Holocaust,* for example, have discovered that the interlock of history and fiction can be a persuasive means of promoting and disseminating certain interpretations of our political and historical experience.

Now we have three additional critical studies which propose to go over part of this fictional-historical terrain. The soil is by no means exhausted; indeed, even to approach the matter of comparing or synthesizing the novel and history is to raise questions about the nature of generic perception and of mimesis which have intrigued aestheticians and philosophers from the time of Plato and will doubtless continue to do so. As the investigation of the relation between history and fiction continues, however, we may hope—indeed, expect—that each new study should both increase our knowledge of the range of texts which incorporate factual and fictional material and at the same time clarify our understanding of the particular powers available to history and fiction, both separately and in combination. There is no question that these three recent works—Morroe Berger's *Real and Imagined Worlds: The Novel and Social Science,* John Hollowell's *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel,* and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh’s *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*—all enhance our acquaintance with the areas jointly and individually bounded by fiction and history. We must acknowledge the complexity of the subject matter these authors have chosen, express our gratitude for the insights they have provided, and temper our criticisms with the awareness that further study of the relationship between fact and fiction will inevitably be indebted to their investigations. But the frontier between the fictive and the real remains an elusive one, and we are forced to question whether any of these books achieves a fully satisfying clarification of the deeper literary-historical and theoretical issues which lie at the interior of the investigation each one undertakes. I propose that, to varying degrees, one common problem
prevents these three attempts from achieving their stated goals—namely, an inadequately dialectical conception of the relation between "reality" and the discourse which is modeled upon that reality, be that discourse historical, fictional, or some hybrid of the two.

Morroe Berger's *Real and Imagined Worlds* belongs to the first grouping of studies mentioned above in that it posits an absolute distinction between novel and history, each with its "appropriate sphere," and proposes to "show how the novel has contributed to a knowledge of the same landscape upon which social science has focused, but through a different lens." Berger's study is useful for its exhaustive survey of societal portraiture in fictions from the seventeenth century to the present and for its realignment of novels under the rubric of social science categories: we are not accustomed to classing fictions according to the sociological themes which they treat—for example, law, the status of women, economic and social class—and to do so provides an illuminating new perspective on many an old and familiar work.

But the liabilities of Berger's method outweigh its assets. To begin with, implicit in his strategy is a rather crude conception of mimesis as being, simply, "the reflection of reality." The mediating consciousness of the author is a concern which Berger does not take into consideration beyond an occasional comment upon the "pessimism" of modern writers as contrasted with the "optimism" of their nineteenth-century forebears; for the most part, novels simply mirror the social conditions of their time, and the author then reacts happily or unhappily to the "objective" picture of order or chaos which he or she has drawn. Such a view of the representation of reality in fiction is not helpful, for it overlooks the crucial role played by ideology or world view in conceiving, selecting, and shaping the "imagined world" which is projected in the text. This rather static conception of the "imagined world" rests, I suspect, upon an equally static conception of the "real world": for Berger, the nineteenth century is generally marked by harmony and confident progressivism, while the twentieth century is shadowed by an intuition of the absurd—and that is where the matter rests. Yet certainly many Victorians evinced anguish at the recession of the Sea of Faith, while many moderns have discovered new sources of ideological sustenance in the twentieth century. Berger's eagerness to reduce the problems of history and mimesis to easily manageable proportions leads him to a variety of textual readings and literary-historical observations that

FACT, FICTION, AND REALITY | 391
are routinely banal. Austen is to be valued for her realistic insights into the marriage market, and Dickens for his passionate critique of the outmoded legal system, while Lord of the Flies represents a significant historical progression beyond the harmonious world view of Ballantyne’s The Coral Island because of Golding’s nihilistically modern vision of humankind as savage, suspicious, and hostile. Such observations are by no means off the mark; but they should form the raw materials for an analysis of literature in its sociological context, rather than the end product.

In addition, Berger’s theoretical conception of the relation of art to life is a quaintly Renaissance one, for he essentially conceives of fictionality as the sugar coating on the barely palatable historical pill: the world of the historian is brazen, while that of the poet is golden. In an interdisciplinary study such as Real and Imagined Worlds purports to be, this a priori generic judgment is injurious, for it leads Berger to weight the theoretical dice in favor of fiction over history in a way that prevents any fruitful discussion of the important relations between the two modes of discourse. As he concludes of Golding’s novel, “While telling an absorbing story, Golding conveys judgments of human nature and society in a brief space. Social scientists are usually much less successful in describing or explaining the primordial, mythic relationships exposed in Lord of the Flies.” If both the novel and social science go over the same ground, with the difference that the novel makes social experience more moving and immediate, then the novel is indeed “superior” by very definition. Berger might have enhanced the rhetoric of his argument by deferring to the superior explanatory power of history in some provinces of discourse—even if these provinces are not those he particularly values. His evident preference for the emotional effect accompanying most fictions reduces the utility of his distinction for either theoretical or exegetical purposes, however; and his offhand conflation of the terms “history,” “social science,” and “science” does little to clarify the precise nature of the disciplines which he proposes to compare.

Real and Imagined Worlds may have value for critics who are locked into the New Critical conception of fiction as wholly autotelic and thus need to be led by the hand to the realization that novels do indeed tell us something about the world they describe. For those of us who are willing to grant Berger’s thesis as a logical premise, the study is disappointing. What could be a fascinating materialist inquiry
into the relative merits of history and fiction as media for portraying and commenting upon social reality becomes little more than a mechanical exercise in the classification of discourse by topic, in which the object becomes all, and the mediating consciousness of the subject virtually nothing.

Hollowell’s and Zavarzadeh’s books exemplify the second grouping of investigations into the relation between factual and fictional narrative—namely, those studies that treat genres in which the strands of imagination and reality are braided together. Both Fact and Fiction and The Mythopoetic Reality make important contributions to literary scholarship in that they are the first book-length attempts to come to terms with the generic and literary-historical status of the nonfiction novel, which is emerging as a highly significant literary form of the post-World War II era. Both books propose descriptions of this new prose form’s generic identity that have interesting ramifications. The difficulties which Hollowell and Zavarzadeh encounter in formulating their theories, however, reveal that the problem of relating “reality” and “representation” which impedes Berger’s investigation does not necessarily disappear in analyses of genres which purport to merge the fictional and the real.

Hollowell’s Fact and Fiction is a modest study which clearly delineates its boundaries and works carefully within them, producing textual readings of considerable insight. Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood, Norman Mailer’s The Armies of the Night, and Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Hollowell argues, are a literary response to the turbulent decade of the 1960s, when “the national confusion and cataclysmic tenor of American life” prompted writers to question the power of the shaping imagination to make sense of a world which seemingly defied previous canons of rationality. The nonfiction novel is a distinctive reaction to the surrealist quality of a decade of urban revolt, anti-war demonstrations, and hippie counterculture; accordingly, it has a unique and characteristic form. Hollowell cites six textual traits as constitutive of the genre: dramatization of scene; full recording of dialogue; stress upon “status details”; adoption of the point of view of “real” people; interior monologue; and composite characterization. By means of these technical devices, Hollowell argues, nonfiction novelists of the 1960s met the challenge of the contemporary crisis in value. They were enabled to develop and exploit a literary form that encompassed the
stark concreteness of an epistemologically problematic reality; at the same time, they could endow that reality with those “mythic,” “archetypal,” and “universal” resonances which are, he claims, the definitive qualities of fiction.

Hollowell’s framework is easily accessible, and it provides him with tools for shaping illuminating textual interpretations, particularly of In Cold Blood. As a means for coming to terms with broader theoretical and literary-historical issues about this hybrid genre, however, the framework leaves me somewhat dissatisfied. To begin with, defining a genre as the sum of a set of textual properties can be a troublesome enterprise, from a logical point of view. What happens if a text contains four of Hollowell’s five traits, or three? What about a text which contains one: is it thereby twenty percent nonfiction novel, eighty percent something else? The problem with characterizing a literary type by means of an additive set of traits is that the definition which emerges is ultimately quantitative rather than qualitative and evades the question of generic identity. This non-qualitative approach to the question of generic definition contributes to the troublesome vagueness of Hollowell’s designation of the ultimate nature of fictionality as consisting in universality or transcendence. Certainly many effective novels do project an imaginative realm of shared human experience; but this projection is a result, rather than a constitutive feature, of fictional discourse and in any event has little relevance to a discussion that purports to be textual rather than mentalist in its chosen arena of definition. Hollowell’s unrigorous approach to the question of generic definition may have utility from an empirical standpoint, but it fails to illuminate the relation between “representation” and “reality” in either hybrid or discrete literary kinds.

What is more, Hollowell’s literary-historical thesis—that the contemporary nonfiction novel is a response to a “radically altered reality”—implies some epistemological assumptions which bear closer scrutiny. There is, after all, a certain myopia behind the claim that contemporary American reality is any more horrific than that of other ages or places: the European conquest of the Congo, which left millions dead, was certainly horrific from the point of view of the Congolese, while the devastation wrought by the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe must have seemed a supremely bizarre visitation to those who endured it. This rather distorted historical perspective, while stemming in part from Hollowell’s twentieth-century American chauvinism, is also related to his theoretical
difficulties in defining generic identity. For Hollowell’s imprecise conception of the nature of historicity and mimesis leaves him, like Berger, open to the rather mechanical notion that a certain kind of reality necessarily produces a certain kind of art. Hollowell is sophisticated enough to reject those dirges about the death of the novel which we hear so often these days, and he points out that “we have entered a period of literary experimentation in which a variety of forms coexist side by side.” Because he neglects to examine the philosophical orientation which might lead one author to opt for the nonfiction novel and another to opt for the conventional novel, however, he implies that the age, rather than the author, writes the work. A less deterministic approach would instead suggest that certain historical conditions tend to open up a variety of formal options to writers and close off others, with the result that writers of one ideological orientation might be more likely to choose one mode while others would embody their outlook in an alternate mode. To see the documentary novel as chosen rather than determined would, I think, heighten the dialectical power of Hollowell’s argument without detracting from its valid historical materialist premise.

These theoretical and literary-historical problems are, we should note, implicit rather than explicit in Hollowell’s book, since the author for the most part chooses not to address directly the abstract questions which go beyond the narrower boundaries which he has set around his study. The theoretical underpinnings of his study are somewhat insecure, but at least his readings are not substantially hindered by a cumbersome apparatus which inhibits the sensitive play of his imagination. Mas’ud Zavarzadeh’s *The Mythopoeic Reality* is more ambitious, for it proposes a bold confrontation with those deeper critical issues which Hollowell avoids. The great virtue of Zavarzadeh’s study is that it acknowledges the dimensions of the questions posed by the nonfiction novel and attempts to formulate a full-fledged theoretical and literary-historical framework in which to place this important new genre. Like Hollowell, Zavarzadeh postulates that the nonfiction novelist, responding to a “fictual” reality, registers a “consciousness, engulfed in fabulous reality and overwhelmed by the naked actuality, articulat[ing] its experience of an extreme situation.” Instead of attributing this epistemological crisis merely to the political and cultural upheavals of the 1960s, however, Zavarzadeh argues that the “zero-degree of interpretation” characteristic of the nonfiction novel is a response to what he calls the “technetronic”
reality of advanced capitalist development in the post-World War II era. The nonfiction novelist is thus more than the timely register of a turbulent decade; he or she is the prophet of the postmodern age, and the nonfiction novel—along with the ‘‘transfiction’’ novel—is the only viable literary expression of a phase of human history which has rendered futile the interpretive design of the conventional novel. Because the nonfiction novel is, Zavarzadeh argues, distinctly new, its generic status transcends existing analytical categories. The nonfiction novel is ‘‘bipolar’’ in its dual adherence to inner coherence and external correspondence, while traditional narrations, whether fictional or historical, are characterized by ‘‘monoreferential’’ adherence to one pole of discourse or the other. As a consequence of this purportedly dual generic premise, a new critical vocabulary is necessitated: characters become ‘‘actants,’’ events are ‘‘actemes,’’ narrators are ‘‘narratists,’’ etc. New standards of evaluation are called for as well: in a narrative informed by this ‘‘bireferential’’ mode, artistic effectiveness is gauged by the text’s ability to retain an even balance between the external and the internal. The nonfiction novel is thus a distinctive kind, with its various embodiments differing from one another merely in degree.

Zavarzadeh’s thesis is forcefully argued, and he makes an effective case for defining the nonfiction novel in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. But there are some serious difficulties accompanying his rather ambitious critical anatomy. First, the literary-historical myopia of Hollowell’s book is, if anything, more pronounced in The Mythopoeic Reality; indeed, Zavarzadeh invests the nonfiction novel with the stature of a teleological apocalypse, implying a vast Hegelian drift over the centuries which has been concretized only in narrative of the past thirty years. Such a responsibility is a heavy prophetic burden to place upon the rather slim shoulders of Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Andy Warhol, and Oscar Lewis. While Hollowell confines epistemological crisis to the cultural ambiance of a single decade and grants that other types of prose narrative have continued to be viable, Zavarzadeh posits that the intuition of the technetronic void is a philosophical precondition for the production of significant prose discourse at the present time. For those of use who do not share Zavarzadeh’s absurdist assumptions, there can be little common ground for determining the literary-historical context of the emergence of the nonfiction novel.

The theoretical difficulties which arise in Zavarzadeh’s discussion of generic identity are related to this apocalyptic historical frame-
work. For the author never really proves that the nonfiction novel is a bireferential narrative form, although his argument has all the appearance of syllogistic progression. Zavarzadeh argues that the reality of the post-World War II era is “fictual”; that a “fictual” reality necessitates a different kind of writing; that a new set of critical terms must be invented to describe this new kind of writing; and that the readings which emerge from the application of these terms to nonfiction novels prove the validity of his generic and literary-historical argument. While it is of course true that establishing the relation between the overall critical framework and the individual work is always challenging in the kind of combined theoretical and textual study that Zavarzadeh is undertaking, the logical circularity of The Mythopoeic Reality poses serious problems. The difficulties with Zavarzadeh’s scheme emerge in his discussion of specific texts, for his readings are impoverished rather than enriched by a theory that commits him to the proposition that “narratists” like Capote, Mailer, or Lewis merely recapitulate, reflect, or edit the “fictual” nature of contemporary events, making no attempt to interpret or judge their materials. As the very titles of In Cold Blood and The Armies of the Night reveal, I would maintain, moral concerns remain at the very heart of the enterprises of these writers, albeit in somewhat submerged form. What is more, Zavarzadeh’s intricate set of neologisms not only requires the reader to keep flipping back to earlier pages to recall definitions, but, more seriously, obfuscates rather than clarifies the notion of “bireferrentiality” which is central to the author’s thesis. For example, the term “acteme” is, according to Zavarzadeh, preferable to the term “plot” because

there is no “plot” in . . . the nonfiction novel; rather, the “plot” of the nonfiction novel is one with the author’s donnée: he cannot change or modify it in order to convey a private vision through it. . . . The plots in these books are shaped by the same forces that mold actuality. . . . Therefore I shall use the term “actemes”—the result of the configuration of experiential events—instead of “plot” to describe the open pattern of situations in the nonfiction novel.

Why not simply call an “acteme” an “historical event,” and be done with it? Upon close scrutiny, we find that the great number of Zavarzadeh’s seemingly rigorous critical coinages are simply terms used to describe a “real” narrative element which is being treated in
an "artistic" manner. Yet when Zavarzadeh attempts to discuss the component of "fictiveness" which endows these actemes with their bipolar referentiality, his vocabulary becomes commensurately non-scientific and imprecise. To wit—"The intermingling of the facts and the dark fiction which oozes from them in Hiroshima establishes the double modes of the narrative." Words like "ooze," "eerie," "dark," and "preternatural" must appear several dozen times in Zavarzadeh's textual exegeses. Upon finishing The Mythopoetic Reality, the reader is left with the distinct impression that the author has taken a rather roundabout path to assert that the nonfiction novel is a "reality-referring" or "historical" document which has simply utilized many of the techniques routinely associated with fiction in order to convey a subject matter which is peculiarly grotesque or difficult to conceive.

While Zavarzadeh approaches the problem of the relationship between historicity and fictionality from a distinctly absurdist philosophical standpoint, his critical framework is not so far removed from that of Hollowell or of Berger as it might first appear. For implicit in the strategy of all three is the assumption that history—as both real events and the discourse modeled upon those events—is lacking in a pattern of meaningfulness which it is the job of mimesis to supply. Zavarzadeh, Hollowell, and Berger differ simply in the epistemological status which they attach to this transforming power of the fictional imagination—Berger resting content with a rather mechanical materialist notion that fiction inevitably mirrors an objective reality; Zavarzadeh implying that the projection of absurdist consciousness in fact constitutes the reality to be represented; Hollowell alternately advocating the primacy of reality and imagination in the mimetic process but theoretically committing himself to neither.

Because Zavarzadeh initially seems to promise so much, his is perhaps the most disappointing of the three books. A theory of the nonfiction novel, and of the generic identity of other such mixed narrative modes, is, after all, badly needed. The studies of Berger and Hollowell reveal the vacuum that is left when critics choose to oversimplify or ignore the broader theoretical issues which any study of such questions must implicitly raise. What I hope to have suggested is that a workable theory of the relationship between history and fiction, whether in discrete or blended modes, must avoid certain philosophical and historical clichés if it is to be perspicuous in its own right as well as instrumental for textual
exegesis. And at the heart of such an investigation must be a
definition of mimesis which stringently differentiates between those
qualities which are characteristic of all narrative discourse and those
which are the province of history or fiction, respectively. If such a
distinction is formulated and preserved, then there will be no
necessity for a priori arguments which assume the inherent
superiority of one mode of discourse over the other. The question of
generic identity, in separate or hybrid genres, can then emerge as an
inquiry into the distinct powers inherent in different kinds of writing;
the question of literary-historical significance can then be discussed
in the context of the range of formal options available to writers who
project varying philosophical values and respond to varying
historical situations. Berger, Hollowell, and Zavarzadeh have set up
guideposts for venturing into this critical terrain and have proposed
charts to delineate the broad configurations of the important zones of
inquiry; but, to borrow the words of Auden, we must acknowledge
that, thus far, the rich interior is still unexplored.

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