Neurotic Narrative: Metafiction and Object-Relations Theory

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Introduction

At a minimal level, all psychoanalytic definitions of narcissism refer to the turning back of the self upon itself. This defining quality of narcissism clearly resonates with the self-reflexive turn of metafictional literature and has paved the way for a rather loose and often pejorative invocation of the term “narcissistic” to characterize metafiction as a genre. These “narcissistic narratives,” to use Hutcheon’s phrase, are denigrated by some for their excessive enchantment with the textual web of tiresome antics that comprises their solipsistic self-absorption. John Barth, probably the pre-eminent American metafictionist of the contemporary period, is clearly aware that his metafictional work will alienate some readers when he quips only half ironically “Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness” (1968, 110). In contrast, a critical study such as Hutcheon’s Narcissistic Narrative (1984) valorizes the epistemological and ontological implications that arise from the relentless scrutiny of narrative
codes and literary conventions in metafiction. While Hutcheon's ground-
breaking study displays a clear awareness of both the pejorative connotations
and the psychoanalytic implications of the term "narcissism," Narcissistic
Narrative declines to examine with any rigor the potential relationship
between the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism and the literary genre of
metafiction. Instead, Hutcheon argues that "These psychological associations
[of narcissism], while likely inevitable, are here, however, irrelevant in that it
is the narrative text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissis-
tic" (1984, 1). Hutcheon appears unable to conceive of how narcissism can be
anything other than a means of diagnosing the authorial psyche; by refusing
this easy gambit, Hutcheon neatly avoids the theoretical pitfalls that accom-
pany such authorial psycho-pathologizing. But her refusal also reveals a cer-
tain limitation in theoretical scope: an unwillingness to stretch the parameters
of the possible relationship between psychoanalytic inquiry and literature.

In the following discussion, I propose to take up where Hutcheon leaves
off by examining how various psychoanalytic models of narcissism can pro-
ductively illuminate some of the features of metafictional literature. At the
basis of this discussion lies the assertion that the libidinal economies of nar-
cissistic personalities provide models for the consideration of metafictional
texts. By developing these models in conjunction with some tools of narra-
tology, and by exploring the implications that arise when these models are
placed in conjunction with a handful contemporary American metafictional
works, this discussion will not only examine the textual economies of
metafictional texts in the light of psychoanalytical theories, but it will also
refract some of the thematic concerns of metafiction through that same psy-
choanalytical and narratological lens. In so doing, "narcissism" is developed
from a pejorative epithet into a new tool for the examination and under-
standing of metafictional texts.

The implications of this approach have direct bearing on how we can
read and understand the implications of metafiction. The predominantly
Formalist approach to metafiction tends to marginalize what Fredric
Jameson would identify as "the political" dimension of metafictional novels.
When these Formalist analyses approach the political dimension of metafic-
tional textuality, they do so almost exclusively through the lens of Russian
Formalism and, in particular, through the concept of defamiliarization. For
example, Waugh notes how the exposure of literary codes and conventions
in metafiction leads to a quasi-Marxist process of demystification. She asserts
that the narrative innovations of metafiction self-consciously examine their
own construction, and in so doing, "explore the possible fictionality of the
world outside the literary fictional text" (1984, 2). Because metafiction offers
"extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience
of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems” (9)—a point that is echoed by others (see Hutcheon 1984, 24; Imhof 1986, 98; Boyd 1983, 26)—readers of metafiction are invited, though not compelled, to question how their own worlds are similar textually. Textuality is ubiquitous because “reading and writing belong to the processes of ‘life’ as much as they do to those of ‘art’” (Hutcheon 1984, 5).

While the relationship between metafiction, defamiliarization, and the consequent demystification of social reality has often been noted, the potential to glimpse a wider interpretive vista beyond the limit of defamiliarization is opened up when metafiction is placed in conjunction with models of narcissism. By examining in detail the connections between narcissism and metafiction, this discussion attempts to extend the critical significance of metafiction beyond the limit of defamiliarization. This is achieved by illustrating how metafiction can emerge as a potent means of cultural contestation in which the narrative strategies of metafictional texts operate to assert dissident cultural values. In particular, the elements of aggression and idealization that define narcissism in object-relations theory can be transposed into a critical typology that concisely expresses the primary narrative impulses that metafictional texts tend to erect within their own narrative matrices. When these are articulated in terms of aggression and idealization, the narrative strategies of metafictional become potent vehicles for the assertion of dissident cultural values which also embody profound epistemological insights into the adequacy of narrative as a representational medium. These insights can be read in terms of object-relations theories of narcissism primarily because metafictional texts tend to erect narrative structures that correspond to narcissistic paradigms of splitting.

The models of narcissism that are invoked in this discussion are limited neither to Freud nor to Lacan. Rather, the object-relations theories of Melanie Klein, Heinz Kohut, and Otto Kernberg occupy a more central role in the outline of the proposed relationship between metafiction and narcissism. The prominence of object-relations theories of narcissism in this discussion is due to their tremendous potential to illuminate the process of splitting that creates the atypical plot structure and the thematization of the reading process in many metafictional works.

**Narcissism in Object-Relations Theory**

Object-relations theory focuses on the dynamic relationship between a subject and the subject's significant objects, where an object is anything or anyone—either real or in fantasy—that is libidinally cathected by the subject (Laplanche and Pontalis 1971, 273–76). These object-relationships are determined by drives and defenses and are expressed through libidinal cathexis.

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Although contemporary theories of narcissism are, to varying degrees, indebted to Freud's 1914 paper "On Narcissism: An Introduction," object-relations theorists such as Melanie Klein have adapted and sometimes modified aspects of Freudian theory in order to develop and expand their unique theories of narcissism. Klein's work is clearly influenced by Freudian drive-theory because she develops the relationship of instinct to objects within the larger context of Freud's late metapsychology. In particular, Klein postulates the prevalence, if not the predominance, of aggressive and loving impulses in the infant which directly correlate to the forces of Thanatos and Eros that Freud posits in his late work, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." The infant, in Klein's view, is suspended in a field that is traversed by these two forces, and the ambivalent nature of this situation directly affects the infant's relationship to its primary object: the breast. Klein speculates that the frustration and pleasure that the breast elicits from the child reinforce the tension of hate and love that characterizes Thanatos and Eros. Thus, the child hates the breast that withdraws from it and loves the breast that feeds it. The incompatibility between these two views of the same object leads the infant to perform a characteristic defensive strategy identified by Klein: splitting. The child splits the object of the breast into part-objects that are either wholly good—the loved breast that feeds—or are wholly bad—the hated breast that withdraws. This defensive maneuver protects the infant from the anxiety that results from having to direct aggressive and destructive impulses toward an object that is simultaneously loved and cherished. The fundamental ambivalence of Kleinian object-relations captures the two poles of aggression and idealization that inform subsequent theories of narcissism.

This rudimentary outline of the role of splitting within the basic tenets of Kleinian object-relations theory does not shed much light on this issue of narcissism. However, when Klein approaches the topic of narcissism, splitting will partly define narcissism in her theory. Klein's formulation of narcissism challenges the Freudian model by collapsing the distinction between primary and secondary narcissism. "For Klein all narcissism is what Freud came to call 'secondary narcissism': a libidinal cathectic of the ego stemming from its identification with former libidinal objects" (Smith 1988, 306). Klein admits that "this hypothesis contradicts Freud's concept of auto-erotic and narcissistic stages which preclude an object-relationship" (1952, 51) because in Klein's theory, "there is no mental process that does not involve objects, external or internal; in other words, object-relations are at the centre of emotional life" (53). The objectless state of primary narcissism as it is described by Freud has no place in Kleinian theory. Accordingly, Klein supplants the Freudian narcissistic stages with narcissistic states that are defined in terms of pathological patterns of object-relations in which splitting predominates. The notion that
primitive forms of object-relations, which characterize narcissistic states, predominate in states of psychopathology is one of the primary legacies that Klein bestowed upon her followers. This focus leads figures such as Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg, who are the most prominent object-relations theorists of the late twentieth-century, to focus on the pathological forms of object-relations in their writings on narcissism.

The Self Psychology of Kohut is clearly indebted to Klein. This relationship is revealed when Kohut argues that “some of the most intense narcissistic experiences relate to objects” (1971, xiv) and are manifest in the process of splitting. But one of Kohut’s most fertile innovations in the theorization of narcissism was to note how pathological forms of narcissistic object-relations are activated in the analytic transference. He argues, in fact, that the emergence of these characteristic transferences is “one of the best and most reliable diagnostic signs” (4) of narcissism. Kohut isolates two categories of transference neuroses—the mirroring transference and the idealizing transference—which correspond respectively to the mobilization of what he calls the archaic idealized parent imago and the archaic grandiose self. While the introduction of Kohut’s jargon may not be immediately illuminating, the nature of these transferences is actually relatively straightforward, and both rely upon patterns of idealization.

In the idealizing transference, the analyst is invested with all the perfection of the idealized parent imago whereas, in contrast, the analysand is empty and without value unless she or he is associated with the idealized analyst. We might think of this as the “You are great; I am nothing” transference. The idealizing transference serves the narcissistic needs of the analysand by saving “a part of the lost experience of primary narcissism [i.e., the idealized parent imago] assigning it to an archaic, rudimentary (transitional) self-object [the analyst]” (Kohut 1971, 37). In the mirroring transference—which is further sub-divided into the three distinct configurations of merger, alter-ego or twinship, and mirror (114)—the analyst is experienced as an extension of the archaic grandiose self of the analysand. We might think of this as the “You are great; I am great” transference. The analysand identifies with the perfection that she or he projects on to the analyst, but the analysand does not experience the analyst as a separate person. The analyst becomes what Kohut calls a selfobject that has no autonomy; the analyst exists only as an extension of the self of the analysand.

Following Kohut, Otto Kernberg has now emerged as the foremost commentator on the issue of narcissism in contemporary object-relations theory. Kernberg shares Kohut’s attention to object-relations but differs from Kohut by maintaining a greater degree of fidelity to Freudian and to Kleinian drive theory. This double fidelity is most clearly displayed in
Kernberg’s attention to the aggressive impulses that emerge within the context of the analytic transference. Kernberg isolates an aggressive type of transference which is best described in terms of a relationship to a “lavatory analyst.” We might think of this as the “You are nothing; I am great” transference. The idealized self-image of the narcissist will not permit him or her to recognize any value in the contributions of the analyst because such a recognition would force an admission of the illusory grandiosity and self-sufficiency of the analysand’s narcissistic self-image. This, in turn, would provoke unbearable envy of the analyst. In order to defend against this envy, the analysand constantly frustrates the progress of analysis by devaluing the contributions of the analyst and by using the analyst as a “lavatory” into which all aggressive and envious impulses are discharged: “The relationship to a ‘lavatory analyst’ is extremely gratifying to the narcissistic patient because everything unpleasant is discharged into the analyst, and the patient attributes to himself everything good that comes from the relationship” (Kernberg 1984, 180).

Kernberg’s formulation of an aggressive lavatory transference complements Kohut’s formulation of the idealizing and mirroring transferences, and all of these transferential relationships are characterized by the Kleinian phenomenon of splitting. This cursory overview of the object-relations aspect of narcissism has, therefore, isolated three important factors: the characteristic defense of splitting whole-objects into part-objects; and various forms of transference that involve either patterns of idealization or aggression. When these few aspects of narcissistic pathology are transposed into tools for the analysis of metafictional textuality, what emerges is a critical typology in which the transferential models usefully illuminate how metafictional texts thematize the activity of reading whereas the process of splitting addresses the fragmentation of plot so commonly found in metafictional texts. This critical typology, and the patterns of the narcissistic transference and narcissistic splitting therein, indicate how the narrative strategies of metafiction can be read as embodying dissident cultural values, while also offering profound epistemological insights into the adequacy of narrative representations.

Splitting and Plot

Critical assessments of the idiosyncratic manipulations of plot in metafictional texts usually focus on the Russian Formalist notion of defamiliarization; plot manipulations such as repetition, mirroring, fragmentation, the violation of chronological order, the expansion or contraction of duration of events, or the violation of the logical order of casual relationships between plot elements are most often interpreted as foregrounding the artificial and constructed nature of narrative. Even though only the most elemental narra-
tives strictly follow the structure of temporal progression and therefore have an identical ordering of \textit{fabula} and \textit{sjuzet}, the plot manipulations, for example, of the third section in William Gass's quintessential metafictional work, \textit{Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife}, push those manipulations to the limits of intelligibility. In this section of Gass's novella, each page presents four simultaneous and unrelated narratives of different genres: i.e., a novella, a drama, a stream-of-consciousness impression, and a poem. The resulting section profoundly challenges the habitual tendency of readers to construct a coherent, linear narrative.

Mihael Kaufman and Larry McCaffery note the obvious violation of linear chronology in Gass's work and each is quick to implicate this strategy of fragmentation, along with the other narrative violations in the novel—e.g., the interpolation of a separate drama, prose work, and advertising copy into the novella—as the means by which \textit{Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife} lays bare the device of narrative itself (Kaufman 1993, 27; McCaffery 1976, 22). The fragmentation of plot violates the prevailing norms of narrative structure and becomes, in their view, a Formalist strategy which lays bare of the device of narrative artifact. The ideological valency that may be located within the contours of these manipulations is largely eclipsed by their interpretive positioning of the text as an exposé of its own narrative codes. However, when these kinds of manipulations of the structures of narrative plot are placed in the context of psychoanalytic theories of narcissism, the potential to glimpse a wider cultural and ideological significance opens up.

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As Klein argues, and as Kohut and Kernberg re-iterate, a characteristic defense of narcissistic personality disorder is splitting: the fragmentation of objects into part-objects that are either wholly good or wholly bad. Splitting reveals the inability of the psyche to synthesize whole-objects and occurs along two axes: horizontal and vertical (Figure 1). The most severe form of splitting occurs along the horizontal axis in which the psyche maintains,
simultaneously and consciously, two incompatible relationships with the same object: e.g., the loved breast that feeds and the hated breast that withdraws. The maintenance of these incompatible relationships partly defines the pre-psychotic nature of borderline conditions such as narcissism; the psyche has almost detached from reality because of its refusal to resolve the conflict between its relationship with these two opposing views of the same object. The kind of narrative fragmentation that marks the third section of Gass’s novella corresponds to horizontal splitting because the text simultaneously and consciously maintains disparate narrative threads.

The less severe—neurotic—form of splitting occurs along the vertical axis in which one relationship with a part-object is repressed while the other relationship is available to conscious apprehension. In this case, repression dominates the configuration of the object-relations and allows the psyche to sustain a functional degree of coherence and continuity. The kind of narrative fragmentation that marks works such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* or Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* corresponds to vertical splitting because these texts alternate between different narrative strands in discrete sections. But these strands are not maintained with the immediate conscious simultaneity of Gass’s novella. The works of both Kingston and Tan paradigmatically arrange their narrative threads along the metaphoric axis of substitution which is divided into conscious and unconscious domains; neither work ever arranges those threads simultaneously along the metonymic axis as does Gass’s work. But this kind of plot fragmentation in Kingston and Tan can be read as a moment of cultural resistance to a paradigm of linear plot progress that is anathema in the cultural context of their works; these manipulations can be read as a means by which Kingston and Tan employ cultural codes of narrative in their works.

The refusal of certain works to integrate narrative plot into a cohesive and coherent whole-object marks a potential moment of cultural resistance. This resistance is necessitated by the inability of the cultural codes of the narrative to find their reflection in the dominant narrative paradigms that determine the habitual ordering of plot. In order to assert a different and, therefore, a culturally distinct narrative paradigm through which the cultural values of a literary text may be filtered or embodied, works such as those of Tan and Kingston split the protocols of narrative itself; certain aspects of plot arrangement are retained as wholly-good part-objects while others are externalized as wholly-bad part-objects. Therefore, the significance of the splitting of plot is not necessarily only a characteristically metafictional gesture of self-reflexivity which enacts a process of defamiliarization; it can become, in these works, an ideologically significant gesture. In the context of minority writers, such splitting can be read as marking an awareness of the cultural impli-
cations that are embodied in the literary convention of unified and causal plot structures.

In *Woman Warrior*, the fragmentation and splitting of plot is directly related to the issues of culturally significant story-telling that inform this novel-memoir. The ability to speak and the often painful process of articulation stand at the center of Kingston's work, which traces the conflicts and tensions between the generations of an immigrant Chinese family in America. On one level, and along one of the five narrative threads in this work, Kingston traces the struggle of the daughter—who is the narrator-protagonist—to seize her voice from under the shadow of her mother's narrative dominance. The conclusion of the novel implies that by finding her own voice, the narrator-protagonist has now become an initiate in the art of her own story-telling, succeeding her mother's former dominance in that role. In a characteristically metafictional move, the concluding section of the novel-memoir suggests that the newly forged story-telling ability of the daughter produces *Woman Warrior* itself. In this way, the ability to speak and to tell stories clearly informs the thematic level of Kingston's work. But this thematic reading does not suggest how the narrative codes of *Woman Warrior* necessitate the violation of conventional linear progression. The reason for this violation rests in the precise nature of the story-telling that is embedded in Kingston's work: the talk-story.

The medium of talk story is the means by which, in Kingston's work, the elder Chinese immigrants to America attempt to inculcate cultural values in the younger, Americanized generation in the family:

> my mother told us stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhood fits in solid America.
> (Kingston 1976, 5)

But as the “first American generation” daughter points out, the excess and proliferation that defines talk-story—“sane people have a variety of talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (159)—only confounds her quest to distill what is quintessentially Chinese in the narrative matrix that contributes to her sense of self: “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies (5–6)?” The excessive nature and narrative proliferation of talk-story has effectively overwhelmed the daughter. Talk-story is, in effect, too much story for the daughter and this narrative

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excess is partially figured, in *Woman Warrior*, both by the struggles of the
daughter to seize her voice and by the fragmentation of plot.

*Woman Warrior* is split into five discrete narrative sections that stand as
autonomous instances of talk-story, though each is obviously inter-related by
its common association with figures of the same family. Each of these narra-
tive fragments serves to contribute to the narrative matrix that constitutes the
daughter’s sense of self. But the narratives do not, taken together, form a
coherent story in a linear form; they are neither chronologically nor caus-
ally ordered, nor do they allow the daughter to easily stabilize what and who
she is. The “Song for a Barbarian’s Reed Pipe” obviously stands at something
of a terminal point in the novel-memoir because it illustrates the daughter’s
reclamation of her voice in the face of the overwhelming proliferation of
talk-story. In this way, the narrative proliferation of the mother’s talk-story,
while initially confusing and inhibiting for the daughter, is transformed by
the daughter’s assertion of her own voice into a vehicle for revitalized self-
expression of a new cultural identity. This cultural identity is embodied in the
daughter, who is emblematic of the delicate balance that defines her sense of
a divided self: a cultural identity that is both respectful of its Chinese heritage
while simultaneously cognizant of the material forces of American culture in
which it is enmeshed. This divided or diffuse sense of self is further embod-
ied in the textual body of *Woman Warrior*. The narrative proliferation of talk-
story clearly frustrates the daughter’s desire and ability to find her own voice.
However, talk-story ultimately provides the daughter with a vehicle through
which her new identity formation may be successfully articulated within the
narrative fragmentation of the novel-memoir.

In a similar fashion, the narrative fragmentation of Amy Tan’s tremendous
commercial success, *The Joy Luck Club*, may also be related to the dynamic
and mutable nature of the mothers’ narratives that constantly shift and have
multiple and variant endings: “Over the years, she told me that same story,
except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life,
and eventually into mine” (1989, 7); “I never thought my Mother’s Knot ring
story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale. The ending always changed . . .
The story always grew and grew” (12). Although in Tan’s work particularly,
the fragmentation of plot—especially in those moments that reveal the sto-
ries of the mothers in China—serves as what Genette would identify as
external heterodiegetic analepses,9 and therefore functions to illuminate the
nature of the mothers’ relationships with the daughters, this narrative frag-
mentation also implicates the conventions of plot that govern the mothers’
shifting and mutable narratives themselves: mutable because they do not end
in their telling and their interminable endings are still played out in the effect
they have upon the daughters’ lives.
The process of narrative splitting that marks the works of Carole Maso, Art Spiegelman, and Raymond Federman also embodies potential cultural implications, but it more pointedly addresses certain epistemological concerns that are related to the issues of loss, absence, and death in the works of these authors. The issue that repeatedly arises in these works concerns how to figure, to employ, and to make available for representation these absences and losses. To further complicate the issue, some of the works of these three authors also address what Hayden White would identify as a "real event": namely, the Holocaust. Federman's novels often address, though in an oblique fashion, the aftermath of his experiences as a young boy in Nazi occupied Paris; Spiegelman's work deals with the life-history of his father, who was interned in Auschwitz; the parents of the protagonist of Carole Maso's AV are survivors of Treblinka. The shadow of the Holocaust falls over all these works and challenges the ability of narrative to capture adequately what Federman has identified as "THE UNFORGIVABLE ENORMITY" (1993, 86–87). For Federman and Spiegelman in particular, the Holocaust is an event of such magnitude and horror that it stands as an inassimilable narrative nugget that can best be figured as an ellipsis or as an absence which always remains beyond the capacity of linguistic or graphic representation. The Holocaust stands for these two authors as a kind of representational limit or absence that their fictional works repeatedly approach, broach, and thematize through various narrative strategies of splitting and fragmentation that can be discussed profitably in terms of the characteristic defenses of narcissistic personality disorder.

The common thread of loss that unites the work of Maso, Spiegelman, and Federman finds part of its expressive force in the recurring strategies of narrative splitting that mark their works. The difficulties that these works confront when attempting to figure loss are partly encapsulated in the tendency of these works to actualize the difficulties of their own diegetic processes in the diegesis itself. Federman and Spiegelman clearly turn part of their narratives back upon themselves and in so doing split their narratives along at least two axes: the story itself, and how the story came to be told. Carole Maso also tends to split her narratives in this way, most particularly in the penultimate section of The Art Lover where her text repeatedly questions its ability to capture adequately the loss of Maso's good friend, Gary Falk, due to an AIDS related illness. These works narcissistically and neurotically split their narratives into a good-object and a bad-object: the object being, of course, the narrative of the novel itself. The good-object might be classified as "the narrative of certainty" whereas the bad-object might be classified as "the narrative of doubt." The contradictory view of narrative expressed in these novels is encapsulated in the tendency of these novels to sustain (in the narrative of certainty) and
subvert (in the narrative of doubt) the progression of narrative in general. While on the one hand, Spiegelman presents the narrative of his father's life in a relatively unproblematic fashion (good-object), that narrative is subverted (bad-object) from within Spiegelman's text (1991, 16).

The same holds true of Maso: “I know, Gary, to write it down is to get it wrong. But here, wanting you back, it's the closest thing I can get to heaven—where I like to picture you” (1990, 199). While Maso continues in her doomed quest to install Gary Falk in the small and limited heaven of her prose (good-object), Maso’s text always remains acutely conscious of the failure inherent within that process of inscription (bad-object).

The internal ambivalence of these narratives is manifest in their tendency to split-off aspects of themselves according to a narcissistic division of aggression and idealization. Usually the dominant or first narrative presents the good-object of the narrative itself. But that first object is a part-object which is counterbalanced by the opposing bad part-object that aggressively attacks the first narrative. The nature of this aggressive attack is expressed, in these literary domains, in terms of a subversion or degradation of the adequacy of the first narrative. These subversions of the first narrative are related, in large part, to the epistemological difficulties that arise when attempting to figure loss and absence for representation. These issues may present special difficulties for novelistic representation, if not for representation in general. Consequentially, the novels of Spiegelman and Maso implicate the problematics of loss and absence on two levels: not only are these problematics addressed in the course of the diegesis, but these issues are also implicated in the form of the narrative itself. This latter aspect of their works most clearly reveals the homology with the characteristic defense of splitting that partly defines narcissism.

Although Maso’s *The Art Lover* establishes two part-objects according to a typically narcissistic division of idealization and aggression in which the latter attacks the former, her work compounds that splitting tendency beyond what characterizes narcissism. In particular, *The Art Lover* adopts what might
be called a position of melancholia with regard to its objects of loss and absence. Maso’s narrative attempts to compensate for the issues of loss and absence that permeate its textual fabric by instilling and preserving the lost objects, or their analogues, in a separate narrative thread. In so doing, these narratives adopt a position of melancholia that directly corresponds to the models of melancholia outlined by Freud.

In his “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud defines melancholia in terms of a conflict between reality-testing and libidinal cathexis. This conflict results in the sustained cathexis of the lost object which can be created through a quasi-psychotic hallucination that refuses to acknowledge the loss of the object:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already becoming to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. (Freud 1984, 253)

This paradigm of melancholia is the first of two that Freud outlines in this paper. But the first model is significant in the context of Maso’s The Art Lover because “Spring 1985,” the opening section of Maso’s work (1990, 5–30), establishes with remarkable precision a textual economy in which the narrative structure of the text enacts this form of melancholia.

The narrative splits along two axes—what might be called a “narrative of plenitude” and a “narrative of loss”—and sets one thread in relation to the second thread in a manner highly suggestive of the melancholic position. “Spring 1985” is the narrative of plenitude which opens with an almost idyllic scene of a family “picnicking in the meadow near their summer house in Massachusetts” (Maso 1990, 8). Henry, Maggie, and their teenage daughters, Candace and Alison, clearly enjoy their time together, though the extradiegetic narrator of this section cannot help but to import a proleptic hint of loss when focalizing through her own perspective: “They move closer together for a moment as if to compensate for someone lost or gone away, someone missing. Wordlessly they move to shield each other from things yet to come” (5). However, the image of a unified family dominates the opening pages and is supported by the narrator’s assertion that “They are just a lovely picture” (8). That picture is immediately modified after its presentation when the narrator admits the artifice of her creation: “a word picture of a family really” (8). The narrator reveals herself to be “I, the on looker, I the one who is telling their story” (8) and this introductory scene turns out to be a familiar metafictional ploy of the novel within the novel.
The narrative of the Massachusetts family and the image of family unity therein is immediately juxtaposed to the dominant first narrative of *The Art Lover*, the narrative of loss, in which the novelist, Caroline Chrylser, reflects upon the recent death of her father, Max, a celebrated professor of Art History: “You were elegant, graying, distinguished, with a slight paunch. You were cerebral, exacting, lively, passionate. You were not old” (Maso 1990, 9). Her reaction of shock to his premature death partly informs the desire that shapes her novel-in-progress: “my wish for them: that they stay together” (8); “one wants to keep them well” (7). The events of Caroline’s life influence the writing of her novel and the novel-in-progress becomes, for her, a repository of her desire for the unified and idealized family that is denied her: an aesthetic retreat where she can maintain the objects that she has lost in her own life. In this way, the relationship of the dominant first narrative of *The Art Lover*, the story of Caroline, to the second narrative, the novel-in-progress, is essentially melancholic. The novel-in-progress preserves analogues of Caroline’s lost familial objects in a discrete narrative thread that functions as a “hallucinatory wishful psychosis” (Freud 1984, 253): a wish to maintain an image of a unified family to deny the reality of her own fractured family.

While *The Art Lover* clearly establishes a melancholic structure between its two narratives, Maso’s work distances itself from the seamless psychosis that defines the phantasy of the first position of Freudian melancholy by acknowledging the artifice of the novel-in-progress. Not only does Caroline Chrylser acknowledge that her novel-in-progress is a fiction, but *The Art Lover* is also unwilling to sustain the illusion of family unity in the novel-in-progress. The hint of proleptic loss that Caroline introduces into her novel-in-progress eventually explodes at the end of the “Spring 1985” section when the father, Henry, abandons his family in the middle of the picnic to escape with his younger mistress. He writes in the letter that he leaves his wife, “God forgive me, I loved another woman and made up an excuse to get up and call her . . . I can’t say I’ll ever be back” (Maso 1990, 28–29). This letter shatters the unity of the family and reveals the unwillingness of *The Art Lover* to sustain the narrative of “hallucinatory wishful psychosis” in order to ease the pain of loss in Caroline’s life. *The Art Lover* therefore abandons the first melancholic position identified by Freud and gradually commences the difficult work of mourning.

Part of what the work of Maso and Spiegelman demonstrates is how narrative splitting does not necessarily shatter the unity of a novel. On the contrary, these works illustrate how the splitting of narrative plot can serve to embody the common thematic level—epistemological issues of loss and absence—that traverse these works. Similarly, the process of splitting in Kingston and Tan does not shatter the unity of the novel. Instead, the split-
ting of narrative allows these novels to assert part of their distinct cultural values within a narrative form that tends to suppress the assertion of cultural difference. The process of splitting in these works, as in the narcissistic psyche, functions to mediate the ambivalent relationship of the first narrative to the problems it poses in its own diegetic process: problems that are split-off into the second narrative. But by splitting their narrative into part-objects, these works do not abandon those split-off objects that return to attack aggressively the adequacy of the first narrative. Indeed, object-relations theory illustrates how the psyche that splits objects does not relinquish its relationship with the wholly-bad object; that object is not repudiated or cast aside. Instead, it continues to function as part of the self-concept of that individual in much the same way that the split-off narrative of doubt functions as an integral, though distinct, part of the first narrative in the works of Maso, Spiegelman, Kingston, and Tăn.

Transferential Models and Reading

When Hutcheon argues that metafiction estranges the imaginative faculties of readers while simultaneously co-opting those same imaginative and creative faculties, she usefully and forcefully isolates what is, in her study, the essence of the metafictional paradox (1984, 5). Hutcheon’s assertion implies that the atypical literary strategies of metafiction are significant primarily for the ways in which they concretize, thematize, and effectively manipulate the assumptions, responses, and activities of readers. Clearly, the issues of reading and reception are central to the concerns of metafictional work, and these issues are noted by most who comment on the genre. However, these kinds of observations about reception and reading tend to overlook at least two points. First, a literary speech-act primarily addresses narratees, not readers. Therefore, to speak about how a work manipulates, implicates, thematizes, or actualizes the activities of readers is, at best, merely interesting speculation, and at worst, theoretically flawed. The absence of readers from texts, and the mediating presence of narratees in those same texts, limits the scope of theorization about the reading process to the embedded attitudes of texts towards their posited narratees. Second, Hutcheon’s argument about how metafiction manipulates the activities and assumptions of readers does not address adequately the range and nature of the attitudes that metafictional texts express towards their narratees.

What I want to suggest is that the attitude of a metafictional text toward its narratees is directly related to the attitude of a metafictional text toward itself. Furthermore, the attitude of a metafictional text toward itself can be modeled on the attitudes and defensive postures assumed by narcissistic personalities in the context of the analytic transference. This is not to claim,
however, that the metafictional text enmeshes its narratee within the matrix of transferential relationship to itself. Rather, the homology between the analytic transference and the attitude of a metafictional text towards its narratees is offered here in order to illustrate how the attitudes and postures of the narcissistic personality within the analytic transference provide illuminating models for the attitudes of metafiction towards those narratees.

Two attitudes of metafiction emerge, as they do in the analytic transference, as representative of the extreme positions that metafiction can adopt towards its narratees. According to what must by now be a familiar dichotomy that repeatedly appears in paradigms of narcissism, those attitudes correspond to the poles of idealization and aggression. On the one hand, a text such as Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* explicitly idealizes its narratee by attributing to that narratee the power of mastery and creation: "You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking" (1968, 33). Barth's text, at this moment, makes an explicit obeisance toward the power of the narratee who, through the act of listening or reception attributed to the narratee, at least partially creates the text. Ironically, of course, Barth's text actually posits the narratee in the moment of its utterance and, consequently, creates the narratee by bestowing upon the narratee its textual form. But notwithstanding the fact that the text overlooks this irony, Barth's text nonetheless idealizes its narratee and correspondingly debases its own status as in the "you are great; I am nothing" transference.

In direct contrast to this idealization of the narratee, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* abuses and aggressively attacks its narratee. In the course of an increasingly complex series of footnotes that are indicated by a longer and longer series of asterisks in the body of the text, Gass's text self-reflectively notes the complexity of the textual apparatus and comments: "***************In addition, the stars interfere with the reading, pester the eye. (Why don't you go to a movie?) More than that, one loses count—which goes with what, what goes with which. All this is true, but don't come crabbing to me about it... (Go to a movie)" (1971, np). Clearly, the attitude of this text is directly opposed to Barth's idealization of its narratee. In contrast to Barth, Gass's text aggressively and disdainfully abuses its narratee, thereby attempting to assert its superiority and autonomy with regard to that narratee as in the "you are nothing; I am great" transference. But just as an irony inhabits the attitude of Barth's text towards its narratee, a similar irony inhabits the attitude of Gass's text towards its narratee. The irony lies in the repeated call of the text for the narratee to "go to a movie" and, therefore, to abandon the text. But with each call that the text issues to the narratee, Gass's text posits that narratee anew, consequently ensuring that the narratee will never be able to leave the text and, metaphorically, "go to a
movie." Because the narrative posits the narratee in the very course of its narration, the only way in which the narratee will quit Gass's narrative is if the narrative quits itself; with the cessation of narrative comes the extinction of narratee. But Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife continues its narrative in the midst of these charges and therefore utters its abuse in vain. Although the narrative wishes itself rid of its narratee, and thereby strives to assert its autonomy, that narratee is woven into the fabric of the narrative and constantly violates the autonomy desired by the narrative.

The fact that the narratee is posited by the text and, therefore, always inhabits the literary speech-act suggests that the narrative itself relates to its narratee in terms that are strikingly similar to how Kohut defines the self-object: an object that is not experienced as separate from the self. The relationship of narrative to narratee parallels that of narcissist to selfobject because both narrative and narcissist relate to their respective selfobjects as extensions of themselves. The significance of viewing the relationship of narrative to narratee in terms of Kohutian models of narcissistic transference rests upon Kohut's observation that the narcissist positions the analyst as a selfobject, in the analytic transference, in two related fashions which relate to the mobilization of different archaic objects.

In the idealizing transference, which is related to the mobilization of the archaic idealized parent imago, the analyst is invested with all the perfection of the idealized parent imago whereas, in contrast, the analysand is empty and without value unless she or he is associated with the idealized analyst. The analysand attempts to maintain a continuous unison with the idealized analyst in order to sustain his or her own idealized self-image by basking in the reflected glory of the idealized analyst. This kind of idealization obviously corresponds to the example of Barth's text which debases itself in order to idealize its narratee. But by attributing the creative power to the narratee, the text actually bolsters its own status and power because the textual speech-act is what creates that idealized narratee in the first instance. Even though Barth's text displays only limited awareness of its creative status, his narrative nonetheless increases its own stature in the same moment that it idealizes the selfobject of its narratee.

However, the attitude of Barth's text towards its narratee can also be placed under the rubric of Kohut's mirror transference which is related to the mobilization of the archaic grandiose self. In this transferential relationship, the analysand identifies with the perfection that he or she has attributed to the analyst. But the analysand recognizes the analyst only insofar as the analyst serves to mirror back to the analysand his or her idealized image of power and perfection. In this way, Barth's idealization of the narratee reflects back to the narrative an image of its own creative power. By attributing to
the narratee the power of creation, what the narrative simultaneously achieves is an endorsement of its own performative, creative function as in the "you are great; I am great" transference.

Kernberg emphasizes the aggressive component of the narcissistic transference and argues that the inability of the narcissist to acknowledge her or his dependence upon external objects is quickly transformed into envy of any helpful object. That envy cannot be acknowledged because it would violate the self-image of a grandiose omnipotent self held by the narcissist; envy therefore finds its expression in the aggressive devaluation of the helpful object. The analysand directs all her or his aggressive impulses into the analyst, thereby using the analyst as a lavatory. The attack that Gass's text launches against its narratee clearly parallels the relationship between the analysand and the lavatory analyst. By abusing and attempting to dismiss the narratee, Gass's narrative expresses its aggression toward the narratee that stems from the necessity of having to share its narrative domain with the narratee. In this way, Gass's narrative attempts to maintain the illusion of its autonomy, while simultaneously acknowledging the violation of its autonomy by means of the aggressive attack.

This perpetual violation of the narrative by the narratee is based upon the inextricable implication of the narratee in the literary speech-act. Federman's *The Twofold Vibration*, which stands as one of his most direct Holocaust memoirs, reveals this self-object relationship of the narrative to the narratee in the narrative structure of the novel. Although *The Twofold Vibration* purports to lend a degree of narrative autonomy to two of its characters, their autonomy is invariably conscripted by their ineluctable status as characters that are posited by the authorial narrator. In a typically obvious play on words, Federman creates two characters, Moinous (a conjunction of the French "I-we") and Namredef ("Federman" spelled backwards), who function both as narrators and as narratees in the novel. These two agents act primarily as mediators between the novel's authorial character, named Federman, and the subject of the novel itself, known only as "the old man." The obvious manipulations of the names Moinous and Namredef suggest that these characters are textual projections of Federman, the authorial character, who in fact never relinquishes control of the focalizations and narration of the novel. Even though, within *The Twofold Vibration*, various textual agents are apparently allotted momentary instances of autonomy, those moments are always subject to the focalizations of the authorial figure. At times, Federman-the-character appears to be the narratee of the discourse of his two narrating agents, Moinous and Namredef: "I sit backward on a chair, facing them, notebook in hand, go ahead, I'm listening" (1982, 153). At other times, Namredef and Moinous appear to speak directly past Federman-the-
character to become the “inseparable narrators of my story” (33). At still other times, Namredf, Moinous, and the authorial character himself become the focalized objects of the gaze of Federman-the-character: “We were still sitting here at La Closerie des Lilas, Namredf, Moinous, and I” (45). But as the use of the authorial character “I” indicates, this focalization through, and narration by, the authorial character in fact dominates the novel and is never, even momentarily, relinquished. 5 In effect, the authorial character Federman posits these characters in the act of his writing, even when he purports to be transcribing the information they present to him. When Moinous and Namredf are posited as narratees, and even when they are momentarily given the illusion of narrative autonomy, they always exist as projections of the authorial character and are, therefore, under his focalization and narration in much the same way that the narcissistic dominates in her or his relationships to the selfobject.

While Barth’s and Gass’s text outline two extremes that correspond to the dichotomies of aggression and idealization at play in the transferential relationship between narcissist and analysand, not all transferential relationships correspond to such an extreme dichotomy. Furthermore, various shades and combinations of the idealized and aggressive poles may emerge in the course of analysis. The same holds true of literary narrative. There are few moments in the work of Federman, Spiegelman, and Maso that so clearly idealize or attack the narratee. Furthermore, the idealization of the narratee and the aggression that is directed toward the narratee are often more muted and tend to have a direct relationship with the epistemological issues that are broached in the course of their narratives. For example, the combination of aggression and idealization of the narratee in Spiegelman’s Maus is implicitly expressed in the manifest display of faith that the narrative reveals in the ability of its narratees to order the fragmented totality of the fabula into a comprehensible and assimilable sjuzet (Spiegelman 1986, 82)

![Figure 3](image)

In Spiegelman’s work, Spiegelman-the-character is the narratee of a panel in which his ability to maintain the temporal order of the fabula is challenged by the chronological vicissitudes of Vladek’s oral narrative. But in the same
moment that the ability of Spiegelman-the-character to maintain temporal coherence is challenged, the narrative depends upon Spiegelman-the-character to do so. Consequently, the aggressive forces in the narrative of doubt attack the adequacy of Spiegelman-the-character to sustain the coherence of narrative of certainty. But the narrative of certainty continues in the wake of this attack and therefore counters the aggressive attack by idealizing its own status. Spiegelman-the-character stands as the narratee of this panel in which the forces of both aggression and idealization are at play.

The forces of idealization and aggression in a text such as Spiegelman’s relate to the ability of the narratee to construct or render with some degree of adequacy the prioretic code of the narrative. If, as Peter Brooks suggests, the motivation for reading is the motivation for meaning, then the construction of the prioretic code—the code of action—is integrally associated with the pursuit of meaning. This is because the inter-relation between the actions of the prioretic code partially sustains the meaning that Brooks suggests is imminent within the text. But the meaning of texts such as Maso’s, Federman’s, and Spiegelman’s becomes even more elusive in light of the fact that the events of the fabula often chafe at the limit of representation. The aspects of these metafictional texts that actualize or thematize the internal ambivalence of the prioretic code and its variable intelligibility by the narratee might, therefore, profitably be viewed in the context of the forces of aggression and idealization that partly define narcissism. Insofar as the intelligibility of the narrative is implicated in these texts in its reception by narratees, the forces of idealization and aggression that are at play in the transferential context of narcissism suggestively illuminate the relationship between narrative and narratee in these works. In effect, the forces of aggression and idealization that a metafictional text can direct towards its narratee can circumscribe the problematics of loss and absence that obscure and reveal the meaning of the text that someone like Brooks, and probably most readers, desire.

**Conclusion**

These cursory literary examples must, as all cursory examples do, illuminate only to a minimal degree how object-relations theories of narcissism can relate to metafictional texts and productively illuminate some of the implications those texts raise. What this discussion has strived to illustrate is how the issues of aggression and idealization that partly define narcissism are also at play, though in a different form, in the narrative matrix of metafictional texts. The importance of object-relations theories of narcissism for metafiction can be seen primarily when the phenomenon of splitting is invoked through paradigms of idealization and aggression. Forming these elements of object-relations theory into a new critical typology for the
understanding of metafictional texts, enhances the potential to glimpse a wider interpretive vista beyond the usual limit of defamiliarization. This wider interpretive vista encompasses not only the often recognized epistemological issues regarding the adequacy of narrative representation, but also issues and implications for how the narrative strategies of metafiction texts can embody cultural values. When seen in this way, many works of contemporary literature strategically utilize the metafictional impulse as a potent means of cultural contestation.

It seems somewhat ironic that during the hey-day of American metafiction in the early sixties, the metafictional novels of Barth, Coover, Barthelme, and Gass were viewed by many as marking the exhaustion of prose fiction; metafiction was commonly viewed as the death of the novel genre. But it is clear, some thirty years later, that neither has the novel died, nor has the metafictional impulse receded. On the contrary, since the late sixties metafiction has moved away from its status as the tombstone of the novel to its present status as one element among many that contribute to the dynamic matrix of postmodernism. Metafiction is clearly no longer a narrow literary phenomenon; rather, it has become a widely established cultural fact. The metafictional impulse has become an integral element within the wider cultural moment of postmodernism and has permeated public consciousness to such a degree that the self-reflexive impulse of metafiction can be glimpsed in everything from North American television commercials for Sprite and Nike to episodes of Seinfeld and The Larry Sanders Show. Perhaps the burgeoning influence of metafiction in popular culture is due to the fact that metafictional self-reflexivity lends itself well to “complicit critique”: the kind of subversive inhabiting of cultural forms and institutions that has been identified as a privileged trope of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1988, 3). While it seems obvious that the metafictional impulse has been co-opted by the rapacious forces of consumerism that define late-capitalism, this fact does not necessarily rob metafiction of its subversive or disruptive potential. On the contrary, one need only look to some works of contemporary American metafiction in order to see how the metafictional impulse within literature has become one powerful strategy, among others, that contributes to the means of cultural critique and self-definition within postmodernism.

Notes

1 In fact, strict [temporal] succession can only be found in stories with a single line or even a single character. The minute there is more than one character, events may become simultaneous and the story is often multilinear rather than unilinear. Strict linear chronology, then, is neither natural nor an actual characteristic of most stories. It is a conventional ‘norm’
which has become so widespread as to replace the actual multilinear temporality of the story and acquire a pseudo-natural status. (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 16-17)

2 The distinction between fabula and sjuzet is clearly defined in narratological analysis. The fabula refers to the proper chronological sequencing of the events that are narrated in a text. The sjuzet refers to the presentation of the narrated events as they occur in the text. I find it helpful to think of the fabula and sjuzet in terms of plot and story respectively: fabula as the ideal chronological ordering of plot elements and sjuzet in terms of the actual diegetic structure of the narrative itself. It is worth noting that few, if any, narratives have a matching fabula and sjuzet.

3 external because the events occur temporally before the extent of the first or dominant narrative of the primary focalizor, Jing Mie “June” Woo, whose narrative frames the novel; heterodiegetic because the events are not directly part of the first narrative; analeptic because the events look back in time to earlier events (Genette 1980, 49-55).

4 Whether the issue of loss or absence, often emblematically represented by the paradigm case of the Holocaust, presents unique difficulties to an effort of representation is, of course, an issue that is always under debate. However, the two poles of the debate are clearly outlined by Hayden White in his paper “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth.” He identifies one position which views the Holocaust as a unique phenomenon in human history that is literally ineffable; White notes to George Stander’s comment that “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason” (White 1992, 43). In contrast, White opposes his own view: “I do not think that the Holocaust, final Solution, Churban, or German genocide of the Jews is any more unrepresentable than any other event in human history” (1992, 52).

5 Section V of the novel opens with a brief interchange of free direct discourse between Moinous and Namredef, which suggests their role as narrators in the text. But that exchange is immediately brought under the control of the authorial character when he intercedes. His intervention marks explicitly his role as focalizor and narror, thereby re-asserts his focalizations that have implicitly focalized the earlier exchange: “it’s not surprising, I say, leaning back in my chair in front of my desk” (Federman 1982, 65).

Works Cited


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