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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

METAFICTION AND POSTMODERNISM

IN FOUR CANADIAN NOVELS

BY

JANET E. DAVIDSON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and
recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
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ABSTRACT

Although metafiction (self-conscious fiction) is often held to be the literary expression of postmodernism, its position within the postmodern canon is highly ambiguous: some critics use "postmodern" and "metafictional" synonymously, while others deny that metafiction is at all postmodern in orientation. The works discussed in this thesis are explicitly and implicitly metafictional in technique and content. Operating from a relatively formal definition of metafiction (as an anti-realist mode of writing) I examine, first, to what degree these works can be considered metafictional, and secondly, to what extent these works reflect the characteristics and principles of postmodernism.

Rudy Wiebe's "historiographic metafiction" is contrasted with Anne Hébert's "discourse of the unreal." Although both use comparable metafictional techniques to investigate modern and postmodern themes and both self-consciously explore the central role of language in literature, Wiebe's novel is ultimately traditional in vision; Hébert's work, likewise, does not represent a postmodernist world or approach.

George Bowering and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, by contrast, are both overtly metafictional and postmodern in the fictional worlds they create. However, they achieve their similar purposes by very different means. Beaulieu's work draws the reader into a postmodern, fictional world, working from the outside in. Bowering repeatedly forces the reader "out" of the text, back into the real world. The self-consciousness of their texts is also therefore manifested very differently: Bowering's text displays an explicit, intrusive authorial consciousness, Beaulieu's text, an absence of explicit, authorial intervention.

On the basis of this analysis, I conclude that it is necessary not only to discriminate among types and degrees of self-consciousness, but also to look at the purposes served by this essentially technical manipulation of form; in other words, that it is necessary to distinguish between metafiction and postmodernism. Although metafictional techniques are a strategy commonly employed by postmodernist writers, the texts selected show that it is possible to be metafictional without being postmodern, and postmodern without being metafictional.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are employed:

TTOBB   _The Temptations of Big Bear_, by Rudy Wiebe.

LFDB   _les Fous de Bassan_, by Anne Hébert.

LG   _les Grands-pères_, by Victor Lévy-Beaulieu.

ASSB   _A Short Sad Book_, by George Bowering.

I: <u>Introduction</u>

> A metafictional device or element is one that
> foregrounds some aspect of the writing, reading,
> or structure of a work that the applicable canons
> of standard (realistic) practice would expect to
> be backgrounded; or is such a foregrounded
> element itself. Metafiction uses techniques to
> <u>systematically</u> heighten its own status as
> fiction. Metafiction is therefore more a formal
> term than an historical one, and is not solely a
> postmodern (or modern) possession.[1]

Defining metafiction is not quite as simple as this

formal definition would lead one to believe, which is

precisely why many discussions of postmodernism begin with:

"beware of labels, lest you be tempted into a fruitless

search for something that in reality exists in language

only."[2] "Metafiction" and "postmodern" are exactly such

labels, terms that are used by critics to describe in a

general way a complex set of ideas or tendencies and which

serve as a critical convenience, but which can also be

applied to a wide variety of works of art. There is little

agreement about what these terms refer to, and there are

many other, competing terms: experimental and innovative,

avant-garde, ludic, areal or irreal, non-representational,

disruptive, anti-, neo-, para-, sur-, superfiction, post-

realistic, contemporary, contemporary modernist, post-

contemporary, the introverted novel, the self-begetting

novel, the new fiction, the <u>nouveau roman</u>, <u>the nouveau</u>

<u>nouveau roman</u>, and, of course, postmodernist fiction.[3]

Metafiction is generally held to mean texts which are, in some way, self-representational, self-conscious, or self-reflexive. Essentially, metafiction explores a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction.[4] Patricia Waugh offers a more expansive definition of metafiction, taking it, as most do, beyond the merely formal:

> Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.... Such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.[5]

Metafiction, broadly defined, is as old or older than the novel itself and "is a tendency or function inherent in all novels."[6] As Waugh remarks, it

> ...is not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency within the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion.[7]

Thus, Robert Alter argues that "self-consciousness" in the novel truly begins with Cervantes and the critical-philosophical awareness that "literary realism is a tantalizing contradiction in terms."[8] As Don Quixote repeatedly discovers, the ontology of fictional worlds is essentially problematic.

Metafiction is a strategy that acts reflexively; it

addresses and embodies the tension maintained between story-
telling and reality, and leads, therefore, to questions
about the relationship of literature to the world. The
expression of this tension is, of course, evident in a great
many works (Alter argues that there are metafictional
elements in most, if not all, novels), but it is the
dominant function in those texts which are considered to be
metafictional.[9]

> A fully self-conscious novel... is one in which
> from beginning to end,... there is a consistent
> effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional
> world as an authorial construct set up against a
> background of literary tradition and
> convention.[10]

Metafictional writing is not a "discursive exposition";
it is a "technical manipulation of the very form that
purports to represent reality."[11] Defined formally as an
anti-mimetic mode of writing, metafiction is not necessarily
postmodern at all; however, metafiction, or more precisely,
self-conscious fiction, is often held to be the literary
expression of the postmodern cultural and aesthetic
revolution. In current criticism, the two terms are often
simply equated: the self-consciousness of metafiction,
parodying and challenging the practices of mimetic
narrative, is seen as an expression of the "self-conscious
slippage between the discourses of art and life"
characteristic of postmodernism.[12] There is, however, an
important distinction to be made between "metafiction" and

"postmodernism." It is necessary to define, limit, and separate the two: metafiction is essentially a formal term, designating a mode of writing which operates in opposition to the literary conventions of realism, whereas postmodernism may be called an ideology, a Weltanschauung that has been held to encompass nearly every aspect of contemporary culture and is considered to represent the fin-de-millenium mood of our times.[13] Although there is a tendency to use the terms synonymously, it is necessary to note that metafictional techniques are only one strategy employed by postmodernist writers, along with many other experiments with form which are not necessarily self-conscious.

Literary postmodernism is a "discursive artifact," as Brian McHale calls it, a "literary-historical fiction."[14] The term is used to designate both a literary historical movement, a period, as well as a poetics, a repertory of motifs and devices and an organized system of relations and differences shared by a particular class of texts.[15] Very generally, postmodernist poetics can be described as dominated by ontological issues, in contrast to the epistemological issues of modernism.[16] As McHale points out, however, there are various ways to construct a poetics of postmodernism, "none of them any less 'true' or less fictional than the others."[17]

Many attempts have been made to describe the central

features of postmodernism, but beyond some simple
generalizations, or specific and technical references to
certain works, there is no real consensus about what the
term means. Because eclecticism is one of its central
features, a clear and concise definition may be impossible;
"postmodern" is a term that can be applied to a number of
works, differing greatly in form and style. Postmodernism
is both a literary current and a particular literary code
with compositional and syntactical conventions, a critical
labelling that can be applied to many genres: fiction,
drama, poetry. The descriptive poetics of postmodernism
more or less take the form of a heterogeneous catalogue of
features "typically organized in terms of oppositions with
features of modernist poetics."[18] Much depends on the way
in which the distinctive features of postmodernism are
defined, however, and "the analysis of individual texts
which are held to be postmodern inevitably leads to problems
of definition and conceptualization."[19] As an adequate
discussion of postmodernist critical theory is beyond the
scope of this thesis, I will assume that postmodernism is a
literary current with definite "historical, geographical,
and sociological boundaries,"[20] and any generalizations will
be qualified, restricted and contingent.

My purpose here is to argue for the need to discriminate
between "metafiction" and "postmodernism." The term
"postmodernist" can certainly be applied to some

metafictional texts, and as Waugh notes, "nearly all
contemporary experimental writing displays some explicitly
metafictional strategies."[21] Nevertheless, metafictional
writing is only one of the techniques available to
postmodernist writers; such writing does not, by itself,
create a postmodernist text. If we consider four works
drawn from contemporary Canadian literature, the need to
discriminate between these two terms becomes apparent. Rudy
Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear, Anne Hébert's les Fous
de Bassan, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's les Grands-pères, and
George Bowering's A Short Sad Book are very different
formally, thematically and stylistically, yet all have been
labelled as self-conscious and postmodern; all have been
subsumed under a common description. Although each of the
novels seems to invite the possibility of using these terms
to describe them, a comparison of the texts would seem to
indicate that some distinction is necessary. If four such
different modes of contemporary writing can be put in the
same category, the critical categories are impossibly broad
in scope, and therefore useless.

These four works demonstrate that there is a problem in
the critical discourse that surrounds the terms. Simply
equating "metafictional" with "postmodernist," as many
critics do, blurs the distinctions between these concepts,
sends false signals to the reader, and creates the
perception of metafiction as a kind of sub-category of

postmodernist fiction. Because the distinctions are blurred in the critical literature, they are also blurred in our understanding of the texts that are often deemed to represent these critical categories. A comparison of these four novels reveals that "postmodern" and "metafictional" are not critically equivalent; by examining these texts, we can arrive at conclusions about why this distinction is necessary. These works are best understood if we have a more discriminating critical framework; if we see metafiction as distinct from postmodernism, these texts are more easily categorized, a better understanding of their place within the different streams of contemporary writing can be reached, and the theoretical issues involved made more precise. By making this distiction, "metafiction" and "postmodernism" become much more powerful and useful terms for distinguishing between different types and modes of literature.

These four novels raise an important question: when does self-consciousness in the novel (a feature that is arguably inherent in all novels) become a part of the particular literary code that is held to be postmodern? When is metafiction also postmodern? This question can be answered by showing that there are varying degrees of self-consciousness and that such strategies can be used for a number of purposes. In other words, texts can be metafictional without being postmodern, and postmodern

without being explicitly, overtly or formally self-conscious. The writers I have selected illustrate the problem clearly and make an interesting contrast because they offer different perspectives on the metafictional process and shift the emphasis in different ways; each text can be critically positioned at variant points along a metafictional spectrum. I will not provide an exhaustive analysis of these works, but rather, will focus on the metafictional elements of these works and the contexts in which they occur in order to illustrate that "postmodern" and "metafictional" are not terms that are interchangeable.

Beginning with the established, general consensus of what constitutes literary postmodernism, the different ways in which the distinctive features have been defined can be examined. The analytical approach used is determined by the goal in mind: to examine the critical categories constructed for metafiction (which may be both included in and excluded from the postmodern canon) and to examine to what extent textual analysis can confirm or refute that the novels discussed reflect the principles of postmodernism.[22] The first chapter is a review of the major critical definitions of postmodernism and the manner in which metafictional writing is or is not placed within the canon of postmodern fiction and theory. A more detailed discussion of metafiction and metafictional techniques distinguishes between types and degrees of self-

consciousness and attempts to establish when self-consciousness in a novel can also be considered to be part of the postmodern literary code.

On the basis of this distinction, I examine four Canadian works: The Temptations of Big Bear, les Fous de Bassan, les Grands-pères, and A Short Sad Book, looking specifically at the metafictional techniques that are used and the purpose for which they are used. Was the author using metafictional forms to subvert or deride the realist/modernist code, that is, reflecting a recognizably postmodern orientation? If the author is attempting to break with certain conventions or codes, what, if anything, is being offered instead? The answers to these questions will lead, finally, to a discussion of whether or not these works can be considered postmodern, and to what extent they reflect a postmodern world-view.

II: Postmodernism and Metafiction

Although the two terms are often used synonymously, it is possible to establish a critical distinction between postmodernism and metafiction. By looking at various definitions of postmodernism, and in particular, the role that self-consciousness plays, we can understand why metafiction has come to be seen as a form of postmodernism, and why there is so much confusion between the two terms. A review of the distinctive features of postmodernism as described by several well-known critics (some complementary, some contradictory) will provide an approximate, collective picture of the many unresolved issues within this literary phenomenon, and will help to illustrate precisely why self-referential literature is sometimes considered to be postmodern, and sometimes not. The basic distinction I will make is between metafiction as a mode of writing, a strategy that is employed by writers for a variety of purposes, and postmodernism as both a literary period and a poetics. Using a chart of metafictional techniques, I will illustrate the types and degrees of self-consciousness that can operate in fiction. What I wish to determine is under what conditions metafictional writing can also be considered postmodern, and to suggest why this terminological confusion has occurred.

The term postmodern is applied to architecture, music,

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and visual art, as well as literature, and has even been
seen by some critics as a new episteme, "a force that
permeates all of contemporary life."[1] Other critics,
however, have denied the existence of it altogether and
argue that postmodernism exists only as a theory or that it
is simply a development within modernism. There are, of
course, problems in naming or defining any literary current
or period, but in the case of postmodernism, perceived as
"transcending the traditional distinctions between the arts
as well as between art and reality,"[2] the critical concepts
are particularly ambiguous and unstable.

> We have arrived now at the relativistic
> conclusion that the concept of literary current
> or period is a mental construction, almost
> completely divorced from empirical reality, and
> as such a rather flexible instrument that may fit
> into almost any argument.[3]

"An absolute separation between investigating subject and
examined object" may be impossible, but this is particularly
a problem with any discussion of postmodernism, which
focuses on this very issue.[4] One must attempt to
distinguish between criticism and an analysis of
postmodernism; it is also necessary to distinguish between
literary postmodernism (which can incorporate criticism) and
postmodernist criticism. The work of Derrida and de Man,
for example, is seen as both contributing to and as
exemplifying postmodernism.

There does not as yet seem to be any characterization of

postmodernism that is widely accepted, nor even any

agreement about whether the term should be used at all.

Indeed, there may be several postmoderns within the

"terminological labyrinth," and whether it will be possible

to group all of these views under one highly abstracted,

encompassing view remains to be seen.[5] We must distinguish

between the various critical concepts to avoid the narrower

definitions and to avoid simple category-making. On the one

hand, a great many critics have attempted to describe

various modes contained within the concept of postmodernism

(Gerald Graff, Alan Wilde and others), and on the other,

there are those critics like Matt Cohen who argue that

postmodernism "lives only as a theory in criticism and not

as a reality in fiction."[6] Two of the adjectives commonly

applied to postmodernism are pluralistic and paradoxical;

the diversity and contradictions among the definitions

cannot be overstated.

Literary postmodernism is obviously not a unified

movement, but "a term that serves most usefully as a general

signifier."[7] The various aesthetic tendencies and other

central issues can and have been approached from a variety

of perspectives. Most commonly, postmodernism has been

discussed as a product of "modern (and fashionable) variants

of linguistic determinism," as a result of "simplified

concepts of the empirical reality of literary

communication," and finally, as a reaction to - or logical

extension of - modernism and the realistic tradition.[8]

Postmodernist literature can be seen as merely an intensification of some aspects of modernism, yet some critics, such as Douwe Fokkema, see anti-modernism as one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism. Others, such as Larry McCaffery, claim that there is no clear line between modernism and postmodernism. One of the central characteristics of modernism is the loss of an optimistic faith in "certain verities and assurances which had shaped our notion of what fiction should be."[9] Many have traced the deeper roots of the modernist revolution in, for example, the philosophies of Kant and the existentialists, in science (the Uncertainty Principle), and "in a deeper awareness in most fields of learning about the role which subjectivity plays in the nature of our systems of thought."[10] Given such a context, realistic fiction - related to empiricism and rationalism - is inadequate in a world which now appears to be "an infinite series of random possibilities,... a world unhinged," in which "nothing temporal, spatial, perceptual, social or moral is fixed."[11] Many modernists thus rejected the notion of representation, with an emerging sense that only selective, individual perspectives which imposed a hypothetical order upon a chaotic and incomprehensible world could be presented. For many modernists, art was seen as a kind of last refuge for reason, beauty and truth, existing somewhere apart from sordid reality. Postmodernism called for a break with the elitism of modern art, presenting itself as anti-artistic

and anti-serious, resisting interpretation. Such art simply "is," and must be experienced, as opposed to the hidden meaning or the "depths" in modern art. Modernism was seen as glorifying the abstract, the inanimate, and devaluing human experience; postmodernism represented a more phenomenal approach, celebrating the immediate. Brian McHale offers this distinction:

> The dominant of Modernist writing is epistemological. That is, modernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is there to be known? who knows it? how do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?... The dominant of postmodernist writing is ontological. That is, postmodernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is a world? what kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? [12]

Unlike the modernist belief that art is autonomous, separate from the world, postmodernist art consciously situates itself in the context of its own creation and reception in an unstable social and ideological reality.[13] Thus, also, the postmodern view holds that fiction must acknowledge and expose its own artificial nature, challenging the conventions of the realist narrative, the line between fact and fiction, prose and poetry, and even, finally, the conventions of typography and pagination. Postmodernist art questions and de-familiarizes the things that once went without saying: character, predictable plots, the recycling of myths, realism. For this reason,

postmodernist writers have also drawn upon genres considered
to be sub-literary: science fiction, the detective novel,
pornography and the Western. Paradoxically - for an art
which rejects modernist abstractions - it is apparent that
theoretical discourse is very much the frame of reference
for postmodern art.

> Postmodern authors - operating in an aesthetic
> environment that has grown out of Saussaurian
> linguistics, Wittgenstein's notion of meaning-as-
> usage, structuralism, and deconstructive views of
> language - tend to manipulate words as changeable
> entities determined by the rules of the
> particular sign-system (the fiction at hand).[14]

Attacking or reinterpreting mimesis - questioning the
referentiality of language - is often considered to be a
distinctly postmodern feature, although, as already noted,
this process was an important part of the modernist code.
Nevertheless, postmodernism was seen in the early seventies
as an intellectual and philosophical revolt against
modernism.

> [For postmodernist writers],skeptical of
> modernist notions of metaphor as a species of
> suprarational truth,...the world outside the
> subject...must be restored in all its object-ness
> to its total inaccessibility.... The difference
> and distance between subject and object must be
> accepted, not denied through metaphorical or
> mythical means.... [The postmodernists] deny
> unity,...ontological anchors, so-called higher
> discourses.[15]

Several critics have noted, however, that this development
can be seen as nothing more than the next (or last) stage of

the modernist revolt against traditional realism, a "radicalization of the doubts that beset Modernism, but were kept largely under control by the Modernist writers."[16] In this respect, a crucial distinction between modernism and postmodernism can be seen in the fragmentation of the narrative: although this process was present in modernism, the fragments could still be given a global interpretation and united. The fragmented text provided its own key, a code whereby the entire text could be integrated and understood by the reader. The narrative fragments of a postmodernist text, in contrast, cannot be totalized; the postmodernists seek to deny unity, not achieve it. The only way to motivate (or totalize) a postmodern novel is by stepping up a level, as in parody, or by stepping outside the text, or by appealing to some other totalizing system such as metaphysics. Postmodern writing does not supply the reader with a code for interpreting the text, thus "refusing to allow the reader the role of passive consumer or any means of arriving at a ´total´ interpretation of the text."[17] Explicitly and overtly, postmodern fiction acknowledges the role of the reader and the reader´s expectations in achieving intelligibility.

What postmodernist texts have in common is a sense that fiction must acknowledge its own artificial, constructed nature, laying bare the artifice of the realist illusion, and a "delight in verbal play and formal manipulations of fictive elements."[18] However, beyond generalizations such

as these and perhaps because of the theoretical frame of

reference which surrounds such works, critical definitions

of what constitutes a postmodern concept or world view are

ambivalent and contradictory. A brief examination of some

of the major critical views will illustrate the many

conflicting characteristics subsumed under the term

postmodern.

Ihab Hassan's concept of postmodernism is closely

connected to the concept of the decentered world of

deconstructionism:

> Whereas Modernism... created its own forms of
> artistic Authority precisely because the centre
> no longer held, postmodernism has tended toward
> artistic anarchy in deeper complicity with things
> falling apart - or has tended toward Pop.[19]

Postmodern writing, according to Hassan, includes

metafiction, the non-fiction novel, American New Journalism,

fantasy, science fiction, and the nouveau roman. Hassan

includes the metafictional novel in the postmodern canon

because "it reflects the awareness that all language is

self-referential, even if it phenomenologically follows its

own creation."[20] Fokkema identifies the following features:

> The Postmodernist world view...appears to be
> characterized by the conviction that any attempt
> towards constructing a world model - however much
> qualified by epistemological doubt - is
> pointless. The Postmodernists seem to believe
> that it is both impossible and useless to try and
> establish some hierarchical order, some system of
> priorities in life. If they admit a world model,
> it will be one based on maximum entropy..., i.e.
> on the equiprobability and equivalidity of all
> constituent elements... the world view of the

postmodernists is built on the principle of
nonhierarchy, but also on polemics against
Modernism.[21]

Jürgen Habermas also defines postmodernism as fundamentally
anti-modernist, but condemns the postmodernist's
"disillusionment" with modernism as "a pretense for
conservative positions."[22] The subjectivity and anti-
historicism of postmodernism, according to Habermas,
represent "the negation of art and philosophy" and are a
cynical departure from the "progressive ideals" of modernism
which began with the Enlightenment.[23]

According to William Spanos, "the paradigmatic archetype
of the postmodern literary imagination is the anti-detective
story" because it refuses to explain or solve the crime for
the reader, thus frustrating the reader's expectations. (21)
Spanos excludes those works that emphasize the purely
linguistic nature of fiction as a "formalistic and
aestheticizing evasion of the historical world." (21) Some
types of metafiction would be included according to Spanos'
definition, (self-conscious metafiction), and some would not
(the purely self-reflexive works).

Lyotard insists on an awareness of "the unpresentable,
the absence of a centre, at the core of things" as defining
literary postmodernism, and defines the postmodern condition
as "characterized by a distrust of 'totalizing' meta-
theories, by a suspicion of those grand narrative systems
that once made sense of everything for us."[24]

> Where can legitimacy reside after the dissolution
> of metanarratives? ...Postmodern legitimation can
> only be highly provisional, temporary, without
> ontological grounding. It is local and fragile
> and incorporates paradox. (33)

This illustrates the fundamental paradox in the nature of
postmodernism: losing faith in someone else's system can
suggest new models, but if one has lost faith in the very
system of systems, how does one justify any new model?

In Literature Against Itself (1979), Gerald Graff
extensively addresses this apparently self-destructive
aspect and argues that according to the postmodern code
"alienation from all significant reality is an inescapable
condition." (37) Graff, among others, distinguishes between
a self-reflexive mode, inner-directed to the work of art,
and an impulse that is outer-directed and engages the world,
both of which are subsumed under the term postmodern. This
division into two main categories of what are loosely termed
the "metafictional" and the "performative" or the
"celebratory" is fairly popular. Raymond Federman sees a
metafictional "act of self-reflection," as well as a
creative impulse to "grab things as they are." (39) Charles
Russell defines two main directions in postmodern
literature, both of which "engage silence at the base of the
artwork." (40)

> One direction emphasizes the epistemological
> dimension of the artwork,...the relationship of
> the individual to the environment...[but can be]
> nothing but responses to an essentially
> inaccessible world.... The other direction is the
> self-reflexive one... [which] focuses more

intently on the prescriptive structure of
language. (40)

These are the major critical conclusions; of course, the
actual practice is another matter. Very generally,
postmodernist fiction reflects an "overwhelming ontological
doubt," (44) and there are two major modes or poles within
the postmodern spectrum: "one that has given up
referentiality and meaning," and "one that still seeks to be
referential and sometimes even tries to establish local,
temporary, and provisional truths." (47)

Since ontological doubt or radical indeterminacy is
central to most concepts of postmodernism, textual analysis
tends to focus on how literary works manifest that doubt.
Metafictional techniques and strategies are obviously a
tendency within postmodernist fiction, but it is important
to note that a work can be postmodern without being
metafictional. The encyclopedic, intricately structured
works by such authors as Pynchon, Barth, or Coover, for
example, are classified as postmodern, as well as works
which affirm disorder and irrationalism, whose incoherent,
fragmented texts supposedly mirror the entropy and chaos of
the world, such as in the work of Barthelme or Raymond
Federman. In addition, some of the paraliterary forms such
as science fiction and detective fiction, which are not at
all necessarily metafictional, have played an important part
in postmodern writing. As McHale points out, postmodernist
writing "does not embrace the entire range of contemporary

innovative or avant-garde writing"; a text can be experimental without reflecting the indeterminacy of postmodernism.[25]

In practice, of course, a self-conscious work can belong to either postmodernist mode, although it has more obvious affinities with the non-referential, self-reflexive mode. Metafictional writing is often incorrectly defined as (and accused of) the postmodern impulse of turning away from reality and withdrawing into the "abstract, rarified realm of art itself," examining "language without regard to referents" similiar to the way abstract painters can experiment with forms, colors, or lines without regard for realism.[26] The purely self-reflexive work that concerns only itself, its own mechanisms, (as in William H. Gass, Robert Pinget, Steve Katz, or Barthelme) has drawn a great deal of negative criticism.

Brian McHale addresses these criticisms in Postmodernist Fiction (1987) and argues that postmodernism, for all its anti-realism, is actually continuing to be mimetic. "Where reality has become unreal, literature qualifies as our guide to reality by de-realizing itself."[27] Perhaps postmodern writers, "highly conscious of the problems of artistic legitimacy, simply sensed a need for novels to theorize about novels."[28] In any case, for the purposes of this thesis, it is only necessary to note that the postmodern emphasis on the self-referential nature of language, fiction-making, literary forms and theoretical discourse

illustrates why metafiction is often seen as a type of postmodern fiction. The inverse, however, is not true: the reflexivity of metafiction does not at all necessarily represent the radical indeterminacy of postmodernism. The relationship between the two is highly ambiguous and in reality (or at least, in books) these critical labels are not interchangeable.

As previously noted, self-consciousness can be seen as a feature inherent in all novels, which may explain some of the confusion that surrounds the term "metafiction." Beyond a strictly formal level, metafictional writing is very difficult to categorize because it cuts across generic boundaries, and can operate on thematic, structural or narratorial levels. It can be reduced to elements within other forms; it can even intrude upon areas that previously would have been considered strictly critical. It is therefore necessary, for the sake of clarity, to limit "metafiction" to a formal level; in other words, to remember that it is a self-reflexive technique which operates in opposition to the illusion of literary realism and which can be used by writers for a wide variety of purposes.

Metafiction, at its very simplest, is a mode of writing that has a subversive function coupled with a realistic function that implies, or reaches for, a greater verisimilitude than that of its targeted code: the conventions of realism. (In this context, "realism" refers not only to the literary code systematized in the nineteenth

century, but to the non-historical, referential transcription of "reality." Thus, Cervantes' Don Quixote, Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Diderot's Jacques le Fataliste, for example, are metafictional novels - self-consciously emphasizing the artifice of their fictionality - even though these works were written before the conventions of realism were formalized.) As a critical reworking or revising, metafiction involves a change of level, Hegel's Aufhebung, the "step up" in thinking which forces the reader to read on a different level but which does not remove the targeted concepts. Metafiction, like parody, attempts to undermine the referential illusion and is therefore implicitly trying to redefine what is real. The success of such an attempt depends on activating a certain knowledge or pattern of meaning in the reader; thus, there is always an element of intertextuality which is based, like parody, on an opposition or counter-practice and which can position metafiction along a spectrum from predominantly imitative to predominantly critical.

When metafiction is defined and discussed as a part of the anti-mimetic tradition, it contains the same double discourse as a parody: in order to displace, correct or deride a signifying system or code, it requires the very system which it is seeking to subvert. It cannot be autonomous in the sense of first order semiotics. "Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them"; indeed, such

conventions provide the norm, "the background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves."[29]

> Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly 'objective' facts..., but to the language of the realistic novel....[It] self-consciously sets its individual _parole_ against the _langue_...of the novel tradition,...setting the mirror of art up to its own linguistic or representational structures.[30]

At an elementary level, metafiction is defined as a mode of writing, a relational concept involving an element of incongruity. This type of metafiction is not, therefore, addressing "reality" on the same level as a work which attempts to be self-conscious about itself or to explore a theory of literature through itself.

Self-conscious fiction, writing about writing, is the most overt kind of metafiction, but it is only one aspect of it. A fully self-conscious novel consistently presents itself as an authorial construct. There are, however, various types and degrees of metafictional writing. The metafictional device that points or refers to itself (self-reflexive) and/or to the reader and the world (self-conscious) must have some significant weight in the novel as a whole for a work to be considered metafictional. "Self-conscious" and "self-reflexive" are often used synonymously, but it is important to note that a text can be self-reflexive (lacking a referent), without being self-conscious. Given this retreat from full "textual self-interrogation," the extent and purpose of metafictional

devices must be examined before a novel is considered to be metafiction; "the message in all fully metafictional novels is at least partly that ´art is artifice´."[31]

Because metafiction can be defined as a technique that foregrounds certain elements of a novel which mimetic writing would hide or leave in the background, the metafictional elements of a work can be systematically surveyed to see what part they play in the overall structure of a work. In other words, it is possible to determine the degree of metafictionality of a text by examining the metafictional elements in relation to the practices of mimetic writing. To examine the metafictional methods in the works selected, I will use the chart proposed by Sarah C. Lauzen based on an extension of the one created by Linda Hutcheon in <u>Narcissistic Narrative</u> (1984). The chart is a classification of techniques, not books, and is meant only to describe the ways in which the familiar facets of the classic, well-made realist story are foregrounded, suppressed, distorted or explicitly scrutinized by metafictional strategies.

	COVERT			OVERT
	Overabundance or Exaggeration	Absence or Reduction	Eccentric Execution	Overt self-consciousness
DIEGETIC				
Narration & Point of View				
Content: Plot/Action Characterization Setting Theme				
Structure:				
LINGUISTIC				
Language:				
Medium:				

Hutcheon distinguishes between texts that are overtly self-aware (thematized) and covertly self-aware (structuralized, internalized, or actualized).[32] Lauzen maintains these categories, but subdivides "covert" into "overabundance," "absence," and "eccentric" as the more specific means by which metafictional writers can foreground conventional technique; "overt" refers to the explicit discussion of such techniques. Along the other axis, Hutcheon separates texts which are diegetically self-aware (self-conscious about their narrative processes) from those that are linguistically self-reflective (that concentrate on their own linguistic functioning).[33] Lauzen subdivides the linguistic dimension into "language" and "medium," and the diegetic dimension into, roughly, "narration," "content"

(which is further divided), and "structure." This chart,
in seeking to define and describe metafictional techniques
and to what degree they contribute to a work's "global
metafictionality," provides a means to distinguish among the
different ways that writers can emphasize different aspects
of the processing of language and literature in relation to
mimetic discourse.[34]

As already noted, metafiction relies on cultural
continuity to achieve significance in the first place, or at
the first level. The reader must be aware (or made aware)
of the code which metafiction is targeting in order to grasp
the point of the work. In the simpler metafictions, the
writer does not construct an alternative context, or
distinguish between the life of the novel and the life of
the world. Simply undermining the referential level lends
credence to the author's own frame. Metafiction that is not
overtly self-aware is a device, or a mode; because
metafiction has some kind of textual referent, it is a
second order signifying system like criticism, invoking
metalanguage. When metafiction becomes self-conscious,
however, the problem then becomes how to re-motivate the
transformed text.

Once metafiction has forced the semantic "jump" to a new
order of thinking, communication has to be re-established;
the metalanguage must reconnect back to the phatic level.
The text must restore complicity with the reader at the new
level, forging a new link, once the conventions of a certain

level of meaning have been transcended. It is in
determining the nature of the reconnection that
metafictional techniques can become part of, and serve, a
number of other literary codes.

Obviously, metafictional devices can be used toward non-
self-conscious ends. There can be elements of fictional
self-consciousness in works that are otherwise
conventionally realistic; these elements can be used in the
service of social, moral or psychological realism. Such
strategies can be used to create eerie or humorous effects;
metafictional "frame-breaking" can even reinforce the
realist/symbolic story intent. A minor framebreak (for
example, the intrusive authorial commentary found in
nineteenth-century fiction) "reinforces the connection
between the real and the fictional world."[35] A major
framebreak, however, destroys the illusion of reality,
exposes "the ontological distinctiveness of the real and
the fictional world, [and] exposes the literary conventions
that disguise this distinctiveness."[36] By drawing out the
relationship between framed and unframed, a text can confuse
ontological levels, and thus approach postmodernist
attitudes.

It is at this point that metafictional writing
participates in the postmodern code: when a text focuses
the reader's attention on its own processes of construction
in order to force an explicit recognition upon the reader of
the narrative codes and metanarratives that construct both

"real" and imaginary worlds. By frustrating our
conventional expectations of meaning and closure, we are
made aware of the mediating processes and codes that
surround and create not only the text, but any linguistic
construction of "significance." As Waugh puts it,
"contemporary reflexivity implies an awareness both of
language and metalanguage, of consciousness and writing."[37]
Metafictional strategies must go beyond simply subverting
literary conventions, and be used to create or illustrate a
radical, ontological indeterminacy in order for a text to be
both self-conscious and postmodern. Metafiction becomes
postmodern when its strategies cross, confuse and destroy
ontological barriers, destroying the illusion of
referentiality.

The critical questions raised by metafiction obviously
lead to metaliterary questions - and to both modernist and
postmodernist writing. Metaliterary writing is both a
response and a contribution to the sense that reality and
history are provisional; there is "no longer a world of
eternal verities but a series of constructions, impermanent
structures."[38] The materialist, positivist world view is no
longer adequate; there does not seem to be a universal
order, only different, competing systems, and the fragility
of our human ordering is a question now raised by most
authors of contemporary fiction.

Metafiction addresses the tension between literature and
the world, and therefore leads quite logically into both

epistemological and ontological issues. Putting reality
into question by demonstrating that any description of
reality can be shown to be a construct and therefore liable
to deconstruction, leads to the immanent relativity of all
knowledge and perception. What we call literature, art, or
life are generated only through sets of mediating
conventions. When fiction becomes self-aware, we are given
a glimpse of the embedded codes, the multiple strata of
meaning, with the implication that everything - free will,
value, meaning, the words on the page - is illusion! In
The Literature of Exhaustion, Barth examines the problem of
the relativity of value in art, and addresses the problem of
authenticity or artistic integrity. If literary art is not
to be merely imitation, an endless recycling of words and
archetypal structures, a writer must not only master, but
move beyond, previous literary systems in order to find
significance. This leads to the postmodern radical
indeterminacy: what conventions can we use to question the
substantiality of the conventions of our existence? Or
rather, after questioning substantiality, and finding only
conventions, where are we left?

In the search for substance or significance, the
relationship between the signifier and the signified is
exposed as utterly arbitrary, which means that meaning,
lying somewhere in the intangible relationship between the
two, is always deferred, moving us toward an absolute
radical skepticism. Can anything be known absolutely, or is

it all a questionable human construct? If there is no
necessary correlation between information and ꓤeaning, then
significance is purely relational. If sense/nonsense is
defined only by context, rather than some innate, concrete
property, then where and how do we draw the line between the
meaningful and meaningless? Is interpretation even
possible? Calling into question the relationship between
the world and the conventions by which the mind knows it, as
metafiction does, calls into question knowledge itself. If
self-consciousness is taken far enough, it points to an
infinity of texts within texts and "the question of the
relationship between tale, teller, and world, fades into the
question of the relationship between any perceiver and any
object."[39] As Margaret A. Rose observes:

> There are only levels of form. There is
> ultimately only content, perhaps, but it will
> never be discovered in a natural, unframed
> state.[40]

There are various artistic strategies that "imply a
fiction that self-consciously reflects upon its own
structure as language,"[41] but which emphasize different
aspects of the same linguistic/creative process. The self-
begetting novel, for example, emphasizes the development of
a narrator up to the point where he writes the novel. This
is certainly self-conscious, but the emphasis is on "the
modernist concern of consciousness rather than the
postmodernist one of fictionality."[42] There are a number of

works which use metafictional strategies to focus on what
are essentially epistemological (and therefore, modernist)
issues, and the lack of a critical distinction between what
McHale calls an epistmological dominant and an ontological
(postmodern) dominant has contributed to the conflation of
"metafiction" and "postmodern."

Definitions and discussions of metafiction are often
taken beyond the formal level:

> Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on
> the principle of a fundamental and sustained
> opposition...the construction of a fictional
> illusion...(as in traditional realism) and the
> laying bare of the illusion.... The two processes
> are held together in a formal tension which
> breaks down the distinctions between 'creation'
> and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts
> of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction.'[43]

What inflated definitions of metafiction confuse are the
different purposes that such a formal strategy can serve.
Epistemological and ontological issues are implicit in such
a critical definition, and of course, the two are not
actually separable:

> Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes
> at a certain point ontological plurality or
> instability.... By the same token, push
> ontological questions far enough and they tip
> over into epistemological questions - the
> sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but
> bidirectional and reversible.[44]

When metafictional and postmodernist writing are both
superficially defined as addressing the "problematic
relationship of literature and 'reality',"[45] metafiction is

quite naturally incorporated as a form of postmodernism.

When metafiction and postmodernism are thus conflated, it is

impossible to discuss works that are metafictional but not

postmodern. We cannot simply say that any text that

displays the artificiality of convention is postmodern.

Self-conscious postmodernism must move beyond the

epistemologically oriented self-consciousness of modernism,

which is why McHale's distinction between an epistmological

dominant in modernism and an ontological dominant in

postmodernism is extremely useful. When Alter describes

metafictional strategies as "purposeful experiments with

form intended in various ways to draw our attention to

fictional form as a consciously articulated entity rather

than a transparent container of 'real' events,"[46] he is

suggesting the epistemological functions such techniques can

serve. When Waugh describes "contemporary metafiction" as

drawing our attention to the fact that "life, as well as

novels, is constructed through frames, and it is finally

impossible to know where one frame ends and another

begins,"[47] she is addressing an ontological issue. So why

not call it "postmodern fiction" instead of "contemporary

metafiction"?

A great deal of this confusion has occurred because of

the problems of definition and conceptualization that

surround the term "postmodernism." Critics use the less

controversial term "metafiction" to avoid these problems; it

is easier to inflate definitions of metafiction and treat it

as a form of postmodernism when discussing self-conscious
contemporary writing. As McHale points out, much of the
ambiguity is due to the fact that postmodernist literature
is often percieved as having only one object of
representation, one concept that it demonstrates again and
again: the "unreality of reality."[48] This is certainly a
recurrent theme, apparent in the postmodernist revisionist
approach to history (and historical fiction), but it is not
the only one. Postmodernism is above all an illusion-
breaking art; "it systematically disturbs the air of reality
by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and of
fictional worlds."[49] Such texts "cannot help but be about
something," and McHale defends postmodern fiction by arguing
that although it is antirealistic, antirealism is not its
only object of representation; two of the themes it returns
to obsessively are as deeply traditional as one could wish:
love and death.[50]

In order to distinguish between metafictional writing and
metafictional-postmodernist writing, definitions of
metafiction must be restricted to a formal level; self-
consciousness is, after all, arguably present in all novels.
When the utilization of such devices is integrated into a
larger vision of the "dialectic interplay between fiction
and reality,"[51] the metafictional devices can raise
questions that are essentially ontological, concerning the
nature and existence of reality, or epistemological,
questioning ways of knowing a reality whose existence is

finally not in doubt. These distinctions become necessary
when attempting to ascertain the purposes served by
metafictional devices; these distinctions also demonstrate
that "metafictional" cannot be equated with "postmodern."

Many of the same principles and tendencies that were
shaping the direction of postmodern fiction are central to
the development of the most important critical schools of
the past 25 years: structuralism, poststructuralism, and
Marxist-oriented criticism. (The emphasis on the
constructedness of human meaning, for example, leads to the
postmodern sense that reality is not given and that our way
of perceiving it is not natural or self-evident.)[52]
Criticism, in this context, both is and examines a "context
of expectations" which surround any text. This new critical
paradigm (developed partially from the activities in modern
epistemology and metafiction itself) exposes the
"fictionality of reality" and treats criticism itself as
simultaneously critical/fictional. In this view, a text is a
human fabrication which human understanding can address,
although our methods can never be tested since both
ourselves and our understanding are also cultural artefacts.
Contemporary criticism reflects this problem, which
"confronts us with blank questions about the nature of human
speech and about the status of significance."[53]

Current criticism, particularly as it deals with
metafiction and postmodernism, can be said to be
theoretically self-aware; it acknowledges and struggles with

the reductive limits of its own ideological bias. The
recognition that "all vision is mediated" results in a
critical ambivalence, trying, on the one hand, to serve a
necessary purpose, but, on the other, dealing with the sense
that to do so will compromise the study as criticism. Self-
conscious art/criticism, existing in complex, subversive
relation to the social/literary system it addresses,
embodies a paradox found in all criticism.

Finally, all criticism and fiction lies somewhere
between literature and reality; both exist in "the prison-
house of language," meaning, they exist in an entirely self-
referential universe. This does not mean, however, that
they are entirely approachable or simply artificial, verbal
artefacts.

> We can interpret texts because texts use a shared
> language which refers, however clumsily, to a
> shared world. We may never exhaust the meaning
> of a text, or our knowledge even of its textual
> surface; but to acknowledge that we can never
> know all is not to decide that we can know
> nothing.[54]

III: Covert Metafiction: Wiebe's Historiographic

   Metafiction and Hébert's Discourse of the Unreal

   Using the criteria set out in Lauzen's chart, Rudy

Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear and Anne Hébert's les

Fous de Bassan can be classified as examples of covert

metafiction. Neither work self-consciously discusses or

addresses the self-reflexive elements it contains; the

metafictional aspect is internal or actualized. Both

writers implicitly focus on the telling of the story, rather

than on the story to be told, and their abundant use of

autorepresentational devices makes these works

unquestionably metafictional. We can count and analyse the

metafictional devices used - the degree of metafictionality

can be ascertained - but we must also look at the context in

which the devices occur and the purposes they serve. Are

they being used to make the reader aware of the

unnaturalness of conventional literary devices, to call into

question or foreground either realist or modernist

discourses? Do they represent a true disruption of

narrative unity and structure, of the smooth uni-level

surface of the referential illusion? In other words, do

they represent a break with totalizing metanarratives,

giving rise to the radical indeterminacy that is held to be

postmodern?

   The Temptations of Big Bear and les Fous de Bassan are

examples of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, which "goes beyond asserting its autonomy as language or as narrative...[and] incorporates into its metafictional form the discourses of the past."[1] Both of these texts approach the problems and implications of reconstructing or "writing" the past. Wiebe and Hébert make an interesting contrast because Wiebe focuses on public, supposedly factual history, and Hébert on private, fictional history, yet both are addressing the same question: how do we know the past? How does a past reality come to be storified, sorted out into the significant and non-significant? These are essentially epistemological questions, examining the accessibility and limitations of knowledge and as such, are characteristically modernist. Wiebe´s and Hébert´s solution is to weigh the past against the present and to weigh oppositional points of view against each other. Both writers address this theme - the creation of meaning - primarily through the use of innovative narrative techniques: there are multiple narrators, voices which become interwoven so that an overall picture emerges that is different from, and yet contains, all of the individual voices. In spite of the innovative narrative techniques and metafictional elements, these works are traditionally modernist in structure and content. Both of these works offer a code or a system by which the fragmentation and disruptions of the narrative unity can be fully resolved and integrated; thus, the metafictional

devices serve modernist purposes and express modernist
themes.

The Temptations of Big Bear

Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction texts
which

> ...self-consciously focus on the processes of
> producing and receiving paradoxically fictive
> historical writing... [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....
> Historiographic metafiction is...overtly a form
> of braided narrative,...disrupting our reading -
> our creating - of a coherent fictive narrative.[2]

Following Lionel Gossman, Hutcheon argues that "it is not
historical reality itself but the present signs of the
historian that limit and order the historical narrative" and
sees in historiographic metafiction a self-conscious
illustration of how "we know reality through texts that
recount it, and...pass on our knowledge through other
texts."[3] Thus,

> ...historiographic metafiction forces a
> recognition of a central responsibility of the
> historian and the novelist: their responsibility
> as makers of meaning.[4]

Linda Hutcheon calls The Temptations of Big Bear a model
of postmodernist historiographic metafiction. Wiebe offers
multiple perspectives on his protagonist's actions, a

tremendous variety of historical paratexts: treaty
extracts, speeches, letters, court records, and then "leaves
us to make up our own minds. The loose ends are not tied up
neatly - even when the official version of ´history´ has
claimed they are, or were."[5] What makes The Temptations of
Big Bear metafictional is the attention paid to the acts of
writing, reading, and interpreting both history and fiction;
Wiebe foregrounds this process in order to show that

> ....history, (like fiction) is constructed,
> systematized and given meaning by its writers and
> its readers. The past is not coherent,
> continuous and unified - until we make it so.[6]

It will be seen, however, that The Temptations of Big Bear
is only obliquely addressing the implicitly metafictional
theme of historiography, the problem of knowing and writing
the past. In spite of its many metafictional elements,
Wiebe does not entirely leave the loose ends of history or
Big Bear dangling; instead, the divergent perspectives and
fragments of history presented in the work are unified by
the meaning and the message that Wiebe weaves through them.

Wiebe presents the story of Big Bear as an epic tragedy.
It dramatizes "the decline of the hero paralleling the
decline of his people, the man of peace...caught in a web of
violence."[7] The Temptations of Big Bear is primarily an
examination of the events leading up to the Frog Lake
massacre of 1885, but the focus of the novel is on Big Bear,
the last twelve years of his life, and the Plains Cree. The

"temptations" to which the title refers are the epic
proportions of Big Bear's situation as Wiebe conceives it:
with the disappearance of the buffalo, it becomes
increasingly necessary, for the sake of his people, to sign
a treaty and accept a reservation, although he has the
foresight (verified by the reader's hindsight) to distrust
the terms of the white treaty. However, the "Worthy Young
Men" want to battle the whites, and Big Bear understands
that this would be useless; thus, he finds himself
increasingly alienated from his people. The unrest erupts
into violence at Frog Lake; Big Bear goes to jail for three
years, and dies shortly after his release.

Several distinctive aspects of Wiebe's approach to
historical fiction emerge from a careful reading of The
Temptations of Big Bear. In Wiebe's view, the objective
rendering of an historical story is not possible because, as
he says in Where is the Voice Coming From?, "I am no longer
spectator of what has happened,... I am become element in
what is happening at this very moment."[8] Wiebe is thus
acknowledging the postmodern premise that subjectivity is
irremediably a part of our systems of thought: the observer
cannot be separated from the observed. His work is
metafictional in its conscious foregrounding of artistic and
philosophical questions concerning the relation of history
to fiction: how can words, a text, communicate or recreate
a valid historical reality? Where is the line between fact
and fiction? How can a written "voice" be given to the

past, especially since Big Bear lived in an oral culture? Wiebe's implicit emphasis is on the craft of making, and he has said: "All forms of fiction are things made (_fiction_), in contrast to things done (_factum_)."[9]

In crafting a blend of history and fiction - contrasting the historical documents with a creative description of several personal realities of the time - Wiebe is approaching a diegetic self-awareness. Foregrounding the _making_ of the story, the narrative processes, comes close to self-consciousness. In TTOBB, Wiebe offers both certain facts and a creative interpretation of them, producing a metafictional self-reflexivity "by this very postmodernist paradox of asserted and then undercut authority."[10] In the fictional world that Wiebe creates, the reader is presented with apparently objective facts and a variety of personal reactions and interpretations of them:

> So David Laird could bump two hundred and eighty-six miles across country to his almost complete headquarters above the Battle River content. He had factual data that would look just fine on the Annual Report, 1877:
>
> The number of Indians paid was as follows:
>
> | | | | |
> |---|---|---|---|
> | Head Chiefs | 10 at $25 | $250 |
> | Minor Chiefs and Councillors | 40 at 15 | 600 |
> | Men, women and children | 4342 at 12 | 52,104 |
>
> Not quite $53,000 for a bit more than fifty thousand square miles of grass and hills. A down payment actually, but complete with rivers, valleys, minerals, sky - everything, forever. Rotting buffalo. (69)

All of the characters are documented participants in the

events described, and the temporal and geographical limits
are precisely and accurately delineated, from the signing of
Treaty No.6 on September 13, 1876 at Fort Pitt to the death
of Big Bear on January 17, 1888 at the Sand Hills. The
historical, factual level of the story is carefully
documented, then elaborated upon and embellished. Wiebe
attempts to ask: what did those twelve years of history
mean to the people who lived them?

TTOBB is composed of several narrative voices and Wiebe
juxtaposes the voices, so that events are seen from the
Indian and the white point of view. In addition, there are
several narrative forms: written records, oral testimony
(sections of pure dialogue), personal diaries, treaty
extracts, newspaper accounts, and public speeches. Some of
the documents presented are real, some are created, some are
a combination of both. Big Bear's address to the court at
his trial, for example, is reconstructed from William
Bleasdell Cameron's summary of it.[11] Meetings and battles
are presented from varying points of view, as well as
prayers, thoughts, and conversations. There are also
sections in italics, representing "the incarnation of white
man's law, the... church, and the
Queen,...characteristically impersonal and rigid".[12]

There is a traditional, omniscient narrator in TTOBB, a
"journalist/poet," heterodiegetic, "revealing the private
truth behind the public event...observing from both within
and without his chosen narrators."[13] The journalist/poet's

voice opens the novel and introduces four of the six

chapters; this level of narrative contains the other

narrative voices and the events of the story. This voice is

multi-levelled and unfixed, moving from past to present,

fact to opinion, and includes a flow of consciousness Wiebe

calls camera-eye internal, "an almost surrealistic

intensification of private reality":[14]

> She felt herself becoming again, the farthest
> tips of her moving out towards the fire until she
> knew herself too complete to comprehend, too
> enormous, each unknown part of her vastness she
> could not yet quite feel but which would
> certainly surround the whole earth bending back
> under her. And there was the heat, it rounded her
> head... reaming the hollows of her head up
> through the sand that held her body... singing
> her suspended while Sun devoured her warmer and
> warmer until she was suffused. Herself;
> completely; open and radiant. (314)

There are also eight private or individual voices, mainly

representing a white point of view. Each moves the story

forward in time and meaning; that is, they do not often

provide perspectives on the same event. Wiebe is not

emphasizing the idea of simultaneity which, as I shall

argue, Hébert does. Most are homodiegetic, employing a

limited, eye-witness point of view: John McDougall, a

missionary, offers a religious point of view; Edgar Dewdney,

the Indian Affairs Commissioner, illustrates the political

point of view; an anonymous Canadian volunteer presents the

military point of view.[15] Kitty McLean, an adolescent,

comes the closest of all the whites to being able to

understand and respond to Big Bear and the events with the same immediacy, the same "lack of distance between physical and psychological experience" that characterizes those passages representing the Indian's oral world-view.[16]

The complex, polyphonic narrative plays a predominant role; its discrepancies call into question the way any individual or group perceives the world. It is quite difficult to untangle the narrators and to identify them in their relation to the historical events and chronology. This fragmented, divergent perspective creates for the reader the same difficulties and confusion that the characters are faced with; the reader moves about in a fictional realm that has no exact dimensions.

> The white onslaught literally alters reality. Wiebe contrives an intricate narrative pattern through the novel that reveals again and again the unbreachable gap between Indian reality and white. He details its effect, that cannot be fought in a battle, nor confronted even in debate, or by treaty. In having Big Bear perceive them as well Wiebe makes him a suffering prophet ... the burden of fiction and history return to Big Bear to carry and endure.[17]

Big Bear is the dominant voice in the novel, the authoritative consciousness. Of all the characters, he alone seems to see and understand the subtleties and implications of his hopeless situation. For the reader, this level of the narrative and this narrator offer the most comprehensive, imaginative and sympathetic view. Big Bear's credibility is reinforced by his prophecies: what the

reader knows by hindsight, Big Bear knows through vision, so
that when the narrative focalizes through Big Bear in his
vision of the coming of the trains (137) and the future of
the prairie measured out into squares, his voice has an
added authenticity.

> He saw then that straight lines of stark bleached
> bones had been spread straight, pressed and
> flattened into the earth for him to ride over,
> and sliced into hills as if that broad thong of
> bone could knuckle them down, those immovable
> hills. As far as he could see, wherever he looked
> the world was slit open with unending lines,
> squares, rectangles, of bone and between the
> strange trees gleamed straight lines of, he
> comprehended it suddenly, white buildings. (409)

Wiebe, attempting to replace the white history with a
version that places the Indian at the centre, accomplishes
this in a relatively traditional way: Big Bear becomes the
tragic hero caught in a hopeless situation, the great man
made larger than life with a "gigantic voice" that dominates
within the novel. (185) To an extent, the voice of Big Bear
does write the book, since much that he actually said is
included, and Robert Kroetsch has spoken of Wiebe´s
"uninventing himself back to Big Bear."[18] As Wiebe states
in his foreward, however, TTOBB is a personal meditation
upon the past, and the predominant voice, the mediating one
in the overall narrative structure, is, I would suggest,
distinctly that of Rudy Wiebe. Nevertheless, there is a
close authorial complicity with the character of Big Bear.
As will be discussed later, Wiebe not only creates a hero,

but a white version of a suffering prophet - a Christian
hero, in Wiebe's terms.

Big Bear has an eloquent simplicity, and the white prose
is usually bureaucratic, unimaginative and cliched; thus,
the conflicting attitudes of white and Indian are embodied
in language, in distinctive modes of speech. The Indians'
speech is generally active, sensual and immediate, employing
metaphors drawn from nature, and although there are sections
in the book in which the white speech is fairly poetic, it
is mostly sterile and prosaic. There is a "basic dissension
between White Man and Indian, which conflict is propagated
because neither race comprehends the implications informing
the language of the other,"[19] and it is this dichotomy, many
critics feel, that is the major theme of the book, rather
than the implicitly metafictional theme of historiography
and the processing of history. The purpose of the shifting
perspectives, it can be argued, is primarily to juxtapose
the oral, Indian's point of view with the written, white's
point of view and really only secondarily to expose the
historical discrepancies between any given interpretations
of events or facts. "Dialectically, Wiebe has fused the
timeless world [of the Indians] with the irruption of
history"; Wiebe "makes us identify with the Indians and
experience their fatal entry into history through their
eyes."[20]

The fundamental conflict which Wiebe portrays is the
"tragic (because unavoidable) clash between two

irreconcilable ways of looking at human beings and their environment."[21] The relationship between the whites and the Indians emerges on various levels in the novel; historical events are fused with a timeless, oral dimension evoked by Wiebe's integration into the narrative of the camera-eye internal and by his attempt to create a living image of the Indian experience and perspective. Wiebe trys to give a voice to Big Bear's unrecorded, oral tradition and to capture the oral reality of the Plains Cree in written language.

> Wiebe attempts, in a very self-reflexive manner, to capture in print and in fiction a historical character whose essence was his voice. He also had to convey, in written English, the rhetorical and ritualistic power of oral speech.... The novel's textual self-consciousness about this oral/written dichotomy points to the text's ironic realization that Big Bear's dynamic oral presence can only be conveyed to us in static print; the oratorical power that goes beyond words can only be expressed in words and perhaps, the truth of historical fact can only be recounted today in self-consciously novelistic fiction.[22]

As far as is possible within a written medium, Wiebe contrasts the oral tradition of the Indians with the written tradition of the whites by selecting a particular narrative formula to portray the oral tradition. As already mentioned, in the world created by the oral passages, there is a proximity to human life, a subjective immediacy in which Wiebe attempts to come as close as possible to re-creating a living experience, as in his description of Big

Bear's buffalo hunt.

> He was the curl of a giant wave breaking down
> upon and racing up the good beach of earth. The
> running hooves drummed him into another country,
> calling and calling, and it came to him he had
> already spread his robe on the Sand Hills, the
> air in his nostrils beyond earth good, the
> buffalo effortlessly fanned out before him in the
> lovely grace of tumbleweed lifting to the western
> wind. The gashed wounds left in the cows'
> shoulders and flanks by hunters they had once and
> then again outrun dripped brilliant red in the
> rhythmic bunch and release of their muscles.
> simply beautiful black crusted roses in the green
> and blue paradise of their running. Dust,
> bellows, shrieks, rifle explosions, grunts were
> gone, only himself and the bay stallion rocking
> suspended as earth turned gently, silently under
> them in the sweet warmth of buffalo curling away
> on either side. (128)

As discussed in Walter J. Ong's Orality and Literacy

(1982), there are profound differences between the way an

oral and a literate culture perceive or articulate the

world. Briefly, in oral discourse the sensuous and the

situational are valued over the abstract. The word is so

revered that the word is practically the thing; spoken words

evoke the total existential reality of a thing. A written

culture, by contrast, can separate the knowing from the

known; objectivity and the abstract are valued over empathy.

The written imagination sees language only as proposition,

never as parable. Big Bear's final words at his trial

emphasize the difference between the two visions:

> I have heard your many words, and now you have
> heard my few. A word is power, it comes from
> nothing into meaning and a Person takes his name
> with him when he dies. I have said my last
> words. Who will say a word for my people? Give

my people help! I have spoken. (398)

Wiebe addresses this issue, albeit indirectly, by
attempting to make the Indian's oral world sufficiently real
through written prose. The opposition between the two ways
of "knowing" the world is a central theme of the text,
bypassing the question of historical reality or historicity.
Wiebe attempts to show that the two linguistic codes cannot
meet, but paradoxically, he can only show this by writing it
all down against an historical background. There is, thus,
a postmodernist impulse in Wiebe's contrasting of the oral
and written traditions, an implicit, ontological questioning
of two ways of being in, and consequently, perceiving the
world.

> Wiebe shows Indians, not simple or weak, but
> baffled. Their reality is so entirely different,
> infused with spirit and necessity, that they have
> no chance for survival. To grasp his achievement
> is to realize the spiritual abyss between the two
> worlds, white and Indian.[23]

If we take as conventional/realist the assumption that

> ...language in fiction should serve as a neutral
> conduit for the content, (taking content to be
> something besides language) [and] it should be
> transparent; it should not call attention to
> itself or distract us from the real business of
> the novel (whatever that might be),[24]

then this aspect of the work is certainly metafictional.
Using Lauzen's chart, Wiebe could almost be classified as
tending towards overabundance (his rhetorically vivid prose,

the flights into the surreal), absence (those sections, such as the courtroom scenes which offer only verbal confrontations and characters reduced to dramatic roles) (21,360), and eccentric execution (the strained and broken syntax). Indeed, Wiebe comes as close as possible to addressing the issue of language quite overtly; he approaches self-consciousness at this level. He explores and emphasizes, as already mentioned, the making of meaning and it could be argued that the power of words, of voice, is one of the themes of this work. "Words are not just sounds" Big Bear warns, and he pleads the court "to print my words and scatter them among White People." (314,400) Yet the spoken word is hardly valued in the white, literate world, and in the end, words are unable to bridge the gap between the white and the Indian reality.

The book ends with a postmodern solution to Big Bear's dilemma: Big Bear enters "the circle of all that had once been given him" (414) and withdraws into the silence of death. One's view of the ending determines the final or global interpretation of the book.

In a postmodern reading we are left, after calling into question the white structuring of history, with a myth or model more solid than before. Big Bear enters a mode of being, a world, where we cannot follow; Big Bear cannot get out of his circle, and we cannot get in, except partially, perhaps, through Kitty's sympathetic consciousness. We do not have the imagination to understand Big Bear, or enter

his world, and our exclusion from his circle is the final message. This re-tracing of Big Bear ultimately alienates us from Big Bear, "kills" him, and puts him back into the museum. The final message of the work is that Big Bear is not accessible to us; he disappears into his own mystery/history. The reader comes to the same realization as Kitty, "understanding at last she could not understand him...not in the least." (388) Thus, there is a retrograde movement in Big Bear, a return to silence in which we are only left with writing, a medium of communication which cannot reach Big Bear. This certainly corresponds to the postmodern view of the inability of language to approach "the unpresentable," but is this the overall effect that the novel achieves?

The ending can also be viewed more positively: Big Bear´s trail to the Sand Hills is often interpreted as an affirmation of faith in the "Only One" and the land. George Woodcock, for example, feels that Wiebe has created not historical fiction but religious myth, and thus, is taking Big Bear out of his Indian context.

> Big Bear takes on the role of the Christian
> martyr; like Christ himself, he...clings to a
> non-violent but fixed moral stance...thus, the
> least Christian of Wiebe´s novels in its overt
> content is the most powerful in its Christian
> implications.[25]

Big Bear´s situation, as portrayed by Wiebe, is expressed in terms related to certain Christian principles. In

Woodcock's view, Wiebe has been unable to separate the

purpose of historical fiction, which is to create a

"plausible image and a true feeling of the past," from that

of the historical moralist, "which is to apportion blame,

signal merit and formulate lessons."[26] Susan Whaley, on the

other hand, asserts that Wiebe seeks

> ... to reveal a central human truth which
> transcends the issue of race.... Wiebe points no
> accusing finger at either race, hence the appeal
> of his vision. If the novel is to be seen as a
> treatise on where the fault lies, Wiebe's answer
> must be a qualified 'everywhere and
> nowhere'....[TTOBB] is not an historical or
> sociological catalogue of events; rather, it is a
> series of mental flashes which illuminate and
> transcend the facts.[27]

John Moss also views this work, not as a Christian allegory,

or a re-creation of an historical event, but as "a form of

transcendence."[28]

> [TTOBB] is an intensely moral novel, yet it is
> not a moral vision...He endeavours to bind us
> together with a place, to regenerate community
> across time, to make the land breathe with the
> lives of people who have lived on it, to make us
> responsible each to all.... To achieve so much he
> may have been morally driven, but the effect is
> spiritual history.[29]

Even if Woodcock's description of the book as a religious

allegory is not accepted, or if the ending of the book is

seen as more ambiguous than the comforting closure of the

"affirmation of life" described, it is generally agreed that

Wiebe is attempting to create a transcending vision that

reaches beyond time, place and race and is essentially a

Christian statement about the common humanity of all people.

The final effect of Wiebe's historical/fictive text is the implication that the human meaning is revealed behind the historical facts, the human side of history is made tangible. Wiebe is a didactic writer, and his book reflects his religious perspective; Wiebe himself has said: "I don't pretend that it's a history which is written impartially. It's written in a biased way."[30] Wiebe sees as the ideal for the historical novelist the revelation that occurs when "a truly artistic intelligence subsumes all that fact for us and carries us with it beyond history."[31] In other words, Wiebe uses metafictional techniques to take the reader beyond one frame, denying the objective reality and validity of written history while claiming, however, the transcendental vision of the artist as a means of reaching a greater human and historical truth. The content of this work is material drawn from history, but it is subsumed by the manner in which it is retextualized and rethought. The final vision which informs and unites the whole text is Wiebe's, and, as will be discussed later, this is a modernist, rather than a postmodernist, orientation.

Although Wiebe has argued that "the line between history and fiction is an impossible line anyway,"[32] he has made it clear that part of his purpose was to discover the richness of the unrecognized Canadian historical past; to recover a past, and indeed, "critics obsessed with a lack of Canadian mythology were pleased to claim his book as satisfying the

need for one."[33] This directly opposes the postmodern view

of history (or at least, the way the deconstructionists view

it). Within the postmodern code, a knowledge of true

history is impossible; history, like literature, is not part

of a knowable reality. In seeking to show the bias and the

discursive nature of historical documents, Wiebe is

postmodern; he does not, however, really attempt to show or

move beyond the bias in his own document/novel. Revealing

the processing/creation of history is certainly a postmodern

aim, but to "think Indian," the obvious aim of Wiebe´s

writing, is not. "He convinces the white reader that the

Indian perspective makes infinitely more sense than the

white view"[34]; thus, he is not reflecting the postmodern

distrust of the grand metanarratives - such as Christianity

- which legitimize certain ways of perceiving the world.

Hutcheon claims that TTOBB is postmodern historiographic

metafiction because it calls into question the validity of

historicity and because Wiebe is attempting to show how

history is distorted and misinterpreted through various

discourses. Nevertheless, if Wiebe were writing from a

postmodern perspective, he would have wished to demonstrate

the impossibility of re-creating any historical reality, and

this is obviously not what Wiebe was trying to do.

Wiebe is one of several writers who have focused upon

the "marginal" existence of native people in the national

mythology, who, "bred of a sense of vast injustice", have

transformed "the history of small rebellions into the myth

of a dying nation defending itself against impossible odds."[35] Wiebe elevates Big Bear to the level of myth, even, perhaps, a Christian myth, and within the postmodern code, myths are to be debunked, not created. The Temptations of Big Bear may be a model of historiographic metafiction, but it does not reflect a postmodern world view.

There is a variety of metafictional elements in this work and a brief survey, using Lauzen's chart, will illustrate where Wiebe deviates, or does not, from the realist code. TTOBB can be classified as an example of covert metafiction because this work does not explicitly discuss the metafictional elements that it contains; they are implicit. The multiplicity of voices has the effect of foregrounding conventional narratorial technique and from a formal point of view, may be the overriding metafictional element in this book even though there is a traditional omniscient narrator. The plot is relatively conventional; certain events build to an incident and it follows a linear, progressive chronology, but the action is not central or pivotal to the work. We already know what is going to happen; the novel focuses more upon personal and public response to the inevitable progression of history.

The characterization is traditional: there are detailed descriptions of physical appearance and mannerisms, and, as already mentioned, Wiebe presents Big Bear as a tragic hero, larger than life as heroes are supposed to be. The setting

is also conventionally realistic: clearly placed, carefully and lyrically described.

On a thematic level, TTOBB can be said to be metafictional in its implicit treatment of both history and orality: Wiebe self-consciously foregrounds the writing - the production - of history, and the gap between a written and a spoken reality. Nevertheless, the main purpose of the book seems to be, more precisely, the building of a myth around the figure of Big Bear, for which purpose the Indian reality of the time is created.

The degree of metafictionality of the structure is debatable; there are no noticeably external or artificial organizing principles, nor is it really a fragmented, semi-disconnected composition. Rather, the structure is determined by the sequence of historical events and the perspectives of the individual characters. There are the paratexts, however, which serve as frame-breaks, as well as the multiple levels of the narrative and Big Bear's visions: the reader knows they will come true, thus, they take the reader beyond the temporal limits of the story. Nevertheless, TTOBB follows the standard realist presupposition that "structure is organic, given by content, and not arbitrarily imposed."[36] The form of the book, adhering to an historical chronology, is dictated by the content. Beyond the multiplicity of voices, each voice remains true to the character it is supposed to represent, and the voices can be seen as serving primarily as ironic

contrasts in their context, as the documents are often covertly presented ironically - deliberately made to appear stilted and ridiculous - in order for Wiebe to imply his further and greater truth beyond the fictional frame of the documentary history.

As already discussed, Wiebe shows a self-conscious preoccupation with language, and approaches a metafictional self-awareness in this respect. In the last category, medium, the book is entirely traditional (the printing and pagination), yet Wiebe indirectly addresses the issue of medium by focusing upon the qualities of orality and literacy.

In summary, TTOBB is metafictional in form (the paratexts) and narratorial technique, and on a thematic level it can be said to be metafictional in its implicit treatment of history and the contrasting of the linguistic reality of two cultures. The metafictional impulse takes Wiebe outside of one frame - historical fact or written history - but not beyond Wiebe himself, his vision. Wiebe is attempting to displace one perceived truth using metafictional methods, but at the same time he is replacing it, using relatively realistic methods, with a personal, artistic truth, a totalizing vision which unites the fragmented, isolated pieces of history in the book. The fragmented narrative is unified by Wiebe's message; the text is ultimately coherent and readable. Rather than presenting a dislocated description of an ultimately unknowable

reality, TTOBB is - except for Big Bear´s withdrawal into an unreachable, unexpressible mode of being at the end - more modern than postmodern in orientation.

Linda Hutcheon considers this book to be postmodern, but Fokkema or McHale would find this book to be modernist: it does not proceed from a framework of radical ontological doubt. The intent of the novel is didactic; in the final analysis, therefore, The Temptations of Big Bear attempts to know and represent a certain reality and treats language and fiction as a referential means of re-entering history and providing personal truths.

les Fous de Bassan

Anne Hébert employs many of the same metafictional devices that Wiebe uses; however, as in TTOBB, the basic impulse of her work is modern, rather than postmodern. Les Fous de Bassan is similar in form and technique to Big Bear, but where Wiebe imaginatively reconstructs the past in order to create a myth, disrupting the conventional discourses of history to produce a vision of a truer or more human history, Hébert departs from realistic discourse in order to create a psychological realm of "the imaginary and the forbidden," a subterranean level below the "real" events and words of the story.[37] Wiebe and Hébert are similar in their exploration of how we give the past meaning, but Hébert focuses more upon the novelistic world of the self, the

inner world, both personal and collective, and how this world affects perceptions and behaviour. Wiebe consciously foregrounds the structuring of historical discourse, the telling of events past; Hébert treats the same process on an individual, personal level. As in Wiebe's work, there is still a referential element, but it is "transgressed, subverted and liberated."[38]

To a greater degree than Wiebe, Hébert emphasizes the central role of language in literature and in creating significance. She has spoken of "le mystère de la parole"[39] and like Wiebe, sees language not as a mimetic tool but a means of creation, a method for discovery and knowledge. She goes beyond Wiebe in testing the limits of the worlds that can be built with language and in approaching "the unpresentable." The world created by Hébert is more ontologically ambiguous than the world of Big Bear, informed as it is by a final authoritative vision of the world that is Wiebe's. Like Wiebe, Hébert's work contains both a social and historical dimension and many details and descriptions reinforce a realistic, referential level, but Hébert also deliberately sabotages and subverts the image of a rational, coherent world, adding another dimension which Janet Paterson calls the discourse of the unreal, "the manifestation of an expanded consciousness, be it personal or collective".[40]

> The poetics of the real is relatively easy to
> identify, analyse and classify...realistic
> discourse is highly structured and

> constrained...[we] readily recognize the
> 'referential illusion'....However, the
> functioning of the discourse of the unreal - that
> is, how it works and creates meaning - remains
> unresolved....It is precisely from the perception
> of a realistic discourse - where words create
> what Barthes calls 'un effet de réel'- that a
> discourse of the unreal is constructed and
> perceived....In purely abstract terms the unreal
> simply cannot be defined. But as a structural
> element in an existing opposition, it can
> generate the transformation of a sign into a
> code, thereby producing a meaning of the
> unreal.[41]

There are, thus, three levels of representation in LFDB:

the real, the imaginary/subconscious, and the unreal. The

levels are not distinct or self-contained; rather, there is

slippage from the e real to the fantastic, from the

literal to a constant the figurative.

> ...c'est que dans [LFDB] la structure tripartite
> du réel, de l'onirique et de l'irréel est
> gouvernée par deux principes opposés. D'une part,
> le sens est constamment soumis à la diffraction
> et à la discontinuité parce que de nombreuses
> stratégies textuelles viennent perturber l'ordre
> et la logique discursives. Mais, d'autre part,
> selon un processus inverse, le sens est aussi
> continuellement récupéré et réintégré au sein de
> significations globales et unitaires par le
> truchement des structures de redondance....
> C'est...un texte où le discours fictionnel se
> déploie dans un mouvement de tension
> continuelle.[42]

Hébert maintains this constant tension between the real and

the fantastic, the conscious and the unconscious, through

the representation of antithetical patterns. The text is

anchored in the referential, but the logic of the realistic

discourse is continually undermined, producing a constant

slippage towards the oneiric and the unreal. Inversely, by the repetition of certain structures and details, the referentiality and credibility of the narrative are also constantly reasserted.[43]

Les Fous de Bassan is an enigmatic novel, offering multiple readings. The antinomical organization and the multiplicity of levels are apparent both at the microlevel of detail within the text and in the global structure of the work; LFDB is abundantly metafictional. Hébert creates a self-consciously fictive universe, but, as will be seen, the interplay of the three levels and the numerous self-reflexive structures do not take the novel in a postmodern direction.

It is primarily through her presentation of a discourse of the unreal that Hébert self-consciously undermines the referential illusion and apparently approaches an ontological uncertainty. The fragmentations and dislocations of the unreal are not, however, postmodern in the context of this work. The "unreal" is related to similar concepts such as Todorov's "fantastic," "uncanny," or "marvellous" and thus, is not necessarily postmodern.[44] In LFDB, Hébert constantly juxtaposes and intermingles the real, the dreamlike and the unreal; the levels become blurred and confused, creating a tension at the level of language which forces the reader to read on a different level - to shift codes.[45] This is similar to the metafictional technique of framebreaking, but it is not the

total dislocation of the postmodern code. The fragmentation

present in LFDB is matched everywhere, as Paterson notes, by

a reaffirmation and reinstatement of the real. Even the

voice of the ghost, Olivia de la Haute Mer, contributes to

the overall meaning of the text. The unreal still functions

at an intelligible level; there is still a possibility of

interpreting the unreal as an expression of the

subconscious, personal and collective, of the characters.

LFDB offers its own code whereby the entire text, even the

unreal and fantastic elements, can be understood and read,

and this work does not, therefore, reflect the radical

indeterminacy that is held to be postmodern. The discourse

of the unreal contributes to the metafictional dimension of

this work, but the metafictional elements are not created

solely by the discourse of the unreal; there are a great

many self-reflexive structures in LFDB. Within the context

of the rest of the text, however, the self-reflexive

structures do not represent a postmodern subversion of the

referential illusion.

Hébert depicts the insular and stifling world of Griffin

Creek, an imaginary colony on the Gaspé, founded by four

families of American Loyalists.

> Trop près les uns des autres. Ces gens-là ne sont
> jamais seuls. S'entendent respirer. Ne peuvent
> bouger le petit doigt sans que le voisin le
> sache. Leurs pensées les plus secrètes sont
> saisies à la source, très vite ne leur
> appartiennent plus, n'ont pas le temps de devenir
> parole.(30-31)

The pivotal event in the story is the disappearance on the night of August 31, 1936, of two cousins, Nora and Olivia Atkins, which leads ultimately to the death and dispersal of the community. There are resemblances to a murder mystery - a favourite form for metafictional subversions of the realist code - and the reader is given six different versions of the events of the summer of 1936. It is not entirely certain who the murderer is in spite of what seems to be a clear-cut confession, but the solution that Hébert offers is that "the distinction between guilt and innocence is irrelevant. All the inhabitants of Griffin Creek are guilty and innocent of the same desire, the same hypocrisy, the same bad and good faith".[46] The society is as guilty as the killer it seeks to protect.

> In a now-familiar but ever-renewing Hébertian scenario, sensual/sexual obsessions and their inevitable composites of inner fear and fascination take the outer forms of domination and death, or suffering and silence, or submission and dispossession. Here the author assigns destructive power to the male characters, humiliation to female characters, but suppressed passions and overwhelming feelings of guilt and discontent haunt all of them. A brooding pessimism, a sense of helplessness and hopelessness invades the entire book, in which characters seek havens of peace whereas none can exist, or concoct cosmologies to fill the voids left by daily reality.[47]

The characters in the novel are driven by their own natures and by their environment, but also, primarily, by the past. They attempt to reconstruct and understand their own histories and come to terms with the murder and its

consequences for their lives. Much of the ambivalence of the novel is created by the characters´ "constant seesaw between the expressed and the repressed, fact and phantasm, faced as they are with their own instability and the chaos of the world about them."[48] The wind and the sea exert a mystical, semi-hostile influence upon the isolated little village, and for the inhabitants, "life appears as an exercise in ultimate powerlessness and disintegration,...a threatening imminence rather than...[a] secure state of immanence."[49]

Les Fous de Bassan deals essentially with two time periods: the summer of 1936 and the present (1982). The events of the fateful night of August 31, 1936 when the two young cousins disappeared are continually dwelt upon, the object of numerous analepses and prolepses.[50] All of the characters/narrators continually approach and withdraw from the night of August 31; the reader is given only tantalizing glimpses of the fateful night, partial scenes.

As in Wiebe´s work, there is an interweaving and juxtaposition of narrative voices with corresponding variations in style and a continuous shift in perspective. The multiple narrators tell most of their stories in the first person, offering the reader multiple focalizations. The five narrators more or less repeat the same story, which creates, with their similarities and dissimilarities, an effect of both fragmentation and verisimilitude. The structures of redundancy lend an air of authenticity to the

stories, reinforcing the referential level, while the inclusion and intrusion of a fantastic, "unreal" discourse subverts the logic of the writing of the real.[51]

The narrators are both intradiegetic and extradiegetic, narrators in the first degree, but they also move from autodiegetic to homodiegetic (still in the first person but essentially filling in parts of another's story). The narrators even mimic the traditional omniscient, heterodiegetic mode, employing the third person plural and the neutral voice: "Notre angoisse avec lui atteint un paroxysme difficilement supportable," (153) and "S'il vient quelque chose encore ce sera du côté de la mer." (181) Hébert does not entirely deny person (or voice) as much as some postmodernist works, but there is a "variable or floating relationship" between the narrator, the other characters, and the events related.[52] This has the effect of confusing the linearity of the narrative, and "the fiction loses its specificity of fiction."[53]

In TTOBB, events are located consecutively in time and space, although Big Bear looks into the future in his visions and several other characters muse upon events past. In Hébert's work, there is a combination of precise dates and descriptions of place, explicitly situated in the real, with time segments that are non-sequential, fantastic, and mnemonic, multi-leveled dimensions in both time and space. There is both a linear, chronological, referential level and a circular, achronological, subjective level: the letters

of Stevens are carefully dated, for example, while Olivia's
narration is set outside of time, "sans date." The story
oscillates between the present and the past, revolving
around an event and a time, summer 1936, which had a
profound effect on the lives of the characters.

> ...la pluralité temporelle romanesque dans les
> Fous de Bassan a partie liée avec une pluralité
> des récits, d'où une polyvalence narrative. Ces
> deux pluralités renvoient à une troisième, celle
> des narrateurs, chacune des six parties du roman
> étant le (voire les) récit(s) d'un personnage-
> narrateur (qui a aussi un statut d'actant dans le
> ou les récit(s) qu'il narre) racontant de son
> point de vue une époque, des personnages et des
> événements racontés ailleurs.[54]

The fusion of time, space and voice - transcending the
temporal and spatial dimensions of the narrative - subverts
the referential illusion, and creates "one atemporal
literary dimension."[55] The characters and events are
superimposed in this textual dimension which forces a
recognition upon the reader of an explicitly fictive
discourse and which produces, on a structural level, a code
of the unreal.[56] This work cannot be read on a literal,
realistic level, because there is a progressive distortion
and loss of the real. The effect of defamiliarization
generates the transition from one code to another, from the
literal to the figurative, from the real to the unreal.

> Time and time again, through the repetition of
> seemingly irrelevant details,...the reader is
> projected into another time and space -
> atemporal, fictive and mnemonic; a time (and
> space) which serves in the end to subvert the
> very notion of reality.[57]

The first section, "Le Livre du Révérend Nicolas Jones," is set in autumn, 1982 corresponding to the date of the publication of the novel. Jones´ bitter reminiscences upon the dying town´s bicentennial celebrations provide a conventionally referential historical background and setting. In the first few pages of the Reverend Jones´ "book," however, realistic discourse gives way to a "stream of unconsciousness...where memories, dreams and hallucinations intermingle and become confused,"[58] immediately suggesting to the reader two possible levels of narrative, held in tension. He speaks of "créature de songe hantant Griffin Creek depuis la nuit des temps" (16) and in the first of many intertextual references, states that "leurs père et mère [avaient] désiré très tôt les perdre en forêt" (19). The world of Griffin Creek is a stagnating, repressed world and the repression, as it quickly becomes clear, is of sexual desire. Jones slips into the third person to talk about the events of 1936, emphasizing his shame, his attempt to deny his sexual attraction to his nieces, Nora and Olivia Atkins. His story swings between the past and the present, dream and memory.

> Bousculant toute chronologie, s´inventant des grandmères et des soeurs à foison, les jumelles découvrent le plaisir de peindre...Trois têtes de femmes flottent sur un fond glauque, tapissé d´herbes marines, de filets de pêche, de cordes et de pierres. Trois prénoms de femmes, en lettres noires, sont jetés de-ci de-là, au bas des tableaux, en haut, à droite, à gauche, ou en travers, se mêlent aux herbes folles, s´inscrivent sur un front blême ou se gravent, comme une balafre, sur une joue ronde. Nora,

> Olivia, Irène, en lettres moulées, brillantes, se
> répètent,...Pour ce qui est de la guirlande d'un
> noir de charbon, patiemment travaillée et
> déroulée, tout le long de la plinthe, il suffit
> de se baisser et d'être attentif pour reconnaître
> des chiffres, toujours les mêmes, liés les uns
> aux autres, en un seul graffiti interminable:
> 19361936193619361936193619361936. Plus bas, en
> caractères plus petits, une seconde ligne, aussi
> régulière et obstinée, tout d'abord
> indéchiffrable: étéétéétéétéétéété. (16-17)

The painting is a mise-en-abyme, depicting the world on the
seashore which Hébert creates and actualizing the shift from
the literal to the figurative. The description of the
painting expresses the major themes of creativity, the
opposition between men and women, lost innocence, violence,
alienation, and sorrow.

The second section, "Les Lettres de Stevens Brown à
Michel Hotchkiss," is set in 1936 and the narrator also
occasionally lapses into the third person. This section is
ostensibly in the form of letters, again reinforcing the
realistic level, but the narratee is rarely addressed. It
is primarily autodiegetic but often takes on the form and
the tone of an omniscient narrator as Stevens gives his
jaundiced view of the town and its inhabitants. He despises
it, but is drawn to his two young cousins. Stevens,
ostensibly the murderer, wants to escape from his identity
and Griffin Creek.

> 23 juillet.

> Etre quelqu'un d'autre. Ne plus être Stevens
> Brown, fils de John Brown et de Bea Jones. Il
> n'est peut-être pas trop tard pour changer de
> peau définitivement, de haut en bas et de long en

large... Ne pas laisser la suite de mon histoire
à Griffin Creek se dérouler jusqu'au bout. Fuir
avant que.... (79-80)

The passage quoted above contains an example of the

prolepses which, while serving to heighten the suspense,

also disrupt the realistic code or level: how could

Stevens, on July 23, possibly "run away before ..." the

events of August 31 - an event still in the future? More

importantly, however, these breaks create an emotional

tension: what happened at that central moment of the

narrative? Stevens´ section ends on the night of August 31,

while he is bailing out his boat, waiting for the girls.

The third part, "Le Livre de Nora Atkins," is

autodiegetic and like the story of Nicolas, is characterized

by a discourse that combines the real and the fantastic and

again subverts the logic of the referential discourse. The

reader is given another description of the events of the

summer of 1936. "Nora´s version, the most direct, vital,

unencumbered of the three, reflects with fairly simple and

repetitive sentence structures her joy in a newly found

sexuality."[59] Nora speaks of a theoretical future: "un

jour ce sera l´amour fou,.... nous serons mari et femme, roi

et reine, pour l´éternité" (120). She also reminisces about

a previous life, taking the narrative beyond realistic

temporal limits. The language of this narrative fragment is

poetic and lyrical, and it is textually implied and

critically agreed that Stevens kills her because she openly

and joyfully expresses her sexuality; Stevens must "punish"
her for her rejection of the traditional, passive female
role.[60]

The fourth and largest section, "Le Livre de Perceval
Brown et de quelques autres," is set in 1936. Perceval is
the village idiot, yet he seems to have the human qualities
that the others do not. Perceval´s narration is disjointed,
a lyrical, interior monologue that produces "nouns, verbs,
onomatopeic interjections...a chain of words - linked by
free association of ideas":[61]

> Lentement. Sans bruit. Main trop grosse.
> S´appliquer. Faire très attention. Main lourde.
> Comme gonflée. La poignée fraîche dans ma main.
> Tourne doucement. Fait clic. Retiens mon
> souffle... Par le nez, par la bouche. Fretch,
> fretch, gr, gr, gr. (139)

In addition, there are passages told in a combination of
first person (plural) and third person by a seemingly
omniscient narrator; this voice is the voice of the people,
the collective voice of the town which ironically mimics the
traditional authoritative narrator:

> Nous les gens de Griffin Creek, devancés par les
> événements, ne pouvant plus suivre, bouleversés
> par la disparition de Nora et d´Olivia, n´ayant
> pas le temps de faire entre nous les recoupements
> nécessaires, mis en face de la police et sommés
> de répondre, sans avoir le temps de se consulter
> et de réfléchir. (157)

The voice of Perceval, aware, suffering and searching,
alternates with that of the voice of the town:

disapproving, denying, and hostile to the intrusion of the police, the outsiders. Again, there is a blurring between the real and the imagined; Perceval and the others give a doubled view of the events immediately following the disappearance of the cousins and "the whole machinery of justice is questioned through the lucid vision of the idiot."[62] The effect of separate voices, each offering a fragment, is repeated or redoubled within Perceval's "book." This section also contains micro-fragments - a single sentence - and many semi-disconnected short takes; it is another mise-en-abyme, contrasting the innocent vitality of Perceval with the repressed and repressing voice of the collective authority.

The fifth narrative fragment is titled "Olivia de la Haute Mer, sans date." It is told from beyond the grave and extends outside of time. With the narrator/ghost, Hébert transcends the parameters of the world of Griffin Creek, "thereby integrating the fiction into an explicitly fictional discourse."[63] Olivia alternates between the past and her "vie présente," and to an even greater degree than any of the other narrators, Olivia speaks of the murder - her murder - in the third person.

> J'ai beau me répéter qu'il est neuf heures
> trente, à la grande horloge de Maureen, et qu'il
> n'est encore rien arrivé, le soir du 31 août, je
> vois distinctement deux filles qui marchent sur
> la route dans la nuit blanche de lune. Un garçon
> les attend au bord de la route, posté comme une
> sentinelle. Bientôt filles et garçon ne feront
> plus qu'une seule ombre compacte, noire, sur le
> sol clair. (224)

There is another voice in this section, the voice of the
"femmes passées" who do not speak directly; Olivia repeats
their words: "Mon Dieu il ne fallait pas disent-elles
toutes dans l´ombre et le vent, les mères et les grand-mères
alertées." (215) This other voice is plural and is not
associated with any specific character; it is the voice of
the women in the wind. Unlike Nora, Olivia listens to the
warnings of these other voices; she is not forward but
proper, dutiful, and reticent. However, her fate is the
same; the advice of the women in the wind does not protect
her; Stevens´ desire dooms her. Olivia seems to bear no
malice for her murder, but avoids the beach and the night of
August 31, using her "power" to slip away from the beach at
"the speed of the wind." (224) "She has gained eternity by
becoming a sea creature.... yet her unappeased desire still
returns with the tide and the wind to recall her joyous
youth."[64]

Only in the last section, "Dernière Lettre de Stevens
Brown à Michael Hotchkiss," set in 1982, is there an actual
description of the murder, told from the point of view of
Stevens, the ostensible murderer. Again, the narratee is
only briefly addressed. Stevens changes to the present
tense to tell about the rape/murder and re-lives it, showing
us what happened: the savage, repressed inner world
supersedes the rational, outer world; the inhibited
subconscious can only express its desires through violence.

Tous vont insister sur le calme de la nuit,

> l´absence de vent. Et moi j´affirme avoir éprouvé
> la rage de la tempête dans tout mon corps secoué
> et disloqué, tandis qu´Olivia se débattait,
> partageant avec moi le même ressac forcené. (246)

Stevens is acquitted for the murder in spite of his
confession and there is no real punishment for his crime.
Nevertheless, he is haunted by visions of the girls and by
memories of Griffin Creek and is, at the end of the book,
contemplating suicide.

As in TTOBB, the ending is ambiguous; there are no clear
patterns drawn of cause and effect, no resolution, no
working out of guilt and punishment. We are left, finally,
with two male characters in 1982 - Nicolas and Stevens -
confused, miserable and essentially unchanged, still
attempting to understand the murder and its consequences.
The ending is most often interpreted as reflecting Hébert´s
feminist concerns: Nora and Olivia are killed "by the male
who fears their very femininity and their assertion of it,"
and the admonishing voice of the "femmes passées" is seen as
reflecting and articulating a feminist ideology.[65] Given
this interpretation, however, the conclusion offers a very
pessimistic comment on the relationship between men and
women: Hébert´s message seems to be that the desires in
women are healthy, sane, and life-oriented; in men, the
desires are egotistical, sadistic and death-oriented.[66]

> Pourtant, dans ce choc de deux désirs, le féminin
> et le masculin, la force (mais non point le
> droit) paraît être du côté de celui-ci.[67]

Thus, this work is usually interpreted as a condemnation of
a chauvinistic and insular society, illustrating the
consequences of sexual repression on male and female
relations. This is a naive reading, however, which really
only addresses the literal level of the novel and ignores a
great deal.

Hébert breaks away from the realistic code, first and
foremost, in order to give form to an aesthetic vision which
can contain the opposite and the irreconcilable: within the
text, Hébert attempts to create a world where fragmentation
and redundancy, the unreal and the real can coexist.[68]
Thus, there are two organizing principles which facilitate
the combination of the real, the oneiric and the unreal:
"la répétition renforce le registre du réel alors que la
fragmentation, par une logique qui lui est propre, permet au
discours de s'orienter vers le fantasmatique et l'irréel."[69]
In LFDB,

> ...on s'aperçoit qu'une certaine unicité se
> dégage de la pluralité, qu'un ordre émerge de ce
> désordre et qu'une cohérence surgit au sein même
> de l'incohérence. Paradoxalement, le sens du
> texte est à la fois unitaire et pluriel,
> éparpillé et centré; il est un lieu où de
> nombreuses structures de redondance produisent
> une convergence du sens à travers et au-delà de
> la fragmentation."[70]

Although there are five different versions, each tells
essentially the same story; in spite of the fragmentation,
there is a constant return to the same themes of desire,
violence and repression which provide a cohesive principle,

the unifying thread in LFDB.

Hébert balances the real and the unreal, and she adds another dimension with the oneiric/subconscious: the depiction of the subjective, internal world of a Jungian subconscious, both personal and collective, by means of which she can examine the effects of ,this world on perception and behavior. Again and again, within the text, the characters struggle to communicate and reconcile their "savage inner life" with the repressive superconscious of Griffin Creek. Although the prolepses, for example, imply inconsistency at the level of the narrative, this realm - the psychological realm of the characters - is never disrupted. The characters are unable to escape, control, or understand the subconscious, irrational realm.

Hébert created a psychological "reality" in which to explore human relationships and behaviors and secondly, sought to express the problems of both human and literary communication. There is, therefore, an obvious preoccupation with creativity and language which reflects a self-conscious orientation but which is subordinate to her exploration of the interior lives of the characters. Hébert depicts a Jungian (archetypal) subconscious which reflects the myths of a society in order to illustrate the danger of, and damage to, the self in a closed, repressive society. The struggle to understand a fragmented, irrational self, to gain insight and to integrate that self is characteristically modernist; the postmodern self is

ultimately unknowable and uncontrollable. There is, in postmodern fiction, a loss of self: character is reduced to perception without interiority.[71] "The Self,...following the intuition of Nietzsche, is really an empty ´place´ where many selves come to mingle and depart."[72] The characters in LFDB, although emotionally handicapped, do not lack interiority.

Thus Hébert, like Wiebe, has a more modern than postmodern orientation, but she comes closer than Wiebe to self-consciousness, to creating an explicitly metafictional discourse. There is a greater variety of self-reflexive forms in her work.

The authorial manipulations of point of view and voice forces a recognition on the reader of how the narrative levels are created and foreground the functioning of fictional writing. The struggles of the characters to communicate within the book and the varying narrative techniques employed to communicate this struggle reflect the creative process of writing. The text also gives several metaphors of its own functioning, expressing the notion of creativity: the "letters" and "books" of the characters,for example, and the frequent use of the mise-en-abyme. The many intertextual allusions to folktales, Hébert´s other works, Rimbaud, the Bible, Hans Christian Anderson´s "The Little Mermaid," Shakespeare, Cixous, and Faulkner (Perceval may be seen to be modelled upon Benjamin in The Sound and the Fury, just as Stevens may be to Joe Christmas in Light

<u>in August</u>) focus the reader's attention on the fabrication
and literariness of the text and "converge to create a
textual reflection of literary and imaginary discourse."[73]

Hébert's discourse of the unreal, as already noted,
shifts the narrative discourse (which forces the reader to
shift codes) into an explicitly fictive and figurative
literary dimension. Within the first few pages of the
novel, the real is diverted, and most noticeably in "Olivia
de la Haute Mer," finally subverted. The discourse of the
unreal also, however, subverts the image of a rational,
coherent, and understandable world. The fictional universe
of LFDB appears to be ontologically uncertain, reflecting
the entropy and ultimate inaccessibility of a postmodern
world model. Explanations and logic are useless in the
ambivalent world of Griffin Creek; there are no
metanarratives, from the point of view of the reader, to
explain the murder and its consequences. In emphasizing the
indeterminate nature of the world and the characters'
inability to communicate, Hébert's novel is certainly
reflecting a postmodern attitude. As with Wiebe, however,
one must ask if these postmodern elements are consistent in
the context of the rest of her novel. It could perhaps be
argued that in Olivia de la Haute Mer and the voice of the
"femmes passées," Hébert comes close to improvising a
possible world, an ontological projection of an imaginative
mode of being. But if Stevens' diegetic confession is to be
believed, his <u>telling</u> of the murder, the "solution" reflects

an epistemological process or logic. As with Wiebe, one
must ask what purpose the postmodern ambiguities serve in
this context. Stevens remains unpunished and unenlightened;
how, then, does his detailed, poetic and intensely emotional
description of the rape/murder fit into the structure of the
rest of the text? Is this an ontological projection of a
possible reality or is it an epistemological representation
of what really happened?

In subverting the image of a rational world, the
discourse of the unreal serves primarily to enhance the
referential depiction of the subconscious and irrational
realm. Hébert is illustrating the negative effects of
entropy, how a closed society will destroy itself from
within and, perhaps, how the inner self cannot be repressed
or denied. The work is an examination of the interior,
emotional lives of the characters and the fragmented
narrative, the separate lives and minds of the characters,
and even the discourse of the unreal are united and
interpretable in this psychological dimension.

In summary, LFDB is metafictional in form (the self-
reflexive structures and the discourse of the unreal) and
narratorial technique, and on a thematic level is
metafictional in its constant undermining - and therefore
foregrounding - of the discourse of the real. The text is
also metafictional in its self-conscious preoccupation with
the processes of creativity, communication and language.
However, Hébert is subverting and displacing the realist

code in order to portray a psychological reality, not to
focus on the impossibility of knowing any such reality.
Thus, although the world of Griffin Creek, the context in
which the characters operate, seems to be an ambivalent,
hostile, indifferent and postmodern world, the world of the
characters themselves - which is never violated - is
ultimately modernist.

Using Lauzen's chart to survey the metafictional
elements of this work, LFDB can be classified as covert
metafiction. Although the characters within the story muse
on how to tell about the murder and how to understand and
recreate the past, there is no explicit discussion of the
story at the level of the narrative. As in TTOBB, the most
noticeable metafictional feature is the narrative technique:
there is an overabundance of narrative levels and modes.

> Ce qui frappe, outre la multiplicité des points
> de vue, c'est une pluralité "intra-narrateur".
> Par là, nous entendons que chaque personnage-
> narrateur, s'exprimant le plus souvent comme
> narrateur autodiégétique, décrit ou analyse
> parfois un autre personnage en focalisation
> interne, s'exprimant alors comme s'il était un
> narrateur hétérodiégétique. C'est le cas, par
> exemple, de Stevens Brown, qui décrit et raconte
> d'abord tout le village, ... comme s'il était le
> narrateur omniscient traditionnel."[74]

Of course, the omniscience attributed to each character is
often mistaken: Stevens completely misunderstands Nora and
Olivia, for example, but the result is a "dédoublement du
personnage" and an expansion of the abstract world of the
characters; the characters become both subject and object

within the text.[75] The interplay of the voices offers three
levels: the real, the imaginary/subconscious, driving and
ultimately superseding the real, and the level of the
unreal. The levels are not distinct or self-contained; they
overlap, but as already discussed, this technique primarily
enhances the depiction of the subjective, inner world of
perception and only secondarily self-consciously emphasizes
the articulation of fictional writing.

Although the entire book revolves repetitiously around a
single incident, the plot is not what motivates this story.
LFDB could possibly be seen as tending towards an absence or
reduction of plot: the same story is told five times and
the narrative continually approaches the night in question
from a variety of perspectives but stops short, until the
last few pages, of an actual description of the murder. It
seems quite apparent that the murderer is Stevens, yet his
confession leaves many questions unanswered.

The characterization and the setting are traditionally
realistic: carefully, clearly and fully described. There
are ample descriptions of physical appearance and mannerism;
the characters are unaware of their fictional status.

The theme of this work is implicitly metafictional: the
discourse of the unreal and the numerous self-referential
elements constantly undermine the discourse of the real, and
the text self-consciously reflects the processes of literary
communication and creativity. Nevertheless, the effect of
the real is also constantly re-created and recuperated; the

theme of fictionality, while present, is secondary to the exploration of character and behavior, of a human reality.

The structure of the work is explicitly metafictional; related but nonsequential sections offer different points of view on the same action. Whose version of the truth is to be believed? The structure of the work suggests infinite variations. In form, there are many similarities to the detective novel: the crime, the suspects, the alibis, the motives, the solving of the murder delayed until the last few pages of the text. LFDB is a parodic imitation of the detective novel and the early nouveau roman. Again and again, we approach the night of August 31, but not until the last few pages do we hear and see what happened - from a patient whose reliability may be questioned, since he has been insane for thirty seven years.

Hébert does not often or noticeably disrupt the rules of prose, but she goes further than Wiebe in approaching "the unpresentable." Language cannot entirely reach or control the ambivalent universe she creates. Perceval, who sees and understands more than any of the other characters, is unable to express himself. "Quant à Perceval, G. Poulin a bien parlé de celui ´dont le désir dépasse les limites et la mesure du langage et ne sait éclater qu´en cris insoutenables.´"[76] The shrieking and crying of the birds is a repeated image, and Hébert emphasizes, again and again, the inability of the characters to express themselves. To an even greater degree than Wiebe, Hébert is linguistically

oriented, reflecting a self-conscious preoccupation with the limits of language.

Janet Paterson describes this text as postmodern because she equates "self-representational" with postmodern: "C´est en effet par le reflet du texte dans le texte et, ainsi, par une subversion partielle du paradigme référentiel que l´écriture hébertienne participe à une esthétique qu´on appelle aujourd´hui ´postmoderne.´"[77] As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, however, a text can be self-referential without subverting or dislocating its own referentiality and narrative structure - in other words, without being postmodern.

Hébert, like Wiebe, is not offering or aiming for an authentic, precise reconstruction, and both of these texts deliberately foreground and expose their own artificial, constructed nature. Wiebe and Hébert can be described as metafictional and self-reflexive, but are they postmodern?

Given that both texts contain a number of elements that reflect a modernist orientation, McHale´s distinction between the ontological dominant of postmodernism and the epistemological dominant of modernism is useful here. It is possible to define both of these works as typically modernist using McHale´s terms. He identifies as epistemological and modernist such themes as

> ...the accessibility and circulation of
> knowledge, the different structuring imposed on
> the ´same´ knowledge by different minds, and the
> problems of the ´unknowability´ or the limits of
> knowledge. [These themes are] foreground[ed]

> through the use of characteristically Modernist
> (epistemological) devices: the multiplication
> and juxtaposition of perspectives, the
> focalization of all the evidence through a single
> 'centre of consciousness'... variants on interior
> monologue...and so on.[78]

The withdrawal into silence at the end of TTOBB is
postmodern; Big Bear enters a mode of being where we, with
words, cannot follow. In LFDB, also, the discourse of the
unreal apparently subverts the image of a rational, coherent
world. Both Wiebe and Hébert seem to approach ontological
questions, comparing ways of perceiving or being in the
world. In both texts, however, the narrative fragments can
be ultimately integrated and fully interpreted; the texts,
in other words, offer a means of ordering and understanding
themselves: a characteristically modernist feature.[79] In
Wiebe's novel, the thread that ties the work together is
Wiebe's Christian/artistic vision. In Hébert's novel, the
unity is provided by the psychological dimension, the
"unreal" world of fantasy and imagination.

The ambiguities of both of these works points out how we
as readers desire and create both significance and closure.
Both writers self-consciously build, rather than describe, a
world with language, but the elaborate narrative artifice of
their novels ultimately contributes to a modernist version
of moral and psychological realism. Neither work truly
proceeds from or manifests a framework of radical
ontological doubt. The Temptations of Big Bear and les Fous
de Bassan contain a number of metafictional elements, but

they are both more modern than postmodern in orientation.

IV: <u>Overt Metafiction: Inside Beaulieu and Outside</u>
<u>Bowering</u>

The next two works to be considered represent a very
different type of approach to literary self-consciousness.
<u>Les Grands-pères</u> by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu and <u>A Short Sad</u>
<u>Book</u> by George Bowering are overtly both metafictional and
postmodern; both texts explicitly address the ontological
foundation of their own existence and actively engage the
reader as a necessary participant in the narrative act. The
reader is required to complete the text, rather than
passively being shown the text, and the author is present -
visible - in a way that neither Wiebe nor Hébert are. As in
the work of Wiebe and Hébert, the central role of language
as the means by which meaning is created is asserted, but to
a greater degree than Wiebe or Hébert, these writers seek to
destroy the illusion that language is referential, and
assert, instead, the materiality of the act of writing.
Each work is centered on the fiction-making process itself
and self-consciously declares itself as <u>artefact</u>. The focus
is on the mechanics of creativity far more than on the
results of the writing (the historical, social and
psychological questions that are addressed by Wiebe and
Hébert, for example) yet the self-conscious, ontological
uncertainty in these works manifests itself very
differently.

Both Bowering's and Beaulieu's texts are truly postmodern: the fictional worlds created in these works are ambiguous and partial, and there is no totalizing pattern or vision offered that unites the disparate elements. Both of these works offer the complete dislocation of narrative boundaries, structure and unity that is held to be postmodern. Interestingly, however, these works differ greatly in their metafictional techniques. Bowering's text explicitly dramatizes the reader, the writer, and the traditions of literary realism. Unlike Wiebe and Hébert, Bowering does not use these devices toward a non-self-conscious end; he discusses and deconstructs a number of literary conventions, particularly those of modernism. In Beaulieu's text, by contrast, there are relatively few overtly self-reflexive structures, yet the dominant thrust of the work is explicitly self-conscious. As readers, we are constantly being reminded that we are participating in a process, "that any message comes to us via processing of language by both author and reader."[1]

The metafictional premise that "art is artifice" is a central theme in both of these works. Bowering and Beaulieu make an interesting contrast because although both writers focus on the same issues, Bowering achieves his effects by an overt, authorial presence, a kind of intrusive, continuous observing over the shoulder of the reader reading, while Beaulieu does the opposite. His book is marked by a distinct, overt absence - not of the author,

precisely, but of any level of authorial or narratorial reliability. Bowering's text is metafictional because of a variety of disruptions of the referential discourse: authorial interruptions, questions, jokes, book reviews of the book and so on, that continually disrupt the reading of the book, destroying the referential illusion. Beaulieu's text is metafictional because of an absence of certain things expected of a text - a discourse that is anchored at some level of referentiality - which also, therefore, disrupts the reading and the creating of a coherent context. Beaulieu "reconstructs the deconstructed universe"[2] with the reader inside; Bowering repeatedly forces the reader "out" of the text by collapsing the narrative; the reader is thrown back into the reality of one's self, reading.

les Grands-pères

Les Grands-pères requires multiple read.. ..s in order to grasp the book. The fictional world that the narrative presents resists interpretation, and is extremely confusing and ambiguous. Most of the story ostensibly "unfolds itself inside [an] old man's head, a narrative as disorderly (in terms of chronology) as his white hair,"[3] yet even this level of the text - reading it as an old man's rambling and confused stream of consciousness - is ultimately violated. The protagonist, Milien Bérubé, is a member of the Beauchemin family, and the grandfather of Jos Connaissant

and Abel Beauchemin, both novelists. These "writers" have written all of Beaulieu's novels and they are also "in the process of writing all those that Beaulieu is announcing in advance."[4]

> The degree of difference between the real and fictional authors is sometimes nonexistant, at other times rather large; indeed, the process becomes even more convoluted as Beauchemin recognizes the extent to which all the characters he has created are in some ways merely portrayals of aspects of himself.[5]

LGP is, therefore, a part of the larger saga of the Beauchemin family, which Abel Beauchemin (in Beaulieu's other works) has long planned to describe in la Grande Tribu. These texts "exist as a kind of Chinese box of fictions, a potentially infinite regression of imaginings imagined,"[6] which is, of course, a recurring postmodern image: multi-layered symbols such as mirrors, palimpsests, and the mise-en-abyme express the notion of a multiplicity of frames or levels as opposed to any discriminating singularity.[7] The characters reappear in many of the books, and, with the intermingling of past and present, real and dream, and indeed, authors, "it is often impossible to determine on what level of reality a given episode takes place."[8] Thus, it can be assumed that the narrator of LGP is Jos Connaissant, attempting "to delve into his grandfather's mind... to return to the origins of his family, their rural environment, their desires and beliefs, their attachment to their animals."[9] The textual evidence

for this is one passage near the end of the book:

> (Cela ne pouvait plus être une histoire, à peine
> un viol d'où la douleur finirait par s'exclure
> quand le temps, fatigué du grossissement de son
> ventre, se laisserait aller à la dérive. Il n'y
> avait donc aucun motif d'inquiétude malgré
> l'écriture des faits. Rien n'avait lieu que dans
> l'esprit de quelqu'un immobile devant la tasse de
> café froid, un livre inactuel devant les yeux. Et
> pourquoi, finalement, aurait-il fallu écrire dans
> l'ailleurs des Miliens et d'une grosse femme
> assise avec majesté sur son pot?) (125)

It is in this passage that most critics find an ontological
foundation for the rest of the work: the entire text is
assumed to be Connaissant's attempt at projecting the
reality of the old man, at reproducing his consciousness and
his world. The rest of the text, therefore, cannot be read
on a literal level; there are really a number of frames in
this work, and the work itself is framed by Beaulieu's other
works. This passage frames the level of narrative which
contains the old man's story, which is, thus, a story within
another story which is part of the other stories in
Beaulieu's entire literary production.

The narrative is in the third person, predominantly from
the point of view of Milien, but the reader also enters into
the consciousness of Milienne, his second wife, at the
beginning of the novel, Milienne, his first wife, (79-81),
Chien Chien Pichlotte, a friend, (112), and an anonymous
doctor, (151-153). The consciousness of Milien is far from
clear: age and sickness have left "great black holes" in
his mind and his memory; the narrative is morbid, incoherent

and ponderous. In addition, there are many passages which
seem to be a kind of metatext, commenting and
philosophizing, the voice of Connaissant, or Beaulieu
himself:

> Il y avait peut-être un âge qui rendait
> impossible le geste et la parole. Pour avoir
> longtemps vécu, on devenait incapable de
> vivre,.... (123)

The levels of the real (the referential) and of dream,
imagination, memory, hallucination and metacommentary are
almost indistinguishable. The story unfolds over the space
of one day and seemingly ends with the old man's death. (At
least, that is what critics have assumed, for the text is
not definite.) Milien, le Vieux, lives the last day of his
life recalling his farm, his wives, his children, and his
animals. The narrative blends and confuses past and present
realities, dreams, and memories. Many of the dreams are
marked off with parentheses, which help the reader to follow
the ramblings of Milien's consciousness; many, however, are
not. Some of the offset sequences are action, some are
memories, some hallucinations. Milien's world is aimless,
inexplicable, and rotting; it is a world which ultimately
makes no sense. There is a great deal of pronominal
confusion, and deliberately ambiguous references. The time
frame of events is imprecise; the structure of flashbacks
and fast-forward leaps produces stops and starts and
recursiveness, making the narrative spasmodic; the story

seems to advance almost at random.

> Quelqu'un parmi les Miliens avait jadis gagné
> tous les concours de pets de Saint-Jean-de
> Dieu.... Mais le temps, comme les vestes, finit
> par suspendre son vol. "On joue-tu ou on joue-tu
> pas?" demanda l'un des Miliens. La pluie tombait
> sans doute dehors. (59)

There are very long sentences and no paragraphs,
although the edition published in 1979 has divided into
chapters those sections originally separated by lines of
dots. Sometimes these breaks coincide with the kind of
semantic break associated with the end of a chapter, and
sometimes not. Predominantly, the narrative appears to be
limited to what the old man can see, hear, imagine and
hallucinate in his world.

> [Beaulieu] y parvient en réduisant à l'essentiel
> la description du monde extérieur présent (c'est-
> à-dire le décor du temps de l'action), alors
> qu'il peint avec un relief saisissant les
> souvenirs du vieillard.[10]

However, Milien becomes increasingly incapable of
distinguishing between what is really happening in the world
around him and what is happening only in his mind. The
narrative perspective often shifts to an utterly loose,
disoriented stream of consciousness.

> Tant de choses se mouraient dans sa tête depuis
> qu'il était vieux. Le monde se rapetissait, se
> rapprochait de lui; dans quelque temps, il serait
> tout à fait encerclé, il allait être incapable de
> penser à tout ce qui ne serait pas près de lui;
> ses mots ne s'allongeraient plus dans le temps,
> demeureraient emprisonnés dans l'espace de son
> corps. (48)

Beaulieu thus distances himself (and the reader) from
Milien, by indirectly allowing the reader to know more than
Milien: "Le Vieux comprit que ce qui avait été à l´intérieur
de sa tête s´était déversé sur les choses." (46) At the
same time, however, the writer and the reader are often
apparently limited to what the old man can perceive, trapped
within his failing body. The outer world is greatly reduced
in this work, but not (as in Hébert´s text) in order that
Beaulieu may portray an inner world or psychological
reality. Rather, the chaotic, sensorial world of Milien is
presented in great detail: sights, smells and sounds are
described without any apparent meaning, relevance or
interpretation. The depiction of Milien certainly
represents the "perception without interiority"[11] of
postmodern characterization, but it also serves as a
constant reminder that this story is not "true"; it is to be
perceived as a writer´s attempt at re-creating an old man´s
reality. Milien is not entirely without emotion or feeling;
he is helpless, alienated and terrified when his body and
senses fail, and also derives pleasure from the physical
world: the warmth of a cat, for example, or sitting by a
fire. He does not come to any conclusions or insights,
however, nor does he nostalgically long for his land or his
farm. His outlook is prosaic and stolid, almost a
stereotype of the taciturn, insular habitant.

> Pa me disait: "Quand tu pourras tuer le cochon,
> le saigner proprement, comme un homme, je me
> ferai pus soucis pour toi, mon Milien." (37)

> Son père lui avait appris que rien n'était
> compliqué et que si cela le devenait, il
> suffisait de cracher deux ou trois fois dans
> l'herbe pour que tout reprenne la place qui lui
> était assignée de toute éternité. (43)

Consistent with this characterization, Milien's dreams, memories and visions are related in great sensorial detail; he literally wallows in the sights and smells of his rural past. Blood, urine, manure, and copulation are all remembered, repeatedly, in great physical detail without much affective content. Indeed, the "excremental element" in this book is so pronounced that it must almost be considered a theme. Most of the critics who have discussed this book seem to look beyond these revolting images, and state simply that Milien/Beaulieu is "earthy" or that Beaulieu is purging his writer's inner angst, giving "uninhibited rein to his fantasy and his need for invention, necessary as a form of autoanalysis."[12] Whatever the interpretation, these prurient and lurid passages are a major part of the work. John Moss's review of <u>Jos Connaissant</u> could also be applied to <u>les Grands-pères</u>:

> ...a n vel that displays an almost obsessive
> fascination with death, decomposition,
> putrescence, and filth... with virtually every
> bodily orifice and the various textures,
> discharges, and distensions of the same... Death,
> decrepitude, the ubiquitous phallus, these are
> the measures of Jos's world, of Beaulieu's
> vision. The writing itself is powerful, but the
> vision is... oppressive.... a particular
> philosophical attitude is made graphically
> manifest but... [it] is quite an unpleasant
> novel, and it remains so in the mind long after
> it has been set aside.[13]

It could perhaps be argued that Beaulieu is drawing upon

the Rabelaisian tradition of the grotesque; however, this

work also offers "a veritable feast for Freudian critics."[14]

The book abounds with Freudian images and motifs:

castration, oral and anal fixations, the "ubiquitous

phallus," and at one point, in one of the passages that

seems to be Beaulieu himself talking, "Et peut-être

pourrait-on enfin être incestueux et sadiques et heureux."

(101-2) Nevertheless, a Freudian interpretation does not

really foster a plausible or reasonable interpretation. As

Eva-Marie Kroller notes,

> In his attraction to animals, sexuality and
> scatology are fused; through a process of mental
> transfer, this fusion also applies to his
> attitude to women. It is this element that, for
> me, spoils a brilliantly conceived novel;
> Beaulieu's obsessively anal language becomes
> unbearable when it is coupled with the notion of
> woman as cloaca."[15]

Ultimately, the repelling and offensive images serve

another, more mundane, purpose. As will be discussed

later, Beaulieu achieves his effects, in part, by

simultaneously maintaining and destroying the referential

illusion. The constant return to the level of graphic

detail reasserts and re-establishes the referentiality of

the story (as in Hébert's work), while the excessive

language and imagery perverts the narrative logic and

undermines the referentiality of the language. The reader

is first lulled into accepting the fiction, the words, and

then shocked out of it by the bizarre nature of what the language is, in fact, saying.

> Ses deux pieds nus appuyés contre les fesses de
> l´étalon, Milien fumait; son sexe mou qui
> ballottait dans les cahots s´était lentement
> allongé, prenait peu à peu l´espace du pantalon.
> Cela était bon et s´intégrait à la paisible
> sensualité du monde. Seule la tentation de mettre
> son pied dans l´anus du cheval troubla, pendant
> un moment, la fête. (124)

The reader´s expectations are violated by the narrative, and this may be why Beaulieu creates such ostentatiously revolting images: not for any carnivalesque or Freudian overtones, but quite simply for the shock value. The violence of the repeated images of blood and excrement serve to "play response against meaning,"[16] and although we intellectually recognize the improbabilities, our emotions are caught, and we keep reading. Beaulieu maintains an illusion of narrative logic and progress; it is what the language itself says that denies both.

The narrative moves from a nightmarish, grotesque vision of a dying woman covered in faeces, to a tender and almost lyrical description of a stallion´s penis, to a frame-breaking poetic/philosophical flight in which Milien muses upon those questions that Beaulieu wants to address.

> Mais rien n´avait pu se passer ainsi. Rien ne
> pouvait être aussi facile. Quand le Vieux avait
> laissé la Grande Rue, ses amis s´étaient séparés
> de lui, avaient glissé dans la nuit dont on
> devinait qu´elle n´allait plus jamais se
> terminer, qu´elle serait emportée dans son propre
> mouvement, dans l´anarchie noire. ... Tout
> devenait risible, vieillir n´avait pas de sens

> puisqu´il fallait sans relâche avoir recours à
> des descriptions, puisqu´il n´était pas efficace
> de rester immobile pour penser à quelques idées
> essentielles. L´imagination était une force
> mauvaise; elle faisait perdre le temps, elle
> constituait l´une des formes terribles de
> l´égarement. Le Vieux ne pouvait pas penser cela,
> son imagination le lui interdisait, elle le
> précipitait dans le monde des souvenirs, mais se
> souvenir n´était peut-être que créer du présent?
> Rien n´avait eu lieu. Tout arrivait quelque part
> dans l´absence, entre les murs du futur et du
> passé. (101-2)

The novel ends with Milien withdrawing into a pre-
linguistic reality, a "white, motionless country" that is an
apparently primordial, pre-literate, pre-rational mode of
being. His grandson can follow him, in narrative, no
further. Unlike Big Bear´s withdrawal into the silence of
death, however, Milien´s withdrawal is entirely consistent
with the rest of the work: the whole text is overtly a
novelist´s attempt at projecting and writing possible states
of being or reality, and the old man becomes, as essentially
he always was, beyond words. The ending reinforces the
central premise that the book is not about an old man, but
about writing an old man.

> Il était en sueur, sa tête se vidait de toute
> image; il était plein de trous. Rien ne pouvait
> plus être retenu, observé, accepté ou refusé. Il
> n´appartenait désormais qu´à ce qui descendait,
> s´enfonçait, s´engloutissait, se perdait dans la
> compagnie des diables aux yeux pervers. Ne
> restait plus qu´à s´exprimer une dernière pensée
> qui ne se formulerait pourtant que de l´autre
> côté du miroir, dans le pays immobile et blanc.
> (14 novembre 1970/3 février 1971) (157)

Gabrielle Poulin sees the "white, motionless country" in

juxtaposition to the "black anarchy" mentioned earlier;
thus, she suggests that Beaulieu is making some kind of a
relatively optimistic statement:

> Si Milien Bérubé est mort, grand-père, lui, ne
> peut mourir tout à fait. Au dernier instant, il
> est rescapé avec toute sa vie telle qu'il l'a
> recréée en ce dernier jour, par son romancier de
> petit-fils.[17]

This, however, is interpreting the book at a referential
level; Poulin discusses this book in the context of
Beaulieu's other works, stating that "[l]a cohérence de
l'ensemble compense l'apparente incohérence de certaines
parties."[18]

> Pour comprendre l'univers des Grands-pères, ...il
> faut avoir connu l'espace réel tel que décrit
> dans Race de monde!: il est le lieu d'origine des
> autres héros de Victor-Lévy Beaulieu.[19]

Within this context, Poulin sees in les Grands-pères an
extension of his other works, a nostalgic search for the
past of the people. "Grâce à ce roman, le passé est devenu
présent et futur, ...est entré dans un univers cohérent qui
peu à peu s'élargit et s'enrichit."[20]

Eva-Marie Kroller notes the many similarities to a roman
de la terre, and discusses it as a parodic and self-
conscious subversion of that form.

> The presence of a narrator who is himself a
> novelist indicates that les Grands-pères is the
> mental reconstruction of a lost time and place;
> writing is thus not simply recording, but
> literally creating an old farmer's consciousness
> and, in doing so, re-defining a literary genre

much despised by the writers of the Quiet
Revolution. Beaulieu's les Grands-pères joins the
many other literary works in contemporary Québec
whose form is a result of ironizing, destroying,
and re-assembling traditional genres that no
longer suit the reality they purport to
enclose.[21]

The incoherent, morbid and sordid world of the novel
would seem to preclude all attempts at realistic
interpretations; it is interesting to note that critics seem
to focus on the limited referential aspect, even though they
must step outside the text to do this and include his other
works in order to find for this work some kind of truth-
telling, referential function. The critics, while
acknowledging the postmodern form of the work, treat it in a
most traditional manner! Most agree, however, that the
predominating theme of Beaulieu's work is the constructing,
the telling of the story rather than the story itself. "The
mythopoeic process [is] the subject that most concerns
Beaulieu, for all exterior realities are inevitably subsumed
into raw materials for creativity."[22]

In Beaulieu's work, the incoherent discourse generated
by Milien's consciousness deconstructs the realism of the
novel and its language from within, but in addition, it is
explicity made clear that the old man's existence only
becomes narrative through the consciousness of his novelist
grandson (and, of course, Beaulieu). The story comes to us
through Milien, but he does not tell it; that is, the words
are not his, but a "separate domain, the narrative world of

existential reality."[23] Milien's existence is contained
within the story, brought into being by his grandson's
awareness. Thus, there are two distinct versions of reality
presented: the reality of the old man which comes into
being, into narrative, because of his grandson's attempt at
imagining and writing him, and also the reality of the
writing which self-consciously gives Milien an existence.
These two modes are implicit throughout the text; held
simultaneously present are the author's imaginative reality
and the grandfather's linear, existential reality.

The novel subsumes both into a single version and the
conceptualization and expression of these different
realities (or more precisely, states of being) is the
implicit subject of the narrative. These states are created
with narrative, and, as already noted, are continually being
disrupted; the reader's expectations are aroused and then
frustrated. It is therefore essential that the narrative
illusion be always, but only temporarily, maintained. The
discourse generated within the novel deconstructs the
realism of the novel both by foregrounding its own creation
and by what it says: simultaneously maintaining and
destroying the narrative credibility. The collage form in
which the old man's life is presented is ideal for this
purpose; it is representational while breaking with realism
through its fragmentation and discontinuity.

Using Lauzen's chart, this book, can be classified as
overtly self-conscious. The narrating of the story is a

major part of the subject matter and is explicitly referred
to within the story: "(Désormais, pourrait-on s'écrire.)"
(61) There are passages where the narrator questions and
casts doubt on the narration, using words like "probably,"
and "perhaps," which serve to focus the reader's attention
on the reliability of the narrator and the illusion created
by his words - that which is usually unquestioningly
accepted. In spite of the fact that much of the story is
told in the third person, the author is present; there are
some passages which can only be the author's voice, but
there are no passages with an overt, authorial "I" in the
first person. This work, in postmodern terms, "does not
accept person."[24]

LGP could perhaps be considered as tending towards a
metafictional absence of plot. There are a number of
incidents related in the course of the story, but the reader
has great difficulty in making connections between them,
finding some overall unity. Some of Milien's dreams and the
events related are so grotesque, so blatantly impossible and
inconsistent that interpretation is not possible. The
result is a postmodern version of irrealism: some small
events seem very important, other large, apocalyptic events
turn out to be imaginary.

The characters may not be self-conscious - Milien is
hardly conscious of the world around him - but they
certainly represent, as already noted, the postmodern
absence of characterization, the "empty Self." There is

almost no physical description of some (the three Miliens, his friends) and an almost microscopic description of others (the Milliennes, Chien Chien Pichlotte and their diseases). The characters are grotesque, which covertly mocks the humanity of realistic characters. As already mentioned, the setting is limited to what the old man notices, and only sporadically described.

The theme of this work is truly self-reflexive: its theme is itself. Those critics that find meaning for it in the larger context of the rest of his work are stepping outside of the text to do so. Thus, LGP meets another postmodern criterion: the text does not contain any literary "key" to itself that would unite its various fragments. If we consider this work in the larger context of his other work, there is an obvious, intertextual element; LGP seems to be partial and incomplete because it is a smaller part of a larger literary universe. The structure of the work, with the inextricably entangled levels of dreams and realities, could be classified as either a metafictional overabundance or absence of structure. There are also elements which seem to parody a roman de la terre; thus, it can perhaps be seen as a metafictional subversion of a traditional genre; there is certainly a metafictional disturbing of the "uni-level surface expected in conventional realism."[25]

The language is exaggerated and vivid, which serves to focus the reader more on the surface of the work - the words

themselves - than on any message it purportedly contains. The process of communication is disrupted, and therefore, emphasized. The chaotic, run-on, monologue approaches unintelligibility and there are sections of the book where the language reaches "extreme opacity," destroying its referentiality.

> Et finir dans le rire bruyant qui abrille le ciel et recouvrir les fesses de Milienne de beaucoup de sang. (121)

In LGP, the reader finds wisps of meaning from which significance must be derived. The sentences are long and run-on, but the grammar is surprisingly correct. The dislocation of the language depends upon, in the first place, the creation of a relatively coherent context; the conventions must be put in place in order to be removed. The medium, the physical presentation of the text, is a departure from the norm: no paragraphs and no chapters (at least in the first edition); sections are divided by lines of dots.

Critics have found a variety of meanings in this work. Poulin finds it significant within the context of the larger universe of Beaulieu's other works, all relating to Québec coming to terms with itself and its past. Others see it as a modern day roman de la terre, making an ironic comment on a previous well-known literary form. Still others find it to be a psychological image or metaphor for Québec's past, finding it to be, in Freudian terms, anal-infantile-

perverted.[26] The text itself does not offer any kind of explicit comment, or key to an interpretation of itself; any message, beyond the overt preoccupation with the act of writing, is simply not there.

LGP is both self-conscious and postmodern. One must ask, however, whether Beaulieu is being given credit for his created, multi-textual universe (based upon traditional, realistic standards and ontologically anchored), or credit for his postmodern innovations which constitute the dislocations and incoherence apparent in this text. LGP should perhaps be considered as postmodern in the performative mode, rather than the self-reflexive; Beaulieu's postmodernism is manifested mainly through an absence of any ontological anchoring and a lack of any coherent, unifying thread which ties the book together; there is a "deliberate sabotage of any possible reconstruction of the ´reality´ of situations."[27] Certain passages have meaning, but overall, the text does not.

Formally, LGP can be defined as postmodern: it subverts and frustrates the reader's expectations, offering no metanarratives or totalizing visions of the world which would provide some order and reason. It proceeds from the framework of radical indeterminacy that is held to be postmodern; the fictional world of LGP is random, disintegrating and apparently meaningless. This is not necessarily the same, however, as the presentation or textual awareness of "the unpresentable" that Lyotard, among

others, insisted upon. Beaulieu is not asserting any
universal or eternal truths, and he certainly manifests the
postmodern "absence of a centre" in his text; what, then, is
he offering?

Random and obscure writing has been justified on the
grounds that it represents "meaninglessness," but even a
work which has the theme of meaninglessness must be coherent
and unified enough on some level to make its statement.
Creating a technically sophisticated surface, as Beaulieu
does, does not create significance or meaning. (And this is
also why Beaulieu can be accused of being sensationalistic:
if he wants to disrupt the referentiality of language, to
decontextualize the meaning of narrative, why must he borrow
power from pointedly Freudian and excessively foul images?)
The truth that Beaulieu offers is precisely the absence
beneath the surface; he is attempting to show effects
without cause, history without meaning, a life without
interpretation. LGP must therefore be considered an example
of negative art, and Beaulieu´s technique, an end in itself.
Thus, although this text can be judged as postmodern on the
basis of form, some critics (such as Palmer, Lyotard and
Spanos) would exclude this text from the postmodern canon
because it is a "formalistic and aestheticizing evasion of
the historical world."[28]

A Short Sad Book

George Bowering is the most overtly metafictional and
postmodern of the writers discussed in this thesis.
Although Wiebe and Hébert use innovative and self-reflexive
techniques, their works can be seen as operating within the
conventions of modernist realism with the accompanying
contradictions: both the writer and the reader must be
invisible in order to maintain the illusion of reality.
Beaulieu's work is self-reflexive in that it is apparently
centered on the process of its own creation, but this is
acheived, more or less, by constructing and then
deconstructing some of the standard props of realism. In A
Short Sad Book, Bowering overtly and explicitly discusses
the act of writing the book the reader is reading; his text
is both metafictional and postmodern because it examines the
issue of postmodernism and is, at the same time, self-
consciously postmodern. Bowering does this directly, not,
as Beaulieu does, by what is left out, but by what is
clearly and relatively coherently left in. Bowering sets up
an antagonism between his own work and the literary
conventions of modernism in order to show that "the
represented reality in the modern novel is not substantial
but formal."[29] Realism, he states, "is no more like the
real than any previous method of making fiction."[30]

Most of Bowering's work, both critical and fictive, is
devoted to exploring the themes of art, language, identity
(often Canadian culture and society) and repeatedly, the
conflict between art and reality: "the relations between

subject and author, or art and life...or at least life and literature."[31]   A great deal of his writing is self-reflexive in the strictest sense of the word, "a mode through which the poet's thoughts and the act of creation itself are reflected in the form and content of the composition."[32]

In a A Short Sad Book Bowering explores the creative process in "a self-reflexive narrative that directly involves the reader."[33] To analyse ASSB - what it is, and what it contains - would be to list the principles of metafiction and postmodernism already discussed: Bowering systematically manipulates the formal elements of fiction in order to address the problematic ontology of the relationship between language and reality. A Short Sad Book is, and is about, metafiction; Bowering discusses postmodernism, and creates a postmodernist novel. There is more to it, of course, but the predominant theme of this book, as in most of his other works, is the act and process of creation; ASSB is a vehicle for putting Bowering's theories into practice. Bowering himself has said:

> In [ASSB], I was trying to clear the boards and
> make clear a lot of my opinions that had been
> working up over the years on various things and
> say them out.... I was trying to get the sense of
> spreading the whole thing out on one big flat
> surface.... The book just ends because one ran
> out of space or ran out of pages to do or what
> ever.[34]

There is a kind of core story which Bowering departs

from and returns to, but it defies any attempt at plot
summary or analysis; rather, it is a kind of literary
Trivial Pursuit. Early in the novel, he writes "what do you
mean, this is no novel" (26), and "Do you know I am keeping
secrets from you & I want you to discover them. & I will be
disappointed with myself if you do" (16). Bowering´s brand
of postmodernism is a playful "non-art" that resists
interpretation; the author is emphasizing and changing the
rules of communication, and the reader must attempt to
decipher the text.

> Bowering writes of writing, of himself writing,
> of his novel being written, of his novel writing.
> The novel writes, and Bowering keeps up with it,
> writing. The novel is not about writing; it is
> writing. What it is about is staking peonies, the
> Black Mountain influence, Canadian history and
> Canadian literature, smoking cigars, Evangeline
> and Sir John A. Macdonald, postmodernism, British
> Columbia, the West Coast experience, alienation,
> the Bowering experience, pursuit of the Pretty
> Good Canadian novel, the Tercentenary History of
> Canada, Volume III, from Laurier to King, MCMVIV-
> MCMXLV, rootless cosmopolites, feckless
> nationalists, baseball, Americans, underwater
> discoveries, Tom Thom(p)son´s body, other things,
> motifs, word-combinations, images, and a plethora
> of allusions. A Short Sad Book does not make
> allusions; it consumes them. It is a novel filled
> with its own sense of being a novel.[35]

ASSB is part fiction, part criticism, part essay, part
autobiography, and part poem. There is even an index; the
text explicitly mocks and parodies various forms of the
traditional novel, Canadian literature and literary
convention. The self-consciousness of the narrator-author
is the most prominent feature of this work and the

overriding metafictional element. The conventions of
realism demand that the author be invisible, producing a
representation of reality while disguising the reality of
the act of writing; in ASSB, the author is always
intrusively visible, presenting the writing of the text, and
involving the reader in the process of writing. Bowering
does not "play hide-and-seek with his readers" but "comes to
the fore both in his fiction and in his criticism."[36] He is
attempting, first and foremost, to cancel the illusion that
fiction is representational; he is self-consciously creating
an artefact. In "The Painted Window: Notes on Post Realist
Fiction," Bowering states that

> The reader's first experience of any story is an
> experience of form. He opens the book, sees black
> marks, & away he goes. Formally, in that
> situation, there is no criterion that will
> distinguish fiction from 'non-fiction.' It is all
> fiction - the reality here is the book. Fictilis:
> (capable of being) fashioned. Hence the only way
> a story can be told is fictively. To put it more
> boldly: life is revealed as a fiction.[37]

Bowering is drawing attention to the fact that in self-
conscious postmodernist fiction the writing of the text is
often present; the self-reflexive structures reveal the
creating of the text, emphasizing and making visible the
surface of the text, which therefore constitutes its meaning
and significance.

> My favorite place in Alberta (oh this new pen is
> getting broken in nicely) is Drumheller (my wife
> will hate that one because she hates this novel
> she says I'm getting far too removed from my
> readers with all this obscure self-absorption.

> What do you think dear friend) although I have
> been there only once.
>
> (I mean I said it was a novel but did it say it
> was a novel.&if it didnt say so it can hardly be
> a novel because then it would have been something
> else calling itself a novel & I would have
> disagreed.)
>
> It may get to be a short sad book. (58)

The metacommentary on the construction of the novel confuses
the ontological levels of the text; the novel itself becomes
a character in the story. This text is a satire of a novel
on one level, but also a novel that insists on its own
reality.

> All this dialogue was too much for the novel. I
> noticed it was beginning to speak in short
> sentences with periods. Literature fell from the
> skies. The novel withdrew itself painfully from
> its skin & assumed position five. The skies
> opened. (72)

Bowering ends his first section by remarking that "I felt as
if the background of the novel was beginning to take shape"
(37).

> Well I said it is a novel&so I will at last give
> you some scenery & dialogue. (38)
>
> Confuse setting&person confuse
> landscape&characters you wind up with thematic
> criticism not a novel. (53)

The narrative does not alternate between realities.
There is only one - the reality of the narrative - and the
intruding author-narrator foregrounds and explores, with the
reader, the writing of the book, the act of creation.

Bowering is concerned with the narrative voice; he describes it as the "I, someone, that voice speaking to you at last, the intrusion you will probably call it, though I have been here all along, of the first person."[38] ASSB explores the limits of narrative: "how much recursion and interruption does it take until no narrative remains?"[39] There are narrators parodying narrators, arguing with "the" narrator, interrupting and proving a point, all of which has the effect of destroying the illusion of narrative voice, or rather, the logic of narrative discourse.

> Your father told you about things you had never seen because he was an adult. & the same with Canada. It told you to sing about things you had never seen. What did a maple leaf look like.
>
> You learned to draw one, what is this second person doing here, oh, I see now, just as you learned to draw Australia. (p.60)

The book is also full of often obscure Canadian references and there are a number of "Can-Lit" nicknames: Al (Purdy), Frank (Davey), Peggy (Atwood) and so on. The constant intertextual and linguistic play is the element by which the various sections and surfaces of the work are related and loosely connected; the seemingly unrelated fragments are integrated at a ludic level, which "renders the jarring elements of his discursive narrative as comic and parodic."[40]

> ...[in] the open play of signification... without regard for an original or ultimate meaning,... ludism signifies textual play; the text is viewed as a game affording both author and reader the

possibility of producing endless meanings and relationships.[41]

Bowering's textual play incorporates the reader, the characters and Bowering himself. The writer's consciousness plays with the narrative; the jokes, syllogisms, melodrama and puns cohere and define the text on one level, but they offer no apparent meaning, no ontological anchors. The clarity and meaning of particular narrative moments is constantly undercut by the contradictory logic of other moments, and the textual play, present throughout the work, illustrates Bowering's self-reflexive awareness.[42] ASSB has an obvious theatricality that is used to foreground the phenomenal reality of the text - the process of both writing and reading the text - even while the characters, jokes and puns portray the aesthetics and ideology of postmodernism.

> If I want this to be a postmodern novel I'd better forget about history. You'll forget about history if you just quit writing it for reasons outlined above & by & by history will forget about you. You can take my word for it. (107)

> Wow, is this ever a postmodern novel. Frank, is this a postmodern novel. I'm sorry if you werent expecting a postmodern novel. I wasnt expecting any of it. That's what I mean. (108)

Although the tone of the work is playful and there are a number of word games involved, AASB is also an exploration of language and literary form. "As with all really good games, immensely serious things are going on, sometimes on the surface and sometimes deep beneath the surface."[43] The

premise that "art is play" is a common theme of both
metafictional and postmodern texts. Self-conscious fiction
uses "meta" levels of discourse to play with the narrative,
to shift the signification of fictional rules and contexts,
and to allow release from established patterns of
communication.[44]

The writing of both history and fiction is a recurring
theme in ASSB: "In Canada the only history is writing
history" (76). Bowering is making essentially the same
point that both Wiebe and Hébert had to make about history,
but he is more succinct: "Incidents are not history.
Writing history is history" (94). Bowering explores "the
grammar of Canadian history and literary tradition" but the
logic of the dialogue "exceeds that of history and of
straight fiction."[45] In ASSB, Bowering is examining and
playing with opposing and contradictory cultural, semantic
and ideological systems, and he self-consciously presents
his work in a fragmented form; ASSB "works against the
principle of a unified structure that solidifies the form of
the modernist novel."[46]

The style of the text is free-flowing and intuitive;
the form is fragmented: sixty-one short chapters in six
sections, numbered with large Roman numerals. Nearly every
sentence begins a new paragraph, and in spelling and
punctuation Bowering creates a personal language using
particular patterns of language and idiom, signs instead of
words ("&"), phonetic spelling ("pumpt"), run-on sentences,

and small case letters. These devices reinforce the
colloquial quality of his work; Bowering seeks "to elucidate
the relationship between language and response,"[47] and
again, many of these devices are explicitly discussed: "&
people say why are you doing archaic avant-garde writing.
This is warmed over Gertrude Stein there I said her name why
are you doing it" (154).

Bowering consistently and explicitly includes the reader
and the reader´s expectations in the narrative; "the reader
is not left on the margin to observe the author at play, as
in most postmodern writing."[48]

> Shove over, I want to talk to the reader. I want
> to say something to the reader reading. Reader
> reading, dont imagine any more that you can put
> on your invisibility suit & watch what they are
> doing, what Jane & Rochester are doing, what they
> are saying to each other... (174)

The reader is involved at a textual, immediate level,
becoming a character, a necessary partner/player who
contributes to the realization of the writing act. To an
extent, the reader is required to participate in the text as
a co-creator of the text, and this can be very frustrating.
In ASSB, the reader is given the role of a detective who
must try to solve certain puzzles, but who is also always at
the mercy of the writer, "always a few steps behind the
writer who detects his impulse to pin him down."[49] At the
same time, of course, the reader is made aware that there is
no "correct" or final solution; an overall or thematic

interpretation is impossible. "Bowering does in fiction what is traditionally done to fiction."[50]

> I might be hiding things from you but I am hiding them in this book. At least you know where to look. I wish you luck. (43)

As will be discussed later, this illustrates the fundamental difference between Beaulieu and Bowering. Beaulieu creates a postmodern, fictional world with gaps (Leerstellen) in it, thus drawing the reader's attention to the artifice involved, but which also, in order to work, must draw the reader into the text, into the fictional world. In LGP, the author is a self-conscious presence but the reader is required, or present, only through implication, and is unacknowledged. In Bowering's work, the reader is directly addressed and discussed, continually being reminded that "this is not reality" by the author's overt interruptions. The reader is made aware that he is holding a book and reading it; thus, the referential and fictional illusion is destroyed, and the fictional world becomes a text. Bowering uses metafictional techniques to continually deconstruct the book before the reader's very eyes, even though the reader is challenged to discover a context for the work within the structure of the book.

The self-consciousness of the work is also the point of the work; by destroying the referential illusion, it asserts its own reality. Bowering is not attempting a realistic rendering of experience or memory, but instead, the fictive

act.

> His fiction is not to be measured through the
> norms of external reality.... not to be
> interpreted in the same way critics interpret
> mimetic fiction. His fiction is not realistic
> because it is mimetic; it _is_ real in the sense of
> knowing that it is being written.[51]

Bowering's work is overtly concerned with the realities

which the realists, and, to an extent, the modernists,

ignore. His work self-consciously and self-reflexively

presents itself as artefact. His fiction "posits itself as

being more real than modernist realism exactly because it is

an act of consciousness, an art of surfaces."[52] He has

stated that "if the writer...becomes attentive to the

surface upon which he must work... the literal prose will

become more interesting & the reader will be called upon to

actualize the work."[53]

> But history is an idea of linear time, she
> said.... What else is there, not counting
> eternity because here you are said someone else.
> You might as well know it, it was myself.
>
> Turning to me she said you know because you are
> mouthing it, there is mythical time. These three
> easterners are from a text book, they are
> admythical in short. Myth is a truth of
> repetitive time. It is a blot that bleeds thru
> all time.
>
> I bowed my head beneath her point. You are right,
> I said. This has all been a waste of time.
> (p.184)

Bowering's work reflects a postmodern world view as

Fokkema defined it: an anti-realistic mode based on a

polemics opposed to the modernist belief in art as a means
of establishing and representing value or coherence.
Bowering seeks to cancel the illusion that literature is
representational; for Bowering, "art is simply another
subjective creation of the human mind that cannot pretend to
reveal truth and meaning in a world whose values are
constantly refurnished."[54]   One must ask, however, if
Bowering has entirely moved beyond modernism. He details
its failures and objects to any pretense of objectivity, but
he is only referring to those modernists who saw art as a
refuge for truth and meaning. As discussed in the second
chapter of this thesis, postmodernism can be seen as a
logical continuation of certain practices which began with
the modernists. Smaro Kamboureli believes that Bowering
does not manage to divorce himself from modernism, but
hovers between modernism and postmodernism; thus, she calls
his work a "fiction of unrest."[55]   Bowering himself has said

> The compulsive commentator does not proclaim that
> any writing described as post-modern is free of
> the taint of modernism, nor _vice-versa_. For one
> thing, post-modernism grew out of the fiction
> caused by the modernists in their carving of
> patterns in the wood sawn for them by the
> Romantics & realists.[56]

As with parody, Bowering seems to require the very system -
or at least, the reader's knowledge of it - that he is
seeking to subvert. He redeploys the devices of modernism
and parodies its claims, yet "he can go beyond the mimesis
of modernism only by exorcising its tropes through his own

use of them."[57]

Nevertheless, to a greater degree than the other writers discussed in this thesis, ASSB manifests the principles of postmodernist fiction, attempting "to re-establish the relation of language to reality.... [by] the deconstruction of the innocence of realism."[58] ASSB is metafictional in form and content (both self-reflexive and self-conscious) and postmodern in orientation.

With reference to Lauzen's chart, ASSB is most certainly an example of overt metafiction: Bowering has explicitly foregrounded, discussed and disrupted nearly every aspect of the traditional, realist story. The telling of the story, the narrating, is a major part of the work, and the narrator is visibly engaged in the act of composition. The reader is also dramatized, thematized and often directly addressed.

The plot, while relatively absent, is also thematized; the author-narrator and the characters search for The Pretty Good Canadian Novel, for what it means to be Canadian, for a connecting principle within the text, and so on. The plot, however, is subordinate to the external organizing principle of the entire text, which is the playful presentation of literary conventions and theory.

The characters are aware of their fictional status, they appear and reappear, address the author, complain and advise about the work in progress; there is even a talking beaver.

> She lookt around for help. Nobody would help her.
> The novel is writing it, I said, trying to
> help... But I thought the novel was a character

> in the story she said. At least once in a while.
> Yes, I suppose so, it is at heart an
> autobiographical novel, I said. (84)

The setting is self-consciously played with: presented,

described, even discussed, and then undercut.

> Scenery has no beginning & no end. It has no
> ending. It is there everywhere whether you are
> there moving or not, sorry David Hume.... For our
> purposes scenery begins from what you can see
> standing on the beach at Sooke Inlet looking west
> but it doesnt. (25) As sunlight to the east
> glinted on the canal & toucht church spires &
> towers, the city began to stir with a faint low
> hum. Hmmmmmmmmm. Hrrrrrrrr. (161)

As already mentioned, the major theme of the work is the

work itself; it is explicitly self-aware. There is also the

metafictional and postmodern theme of "fiction as a game,"

and Bowering pointedly disavows any symbolism or real world

applications.

Structure, by its very nature, is very difficult to make

self-conscious: it is a principle of organization that is

internal and inherent. Bowering comes close to a self-

conscious structure, however, by organizing the text with

the external and artificial principle of literature as a set

of rules and contexts to be examined and illustrated, and by

playing with frames and levels that become mixed and

inconsistent. There are short, disconnected chapters, an

index, parodies of book reviews, historical dramas and other

aspects of traditional realism. However, these elements are

apparently unconnected; there is no final pattern or code

offered to solve the puzzles that the text offers.

Bowering's approach to language is also postmodern; again and again, throughout the work, he reminds the reader that language is anything but a transparent, neutral conduit, but he does not make this point, as Beaulieu does, by making his language opaque and by continually sending the reader down a linguistic dead-end. Bowering's prose is playful, and he draws the reader's attention to the words themselves by punning, by exaggerating the figurative language or literalizing it. The surface of the prose is indeed made interesting, but Bowering also manages to communicate his ideas about language and literature through relatively coherent language. He disrupts both syntax and discourse structure; his odd spellings, ('wisht') also draw attention to the way we speak. Throughout the text, the primacy or sovereignty of meaning is constantly displaced by accidents of form in language: puns, rhymes, word-play, distorted words, etc.

The medium, the printing and pagination, is relatively standard, but Bowering often self-consciously refers to the chapter number he is on and discusses the typesetting of the text.

Although Bowering states in ASSB that "Victor-Lévy Beaulieu is my brother," (160) these two writers make an interesting comparison because they reflect two very different approaches to constructing a postmodern narrative. Bowering and Beaulieu, in quite different ways, make the

reader engage the text in order to create meaning. Beaulieu builds, or reconstructs, a fragmented, deconstructed world with the reader inside. Bowering, in contrast, continually breaks the illusion of reality within the created world, and the reader is thrown out of the text, back to reality, back to himself, reading. Beaulieu only implies that there is a reality beyond the text; except for the "white, motionless country" that is beyond words, the narrative is focused almost exclusively upon itself. Bowering repeatedly asserts the world, intruding upon the reader so that the reader is aware of the activity of reading he is engaged in. John Moss calls this the difference between "the closed world, re-conceived, and the defiantly open."[59]

Both use language "to expose the arbitrary and limiting nature of conventional narrative,"[60] but the difference between their approaches is evident in the way each uses language. Bowering uses relatively correct syntax to communicate nonsense: the novel making love to Evangeline. However, when he disrupts the normal sentence structure, it is to expose or deflate the rules we unconsciously exercise in order to make us aware of our expectations. Bowering uses the realist mode to highlight its fallacies; "he insists there is a world beyond the text at every turn."[61]

For Beaulieu's purposes, however, it is essential that the narrative illusion, or at least elements of it, remain temporarily intact. The reader's attention is drawn to elements within the narrative, reinforcing narrative closure

instead of violating it, as Bowering does, by reaching
beyond the text. Put another way, in ASSB, the reader is
jarred out of the text; in LGP, the reader is constantly
jarred within the text by the confusing and often repelling
images. Thus, it is necessary to sustain the narrative in
order to violate it; conventions must be present in order to
be disrupted. In LGP, "the misdirections and excesses of
language lead not away from the fiction but deeper into
it."[62]

Bowering exposes the illusion of narrative reality and
makes this process part of the fiction; Beaulieu maintains
the illusion of narrative reality; it is the language
itself, what it says, that declares itself absurd.[63] Yet
both Bowering and Beauliu achieve the same effect, for both
are attempting

> to break down the artificial and arbitrary
> barriers between life and the printed word, to
> break through the walls of the labyrinth which
> language has built around us and in which we too
> readily find ourselves lost.[64]

Both attempt to move the reader, ultimately, beyond the
narrative reality; both "use language and the narrative
text...to effect a change between consciousness and the
nature of reality."[65]

Bowering "reduces the word-worlds to words, and restores
to the reader a sense of the real beyond text, of reality as
a context in which...even books may be real."[66] In
Beaulieu, the concept of different realities is the implicit

object of the discourse; the story comes to us through Milien, but the words are not his - the discourse of the novel deconstructs the realism of the novel by foregrounding its own creation.

The Temptations of Big Bear and les Fous de Bassan were found to be dealing essentially with epistemological (and therefore, modernist) themes and issues: the ways of knowing, and the limits of knowledge. In contrast, the focus in les Grands-pères and A Short Sad Book is ontological; both Bowering and Beaulieu attempt to illustrate modes of being, states of realities, rather than problems of knowing. The emphasis is on the constructing, the fictionalizing, of possible worlds, and the limits and modes of existence of such fictional worlds. It could be argued that both Bowering's and Beaulieu's works are patterned and unified by their preoccupation with the act, process, and results of literary creation, which is, after all, a recurring theme in both works. Both of these texts are self-conscious, but they also proceed from and establish the radical indeterminacy and ontological uncertainty that is held to be postmodern. The unifying thread, in this instance, is paradoxically postmodern: the realignment of reading, being, and the text.

V: Conclusion

This thesis began by proposing a definition of
metafiction as an anti-mimetic mode of writing, and then
examined metafiction in the broader context of postmodernist
fiction. The complicated and contradictory theoretical bias
of the postmodern movement makes it difficult to summarize
the main features of postmodernist fiction; critical
evaluations and judgements on an ongoing process must, of
course, be provisional. Very generally, there seem to be
two modes distinguishable in postmodernist writing: one
which seeks to expose the illusion of referentiality in
language, which refuses to locate meaning or "truth" in
language, and one that still seeks to be referential, that
sees language as a cognitive tool with which to establish
temporary, provisional truths within a framework of
ontological uncertainty.[1] In the nonreferential mode, texts
are seen as withdrawing from the world, focusing only upon
their own structures, and thus, turning the medium into the
artefact - the end, rather than the means. In the
referential mode, broadly associated with a phenomenological
approach, texts still engage the world; the medium is seen
as a means of communication; in this mode, an unstable,
contingent subject approaches an unstable, contingent
reality, without necessarily establishing and imposing
meaning.[2]

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In practice, metafiction can belong to either mode of postmodernism; it can be referential or nonreferential, but it is often defined and categorized as the literary expression of the postmodern, nonreferential mode, that is, writing that does not aim for referentiality. Obviously, however, such writing is not necessarily nonreferential. It may be focused, as is Bowering's, upon the writer involved in his environment, which is why such critics as Christopher Butler do not accept the critical designation of metafiction as a "nonreferential" mode. Even though the subject apparently only engages itself, such writing can be perceived as the artist phenomenologically observing and reporting on the creative process.[3] Strictly speaking, simply reflecting some aspect of an autonomous literary structure undermines the referential illusion of a text, but this does not make the text nonreferential or even self-referential. The critical distinction between a referential and a nonreferential mode in postmodernism may ultimately prove to be useless, at least for literary art. As Dillard notes, "since words necessarily refer to the world, as paint does not, literary contexts must be more responsible to the actual world than painting contexts must be."[4] The critical distinction between texts that engage or withdraw from the world expresses the self-destructive paradox at the heart of postmodernist fiction: what conventions can we use to illustrate the insubstantiality of conventions? The two modes perhaps merely represent two different approaches -

intuitive versus intellectual - to the same end: both are attempting to dislocate and defamiliarize the arbitrary structures - themselves included - that determine and create significance and meaning.[5]

Although "metafictional" and "postmodern" are often used synonymously, the two terms do not mean the same thing. Much of this confusion has occurred because metafiction is a mode of writing which operates in opposition to the realist code, and postmodernism is, above all else, "an illusion-breaking art."[6] A great many texts deliberately expose their own artificiality, however, without being at all postmodern in orientation. "Frame-breaking" can create strange effects or even reinforce the realistic, referential level of a novel, but it does not in itself make a novel either metafictional or postmodern. Metafiction becomes postmodern when a work that focuses upon the creative processing of itself also subverts and undermines the referentiality of the text or its language, thus emphasizing and calling into question any ordering or artificial construction of significance. When a work foregrounds its own ontological structure and status by deconstructing reified notions of time, space, character, plot, and narrative technique, the subversion or frame-breaking is seen as an expression of the radical indeterminacy that characterizes the postmodern world view. In order for a text to be considered postmodern, it must subvert not only the literary conventions of language or narrative, but the

metanarratives, the conventions of thought which determine and define all realities (which is why postmodernism is sometimes defined as defining itself right out of existence). Postmodern fiction must move beyond the disconnections and disjunctions of modernism, and must illustrate a random world of multiplicity and contingency without ontological anchoring at any level of literary "reality." Postmodernist writers, in the extreme, must be both anti-realistic and anti-modernist.

Metafictional writing addresses and embodies the tension between literature and the world, thus, between language and the world, as well as between any perceiver and any object. Postmodern writing does not concentrate so much upon debunking or exalting this relationship, as upon questioning the nature and validity of the human process of writing, how we _make_ _sense_ of the world, and this is why the self-consciousness of metafiction is often held to be postmodern.

> In the event that myth, archetype, and language
> are subverted - as they have been by
> sophisticated modernists - the novelist may then
> turn for subject and authority or validation to
> the act of writing itself.[7]

In focusing upon the constructedness of meaning, many postmodern texts refuse to offer a context; the reader is required to construct his own means of interpreting the text. The reader is not allowed to be a passive consumer of the author-created fictional world, for the text does not offer any means of arriving at a total understanding or

interpretation of the text. The reader must become actively engaged in, and is thus made aware of, the process of reconstructing the rules governing the perception and definition of literary reality. Our inability to resolve many postmodernist texts illustrates "how we, as writers and readers, desire and make closure," and this has profound implications for the critical study of literature.[8]

Postmodern novels are disintegrated and disconnected, ultimately and unresolvably ambivalent. They attempt to foreground and deconstruct the familiar ways of thinking about fiction and the world. Current criticism, particularly as it deals with postmodern fiction, exhibits the same self-conscious ambivalence. For both readers and critics, it is no longer possible to be an objective observer, an epistemologically innocent bystander.[9] The recognition that all writing carries an underlying ideology, all vision is mediated, forces critics to deconstruct their own views. The difficulties and complications increase when one sets out to examine texts that are held to be postmodern with reference to a set of critical and theoretical rules. By its very nature, postmodernism deconstructs and denies such rules, even while being entirely concerned with, and proceeding from, such a theoretical context. Criticism both embodies and exposes the paradox of postmodernism.

As noted, a work can be self-referential (metafictional) without being postmodern, that is, without disrupting its own diegetic or linguistic processes. Thus, it is necessary

to look not only at the metafictional devices which are present in a given text, but to look at the purpose such devices serve in the context in which they occur. All of the novels discussed in this thesis contain metafictional elements, and the writers use different discursive stategies which all, in their own ways, reject descriptive or mimetic realism; however, they cannot all be considered postmodern.

Wiebe is metafictional in his foregrounding of the writing and interpreting of history and fiction, showing that both are human constructs, made continuous and coherent only by their writers and readers. He also attempts to juxtapose two conflicting ways of knowing or structuring the world: the Indian, oral reality is contrasted with the white, documentary reality. Wiebe emphasizes the constructedness of meaning and shows the bias and limiting nature of historical documents, but he does not attempt to deconstruct or move beyond the bias of his own document. His intent is didactic; Wiebe treats language as a referential means of establishing and communicating a personal truth. The fragmented narrative and bits of history in The Temptations of Big Bear are unified by Wiebe's artistic vision, made coherent and interpretable; Wiebe creates a Christian myth with Big Bear as a hero, the suffering prophet. Wiebe unironically reflects a universal myth; in spite of his innovations, Wiebe's text is grounded in nineteenth-century traditions of realism which perceive literature as offering a special kind of knowledge. He

attempts to create a transcending vision, beyond time, place and race, of a universal human truth.

Like Wiebe, Hébert multiplies and juxtaposes narrators and narrative levels. In <u>les Fous de Bassan</u>, Hébert´s "discourse of the unreal" constantly foregrounds and undermines the discourse of the real, apparently subverting the image of a rational, coherent world, but again, the fragmentations and disruptions are finally resolved. Hébert balances both referentiality and dislocation, first subverting the referential illusion and then rebuilding it; structurally, Hébert creates a fictional world where opposing principles can coexist. However, the interplay of contradictory discourses (realistic and fantastic) serves to enhance the depiction of a psychological reality, a subconscious, irrational dimension. There is a constant slippage between the real and the unreal, but the text is organized and coheres through the dominating and repeated images of repression, desire, and violence. There are numerous self-reflexive structures in her work which depict an atemporal, purely fictive dimension and serve as frame-breaks, but which, in the context of the rest of the novel, do not represent the radical indeterminacy of postmodernism.

In both Wiebe and Hébert, the narration proceeds through multiplying perpectives, "aggravating the fragmentation of the text,"[10] although, as noted, the fragmentation is finally integrated and recuperated. The elaborate narrative artifice in these works operates, in the final analysis, to

lend verisimilitude to a fragmented version of a modern
moral and social realism. Although both writers appear to
approach ontological issues, comparing ways of perceiving
and being in the world, the dominant theme of their work is
not the metafictional/postmodern "art is artifice." Wiebe
and Hébert are both self-reflexive and metafictional, but in
the overall effects that they produce, they do not reflect
the principles of literary postmodernism.

Bowering and Beaulieu both emphasize the fiction-making
process itself, the mechanics of creativity, rather than the
results of the writing. Their texts self-consciously focus
almost exclusively on the private, fictional world of their
own structure and narrative. In Bowering and Beaulieu, the
narration is delegated to narrators "whose discourse becomes
increasingly self-referential."[11] Bowering and Beaulieu are
attempting to incorporate two modes: a questionable
narrator generates one level of discourse while the
fragmentations and interruptions, overtly the author's
"voice," dislocates and subverts the logic and meaning of
the narrative. In les Grands-pères, the incoherent
discourse and lurid, morbid language deconstruct the realism
of the novel from within; in addition, it is overtly a story
told, an author's attempt at imagining and articulating a
certain fictional reality. In form, Beaulieu is postmodern,
but the effects he achieves are through absence: an absence
of coherence, unity, and any means of establishing the
reality of much of his narrative. This is not really the

same as the textual awareness of "the unpresentable," the "absence of a centre," as Lyotard puts it, that defines postmodernist writing. After reading this work, one is reminded of the question: "when is a work about meaninglessness and when is it simply meaningless?"[12]

Beaulieu and Bowering are similiar in that both their texts contain a combination of structural narrative and unstructured fabulation. Where Beaulieu is absent, however, Bowering is explicitly and intrusively present. In A Short Sad Book, Bowering is most certainly attacking and subverting the documentary and didactic function of literature; paradoxically, he is also attempting to illustrate and explain the principles of postmodern fiction. The subject of his novel is the "alliance of writer, character, plot and reader"[13] that essentially creates the novel; his novel both reflects and discusses postmodern theory. Bowering is overtly both anti-realistic and anti-modern, (although whether he actually breaks entirely away from modernism is another question) and he attempts to displace, or at least redefine, the referentiality of literature, to displace the sovereignty of meaning. A Short Sad Book is integrated at the ludic level, and could perhaps be considered as an example of performative postmodern writing; his work treats language and the rules of meaning as a game that both the writer and the reader engage in. Bowering and Beaulieu are both self-reflexive and postmodern; their texts disrupt referentiality through the

narration of narrating and offer, finally, a deliberately
self-defeating narrative, reflecting the ontological
uncertainty of postmodernism.

Throughout this thesis, I have distinguished between
epistemology and ontology as representing, in McHale's
terms, the dominant of modernist and postmodernist writing.
I believe this is a valid and useful distinction. The
issues and questions that postmodernist writers address and
that define postmodernism are fundamentally ontolgical:

> What is fiction? What is the relation between
> the fictive and the real, between fiction and its
> creator, between the fictional world and the
> text? what relations hold between different
> 'possible worlds,' where are the boundaries
> between them, and what happens when these
> boundaries are crossed?[14]

On the basis of this distinction, I have classified the
novels of Wiebe and Hébert as modern; they are exploring
essentially epistemological questions: ways of knowing, the
communication of knowledge and the limits of knowledge. The
novels of Bowering and Beaulieu, in contrast, are postmodern
because they illustrate precisely those questions listed in
the quote above: what is fiction? What are fictional
worlds?

Wiebe and Hébert create a verisimilitude by denying
their own presence and the presence of the reader. In both
texts, a certain reality is tacitly assumed without ever
being directly approached. Thus, Wiebe's work is perhaps
more closely associated with the traditions of Tolstoy's

realism, and Hébert's, with James' psychological realism, than either work is with postmodernism. Bowering and Beaulieu, in their separate ways, are objecting to precisely such an assumption of reality as "an absolute and immutable given condition."[15] Both lead the reader to a different realization: there are competing realities, and if there is an absolute reality, we will never know it absolutely. As for written reality, it is all fiction.

Along the spectrum of metafiction as defined by Waugh, Wiebe's text can be placed at one end with "texts that take fictionality as a theme to be explored."[16] Wiebe explores, specifically, the writing of history and historical narrative. Hébert's text can be placed at the centre, with those texts that "manifest symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized," and which are, therefore, sometimes termed "new realism."[17] Bowering's and Beaulieu's texts, however, are more extreme; they must be placed further along the spectrum, tending towards fictions that, "in rejecting realism more thoroughly, posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions."[18] Such texts are using metafictional techniques to reflect an ontological indeterminacy, and can also, therefore, be considered postmodern.

All of these works contain metafictional elements and reflect varying degrees of self-consciousness. However, the

metafictional elements in Wiebe and Hébert serve to enhance the referential and pragmatic function of language. Wiebe and Hébert are therefore explicitly self-reflexive, but only implicitly self-conscious. In Bowering and Beaulieu, the metafictional elements serve to disrupt the referentiality of language, to focus the reader's attention on that which is conventionally ignored or hidden by realistic and even modernist writers. Beaulieu is explicitly self-conscious without being very self-reflexive, and Bowering is overtly both self-reflexive and self-conscious.

Each of these writers shows an awareness of postmodern aesthetics and theory, and the term "postmodern" has been used to describe all of them. It is obvious, however, that four such different works should not be subsumed under a common label and description. These novels demonstrate that it is necessary not only to discriminate among types and degrees of self-consciousness, but also to be aware of the variety of purposes that can be served by such devices. Hence, "metafiction" cannot be equated with "postmodernism." Self-conscious writing is a strategy that has been used by novelists, beginning with Cervantes, for as many reasons as there are books. It is therefore necessary to limit our critical definitions of metafiction to its formal level: as a mode of writing which operates in conjunction with and in opposition to the conventions of mimetic writing. It is also necessary to expand and clarify our critical concepts of postmodernism, to move beyond viewing it simply as

writing which displays and indicates the unreality of all
our concepts of reality. The texts discussed in this thesis
demonstrate that it is possible to be metafictional without
being postmodern, and to be postmodern with differing
degrees of metafictionality. It is necessary to
discriminate between such techniques as metafictional
writing, that a writer may use, and such literary codes as
postmodernism, that a writer may be reflecting and operating
within. "Metafiction" and "postmodernism" are not modes of
writing or discourses that overlap; rather, one is a
technique that may be used, and often is, to reflect the
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