The Significance of Fictionalizing

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If a literary text does something to its readers, it also simultaneously tells us something about them. Thus literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, inclinations, and eventually our overall makeup. The question arises as to why we may need this particular medium, especially in view of the fact that literature as a medium is put on a par with other media, and the ever-increasing role that these play in our civilization shows the degree to which literature has lost its significance as the epitome of culture. The more comprehensively a medium fulfills its sociocultural function, the more it is taken for granted, as literature once used to be. It did indeed fulfill several such functions, ranging from entertainment through information and documentation to pastime, but these have now been distributed among many independent institutions that not only compete fiercely with literature but also deprive it of its formerly all-encompassing function. Does literature still have anything to offer that the competing media are unable to provide?

I shall try to address this question by focusing on the fictionality of literature, first by detailing how to conceive of fictionalizing, and second by suggesting why we as human beings may need this form of make-believe.

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Most people associate the term fiction with the story-telling branch of literature, but in its other guise it is also what Dr Johnson called “a falsehood; a lye” (1755). The equivocalness of the word is very revealing, for each meaning sheds light on the other. Both meanings entail similar processes, which we might term ‘overstepping’ what is: the lie oversteps the truth, and the literary work oversteps the real world which it incorporates. It is therefore not surprising that literary fictions were so often branded as lies, since they talk of what does not exist, even though they present its nonreality as if it did exist.

Plato’s complaint that poets lie met its first strong opposition in the Renaissance, when Sir Philip Sidney rejoined that “the Poet…nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth,”[(1)] since

he does not talk of what is, but of what ought to be, and this form of overstepping is quite different from lying. Fiction and fictionalizing entail a duality, the liar must conceal the truth, but the truth is potentially present in the mask disguising it. In literary fictions, existing worlds are overstepped, and although they are individually still recognizable, they are set in a context that defamiliarizes them. Thus both lie and literature contain two worlds: the lie incorporates the truth and the purpose for which it must be concealed; literary fictions incorporate an identifiable reality that is subjected to an unforeseeable refashioning. And when we describe fictionalizing as an act of overstepping, we must bear in mind that the reality overstepped is not left behind: it remains present, thereby imbuing fiction with a duality that may be exploited for different purposes. In what is to follow, we shall focus on fictionalizing as a means of actualizing the possible in order to address the question why human beings, in spite of their awareness that literature is make-believe, seem to stand in need of fictions.

Even if nowadays literary fictions are no longer charged with lying, they are still stigmatized as being unreal, regardless of the vital role fictions play in our everyday lives. In his book *Ways of Worldmaking*[(2)], Nelson Goodman shows that we do not live in one reality but in many, and each of these realities is the result of a processing which can never be traced back to "something stolid underneath."[(3)] There is no single underlying world, but instead we create new worlds out of old ones in a process which Goodman describes as "fact from fiction."[(4)] Fictions, then, are not the unreal side of reality, let alone the opposite of reality, which our 'tacit knowledge' still takes them to be; they are, rather, conditions that enable the production of worlds whose reality, in turn, is not to be doubted.

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Such ideas were first articulated by Sir Francis Bacon, who argues that fictions "give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind … in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it."[(5)] This is not quite the same as Goodman's ways of worldmaking, but it shows how we can gain access to the inaccessible by inventing possibilities. It is a view that has survived down the ages, and four hundred years later Marshall McLuhan described the "art of fiction" as an extension of man.[(6)]

This may be one of the reasons why we cannot talk of fiction as such, for it can only be described by way of its functions, that is, the manifestations of its use and the products resulting from it. This is evident even to cursory observation: in epistemology we find fictions as presuppositions; in science they are hypotheses; fictions provide the foundations for world-pictures; and the assumptions that guide our actions are fictions as well. In each of these cases, fiction has a different task to perform: with epistemological positing, it is a premise; with the hypothesis, it is a test; with world-pictures, it is a dogma whose fictional nature must remain concealed if the foundation is not to be impaired; and with our actions, it is anticipation. Since fictions have such manifold applications, we might well ask what

they appear to be like, and what they reveal in literature.

Undoubtedly, the literary text is permeated by a vast range of identifiable items selected from social and other extratextual realities. The mere importation of such realities into the text – even though they are not being represented in the text for their own sake – does not ipso facto make them fictive. Instead, the text's apparent reproduction of items from the world outside serves to highlight purposes, intentions, and aims that are decidedly not part of the realities reproduced. Hence they appear in the text as a product of a fictionalizing act, which converts the realities concerned into a sign for something other than themselves.

As the creation of an author, the literary text evidences a particular attitude through which the author directs himself or herself to the world. Therefore each text makes inroads into extratextual fields of reference and, by disrupting them, creates an eventful disorder. In consequence, both structure and semantics of these fields are subject to certain deformations. Each one is reshuffled in the text and takes on a new form, a form that nevertheless includes, and indeed depends on, the very function this field has within the structure of the given world. This function now becomes virtual and provides the background against which the operation of restructuring may stand out in relief, featuring the intention underlying the apparent deformation. Furthermore, the ensuing tension indicates that the referential world which has been overstepped is still present in the text. Every literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text.

A complement to the act of selection is the act of combination, which is also an act of fictionalizing, marked by the same basic mode of operation: the crossing of boundaries . Here the boundaries that are crossed are intratextual, ranging from lexical meanings to the constellation of characters. On the lexical level this is to be seen, for instance, with neologisms such as Joyce's coining of the term *benefiction*, which combines the words benefaction, benediction, and fiction. The lexical meaning of a particular word is faded out and a new meaning faded in, without the loss of the original meaning. This establishes a figure-and-ground relationship, allowing both the separation of the individual elements and a continuous switching of the perspective between them. In accordance with whichever reference forms the foreground or background, the semantic weighting will be shifted.

Another level of relating is to be seen in the organization of specific semantic demarcations within the text. These give rise to intratextual fields of reference, which provide an occasion for the hero of a novel, for instance, to step over internally marked boundaries. Such boundary-crossing is a subject-creating event.[(7)] It is "revolutionary" insofar as it infringes on an intratextual organization.

The various clusters, whether they be words with outstripped meanings or semantic demarcations transgressed by the characters in a narrative, are inseparably linked; they

inscribe themselves into one another, every word becomes dialogic, and every intra-textual semantic field is doubled by another. Through this double-voiced discourse every utterance carries something else in its wake, and thus the acts of combination unfold a play space between them in which the present is always doubled by the absent, frequently redistributing the weight by making the present totally subservient to the absent: What is said ceases to mean itself, so that what is not said can thus gain presence. There is no third dimension in the text that would allow to relate precisely what is related to what; instead, the double meaning of words as well as the elements selected from outside the text and now yoked together in an unfamiliar way are related through the different influences they have upon one another.

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Fictions also play vital roles in the activities of cognition and behavior, as in the founding of institutions, societies, and world-pictures. Unlike such non-literary fictions, the literary text reveals its own fictionality. Because of this, its function must be radically different from that of related activities that mask their fictional nature. The masking, of course, need not necessarily occur with the intention to deceive; it occurs because the fiction is meant to provide an explanation, or even a foundation, and would not do so if its fictive nature were to be exposed. The concealment of fictionality endows an explanation with an appearance of reality, which is vital, because fiction – as explanation – functions as the constitutive basis of this reality.

When a fiction signals its own fictionality – for which of course literary genres are the most obvious and durable signs – it necessitates an attitude different from that adopted toward fictions hiding their fictionality. The incorporated ‘real’ world is, so to speak, put in brackets, simultaneously indicating that it is to be viewed as if it were a world, a world, however, that has no empirical existence, and thus is only to be taken as if it were a given world. In the self-disclosure of its fictionality, an important feature of the fictional text comes to the fore: it places the world organized in the text under the sign of the ‘as if’. Thus readers are signaled that they must bracket off their natural attitudes toward what they are reading. But this does not mean forgetting or transcending those natural attitudes, which cannot be abandoned. Instead, they figure as a virtualized background, which as a latent instance of comparison, or at least as a testing ground, is essential if the textual world is to be digested. Thus the bracketing-off process splits the reader’s attitude into one that is simultaneously natural and artificial. The natural attitude loses its validity, so that the new one may develop, but the new one would not achieve stability if it could not be played off against the old one.

Thus the purpose of the self-disclosing fiction comes to light. If the world represented in the literary text is not meant to denote a given world, and hence is turned into an analogue for figuring something, it serves two different purposes at once. The reaction provoked by the

represented world could be directed toward conceiving what the textual world is meant to 'figure forth.' The analogue, however, could simultaneously direct the reaction to the empirical world from which the textual world was drawn, allowing this very world to be perceived from a vantage point that has never been part of it. In this case the reverse side of things will come into view. The duality of the analogue will never exclude either of the two possibilities; in fact, they appear to interpenetrate, making conceivable what would otherwise remain hidden.

All the acts of fictionalizing that can be distinguished within the fictional text are acts of boundary-crossing. Selection transgresses the limits of extratextual systems as well as the boundaries of the text itself by pointing to the referential fields that link the text to what is beyond the page. Combination transgresses the semantic demarcations established by the text, ranging from the derestriction of lexical meanings to the hero's infringement on strictly enforced borderlines. Finally, the 'as-if' construction discloses the fictionality of fiction, thus transgressing the represented world set up by the acts of selection and combination, thereby indicating that it is to be used for an unverbalized, though overarching, purpose. The self-disclosure has a twofold significance. First, it shows that fiction can be known as fiction. Second, it shows that the represented world is only to be conceived as if it were a world in order that it should be taken to figure something other than itself.

Ultimately, the text brings about one more boundary-crossing that occurs within the reader's experience: it stimulates attitudes toward an unreal world, the unfolding of which leads to the temporary displacement of the reader's own reality. As the acts of fictionalizing are geared to one another and have a clearly punctuated sequence, their different types of boundary-crossing ensure assimilation of a transformed world that issues from them.

The acts of fictionalizing can be clearly distinguished by the different gestalt each of them brings about: selection results in revealing the intentionality of the author; combination results in bringing about unfamiliar relationships of the items selected within the text; and self-disclosure results in bracketing the world represented, thereby converting it into a sign for something else, and simultaneously suspending the reader's natural attitude. All these cases are "facts from fiction."

Furthermore, the various acts of fictionalizing carry with them whatever has been outstripped, and the resultant doubleness might therefore be defined as the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive. All the fictionalizing acts discussed are marked by this doubleness. Selection opens up an area between fields of reference and their distortion in the text; combination opens up another between interacting textual segments; and the 'as if' opens up another between an empirical world and its transposition into an analogue for what remains unsaid though meant by the text. Thus the formula of fictionality as the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive allows for describing the structure of the fictional component of

literature. It gives rise to a dynamic oscillation resulting in a constant interpenetration of things which are set off from one another without ever losing their difference. The tension ensuing from the attempt to resolve this ineradicable difference creates an aesthetic potential which, as a source of meaning, can never be substituted by anything else. This does not imply that the fictional component of literature is the actual work of art. What it does imply, however, is that the fictional component makes the work of art possible.

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Now we have to take a look what this doubling structure may imply, and, better still, what it might indicate. As a lead for addressing this issue, we might consider a passage in the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by the Czech writer Milan Kundera, who caused a stir with this particular piece of literature before European Communism collapsed.

> Staring impotently across the courtyard, at a loss for what to do; hearing the pertinacious rumbling of one's own stomach during a moment of love; betraying, yet lacking the will to abandon the glamorous path of betrayal; raising one's fist with the crowds in the Grand March; displaying one's wit before hidden microphones – I have known all these situations, I have experienced them myself, yet none of them has given rise to the person my curriculum vitae and I represent. The characters in my novels are my unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own 'I' ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.[(8)]

The possibilities Kundera speaks of lie beyond what is, even though they could not exist without what there is. This duality is brought into focus through writing, which is motivated by the desire to overstep the reality surrounding the novelist. Therefore he does not write about what there is, and this overstepping is related to a dimension that retains its equivocalness, for it depends on what is, yet cannot be derived from what there is.

On the one hand the writer's reality fades into a range of its own possibilities, and on the other these possibilities overstep what is and thus invalidate it. But this penumbra of possibilities could not have come into being if the world, to which it forms the horizon, had been left behind. Instead, they begin to uncover what hitherto had remained concealed in the very world now refracted in the mirror of possibilities, thus exposing it as a trap.

In the novel, then, the real and the possible coexist, for it is only the author's selection from and textual representation of the real world that can create a matrix for the possible to

emerge, whose ephemeral character would remain shapeless if it were not the transformation of something already existing. But it would also remain meaningless if it did not serve to bring out the hidden areas of given realities. Having both the real and the possible and yet, at the same time, maintaining the difference between them – this is a process denied us in real life; it can only be staged in the form of the 'as if'. Otherwise, whoever is caught up in reality, cannot experience possibility, and vice versa.

In what sense, though, is our world a "trap," and what compels us to overstep the boundaries? All fictionalizing authors do this, and so, too, do readers of literature who go on reading despite their awareness of the fictionality of the text. The fact that we seem to need this 'ecstatic' state of being beside, outside, and beyond ourselves, caught up in and yet detached from our own reality, derives from our inability to be present to ourselves. The ground out of which we are remains unavailable to us. Samuel Beckett's Malone says: "Live or invent"[(9)], for as we do not know what it is to live, we must invent what eludes penetration. There is a similar dictum, equally pithy, by Helmuth Plessner, who corroborates Beckett from a rather different angle, that of social anthropology: "I am, but I do not have myself".[(10)] "Have" means knowing what it is to be, which would require a transcendental stance in order to grasp the self-evident certainty of our existence with all its implications, significance and, indeed, meaning. If we wish to have what remains impenetrable, we are driven beyond ourselves; and as we can never be both ourselves and the transcendental stance to and of ourselves necessary to predicate what it means to be, we resort to fictionalizing. Beckett gave voice to what Plessner had posed as a problem: that self-fashioning is the answer to our inaccessibility to ourselves. Fictionalizing begins where knowledge leaves off, and this dividing line turns out to be the fountainhead of fiction by means of which we extend ourselves beyond ourselves.

The anthropological significance of fictionalizing becomes unmistakable in relation to the many unknowable realities permeating human life. Beginning and end are perhaps the most all-pervading realities of this kind. This means no less than that the cardinal points of our existence defy cognitive or even experiential penetration. The Greek physician Alkmaeon is believed to have earned Aristotle's approval when saying that human beings must die because they are not in the position to link up beginning and end.[(11)] If death is indeed the result of this impossibility, it is scarcely surprising that it should give rise to ideas that might lead to its abolition. These ideas would entail concocting possibilities in order to do away with what resists penetration, thus linking up ineluctable beginnings and endings and thereby creating a framework within which we might learn what it means to be caught up in life. The unending proliferation of such possibilities points to the fact that there are no means of authentication for the links provided. Instead, the fashioning of the unknowable will be determined to a large extent by historically prevailing needs. If fictionalizing transgresses those boundaries beyond which unrecognizable realities exist, then the very possibilities concocted for the repair of this deficiency, caught between our unknowable beginning and ending, become indicative of what is withheld, inaccessible, and unavailable.

In this respect, fictionalizing turns out to be a measuring rod for gauging the historically conditioned changeability of deeply entrenched human desires.

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If the borderlines of knowledge give rise to fictionalizing activity, we might perceive an economy principle at work: namely, what can be known need not to be staged again, and so fictionality always subsidizes the unknowable. This becomes strikingly obvious when human beings, in contradistinction to the inaccessibility to beginnings and endings, are in full possession of what is or of what they are in. This applies to all evidential experiences of life, which, characterized by instantaneous certainty, embody the exact opposite of inaccessibility.

Evidential experiences are in the nature of an epiphany.

Love is probably the most intense of these experiences, and it is also the central topic of staging in literature. It is far from being excluded from experience, but it is excluded from knowledge, because there is no knowledge of what evidential experience actually is, or because evidence seems to make all knowledge redundant. Evidential experiences evince indubitability, which obviously tempts us to start asking questions. Is this simply because we would like knowledge of what is guaranteed by other certainties? Jerome Bruner provided an answer to this question, when remarking in a different context: “For the object of understanding human events is to sense the alternativeness of human possibility. And so there will be no end to interpretation.”[(12)] If so, then the staging of evidential experiences in literature is concerned with laying out alternatives for instantaneous certainty. Such a display, however, would seem to be without limits, since with evidential experiences one cannot separate the matter experienced from the appearance. This makes the alternatives endlessly proliferating, as is proved by the limitless possibilities of staged love in literature. Evidential experience is almost like an assault; it happens to us, and we are inside it. But the experience awakens in us a desire to look at what has happened to us, and this is when the evidence explodes into alternatives. These alternatives cannot make themselves independent; they remain linked to the evidential experience to which we want to gain access.

But this means that instantaneous certainties trigger the need for staging in exactly the same way as the cardinal mysteries. Now, however, we can see the decentered position of the human being, i.e. to be and not to have oneself, in a somewhat different light. Not being present to oneself is now only one of the spurs to staging, and in the visualization of certainty it springs from the opposite impulse of wishing to face oneself. However, if certainty cannot be understood as compensation for unavailabilities, this asymmetry reflects a craving for alternatives even to those experiences which provide immediate certainty.

This is the point at which literary fictions diverge from the fictions of our ordinary world.

The latter are assumptions, hypotheses, presuppositions and, more often than not, the basis of world views, and may be said to complement reality. Frank Kermode calls them “concord fictions”[(13)] because they close off something which by its very nature is open. Fictionalizing in literature, however, appears to have a different aim. To transgress otherwise inaccessible realities (beginning, end, and evidential experiences) can only come to fruition by staging what is withheld. This enactment is propelled by the drive to reach beyond oneself, yet not in order to transcend oneself, but to become available to oneself. If such a move arises out of a need for compensation, then this very need remains basically unfulfilled in literary fictions. For the latter are always accompanied by convention-governed signs that signalize the ‘as if’- nature of all the possibilities they adumbrate. Consequently, such a staged compensation for what is missing in reality never conceals the fact that in the final analysis it is nothing but make-believe, and so ultimately all the possibilities opened up must be lacking in authenticity. What is remarkable, though, is the fact that our awareness of this inauthenticity does not stop us from continuing to fictionalize.

Why is that so, and why are we still fascinated by fictionality, whose self-disclosure reveals any hoped-for compensation as pure semblance? What accounts for the potency of semblance is the following:

(1) None of the possibilities concocted can be representative, for each one is nothing but a kaleidoscopic refraction of what it mirrors and is therefore potentially infinitely variable. Thus semblance allows for a limitless fashioning of those realities that are sealed off from cognitive penetration.

(2) The possibilities concocted never hide or bridge the rift between themselves and the unfathomable realities. Thus semblance invalidates all forms of reconciliation.

(3) Finally, the rift can be acted out in an infinite number of ways. Thus semblance lifts all restrictions on the modes according to which that play space may be utilized.

The semblance, however, gives vivid presence to intangible states of affairs so that they may penetrate into the conscious mind as if they were an object of perception. What can never become present, and what eludes cognition and knowledge and is beyond experience, can enter consciousness only through feigned representation, for consciousness has no barrier – as Freud has remarked – against the perceptible and no defense against the imaginable. Consequently, ideas can be brought forth in consciousness from an as yet unknown state of affairs, indicating that the presence of the latter does not depend on any preceding experience. – By the way, something similar may be said of the dream. Here, too, the dream thoughts are staged as they push something through into consciousness that is not identical to themselves.

Let us sum up by asking what the fictionalizing of literature reveals of the human makeup. If literature permits limitless patterning of human nature, we may infer that what we call human nature is rather a featureless plasticity that lends itself to a continual culture-bound repatterning. It furthermore indicates the inveterate urge of human beings to become present to themselves; this urge, however, will never issue into a definitive shape, because self-grasping arises out of overstepping limitations. Literature fans out human plasticity into a panoply of shapes, each of which is an enactment of self-confrontation. As a medium, it can only show all determinacy to be illusory. It even incorporates into itself the inauthenticity of all the human patterning it features, since this is the only way it can give presence to the protean character of what it is mediating. Perhaps this is the truth through which literature counters the awareness that it is an illusion, thereby resisting dismissal as mere deception.

Moreover, literature reveals that we are the possibilities of ourselves. But since we are the originators of these possibilities, we cannot actually be them – we are left dangling in-between what we have produced. To unfold ourselves as possibilities of ourselves and – instead of consuming them to meet the pragmatic demands of everyday life – displaying them for what they are in a medium created for such an exposure, literary fictions reveal a deeply entrenched disposition of the human makeup. What might this be? The following answers as to the necessity of fictionalizing suggest themselves: we can only be present to ourselves in the mirror of our own possibilities;or, as a monad in the Leibnitzian sense, we are determined by bearing all imaginable possibilities within ourselves; or we can only cope with the openendedness of the world by means of the possibilities we derive from ourselves and project onto the world; or we are the meeting point of the manifold roles we are able to assume, in order to grasp what we make ourselves into. As none of the roles into which we can transform ourselves is representative of what is possible, humankind is driven to invent itself ever anew. If fictionalizing provides humankind with unlimited possibilities of self-extension, it also exposes the inherent deficiency of human beings – our fundamental inaccessibility to ourselves; owing to this gap within ourselves, we are bound to become creative.

But in the final analysis fictionalizing may not be equated with any of these alternative manifestations. Instead, it spotlights that the in-between state arising as an offshoot of boundary-crossing contains boundless options for human self-fashioning. Fictionalizing, then, may be considered as opening a play space between all the alternatives enumerated, thus setting off free play which militates against all determinations as untenable restrictions. In this sense, fictionalizing offers an answer to the problem which the Greek physician, Alkmaeon, regarded as insoluble: linking beginning and end together in order to create one last possibility through which the end, even if it cannot be overstepped, may at least be illusively postponed. Henry James once said: “The success of a work of art … may

be measured by the degree to which it produces a certain illusion; that illusion makes it appear to us for the time that we have lived another life – that we have had a miraculous enlargement of our experience."[(14)]

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Notes

1. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesie*, *The Prose Works* III, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge, 1962), p. 29.(back)

2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, U.K. 1978).(back)

3. Ibid., pp. 6 and 96.(back)

4. Ibid., pp. 102-107.(back)

5. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, ed. Thomas Case (London, 1974), p. 96.(back)

6. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York 1964), pp. 42, 66, 107, 235, 237 and 242.(back)

7. See Jurij M. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (Michigan Slavic Contributions 7), trans. Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor, 1977), p. 234.(back)

8. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1987), p. 221.(back)

9. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (New York, 1956), p. 18.(back)

10. Helmuth Plessner, "Die anthropologische Dimension der Geschichtlichkeit", in *Sozialer Wandel. Zivilisation und Fortschritt als Kategorien der soziologischen Theorie*, ed. Hans Peter Dreitzel (Neuwied, 1972), p. 160.(back)

11. Aristotle, *Problemata*, *Works* VII, ed. E. S. Forster (Oxford, 1927), p. 916a.(back)

12. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.,1986), p. 53.(back)

13. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, 1967), pp. 62-64.(back)

14. Henry James, *Theory of Fiction*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1972), p. 93.(back)