

Abstract:

Metafiction, also known as self-conscious fiction, is a narrative technique that forces readers to be aware that they are reading a work of fiction. From early critical approaches to metanarrative in literature to more recent enquiries into meta-descriptive strategies in historiography, metafiction has enjoyed significant critical attention. First fully conceptually explored in landmark studies by theorists in the 1980s, it was initially considered to be an almost exclusively twentieth-century and specifically postmodernist phenomenon. As the theory has developed over the last forty years, the geographical and chronological scope of the texts it aimed to describe has expanded, prompting a series of questions about metafiction's hidden pasts and locations. In Russia, metafiction flourished not only, predictably, in the 1990s (roughly in step with the late stage of literary post-modernist writing in Anglophone fiction) but also in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the period associated with the rise of the realist novel. It was exactly this focus on realist poetics – and its supposed incompatibility with metafictional narratives – that caused previous historical accounts of metafiction as a global phenomenon to skip over the nineteenth-century Russian realist novel. This chapter focuses on metafiction's complex correlation with the Russian realist tradition, as a part of the larger global history of narratives that can be considered metafictional *and* realist at the same time. It charts the global rise of theories of metafiction from 1980s to this day and applies these theoretical insights to review the timeline of the development of the Russian realist novel.

Keywords: metafiction, metapoetics, realist novel, Russian literature, narrative theory

Realism and Nineteenth-Century Russian Metafiction

Margarita Vaysman

(University of Oxford)

Metafiction, also known as self-conscious fiction, is a narrative technique that forces readers to be aware that they are reading a work of fiction. First fully conceptually explored in landmark studies by Anglophone theorists like Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) and Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), it was initially considered to be an almost exclusively twentieth-century and specifically postmodernist phenomenon.

As the theory has developed over the last forty years, the geographical and chronological scope of the texts it aimed to describe has expanded, prompting a series of questions about metafiction's hidden pasts and locations. As I have argued in *Self-Conscious Realism: Metafiction in the Nineteenth-Century Realist Novel* (2021),ⁱ in Russia, metafiction flourished not only, predictably, in the 1990s (roughly in step with the late stage of literary post-modernist writing in Anglophone fiction) but also in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the period associated with the rise of the realist novel. It was exactly this focus on realist poetics – and its supposed incompatibility with metafictional narratives – that caused previous historical accounts of metafiction as a global phenomenon skip over the nineteenth-century Russian realist novel.

In this chapter, I will focus on metafiction's complex correlation with the Russian realist tradition, as a part of the larger global history of narratives that can be considered metafictional *and* realist at the same time.

The rise of metafiction

Metafiction is a type of self-conscious fiction,ⁱⁱ defined as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”ⁱⁱⁱ From early critical approaches to metanarrative in literature to more recent enquiries into meta-descriptive strategies in historiography, metafiction has enjoyed significant critical attention. The term has been enthusiastically adopted in various fields, such as history, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, film and digital culture studies, and by disciplines as diverse as semiotics, poetics, narratology, studies of ideology and rhetoric, and genre theory.^{iv}

Considering how intertwined the notions of literary practice and literary criticism are in metafiction, it is not surprising that the term itself is generally thought to have been coined by an American writer William H. Gass (1924-2017) in the late 1960s.^v Soon afterwards, in a series of essays, another American writer, John Barth (1930-2024), discussed the problem of metafiction as a critical and theoretical construct.^{vi} The idea was then taken up by critics and historians of literature, who were interested in the broader implications of the technique. A general understanding was eventually reached within the field: any narrative explicitly conscious of its own ontological status can be considered metafictional.

Considering the trajectory of general critical theory since the Second World War, this 1970s-1980s focus on metafiction could be seen as almost inevitable. It followed, first, the linguist Roman Jakobson's (1896-1982) application of Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) principles to literary analysis, then the French theorist Roland Barthes's preoccupation with linguistic self-consciousness and, ultimately, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's ideas on metalanguage and philosopher Paul de Man's deconstruction of rhetorical reflexivity.^{vii} In other words, as Waugh has pointed out, the occurrence of such terms as "metapolitics, metarhetoric and metatheatre" was "a reminder of what has been, since the 1960s, a more general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world."^{viii} Critics single out different reasons for the rise of this interest, from its socio-economic and historical context to the crisis of realism and the crisis of the novel. Nonetheless, most agree that the problematization of language, represented by the concept of metalinguistics and the ideas of analytical philosophy, lies at the core of the modernist interest in and the postmodernist obsession with metafiction.^{ix}

Another point of consensus in the gradually developed understanding of metafiction is that it is by no means a recent phenomenon. One must therefore be wary of historicizing the development of metafiction solely in the context of the twentieth century and its intellectual achievements. Rather, we should assume that metafiction as *practice* existed for as long as fictional narratives themselves, but that it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that a *theory* of it could avail itself of the terminology developed in the philosophy of language and in linguistics. Theorists were finally able to describe in conceptual terms the narrative strategies that have always stood out as playful and subversive; an applied methodology was also formulated.

Over the years, as the study of metafiction matured as a field, its scope widened, both conceptually (critics have identified types of feminist, Black, moral, ethical, historiographical, etc., metafiction) and geographically. Recently, the theory has been applied to a wide variety of literatures outside the Anglo-American canon and made a significant contribution to the literary criticism of various national traditions and to comparative literary studies. Tracing metafiction back to ancient Chinese manuscripts^x and early Greek and Roman texts,^{xi} these studies demonstrate that it is also not unique to Western literary culture. In a way, it is as old as literary fiction itself.

Following the publication and enthusiastic reception of the landmark studies in the 1980-90s, slowly but surely there emerged a single vocabulary to describe the research methods and findings across these varied fields – and yet, with few exceptions, it bypassed the Russian realist novel as one of the forms in which metanarrative was present in nineteenth-century fiction. Since the theory of metafiction was developed largely by Anglo-American critics, it is easy to see how a popular view of metafiction as a mode of narration practiced mostly in mid- or late twentieth-century literature, primarily written in English, has come into being. The major theoretical studies of metafiction tended to limit their corpus of texts to a small selection of Anglophone writers, with an occasional foray into French and Latin American fiction.^{xii}

In the majority of these early studies, far more British and American novels were examined as examples of metafiction than Latin American and European novels. With the exception of German writer Günter Grass (1927-2015) and Russian emigré writer Vladimir Nabokov's (1899-1977) Russian novels, very few other German or Russian writers were mentioned (even though Russian literary theory almost always gets an honorary citation).^{xiii} Even historical accounts of the development of metafiction – which are, by their very nature, broader in their geographical and historical scope – tended to draw on the same, rather limited pool of British, Spanish, French, and Irish authors: Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), André Gide (1869-1951), and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989).^{xiv} Considering the often privileged position assigned to Russian realism in comparative studies of the history of the novel, this oversight is particularly intriguing – and worth a separate investigation.

[Russian realism and the debate on the nineteenth-century metafiction](#)

Russian studies integrated the theory of metafiction in the 1990s, when trail-blazing investigations by literary scholars such as David Shepherd, Mark Lipovetskii, Nina Kolesnikoff, and others adapted Hutcheon's and Waugh's methodologies to the study of the poetics of twentieth-century literature in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.^{xv} This both chronologically and methodologically specific focus was so insistent during the early period of Russian metafiction studies that the two iconoclastic exceptions from the general rule deserve to be specially mentioned here.

Literary scholar Dmitrii M. Segal's 1981 articles "Literature as a *lassaiz-passer*" (*Literatura kak okhrannaia gramota*) and "Literature as a secondary modelling system" (*Literatura kak vtorichnaia modeliruiushchaia sistema*) emerged as products of an important scholarly approach to metafiction that originated in Russia.^{xvi} Instead of using the term "metafiction," Segal talked about "metapoetics" (*metapoetika*) as a characteristic feature of modernist Russian texts. Even though Segal saw literary self-consciousness (*samosoznanie literatury*) as an inherent characteristic of Russian literature in general, he considered it "a reaction on the part of literature towards an outside intrusion, a response to the removal of the realist tradition"^{xvii} at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even though such nineteenth-century texts as Aleksandr Pushkin's (1799-1837) *Eugene Onegin* (*Evgenii Onegin*, 1833), Nikolai Gogol's (1809-1852) *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye dushi*, 1842) and, later, Fedor Dostoevskii's (1821-1881) *Diary of a Writer* (*Dnevnik pisatelia*, 1873-81) were obviously metafictional, according to Segal, this quality was nevertheless not manifested strongly enough to challenge the traditional perception of Russian realist texts as "primary modelling systems" (i.e. unmediated models of reality).

Another striking exception was American scholar Michael C. Finke's 1995 study *Metapoesis: The Russian Tradition from Pushkin to Chekhov*. Finke used Jakobson's theory of meta-language as an overarching theoretical framework to describe what he called a "metapoetic" Russian literary tradition. Finke charted this "Russian tradition" from Pushkin's poetry, through Gogol's plays, to the prose of Lev Tolstoi (1828-1910), Dostoevskii, and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). Finke's selection of texts was tailored to "suggest that with the rise of realism the metapoetic tradition becomes esoteric, goes underground."^{xviii} Providing an overview of "metapoetic" techniques in the nineteenth-century, Finke shared the established theoretical assumption that realism, in Russia or elsewhere, was incompatible with metafiction. My own focus on the Russian realist novel offers an approach that partly contradicts but also expands Finke's model, introducing the issue of Russian realism's metafictional potential to this already complex theoretical equation.

Considering the doubly "incriminating circumstances" of, first, the novel's precedence as the most common genre of metafictional writing, and second, recent scholarly interest in early metafiction, it might be interesting to explore, at this juncture why it has, so far, escaped sustained scrutiny. It would be easy to explain this omission as natural for a theory devised to

deal with modernist and postmodernist texts, and yet I would argue that there is a more serious methodological issue at stake here.

In her foundational theoretical study of metafiction, Waugh discusses what she defines as a significant difference in how metafiction works in a nineteenth and a twentieth-century English novel. Noting that “metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels,” she argues that there is an “intuitive sense that although Fielding, Trollope and George Eliot, for example, often ‘break the frame’ of their novels they are by no means self-conscious novelists.”^{xix} Waugh compares narrative techniques used in the works of English literature, such as George Eliot’s (1819-1880) *Adam Bede* (1859) and John Fowles’s (1926-1995) *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), and maintains that, in the nineteenth century, metalinguistic commentary in novels reaffirmed the ontological statuses of the narrator and the reader, reinforcing the mimetic illusion. In a functioning metafiction, on the contrary, the illusion should be broken by the narrator’s intrusion, drawing the reader’s attention to the need to suspend disbelief. If, in Eliot, introducing the figure of the self-conscious narrator, barely manages to break the frame of mimetic narration, in Fowles, “it is not just the mimetic function of the traditional novel that is attacked [...] in metafiction, it is the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality.”^{xx}

Literary scholar Robert Alter makes a similar argument in his *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (1975), where he maintains that, in nineteenth-century novels, self-conscious narrative techniques were sidelined by more frequent mimetic representations of reality. The nineteenth-century European novel, in Alter’s view, was characterized by “fits and starts” of self-consciousness since around the 1830s when realism became “the central impulse of the novel”; as a result, in these novels the detailed documentation of historical change became more urgent than the exploration of the medium through which these changes were recorded. Thus, Alter discards any instances of self-consciousness in nineteenth-century novels (for example, in English author William Makepeace Thackeray’s (1811-1863) *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) or in the American novelist’s Herman Melville’s (1819-1891) *Confidence Man* (1857)) as “discontinuous, incomplete.”^{xxi}

Considered alongside metafiction’s acknowledged long lineage that reaches, for the novel, at least as far back as Cervantes’s *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) and Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), this argument exposes a revealing presupposition shared by the early theorists of metafiction. Essentially, both Waugh and Alter

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