

Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*: Metafiction and Metahistory

*Who controls the past controls the future:
Who controls the present controls the past.*

—George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four

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I. Introduction

For the past twenty years American authors have written fiction which self-consciously reveals the ideological or literary concerns of the author. Their work has been labeled metafiction. Simultaneously, authors have rewritten history into fiction which calls attention to the techniques used to create "historical" information. Historians themselves have begun to examine ideological biases in their writing techniques through the study of metahistory. Ishmael Reed's 1976 novel *Flight to Canada* is an excellent reexamination of the American Civil War which uses the techniques of metafiction and asks the questions of metahistory.¹ My essay explains the literary aspects of these two terms, discusses how they apply to *Flight to Canada*, and draws upon interviews with Reed and other materials to show the seriousness and self-awareness with which he uses metafiction and metahistory.

After a brief discussion of the new historical novel—the metafictional novel—I give an account of common images of the American ante-bellum South, the Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln. Then comes a summary of the book, including especially details which contradict the common images. The final section describes Reed's distinctive metafictional style, a breaking apart of old images and myths in which he substitutes a critical stance for the whole process of myth-making.

II. The Metafictional Novel

Recent American literature includes many novels which concentrate upon the similarity between fiction and history, a concern with history

which is quite different from that of the traditional historical novel, or of the traditional novel in general.² As Robert Scholes states in *Fabulation and Metafiction*:

It has happened while we were unaware. The major novels of the past decade or so have tended strongly toward the apparently worn-out form of the historical novel. John Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*, . . . Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Robert Coover's *Public Burning* are all historical novels. But they are not novels based upon the empirical concepts of history that dominated Western thought in the nineteenth century. [They] bristle with facts and smell of research of the most painstaking kind. Yet they deliberately challenge the notion that history may be retrieved by objective investigations of fact.³

Earlier historical novels stressed the difference between the present and the past, and described society at important moments of change.⁴ Contemporary writers, however, go to the opposite extreme and seem to assert that achieving objectivity in either the historical novel or the history book is an impossible goal. Even news reporting is so rooted in fictional techniques that one critic has shown how "straightness is as absolutely impossible in [journalistic] writing as it is in higher mathematics."⁵ Norman Mailer, in his *Armies of the Night* (1968), manages to pinpoint the trend, titling one section of his book "History as a Novel" and the other section "The Novel as History." Like other authors, Mailer self-consciously represents history as an act of interpretation which creates a view of the past in the present.

The life-like realism which Henry James insisted upon in "The Art of Fiction" (1884) is systematically denied by authors like John Barth, who consciously and ostentatiously call attention to the literary tricks usually employed to create a feeling of realism. Both *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and *Chimera* (1972) contain stories which are more concerned with describing the act of creating literature than with creating a convincing work.⁶ When this tendency is linked to scatological references and blatant obscenity, as in works such as Coover's *The Public Burning*, the Jamesian reader will be tempted to close the book and dismiss the author. But these "metafictional" authors try, with such techniques, to show that fiction may be entertaining even when consciously artificial. Their works are metafictional because their focus

is not upon the action, but upon the way words and literary conventions are used to create a vision or conception of reality. As Scholes defines elsewhere: "Now we know that fiction is about other fiction, is criticism in fact, or metafiction."⁷

The authors Scholes mentions, in spite of superficial anarchy or lewdness, treat both literature and history seriously. Their "historical novels" are not so much imaginative re-creations in words of events that actually occurred as they are examinations of the interpenetration of fiction and history. One result has been the rather common assumption that history is itself a "fiction," because the act of recreating the past in the present is much the same process as responding to a work of literature—creative imagination is necessary for both. Therefore, metafiction in part recapitulates the arguments of metahistorians such as Hayden White, who argues that the development of "objective" historical writing in the nineteenth century never took place. Rather one style of writing (realism) was substituted for another (rhetorically ornamented) style.⁸

Ishmael Reed, in *Flight to Canada*, functions both as a metafictionalist and a metahistorian. He constantly calls attention to his book as a construction of words, framing the novel as a story within a story, presenting major characters as masks who shift from one rhetorical pose to another, using changes in tense to signify changes in the authorial stance. He also intrudes anachronisms into the novel with frequency, calling our attention to the simultaneity of past and present, and the ideological role of history. Reed is concerned, as is Orwell, with who controls the past because of the political implications of that control. *Flight to Canada* is a black American novel, and deals with themes of particular significance to black Americans. However, the book stands on its own as an important and representative work of contemporary American literature.

III. Images of the South

Although most Americans have read standard history texts which damn slavery and describe the basic issues and actions of the Civil War, few of their commonly held images of life in the ante-bellum South reflect these textbooks. Their strongest images are visual ones,

for "the movies have been powerful influences in shaping Americans' view of themselves . . . and, at the same time, reflecting that view."⁹ The film most closely associated with Civil War is *Gone With the Wind*, which ignores suffering of slaves and Lincoln's struggle to preserve the Union. Other sources of characters and images are *Huckleberry Finn* and, to a lesser extent, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

These standards are limited indeed. Like *Scarlett's* mammy, mammys worship the young ladies in their charge and are determined to boss and fuss them into being respectable young brides and mothers. Girl slaves are lazy and scatterbrained, like Dilsey or Topsy. Male slaves are respectful and dutiful Uncle Toms, or superstitious and playful Jims, or sweating field hands, or brutal animals like the freed slave who attacks Miss Scarlett after the fall of the South. Besides the general image of ignorance connected with slaves, there is an image (with the important exception of the runaway) of passivity: slaves are moved only by their passions and depend upon whites to force them into action, to lead them, and finally to free them.

Although the men who live along Twain's Mississippi River are often greedy and unscrupulous, hearty Gerald O'Hara, virile Rhett Butler, and the touchingly effete Ashley Wilkes dominate our opinions of Southern manhood. Scarlett the headstrong, Melanie the sweet, and little Eva the saint supply us with pictures of the women of the South. Plantation life, like any "perpetual motion" machine, had a hidden power source, but we are invited to the teas, the dances, the declarations of war. We see the beautiful facade, the magnificent M.G.M. set of white-pillared mansions, not the insides of slave ships, slave markets, and slave houses.

The Civil War has been captured, after a fashion, by photography, and we have static images of generals sitting together, the dead lying on the battlefield of Gettysburg, Lincoln meeting with his staff, and soldiers encamped. The Civil War experienced in *Gone With the Wind* is a series of lost husbands, rallies, and shortages, with the burning of Atlanta furnishing the crowning horror.

Lincoln, the President of that war, is seen as a principled man with a heavy heart and a determination that the Union shall survive. He was born, the story goes, in a log cabin and was an ordinary man

all his life. He was scrupulously honest, once walking miles to return a few pennies he had been overpaid, and intellectually curious, walking further miles to borrow books. He worked hard with his hands and split rails. He was a country lawyer and then a local politician and then a President who said he would be neither a slave nor a master, and would work with anyone to see the Civil War to a successful conclusion. Finally, he was a martyr.

In *Flight to Canada*, Reed does not so much attack these incomplete/inaccurate images as he plays with them: at times he exaggerates them into absurdity; other times he creates new, patently inaccurate images (such as life in the slave quarters). But two characteristics separate Reed's images from those of Stowe and M.G.M. First, they are images perceived from a black American point of view. Second, Reed is aware, and he makes his audience aware, that his images are no more than that. If the reader wants a truer picture of the period, he or she must go deeper than either the views of popular culture or Reed himself.

IV. A Summary of the Book

Flight to Canada is divided into three sections, "Naughty Harriet," "Lincoln the Player," and "The Burning of Richmond," roughly 40, 100, and 40 pages long, respectively. The first section shows a Southern plantation before and during the Civil War, a war resulting partly from the public reaction to "naughty" Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-seller, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The second section describes the efforts of Lincoln, the consummate politician, or "player," to win the war, along with scenes from a particular slave plantation, and portraits of free or fugitive blacks in the North. In the final section, the South collapses and ownership of the plantation passes to the chief of the house slaves, who wonders, "Can we save Virginia?"—will the South, symbolized by its capital in Richmond, be able to survive the "burning" force of social change? The unifying figure in all of this, and the author's voice, is Raven Quickskill, fugitive slave poet, who is "the first one of [the] slaves to read, the first to write and the first to run away" (p. 14).

"Naughty Harriet" begins with the text of the poem "Flight to

Canada," an open letter in which Quickskill condemns his old master and claims he has escaped into Canada.¹⁰ Next, in an italicized section, written *after* the events of the book, Quickskill muses over the Civil War and events that followed from writing the poem. He considers Harriet Beecher Stowe to be a thief, who stole the plot for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and suffered punishment when her reputation fell after she chose to publicly denounce Byron for an incestuous relationship with his half-sister. He remembers the book's main characters, both in the large drama of war and in his personal story.

The setting for the action is Arthur's Swille's plantation, Camelot, where the unbelievably wealthy and sadistic master hopes to recreate the world depicted in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. (Arthur's father named him after the king, believing the "Coming of Arthur" was at hand.) The slaves include Swille's powerful mistress Mammy Barracuda, their dim-witted son Cato, and the uncomplaining manservant Uncle Robin. His wife Ms. Swille is a Radcliffe-educated suffragette who refuses to play the Southern belle and lies sulking in her darkened room, insisting that she be fed intravenously. Three slaves have escaped: 40s, a rough fieldhand, "shot the overseer right between the eyes" before he fled; Stray Leechfield stole chickens on such a grand scale before leaving that he had set himself up as an independent businessman in the next country; and Raven Quickskill, the "trusted book-keeper," tampered with the books, destroyed bills of sale, and forged freedom papers for the other slaves.

During this first section, Abraham Lincoln, "Gary Cooper—awkward, fidgeting with his stovepipe hat, humble-looking, imperfect," comes to beg gold from Swille. Swille praises the life in the South and tries to convince Lincoln to resign the Presidency and become a titled Southerner, but Lincoln declines. While they negotiate, Confederate soldiers begin firing on Lincoln's party, so Swille calls up General Lee and threatens: "I'm going to create an energy crisis and take back my railroads, and on top of that I'll see that the foreign countries don't recognize you."

The second section, "Lincoln the Player," begins with the President and his aide returning to their boat with the gold. Lincoln considers the advice Swille has given him. Then he realizes the way to break

the South is to sign the Emancipation Proclamation: men like Swille depend on slavery and support the Confederacy for that reason. Meanwhile Swille learns Raven Quickskill, 40s, and Stray Leechfield are hiding near the Great Lakes. The news comes from the *Beulahland Review*, the literary magazine to which Quickskill submitted "Flight to Canada." Swille instructs Cato to hire slave hunters to get them back. Meanwhile, rumors are flying around Camelot that Swille makes love with his dead sister Vivian in her crypt.

Raven Quickskill is now a fugitive slave in Emancipation City, looking after the house of vacationing Abolitionists. Two slave hunters try to take him ("We have orders to repossess you."), but he slips out the bathroom window. When he returns to the house, he finds a letter of acceptance for his poem with a promise of \$200, enough to pay for his flight to Canada. Before leaving, Quickskill meets his ex-lover, the Indian Princess Quaw Quaw Tralaralara. Another Radcliffe alumna, she now performs ethnic dances for college audiences. Her husband, Yankee Jack the pirate, has built Emancipation City as "a refuge for slaves, Indians and those who committed heinous acts because society made them do it" (p. 94). She and Quickskill are watching a live television broadcast of "Tom Tyler's new play" (*Our American Cousin*) when Lincoln is shot. Quaw Quaw, disgusted ("This country is violent, just like my [college] professors said."), asks Quickskill to take her along to Canada, and he agrees.

Meanwhile, in Camelot, Swille views his whip collection and enjoys the lovely sound of screams coming from all over the plantation. Mammy gives him a narcotic injection, and he dreams he is in King Arthur's court with his beloved Vivian. Mammy interrupts to tell him Ms. Swille is on a hunger strike until "my husband treats me better than the coloreds around here," and with his permission, Mammy forces her to bathe, dress in hoop skirts, and pay attention to the gentlemen.

Quickskill, on a Lake Erie steamer heading for Buffalo, meets his literary hero, the first black American novelist William Wells Brown. Quickskill goes to get his manuscript poems to show Brown, but in their cabin Quaw Quaw has discovered "The Saga of Third World Belle." It is a 200-word prose poem written to her that reveals

Yankee Jack killed her father and buried her brother alive. Quaw Quaw, who still loves Jack, is devastated to learn the truth.

In Camelot, Swille is conferring with a Union general who assisted him in the assassination of Lincoln, and Ms. Swille is introduced. She declines "a toast to Southern womanhood" and threatens to shoot her husband with a "Stonewall Jackson rocket-powered miniature cannon." After listening to her accusations, Swille tells her how beautiful she is now that fasting has reduced her to skin and bones. Ms. Swille exults: "I've become just like her. . . ." But then Vivian herself appears to claim Swille. His wife faints and he, struggling with the corpse, falls onto the fire and burns to death.

The final section, "The Burning of Richmond," is a protracted reflection upon the earlier events. The narrator Quickskill muses that it was not the idea of winning that spurred the South to rebel: "It was the idea of being ravished" (p. 142). The action moves from Buffalo to Canada, and then back to Virginia, for when he learns of Swille's death, Quickskill returns to the plantation. Swille's will leaves the entire estate to Uncle Robin, who assures the administering judge that, "If I can just go on, I'm going to make Massa Swille up in hebbin proud of me" (p. 168). He explains to his wife Judy that he wrote the will himself because Swille suffered from dyslexia. Later, alone, Robin considers who was more foolish, the slave who endured slavery and came out wealthy or the rebel, like Nat Turner, who died in fruitless resistance. Just then Raven returns, and the book ends.

Even this extensive summary fails to describe the ways that Reed plays with history. For example, after work, Swille's house slaves go home to apartments in "Frederick Douglass Houses" where they enjoy such amenities as waterbeds, television, and chilled champagne. The Eagle Tavern in Buffalo (where Quickskill's reading has so little "fire" that he feels "like a cheap Sears, Roebuck furnace") has trouble with the lights and microphone. In order to help locate Quickskill, Swille considers having bloodhounds sniff Xerox copies of the poem "Flight to Canada" obtained from the *Beulahland Review*. Reed uses anachronisms freely, always for comic effect and occasionally to teach lessons. As a result there are continual incongruities, which may delight or exasperate, depending on their quality and the attitudes

of the reader.

V. Reed's Metafictional Style

In many obvious ways, *Flight to Canada* embodies Ishmael Reed's thoughts and concerns as he has expressed them in essays and interviews. Four years before the book's publication, in a discussion of the contemporary black American author, Reed said: "I'm getting more and more interested in slavery as a metaphor for how blacks are treated in this civilization. . . . So I say to myself and the rest of us that we are going to get to our aesthetic Canada, no matter how many dogs they send after us. We'll get there."¹¹ Certainly the events in *Flight to Canada* point to the importance of finding an "aesthetic" Canada, and the impossibility of prospering in a physical one which "Americans own. . . . They just permit Canadians to operate it for them. They need a Castro up here real bad" (p. 161).

Reed's mixing of past and present allows him to make many didactic comments about the present age, such as the reference to Castro, spoken by a free slave who has gone to Canada just after the Civil War. One of Reed's obsessions is the domination of other cultures by white Europeans and their descendants. In one unpublished interview, Reed says that "what the literary and cultural establishment wants to project is white culture. But we are going to triumph because there are diverse populations of people coming into the country all the time."¹² In the novel, when Raven confronts Yankee Jack concerning Quaw Quaw, he asks:

What was she to you, Jack? Something you could sequin and polish. A subhuman pagan you sent to Radcliffe to learn to appreciate twelve-tone music when her people's scales were more complex, to appreciate nature poetry when her people were one with the bear and the fish and the mountains and the waters, to appreciate uptown classical painting when one totem out front was as good as anything inside (p. 152).

Reed crusades against establishing exclusionary standards in the arts. Among the offenders are the *New Yorker* as a literary arbiter and grant-awarding foundations which spend money to control ideas or co-opt the best thinkers from minority groups. Reed and his friends have tried to counter this perceived cultural imperialism by creating

their own publishing and distributing coalition, called Before Columbus. The forces they are trying to counteract are embodied in Yankee Jack, who has shifted from open piracy to "distribution." Raven accuses him of an insidious form of human manipulation:

At least we fuges [fugitive slaves] know we're slaves, constantly hunted, but you enslave everybody. Making saps of them all. You, the man behind the distribution network, remaining invisible while your underlings become the fall guys (p. 146).

Another item on Reed's agenda is the popular image of the black in the minds of white Americans. He says: "[T]hey would rather see you as some kind of revolutionary hero than to have you build things."¹³ This is similar to Uncle Robin's ruminations at the end of *Flight to Canada*: "Yeah, they get down on me and [Uncle] Tom. But who's the fool? Nat Turner or us? . . . Nat's dead and gone for these many years, and here I am master of a dead man's house. Which one is the fool?" (p. 178).

This concern for the image of blacks blends with Reed's idea of himself as an isolated artist. He says: "In my research I found that exceptional people get it from both sides. It happened to Douglass; it happened to Booker T. Washington. . . ."¹⁴ Similarly, when Raven Quickskill reflects upon his work, he comes to see it as his salvation and damnation:

"Flight to Canada" was the problem. It made him famous but had also tracked him down. It had pointed to where . . . he [was] hiding. It was their bloodhound, this poem "Flight to Canada." [At the same time, it] had given him enough mint to live on. "Flight to Canada" had taken him all the way to the White House . . ." (p. 13).

Raven himself receives treatment quite as ambivalent at the Buffalo reading, where some of the slaves are "downright rude," while others sit at attention. They'd begun some kind of Raven cult. He didn't want to have a cult" (p. 144).

Reed uses his novel as a medium for such particular concerns as the treatment of blacks in American society, economic and cultural imperialism, the distribution and promotion of literature and information, and the role of the isolated artist. While at times Reed's

preaching is painfully didactic, the message often blends with simultaneous presentations of histories and becomes more palatable. Also, these issues are the forces that give power to what Jerome Charyn calls Reed's "special grace" of anger: they are in large part why he has written the book.¹⁵

The chief questions here, however, concern history and the artist. What is history to Ishmael Reed, and how does he feel about its fictional manipulation? What effects (and failures) does Reed produce when he juxtaposes historical and contemporary elements? Finally, does Reed create his own historical illusions when he attacks what he attacks what he considers the dominant illusion? The answers acquit Reed of charges of historical manipulation, chiefly because his images are presented as challenges to, rather than substitutes for, previous images.

Chapter One has two sections. The first, in italics, shows Raven Quickskill puzzling over the role of writing in his life. The opening lines reveal that writing has created history:

Little did I know when I wrote the poem "Flight to Canada" that there were so many secrets locked inside its world. It was more of a reading [a fortune teller's "reading"] than a writing. Everything it said seems to have caught up with me (p. 7).

On the same page, Quickskill adds, "*Who is to say what is fact and what is fiction?*" For Reed's Quickskill persona, the act of creating with words is comparable to historical reality, and fabrications often present more accurate realities than history books:

Why isn't Edgar Allan Poe recognized as the principal biographer of that strange war? Fiction, you say? Where does fact begin and fiction leave off? Why does the perfectly rational, in its own time, often sound like mumbo-jumbo? Where did it leave off for Poe, prophet of a civilization buried alive, where, according to witnesses, people were often whipped for no reason? No reason? Will we ever know, since there are so few traces left of the civilization the planters called "the fairest civilization the sun ever shown [sic] upon," and the slaves called "Satan's Kingdom." Poe got it all down. Poe says more in a few stories than all the volumes by historians (p. 11).

This manifesto attacks the notion that historical objective can tell the truth. Creative works, such as Poe's stories, are more accurate than the efforts of historians, and Poe was not intentionally writing history. The same paradox holds true for Quickskill's own poem, which was fictional, as he admits later in the book (p. 63). History, then, is elusive, and factual accounts are the illusions. Only through imaginative creations can a writer capture the truth. While this argument is by no means new—Aristotle's *Poetics* and Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* both claim it—previous exponents have claimed superiority for literature because it presents generalities which hold true for humankind. The implausibility of some true events is precisely the reason for fiction's superiority: fiction must seem true in order to be good.

Reed/Quickskill admits reality's unreality: "*Strange, history. Complicated, too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy*" (p. 8). These assertions, with the facile rhyming attack on the efforts of historians, go beyond classical arguments, however, and imply that history has lost its role in communicating the mood of past times, even if it may convey some of the facts. Furthermore, those "facts" may be proven false at any movement as a result of research. Although history is a series of events, individuals can never know the accuracy of information outside their own perceptions.

How do human beings build ideas of history, then? Reed/Quickskill points to the activity of poesis. According to the book, Southerners wished to model their civilization on the myth of Arthur's kingdom. With the war lost, the narrator comments: "What the American Arthurians couldn't win on the battlefield will now be fought on the poetry field" (p. 141). Mythic representation has replaced historical records and even historical action in forming human reality. Therefore, whoever disseminates myths determines values. Yankee Jack the private has changed to Yankee Jack the distributor. He says: "The difference between a savage and a civilized man is determined by who has the power. Right now I'm running things" (p. 149). The danger for blacks, Indians, and other minorities, is that the myth makers of the dominant culture will relegate them to oblivion. Quickskill warns Princess Quaw Quaw:

They're going to get your Indian and my Slave on microfilm and in sociology books; then they're going to put them in a space ship and send them to the moon. And then they're going to put you on the nickel and put me on a stamp, and that'll be the end of it (p. 96).

Reed does not create another set of distortions to counteract this system. Instead he presents "facts" from the past blended with present day realities. Reed described his appreciation of a Nigerian review of his book which understood his purpose:

[T]hey did my book along with Alex Haley's *Roots*. They said that Alex Haley's book was taking one myth and substituting it with another myth: that all was correct in Eden or Africa was some kind of Eden—that this is not the case; it's an illusion. And they pointed to my book, *Flight to Canada*, as one that sees the histories as simultaneous.¹⁶

Simultaneous histories produce such anachronisms as a Southern planter traveling by helicopter; slave chasers dressed in blazers, grey slacks, and black cordovans; a house slave calling Chicago by telephone to place gambling bets; and President Lincoln waltzing with a slave mammy who sings, "Hello, Abbbbbe. Well, hello, Abbbbbe. It's so nice to have you here where you belong" (imitating the title song of the 1960s Broadway musical *Hello, Dolly*). Along with hyperbole, word play, and humorous situations, Reed uses anachronisms to develop his satirical history.

The presentation of simultaneous histories has another effect, however. When Yankee Jack claims that revisionist historians have discovered life on Southern plantations was not all pain for the slaves, Quickskill responds:

"Revisionists. Quantitative historians. What does a computer know? Can a computer feel? Make love? Can a computer feel passion?" Quickskill tears off his shirt. "Look at those scars. Look at them! All you see is their fruit, but their roots run deep. The roots are in my soul. What does a . . . computer know about that" (pp. 150-51).

Here Reed implies that the only history we can know is that which runs from our skins to our deep-rooted feelings, and this belief guides Reed's use of historical materials. By blending past and present, he

asserts that past and present are interconnected: the reader's perception of the past will be strongly colored by experience in the present. And so, the experiences of a black writer, Quickskill/Reed, during the Civil War/in 1976, blend together. Reed is not so much telling the reader how to experience history as he is revealing how he experiences it.

The result may be faulted as creating new romantic illusions: the slave as alienated artist, the master as sado-masochistic necrophiliac, Uncle Tom as the true revolutionary, President Lincoln as a manipulator. The cumulative effect of repeated distortions, though, is quite the opposite. Reed does not supplant images such as those outlined in section III, but he does furnish contradictory or disorienting images. These new myths have no force, for the reader can easily see how they have been produced, but Reed's images are lively enough to survive in the memory and surface when the category of, say, plantation house slave is introduced. Reducing the type to Miss Scarlett's mammy or Little Eva's Uncle Tom is no longer possible because the images of Mammy Barracuda and Uncle Robin from *Flight to Canada* intervene. The resulting dissonance requires the reader or auditor to challenge a simplistic image or test rigorously any new image.

In conclusion, Ishmael Reed manages, in *Flight to Canada*, to present a picture of Southern society and the Civil War that prevents readers from relying upon myths and images of the period which simplify the experience and serve the interests of one or another power group. He does not try to replace one set of myths with another—rather he calls all myths into question and heightens the critical faculties of his readers. Prominent among the literary techniques which he employs is the foregrounding of the writing process characteristic of "metafictional" writers. Through his use of anachronisms and simultaneous histories, he highlights the interpenetration of past and present. Like Barth, Pynchon, Coover, and Mailer, Reed acknowledges the impossibility of presenting objective truth in a history or historical novel. As an alternative, he illustrates how interpretation can create a view of the past in the present and invites the reader to share his skepticism rather than his opinions.

NOTES

1. Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Random House, 1976). Page locations of all subsequent quotations from this book appear in parentheses after the cited materials.
2. These points received detailed excellent treatment in the 1980 Purdue doctoral dissertation, "The Fiction of History: the Presentation of History in Recent American Literature," by Ray Mazurek.
3. Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 206.
4. Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah & Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 19-88.
5. Walker Gibson, "Must a Great Newspaper Be Dull?" In Paul Echholz, Alfred Rosa, Virginia Clark (Eds.), *Language Awareness*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martins Press, 1978), p. 144.
6. An extended discussion of Barth's style is found in John O. Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 118-75.
7. Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 1. The creation of the term "metafiction" is attributed to the American novelist W. H. Gass, who wrote, "Many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafiction" (cited in Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, p. 105).
8. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 1-42.
9. James R. Dickenson (the *Washington Post*), "Freshman History: America in the Movies," in the *Japan Times*, April 5, 1986, p. 14.
10. Here Reed consciously echoes Frederick Douglass, whose 1848 "Letter to His Old Master" was a public condemnation of the slave-owner Thomas Laud. A comparison of the "Letter" with the Quickskill poem and the Reed book shows Reed's awareness of and sensitivity to historical materials. He even cites Douglass's autobiography regarding literacy when he describes Quickskill as "the first one of Swille's slaves to read, the first to write, and the first to run away" (p. 14).
11. *The New Fiction*, Joe David Bellamy (Ed.) (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 138.
12. David Remnick, "Ishmael Reed Interview" (unpublished), p. 3. I received this document from Ray Mazurek in spring of 1979.
13. Interview with Cameron Northouse on Sept. 5, 1977, in *Conversations with Writers II* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1978), p. 215.
14. *Conversations with Writers II* interview, p. 215-16.
15. Jerome Charyn, rev. of *Flight to Canada*, *New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 19, 1976, p. 12.
16. *Conversations with Writers II* interview, p. 218.