

RICHARD FORD'S POSTMODERNIST FICTION:
THE SPORTSWRITER AND INDEPENDENCE DAY

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BEVERLY YOUNG



RICHARD FORD'S POSTMODERNIST FICTION: *THE SPORTSWRITER* AND
INDEPENDENCE DAY

by

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Abstract for “Richard Ford’s Postmodernist Fiction: *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*” by Beverly Young

Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* respond to the methods of representation of modernist and early postmodernist fiction. Ford writes a subtler form of postmodernist fiction, one that is conscious of its fictionality yet relates to lived experience. In this thesis I contend that *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* are hybrids of modernist and early postmodernist modes of fiction. Unity of knowledge, totality of text, singularity of voice and vision mingle with uncertainty, multiplicity, and contingency in this new hybrid form. In the context of the literary theories of Brian McHale, Alan Wilde, and Linda Hutcheon, along with the novelistic theories of M.M. Bakhtin, I show that Richard Ford’s novels contribute to postmodernism’s evolving aesthetic. I demonstrate how the novels not only fit within a postmodern aesthetic but also how they advance a new direction for contemporary American fiction.

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Introduction: Irony and Richard Ford's Postmodernist Fiction

Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* revolve around the thoughts and observations of one central character, the narrator, Frank Bascombe. Like many novels about contemporary American life, they report selected episodes of the protagonist's life, including glimpses into his private and professional relationships, his thoughts on happiness, love, and grief, as well as his change in careers. Moreover, of all the details Frank divulges, one occasion is the nucleus of the novels: Frank's decision to quit literary writing. Frank often refers to his decision in an anecdotal style, convincing readers that the novels will have issues of literary writing at their core. Both novels focus on why Frank quit writing, although they are not novels explicitly about the writer as artist. By making his subject the various reasons not to write, Ford uses the novels to cast an ironic eye upon literary writing in the late twentieth century. *The Sportswriter* is the start of Frank's story and the beginning of Ford's experimentation within postmodernist fiction. *Independence Day* continues Frank's story about his life after the time of *The Sportswriter* and is also a formal extension of the structures Ford created in the first novel. Ford merges modernist and early postmodernist elements in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, creating postmodernist novels that comment on the evolving aesthetic of postmodernism.

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* are not autobiographical novels, despite the fact that Frank Bascombe, the narrative voice of the novels, bears some superficial resemblance to Ford. By imbuing Frank with elements of his own biography, Ford specifies a historical and cultural context for both his writing and the period in literary

history which his writing critiques. Ford assigns Frank a birth date of 1945, making Frank, like Ford himself, of that particular generation of writers who came of age in the 1960s. Ford was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1944 (Lee 226). His decision to write came about rather circuitously. As an undergraduate he wrote a number of short stories, but his plan was to be a hotel manager, a profession for which he studied at Michigan State University (Lee 227). He also joined the Marines while in Michigan, and, upon being medically discharged shortly after joining, Ford, on impulse, decided to study literature. After graduating in 1966 and working at a number of jobs, Ford enrolled in the creative writing program at the University of California in Irvine (Lee 228). Ford studied under the tutelage of Oakley Hall and E. L. Doctorow, and graduated with an M.F.A. in 1970 (Lee 229). His first novel, *A Piece of My Heart*, was published in 1976. Five years later Ford's second novel, *The Ultimate Good Luck* was published, and at that time Ford took a job as a sportswriter for *Inside Sports*, but the magazine folded shortly thereafter (Lee 230). Ford returned to fiction in 1982, writing a novel about a thirty-eight year old man, Frank Bascombe, who left a literary writing career to become a sportswriter.

Unlike Ford, Frank Bascombe quit his literary writing in 1971—a year significant because it places the occasion of his decision firmly within the period of American literary debate over postmodernism. In 1971, Frank reached a crossroad as a novelist, which historically coincides with David Lodge's publication of "The Novelist at the Crossroads" and Ford's completion of his M.F.A. Within the critical debates about postmodern American fiction, 1971 represents the midpoint in a fifteen year period which began with Saul Bellow's "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction" (1963), John

Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), and Malcolm Bradbury's *What is a Novel?* (1969), and continued through the 1970s with Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism* (1973), Jerome Klinkowitz's *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (1975), and Gerald Graff's "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough" (1977). These writers explored postmodernist fiction's preoccupation with self-consciousness, self-reflexivity, and experimentalism through meta-fiction, surfiction, fabulist fiction and mixed or hybrid genres. Richard Ford places his protagonist in the midst of these various critical responses to American fiction. Frank's decision to quit literary writing shows that when faced with decisions on how to proceed with his fiction, Frank did not know what to do, largely because of his inability to adapt to the postmodernist moment. In contrast, Richard Ford, upon reaching this crossroad, was able to proceed.

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* arrive almost as if in response to John Aldridge's 1983 declaration that American writing after the postmodern breakthrough needed a new revolution. Aldridge penned this final sentiment in *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now*:

the proper work of the imagination remains to be done and where our novelists are concerned its ultimate objective is clear: to become genuinely and radically subversive once again, to resume the traditional function of examining with the clear eye of sanity whatever are the shams and delusions of the prevailing culture, and, by so doing, to restore some measure of wisdom, wonder, and even delight to the short sombre passage of our history through time. (162)

In *The Sportswriter*, published in 1986, and *Independence Day*, published in 1995, Ford fulfills this challenge by developing a variety of postmodernist fiction distinct from that produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Ford displays consciousness of the early

postmodernists and modernists who preceded him, but he does not imitate them. The Frank Bascombe novels are Richard Ford's response to Lodge's argument that metafictional techniques are important to the development of the contemporary novel. Unlike the postmodernist fiction produced in the 1960s and 1970s, *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* do not carry the counter-traditional experiments of modernist fiction to an extreme, nor do they represent an attempt to radically break away from modernist and realist forms. Ford's Bascombe novels refine postmodernist fiction by reconciling elements from both modernist and earlier postmodernist fiction. In this regard, Ford's novels are radical in an ironic way. Their reactions to tradition are subtle, almost muted, when compared to earlier works of postmodernist fiction.

Contemporary critics observe the complexity that has come to characterize the field of "postmodernist fiction," so much so that any general statement about postmodern American fiction is bound to misrepresent it. The spectrum of postmodern American fiction is "wildly diverse" (Varsava 192), and historical perspective reveals that diversity. Undoubtedly, questions involving cultural contexts, as well as textual structure and meaning, asked in the 1980s and 1990s will not be identical to those asked in the 1960s and 1970s because of cultural and social changes. Jerry Varsava offers this observation about the diversity of postmodern American fiction:

American postmodern society is a vast *combinatoire* impelled by a myriad of powers and pressures, a kaleidoscopic world whose full complexity can never be recorded though the best of American postmodernist writers succeed in capturing moments of its motion and moments of its mischief and misery. (195)

Varsava advocates a theoretical paradigm "whereby individual works are seen to occupy small non-identical positions within a radically variegated (and changing) field" (186).

Ford's Frank Bascombe novels occupy a position within postmodernist fiction that has not yet been fully explored, arguably because they are "non-identical" to those fictions already established within the tradition. As fictions that reconcile elements of both modernist and early postmodernist fiction, *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* develop a form of fiction suitable for the literary and historical context after the early postmodernist writers. Brian McHale's theory that modernist and postmodernist fictions operate on principles of dominants supports Varsava's idea that postmodernist fiction resists totalizing philosophies. McHale shows that modernist fiction tends toward questions of epistemology while postmodernist fiction tends toward questions of ontology (9-10). Questions of ontology ultimately derive from perceptions of multiplicity—multiple worlds and multiple selves. Hence, McHale's theory provides for complexity within the field of postmodernist fiction and creates a general critical context for discussing Ford's writing. In addition, Alan Wilde's and Linda Hutcheon's descriptions of postmodernist irony situate Ford's novels within a postmodern practice. Thus, an examination of the role of irony in Ford's works situates his writing within the complex variety that has come to define contemporary postmodernist American fiction.

The myriad of powers and pressures within American postmodern society has become more complex since early postmodern fiction writers began to write in the 1960s. Given that contemporary writers need to find suitable forms for their fiction, Richard Ford confronts this challenge by addressing themes of "temporariness." Ford's protagonist sums it up nicely when he says, "Some things can't be explained. They just are. And after a while they disappear, usually forever, or become interesting in another

way. Literature's consolations are always temporary, while life is quick to begin again" (*The Sportswriter* 223). Ford presents grief, ecstasy, insight, and embarrassment, all as temporary moments. Ford makes literal the momentary nature of Frank's glimpses on continuing life. By looking at moments as moments, which means looking at them from different perspectives as time passes, Ford resists the "totalizing" tendency of earlier fiction. In *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* moments are not distilled into a single vision, as they are by such devices as the Joycean epiphany. Moments, for Ford, mean incompleteness; they are pieces of a whole, and it is the whole created by fictional synthesis in the guise of explanation, causality, and permanence that Ford resists. As Frank states, "Things change. We have that to look forward to" (*The Sportswriter* 347).

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* bear little immediate resemblance to works of earlier postmodernist fiction. For this reason, critics and academics have trouble situating Ford within a context of contemporary American fiction. Fred Hobson, in *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, devotes a portion of his book to discussing Ford as "a most uncommon southern writer" (41) but claims Ford's perception of place comes close to "a postmodern definition" (42). Raymond S. Schroth, Frank Shelton, Bruce Weber, and Leigh Allison Wilson use the labels "minimalist" and "maximalist" in their critical assessment of Ford as a contemporary writer, but none provides substantial, comprehensive discussion of how Ford is or is not one or the other (or both). Shelton recognizes the critical tendency to label Ford a "new realist" and goes on to defend this label as necessary to "place [Ford] with those who reacted against minimalism and metafiction in the 1960s and 1970s" (149). Shelton wants to place Ford historically with

those who followed the earlier postmodern experimentalists, but stops short of situating Ford within the postmodernist context by tagging him a “new realist.” More recently, Sarah Robbins’s 1998 interview with Richard Ford, titled “Don’t call him Hemingway,” revealed another angle critics take when trying to place Ford in some definitive context: comparison to earlier American realists like Hemingway and Steinbeck.

These shifting and uncertain perceptions of Richard Ford’s fiction are in fact evidence of the very qualities that place him firmly within a postmodernist tradition, for there is no *established* category in which to place his Frank Bascombe novels. These novels are not metafiction, surfiction, or fabulist fiction, but they do investigate earlier postmodernist practices. Ford’s mingling of modernist and postmodernist practices in the Frank Bascombe novels pulls together principles conventionally considered at odds, and the result is neither elitist nor quotidian, conventional modernist or postmodernist. Ford presents themes which question the depths of human and artistic perception even as he exposes the fictionality of the literary forms which communicate those perceptions. A stream of consciousness dictates the flow of the narrative, yet Ford engages in self-referential play. Ford challenges the expectations his readers may have of conventional narratives, and deliberately unveils his novels’ status as artifice, but he also retains some mimetic-realistic unities in his presentation of character and plot. The novels defy categorization because Ford reacts to those categories already in vogue. In a familiar sense, he continues the generational conflict of literary history, and he proceeds to develop a new direction for fiction that comes after and augments earlier postmodernism.

Unlike the postmodernist fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, the Frank Bascombe novels are not conspicuously experimental in form; they are not blatantly preoccupied with issues of fictionality, and they are not fabulist in approach. In his 1992 *Hopwood Lecture*, Ford confesses he sometimes fears “that [his] books are tame, not offensive enough, and that [he’s] not a technical innovator” (384). His confession speaks volumes on what he perceives critics and readers see as being definitive qualities of postmodernist fiction. Generally, postmodernist American fiction is recognized as that which radically disrupts textual order, structure, and meaning, and/or cultural order, structure, and meaning (Hobson 9). For instance, Ricardo Miguel Alfonso proclaims in “Introduction: Ethics and Contemporary Fiction,” that “metafictional writers such as Nabokov, Coover, Barth, [and] Pynchon illustrate...a shift of interest in the representational concerns of novelistic creation...and the laying bare of the inner structure of the literary text” (i). The writers to whom Alfonso refers are frequently cited for calling into question, for disrupting, “many of the traditionally accepted conventions of the [novel] genre,” including representation, narrative linearity, and psychological characterization (Alfonso i).

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* do not readily accommodate the conventional discourse on postmodernist fiction, but they do raise questions about the adequacy of such criticism. Some critics have taken issue with this discourse itself, indicating there is need to reform the theory and the discourse of postmodernist fiction. For instance, in 1992, Larry McCaffery, in “Remarks, Notes, Introduction and Other Guest-Editorial Texts Prefacing *Postmodern Culture’s* Special Fiction Issue Devoted to

Postmodern Fiction”—which is itself an excellent satiric form of the subject it satirizes—comments on the recurrence of certain postmodernist features in the discussions of contemporary fiction, those features that have typically defined the discussions published in academic and critical journals. In an introduction that is a skilled representation of postmodernist tradition, McCaffery parodically distills those features into an “Easy-to-Use” reference code of postmodernist traits. He implies certain features have become so obviously associated with postmodernist fiction that a “code” can replace significant commentary. His code is as follows:

A (1): Avant-Pop—appropriation of style and content of pop culture.

A (2): Avant-Pop—appropriation of style and content of pop culture to subvert pop culture.

B: Strategies of confounding the usual distinctions between author/character, fiction/autobiography, “real” history and invented versions.

C: Meta-features.

D: Cyberpunk features.

E: Non-linear methods of presentation.

F: Process over product.

G: Collision of different world or planes of reality motif.

H: Radically idiosyncratic voices and idioms employed.

[Note: continue through Z.] (McCaffery sec. V. para. 3)

McCaffery’s commentary on Kathy Acker’s “Obsession” is just this: “A (1, 3), B, C, E, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, O (2), P, Q, S, T, U, W, X, Y” (sec. V. para. 2). McCaffery’s presentation points out the absurdity of much commentary on postmodernist fiction, showing it to be simply a recyclable set of features. Most noticeably absent is any in-depth discussion or analysis of the fiction itself—no doubt McCaffery’s way of insinuating something of an established routine or tradition for the fiction that promised

to balk at routine and tradition. McCaffery's humorous presentation gestures not only toward the predictability of this type of postmodernist fiction, but also to the uniformity of the discourse on such fiction. He indicates it is now time to talk about something else—creatively and critically.

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* represent an alternative type of postmodernist fiction, one that is more subtle than those works McCaffery writes about. Even though *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* subvert and confound some distinctions and expectations of fiction, and they do appropriate elements of styles from the past, they represent a new direction within postmodern American fiction. *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* respond to, expand upon, and, at the same time, critique features that have become part of the vocabulary defining postmodernist American fiction. In other words, the Frank Bascombe novels do not emulate earlier postmodernist fiction, but rather share with that earlier fiction a principle of re-visioning. Since *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* entered the literary scene in 1986 and 1995 respectively, Ford's revision is done after the radical revisions of the 1960s and 1970s. Hence, Ford's novels differ from early postmodernist works because they more subtly revise fictional practices yet resist the illusion of fictionality produced by the modernists. McCaffery's list is punctuated by powerful descriptors of disruption: "subversion," "confounding," "meta," "non-linear," and "radical." Ford's novels quietly elicit disruptions. They show awareness of literary history as well as an awareness of themselves as fiction of a particular time.

In Ford's novels "re-visioning" operates on both a figurative and a literal level; both novels exhibit a pronounced textual feature of postmodernist fiction: ironic doubleness. Specifically, Ford designed the narrative to be read as simultaneously scripted and spoken. Unlike other first-person narratives in which the narrator presents the narrative as a confession, diary, letter, or some combination of those forms, *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* offer no pretences to being formally scripted. Ford distinguishes himself from his contemporaries by presenting a narrative that foregrounds both the narration and the composition of the novels in subtle rather than conspicuous metafictional ways. Apt contrast can be found in the novels of Phillip Roth, an American contemporary of Ford. Roth's *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) are first-person narratives presented in the guise of testimony to events, and they both foreground the scripted qualities of that testimony. The very first line of *The Ghost Writer* situates the novel's status as script: "It was the last daylight hour of a December afternoon more than twenty years ago..." (3). Presumably, what will follow is a narrative elaboration, a script, on that vague pronoun "it." *Operation Shylock* is clearly more experimental in form than *The Ghost Writer*, and Roth's piecing together of conversations and interactions between people conspicuously foregrounds the scripted quality of the "false" confession. The ironic doubleness of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* is in their presentation as both story *and* novel rather than story *as* confession. Reading the novels requires accepting this ironic doubleness.

The Sportswriter chronicles Frank's grief over the death of his first-born son, the break-up of his marriage, and the failure of his literary writing career. *Independence Day*

provides a glimpse into Frank's life six years later: he is no longer a sportswriter but now a realtor, small business owner, and a father to two geographically and emotionally distant children. However, in both *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* the events of the story (what Russian formalists call *sujet*) is secondary to the activity created by Frank's narration of the events (the *fabula*). Ford shifts his readers' focus from within to beyond the boundaries of the text's fictional world. He constructs readers who experience the narrative as Frank Bascombe's oral narrative, but at the same time experience more than the character's world. Readers recognize the narrative as Richard Ford's text. Thus, Ford's readers see the twofold nature of the novels: spoken narrative and scripted novels.

Ford presents these two modes of existence as being simultaneous and co-existent, and an informed reading of the novels depends upon readers' acceptance of this ironic, doubled, condition. Since Ford designs *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* to exist as simultaneously spoken narratives and scripted narratives, they challenge conventional ontological boundaries. The boundary between the novels' fictional reality and the novels' reality as objects of script is violated by the duplicitous nature of their being both at the same time. This merger is Ford's homage to the postmodernist tendency to juxtapose distinctly different modes; this merger "doubles" the narrative of the novels, for they are not just about Frank Bascombe, but about the ontological status of fiction as well.

Brian McHale shows in his *Postmodernist Fiction* that more so than any other recognized trait of postmodernism is its examination of ontology. Postmodernism, as the phenomenon reacting to or expanding upon modernism, prizes the subjective and the

individual by asking questions involving ontology. Its discourse is one of fragments aimed at disillusioning. McHale explains that postmodernism dis-orders and disrupts the orders, structures, and modes of representation of modernism, not necessarily to celebrate chaos and paranoia—though sometimes so—but to deny the claim to truth of modernism. By reacting to modernism, postmodernism offers a revisionist philosophy focussed on questions of ontology.

A postmodernist “tradition” of re-vision is discernible by the advantage of hindsight. From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, we see that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, literary and cultural critics explored postmodernism as both an aesthetic theory of art and as a descriptor for a historical period. For instance, Jean Francois Lyotard’s examination of a crisis in ideology makes *The Postmodernist Condition* a study of historical-cultural postmodernity; his thesis relies on the perception of a particular situation at one point in history. Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism; or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, examines the movement in the arts and culture of late capitalist society; his thesis relies on the perception of an emerging aesthetic based on the political and economic conditions of Western society. While there is a difference between postmodernity as a historical condition and postmodernism as movement in the arts, one can detect paradigmatic parallels between the history of postmodern theories and the development of literary postmodernism. For instance, Lyotard’s historical postmodern condition is one defined by dissolution of master narratives (xii). Likewise, the postmodernist literary qualities of subversion and resistance, eclectic style and hybrid forms, and localized as opposed to universalized narratives all challenge the ways

narratives—both historical and fictional—have been perceived. The historical postmodern condition and the postmodern theories of art share, in a broad sense, the notion of re-visioning language's and literature's relationship with and to existence.

John Barth's pair of essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), conveys that tendency toward ending-but-re-visioning the history of fiction. In the first of his essays, Barth makes his now famous claim about the literature of exhaustion: "By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities—by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (29). Thirteen years later he revises that earlier claim:

What my essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" was really about, so it seems to me now, was the effective "exhaustion" not of language or of literature but of the aesthetic of high modernism: that admirable, not-to-be-repudiated, but essentially completed "program" of what Hugh Kenner has dubbed "the Pound era." In 1966/67 we scarcely had the term *postmodernism* in its current literary-cultural usage—at least I hadn't heard it yet—but a number of us, in quite different ways and with varying combinations of intuitive response and conscious deliberation, were already well into the working out, not of the next-best thing after modernism, but of the *best next* thing: what is gropingly now called postmodernist fiction; what I hope might also be thought of one day as a literature of replenishment. (71)

"Replenishment" replaced "exhaustion" in Barth's rhetoric. His re-vision was not an admission of mistake, but an admission of the need, even the compulsion, to accommodate a perspective that changes with time. Barth does not attempt to hide the fact that he was modifying the scope of his earlier claim, thus reassessing the idea that claims made with conviction necessarily resound with that conviction forever. Barth's pair of essays recognizes the need to look again at literary history. His editing and

revising represents a second (at least) look at earlier ideas; Barth re-sees earlier ideas in a different light, a light conditioned by time and history. This critical gesture views literary genres as temporal, as part of a continuous movement instead of a definitive, stationary entity.

Ford's novels share Barth's gesture by employing a particular trope typical of postmodernist fiction: ironic vision and revision of multiple textual levels. While "irony" is recognized as a defining feature of the postmodernist avant-garde, or as Linda Hutcheon claims, "[i]t is almost cliché today to say irony plays an important role in the definition of the postmodern" (35), literary critics disagree about the form of irony postmodernism takes. For instance, Fredric Jameson, while primarily concerned with postmodernism as a social and political phenomenon, and not specifically with literary postmodernism, designates the term "pastiche" for the blank irony in postmodern art. Jameson argues that in postmodern "pastiche," "surface" replaces "depth" (62). He explains:

Pastiche is...the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry,...amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs...a kind of blank irony.... (65)

Jameson's implication is that in an economy powered by mass production and mass consumption, an economy whereby the worker is as much a commodity as the product, there results an art that is equally without substance or depth of meaning. Jameson refers to Andy Warhol's visual art to support his claims, and he refers to Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* and the writings of E.L. Doctorow for literary examples. Pastiche is thus

shown to be a form of postmodern irony in which ironic doubleness plays a subordinate role, where it has an implicit rather than explicit presence.

However, Jameson's notion of "pastiche" in no way encompasses the multiple forms of irony in postmodernist fiction. Most importantly, "pastiche" does not realize the power of irony to function as a form of criticism, for Jameson's perspective ultimately limits his perception of the power of irony to function in any but Marxist terms. Other critics have come to see irony in postmodernist fiction as a trope that facilitates depth by making possible multiple meanings; they see irony as having an evolving or inconstant form and definition. Unlike Jameson, Ihab Hassan approaches postmodernism from a literary rather than more general cultural perspective. Hassan's discussion encompasses multiple forms of irony and evidences his changing perception of irony. Initially, he views it as merely implicit in postmodernist fiction, like Jameson's "pastiche." However, his subsequent observations show the primary and explicit role irony plays in postmodernism. In "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," Hassan stated that postmodernism

must be perceived in terms *both* of continuity *and* discontinuity, the two perspectives being complementary and partial. . . . Thus, postmodernism, by invoking two divinities at once, engages a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt. . . . (277)

Importantly, Hassan did not settle on "Irony" as *the* way of expressing "two divinities at once." In fact, Hassan viewed irony as just one form of expression among others:

postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a "white ideology" of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of the complex, articulate silences. Postmodernism

veers toward all these yet implies a different, if not antithetical movement toward pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages. (“Toward a Concept” 283)

Here, Hassan discussed postmodernism as being a discourse of ironies through implications, much as he did in his earlier publication, *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times*, which he confessed had at the center of his concerns “an awkward vision of change” (x)—awkward only in that he had yet to articulate that vision. In *Paracriticisms* Hassan envisioned a merger of Modernism and Postmodernism, specifically claiming that both isms now “coexist” (47); in the chapter entitled “POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography,” his sparse comments on Irony entail the following:

Play, complexity, formalism. The aloofness of art but also sly hints of its radical incompleteness. *Dr. Faustus* and *Confessions of Felix Krull*. Irony as awareness of Non-being. (50)

Later, in his 1987 essay, “Making Sense: The Trials of Postmodern Discourse,” Hassan lists eleven traits of postmodernism and situates “Irony” as, literally, the central trait among Indeterminacy, Fragmentation, Decanonization, Self-less-ness, The Unpresentable, Irony, Hybridization, Carnivalization, Performance, Constructionism, and Immanence (445-46). Here, irony plays a pivotal role in postmodern literary expression: “With irony, we reach a peripety of negations; we flip from the deconstructive to reconstructive side of postmodernism. For irony can overcome ‘silence’ or ‘exhaustion’ in play, interplay, dialogue, polylogue, [and] allegory” (“Making Sense” 445). Whether it is expressed as “invoking two divinities at once” or flipping from “deconstructive to

reconstructive” sides, Hassan provides a vision of postmodern irony that, unlike Jameson’s “pastiche,” includes doubleness of expression on multiple textual levels.

Other theorists, such as Alan Wilde, Linda Hutcheon, and Brian McHale, offer a vision of postmodern irony that is similarly defined by doubleness. Where Hassan’s critical essays do much to expand the literary theory of postmodernism, Wilde, Hutcheon, and McHale offer a more detailed examination of *how* postmodern irony is expressed through various themes and narrative strategies in fiction. Together, their writings enable an informed reading of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* as postmodernist novels, for the ironic construction that creates and sustains the novels’ doubleness is exemplary of their brands of postmodern irony.

In *Horizons of Assent* Alan Wilde describes postmodernist irony as “suspensive irony.” Suspensive irony is “[a] radical vision of multiplicity, randomness, contingency, and even absurdity [that] abandons the quest for paradise...—the world in all its disorder is simply (or not so simply) accepted” (10). To put this in context, Wilde differentiates “suspensive irony” from “mediate irony”—an irony that mediates a satiric vision, a vision common to romantic ironists (9)—and “disjunctive irony”—an irony that strives toward a condition of paradox (the characteristic form of modernist irony) (10).

Postmodern ironists, Wilde says, while “unlike one another in [some] respects, [agree] at least in acknowledging the inevitability of their situation in the world they describe” (121). The postmodern ironist is “typically involved *in*, though not necessarily *with* [the] world,” and that involvement accepts the uncertainty and imperfection of knowledge and communication (166). Wilde’s suspensive irony essentially resolves what he sees as the

postmodernist's interrogation of both distance and depth (129). The postmodernist's interrogation can be facilitated in any number of ways, including by way of "thinly veiled autobiographical narrators" (133), as he finds typical in the fiction of Raymond Federman, Ronald Sukenick, and Donald Bartheleme. Interrogation can also be facilitated through the presentation of art as artifice—the drawing of attention to the nature of the text as text (171). This last strategy has the most bearing on Ford's fiction, for the "double" nature of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* is a consequence of its presentation as both a spoken narrative and a scripted, "artificially" constructed fiction.

In *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, beginnings and endings are laden with doubleness achieved from their presentation as artifice. At the beginning of *The Sportswriter* Ford questions the very notion of where a beginning begins by expertly manoeuvring among several points of origin, effectively doubling (and redoubling) the idea of "beginning." Firstly, Ford begins with the identification of the speaker—"My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter" (3)—allowing readers to interpret the story to begin with the person, and/or the voice of the speaker, Frank Bascombe. Secondly, Ford jumps back "fourteen years" (3) by having Frank look back upon that specific period as significant in explaining his life, thereby allowing his reader to interpret a point of origin for Frank's story to be fourteen years prior to the present time. Thirdly, Ford designates the period of twelve years as the time since Frank quit his literary writing career (3), again allowing readers to interpret Frank's resignation as a possible starting point for the ensuing narrative. Lastly, as Ford closes the introductory segment of the novel, he has his protagonist claim to have "[f]aced down regret. Avoided ruin.

And...still [be] here to tell” (4) the story, which ultimately resituates the point of the narrative’s origin in the present. However, after the many digressions of the first segment of the novel, the present has its origin in and has been constructed by a past. Thus, the sequence of short paragraphs that touch on various points of time in Frank’s recent past form an interrogation of the conceptual distance and depth of “beginning.”

Similarly, the last chapter of *The Sportswriter* exhibits artificiality in its open-endedness and its multiple endings. “THE END” is boldly and largely printed at the top of page 366 like a chapter title, but those words do not announce an end typical of fiction. Usually, “THE END,” as end title, marks the literal end of the narrative—no words follow “THE END.” However, because Frank’s narrative continues for more than nine additional pages, readers question why Ford has typographically signalled the end, yet he continues the narrative. “THE END” in *The Sportswriter* must not mean the same thing as “THE END” as read in conventional novels. Ford’s earlier novels *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), and later *Wildlife* (1990) have typical endings, but “THE END” in *The Sportswriter* is actually presented as if it were marking the beginning of a new chapter. The textual formatting of the first page of the last chapter, with the extra wide margin at the head of the page, is of the style of the previous thirteen chapters’ first pages. So, “THE END” is really signalling a beginning—the beginning of an ending.

It is far more useful to perceive the final pages of *The Sportswriter* in terms of their being of two forms at the same time. “Ending” is a useful term when talking about the final pages of *The Sportswriter* because “ending,” the verb, is the action of bringing

the narrative to a close, which is what nine pages subsequent to the announcement of the novel's end is actually *doing*. "THE END," alone, would make the final pages a *thing*, a noun, an end, which is what those nine pages are collectively. On one level readers see the narrative's act of closure—the ending—and on another level readers see the novel's closure—the end.

"Closure" is not the best way to describe the last few pages of *The Sportswriter* because the ending is not conventional. The last paragraph of the novel suggests openness. Frank refers to "being released, let loose" to a "new living" (375), which does not imply closure but rather an opening, another beginning. Having just read Frank's proclamations that "life has only one certain closure" and that "[t]he only truth that can never be a lie...is life itself—the thing that happens" (374), readers are especially aware this "ending," this closing of the narrative/final chapter of the novel, is not a simple "truth"—not a thing that happens in the sense Frank explained—but two things that happen: the character's narrative and the author's novel both end. Ford has effectively re-visioned what it means to end a novel by presenting the multiple levels of "end/ending."

In view of the un-final tone of *The Sportswriter*, it was not surprising, albeit it was nine years later, *Independence Day* followed as the sequel. In *Independence Day* Ford revisits his challenge to conventional narrative signals in a number of ways, one of which is in his titling the final chapter of the novel—which is actually the only chapter of the novel that has a title—the same as the title of the novel, "*INDEPENDENCE DAY*." The effect Ford achieves by repeating the novel's title as the title of the final chapter is a

casting of suspicion over the previous twelve chapters. One would think that the entire novel is working together to express some literal or metaphorical expression of independence, so why draw attention to only the final chapter as “*INDEPENDENCE DAY*”? Ford even italicizes the title of the chapter, subtly implying the significance of this title as representing a substantial piece of work, exactly as italicized titles of books and lengthy compositions signify—yet titles traditionally announce beginnings, not endings. The impression, once again, is that the ending is really a beginning.

In light of this doubling of the novels’ endings, Alan Wilde’s claim that postmodern ironists acknowledge “the inevitability of their situation in the world they describe” (121) clearly applies to Ford. Richard Ford, the postmodern ironist, is very much involved *in*, as opposed to *with*, the world he describes. He is a part of the object of his discourse—the literary world—rather than a mere observer or creator of it. Ford’s complicity is evidenced in the attention he draws to the multiple textual levels of his novels, as well as in the first person voice of Frank Bascombe, and even more so in the intricate weave of intertextuality throughout *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. References, at times explicit and other times subtle, to Jean Paul Sartre and Existentialism, to Alan Robbe-Grillet and the formal literary controversies surrounding “authority,” “voice,” “influence,” and “angst,” to the political atmosphere of the Reagan-Bush era, to writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Faulkner, James Joyce, and John Barth all indicate a historical and literary-historical consciousness. This consciousness is not discernible simply because the main character/narrator is a writer, but also because of Ford’s complicity in re-visioning, in his deliberate effort to construct

a present, a *now* for his fiction that pays homage to a past. Fred Hobson's observation that the name "Bascombe" can be traced to Faulkner's Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury* (50) illustrates how Ford's present text is literally and literarily made up of past texts. Ford takes a broad sweep of social, cultural, and political references as well as a broad sweep of literary tradition and writes them into a new context and a new style.

Ford himself has been quite vocal about the influence of modernists like Faulkner. In "The Three Kings: Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald," Ford acknowledges the three as the great teachers of creative prose, saying that from them he "first learned what meaning meant" (580). From Hemingway he says he learned "just how little narrative 'intrusion'...was actually necessary to keep action going....Yet locked within is the greater lesson that the page is officially different from the life, and that in creating life's illusion, the page need not exactly mimic—need not nearly mimic, really—and moreover, that this very discrepancy is what sets art free" (584). From Faulkner Ford felt his own attention to "the subliterate runs and drumbeats of words, their physical and auditory manifestations, the extremes of utterance and cadence[,]...the outside of language" was reinforced (582). Ford writes: "From Faulkner I'm sure I learned that in 'serious' fiction it is possible to be funny at the expense of nothing...; that it is sometimes profitable to take risks with syntax and diction, and bring together words that ordinarily do not seem to belong together—the world being not completely foregone—and in this small way reinvent language and cause pleasure" (584). From Fitzgerald, Ford simply says he found style: "elegant economies and proportionings...[and] Fitzgerald's...eye for the visual detail and, once observed, for that detail's suitability as host for his wonderful, clear

judgement about Americans and American life” (582). However, despite Ford’s reverence for these three “kings,” his fiction is not mere homage to them.

Ford’s literary coming of age was in the 1960s and 1970s, and he is just as vocal about that era’s influence on him as he is about being a subject in Hemingway’s, Faulkner’s, and Fitzgerald’s kingdom. Ford honours the fiction of the 1960s and 1970s by crediting the sorts of fiction that draw attention to themselves as fiction with generating a “new way” to appeal to readers. In his introduction to *The Granta Book of the American Short Story*, Ford discusses in detail the influence of Irish writer Frank O’Connor, and contrasts O’Connor’s material and aims with those of postmodernist fiction writers:

Many of O’Connor’s finest convictions, though—about plausibility and character, exposition, development—were, at the beginning of the sixties, being uprooted and turned upside down by Americans writing what came to be called ‘anti-stories’ or ‘metafiction’ and later on in the seventies, ‘postmodernist fiction’ or just plain ‘fictions.’

This was new work with uncertain settings, stories often without characters *at all*, much less lonely, outlawed ones; stories without linear developments or events or closures, stories that goaded conventional plausibility, and in which words were imagined not first as windows to meaning or even to the factual world, as had been the case since slightly before Cervantes, but as narrative *objets* with arbitrary, sometimes ironically-assigned references, palpable shapes, audible sounds, rhythms—all of whose intricacies and ironies produced aesthetic as well as ordinary pleasures. These were often outrageous, loudly-funny, declamatory, brainy, biting, self-referring stories, if in fact they were ‘stories’ at all (much more chin-pulling went on about this). They defied the mimetic-realistic unities Frank O’Connor loved so much, and many of us who were beginning to be writers in the sixties loved them and were shocked by them, even if we loved O’Connor’s unities, too, and couldn’t write in the new way. (viii-ix)

Herein lies the elements of Ford’s hybridity; Ford aims to reconcile the “mimetic-realistic unities” of O’Connor and the “narrative *objets*” of the 1960s and 1970s. The “aesthetic as well as ordinary pleasures” Ford identified with that fiction did not replace or minimize

the joy derived from more conventional fiction. Ford's own perspective on the early postmodernists was that they were writing in a "new way," which is quite different from saying they were writing about *new* things, or writing in a *better* way. In terms of his own style, *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* do draw attention to themselves as fictions, but do not use the same shock tactics Ford witnessed in the fiction of the 1960s. The "ironically-assigned references, palpable shapes, audible sounds, [and] rhythms" to which Ford refers, clearly point to a newfound delight in fiction—a joyous vision of language and linguistic interactions between readers and text as a level of narrative unto itself—yet this did not negate the value derived from mimetic characters and settings, linear plots and unified closures. As if fulfilling Barth's declaration in 1980, Ford went to work on the best next thing, replenishing by revising, re-writing, and reconciling established elements of twentieth-century fiction.

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* represent a merger of those modernist conventions Ford valued and the aesthetic and ordinary pleasures he derived from the language and structures of experimental fiction. Throughout both novels, the story of Frank Bascombe is characterized by a deliberate consciousness of its status as story. For instance, the first person narrator makes the relationship between form and content explicit, not because of his first person point of view, but because of his duplicitous position. Structurally, Frank embodies an uncanny meeting ground of something beyond the text and something within the text. Frank, as he is involved in the ongoing events of the plot, speaks to and is aware of a party external to the fictional world he occupies—a reader or listener. Frank is both participant in the events of the plot, and spectator

recounting those events; he is both the object of readers' visions and the lens through which readers see. It is through Frank, the ironic "spectacle," that Ford subtly, facilitates a double vision, a double discourse. Consequently, when readers "see" Frank, they see him as both a character, a representation of "self," and as a narrative configuration, a constructed self, thereby seeing him on two textual levels. Ford reconciles textual levels in Frank Bascombe, making Frank a representation of a postmodernist phenomenon, one that combines the artistic with the familiar, and one that by design challenges epistemological and ontological boundaries.

Seeing Frank as an ironic "spectacle" means seeing the structures and designs of the novels *as* structures and designs, which is precisely what Alan Wilde means by a presentation of art as artifice, or drawing attention to the nature of the text as text (171). Linda Hutcheon's "insider position," which she admits is a direct product of Wilde's theory, best describes Frank Bascombe's position in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* because the "insider position" facilitates a vision of the artificial qualities of these novels. The insider position

enable[s] a critique from within. Far from being a distancing from commitment and feeling, postmodern irony can be a mode of engagement that uses (in order to abuse) the very possibility of distance, for it knows it is inescapably implicated in that which it contests. (37)

Ford has designed Frank in such a way that Frank's distance from readers is minimized by his awareness of readers and his reference to subjects beyond the immediate domain of the story, yet Frank is inescapably implicated in the story because he is a character in it; he is a fictional creation, yet he is projecting his narrative beyond the realm of his fictional world. Frank does not transcend his fiction, for he is, in every respect, subject to

its contents. While Frank's narrative exhibits qualities inconsistent with a single ontological position—for the narrative is simultaneously scripted and spoken—Frank, as a character, never trespasses an ontological boundary. In keeping with Hutcheon's argument that postmodern irony is used as an “ideologically deconstructive weapon” to combat any “claim to transcendence, universality and power” (35), Frank's position facilitates a critique of literary works that conceal their own “artificial” qualities.

This doubled form of spoken and scripted narrative achieves the power to ironically critique. According to Hutcheon, postmodern forms of irony, by retaining a “doubleness that is its identity,” achieve power to combat power (35):

postmodern irony is the structural recognition that discourse today cannot avoid acknowledging its situation in the world it represents: irony's critique, in other words, will always be at least somewhat complicitous with the dominants it contests but within which it cannot help existing. (36)

“Acknowledging its situation in the world it represents” and being “somewhat complicitous with the dominants it contests” are expressions of ironic simultaneity, and in Hutcheon's argument, such irony is structural in nature: doubleness of discourse. Such a vision of “double discourse” is hardly unique; Molly Hite, in her survey, “Postmodernist Fiction,” cites John Barth's *Chimera* (1972), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), and Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* (1986) as being among those works of fiction frequently cited as challenging, through a construction of double discourse, some established convention of writing, or some established belief or knowledge. However, Ford's “double discourse” is a less radical, less disruptive, more subtle examination of writing than those offered by the aforementioned fiction writers; Ford's

double discourse is a challenge to conventional perceptions of writing. Its principal concern is with reading—with reading as a deconstructive-reconstructive act, an act in which unities are made and disunities accepted or encompassed. The double discourse to which Hutcheon refers in her description of postmodern irony explains the indirectness, the displacement of subject, which facilitates an ironic construction such as Ford's, and which further necessitates reading within and beyond the text's boundaries.

Hutcheon's description of postmodern irony's power to critique is in part a defence of postmodern irony itself; after all, she is aiming to distinguish postmodern irony from Romantic Irony. As such, her discussion is very much centred on the difference between perceptive distance and perceptive complicity, even though she is not explicitly concerned with readers. However, as she questions the desirability or even the possibility of employing postmodern irony, she refers to writers' uses of postmodern irony:

Certainly women artists seem to produce few ironic works about children; writers rarely write about their immigrant parents with irony. One of the ways irony does reappear, however, is in displaced form, or at least with a displaced target. Margaret Atwood takes on injustice to women in a fictionalized dystopia named Gilead (in *The Handmaid's Tale*); Dionne Brand writes of exploitation and colonization in Grenada (in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*). Are they really *not* writing about their experience in Canada, however? (40-41)

Hutcheon's assertion that these writers are writing one thing and implying another, that they employ irony's "double voicing" (39), does indeed attribute part of postmodern irony's "power" to writers. But here Hutcheon seems to be recalling Bakhtin's assertion that "every...sort of discourse...is oriented toward an understanding that is 'responsive.'...Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in

the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding” (280).

However, Hutcheon fails to explicitly acknowledge, or at least fails to discuss, the “*čuždost*” (Bakhtin’s “otherness”) that makes her reading possible. After all, is it not her own knowledge—her “apperceptive background” (281)—as a reader, that informs her reading of Atwood’s and Brand’s displaced targets?

While Hutcheon does not explicitly refer to a reader in her discussion of postmodern irony, her notions of the “insider position” and “displaced target” depend upon an implied reader. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale builds his theory explicitly on reader response, claiming it is because of reader involvement in the process of fiction that writers are able to create and manipulate particular “dominants.” The dominants of modernist and postmodernist texts are contingent upon a chosen analytical approach (6). McHale concedes that the questions asked of a text have an immediate impact on the answers derived from it, and readers’ questions are shaped by, if not altogether formulated by, the authors’ structural and narrative strategies. McHale theorizes that modernist and postmodernist texts construct different types of readers by shaping their responses. For instance, modernists force certain questions from readers:

modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as... What is there to be known?; Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on. (9)

Postmodernist texts construct different readers by employing

strategies which engage and foreground questions...[which] bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world it projects, for instance: What is world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted,

and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (10)

McHale's theory shows readers' responses to the text play an important role in determining whether a text is epistemologically focused (making it a modernist text) or ontologically focused (making it a postmodernist text). While the dominant is inherent in the writer's chosen strategy to affect reader involvement, the writer alone does not determine a text's dominant.

McHale's theory that reader involvement helps determine dominants provides a constructive context for discussing *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. The novels fit well with McHale's ideas about ontological boundaries, namely in the challenging question of how language can be of both the spoken and scripted form at the same time. Language clearly retains different qualities depending on its mode of being, depending on whether it is spoken or scripted, but in Ford's novels there is a merger of modes. Readers are presented with a text that regularly implies their acceptance of the simultaneously spoken and scripted narrative forms, a text that consequently implies their acceptance of both roles of listener and reader. Ultimately, Ford shapes his readers by affecting their perception of the protagonist. Because Frank Bascombe is both lens and object, both the medium through which the narrative is filtered and at the same time the very subject of the narrative, Ford clearly violates ontological boundaries. Ford's readers ask: How can Frank occupy positions on multiple textual levels? What constitutes these levels? What is the mode of existence of these novels? What is the mode of existence of Frank's world?

What are the implications of accepting the novels as being of both the spoken and scripted modes?

Ford's construction of Frank ultimately prompts questions of both epistemological and ontological boundaries. For instance, Frank's knowledge of literary writing complicates the subject matter of the narrative, not to mention the fact that it makes him sound suspiciously like a thinly veiled autobiographical narrator. Frank's reliability as a "knower" and a "transmitter of knowledge" is questionable because Ford implicates matters not directly covered by the narrative itself. As well, the displaced, "real" targets of critique certainly raise questions as to the "object of knowledge." On the other hand, Frank's structural position, his status of being both 'not quite in the text,' yet nonetheless implicated by its fictional boundaries, is a position that continuously, and by Ford's design, violates the boundaries of the fiction's worlds.

McHale admits that any given work of fiction can exhibit both modernist and postmodernist dominants. He explains:

There is a kind of inner logic or inner dynamics... governing the change of dominant from modernist to postmodernist fiction. Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. 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. (11)

Because of Frank's doubleness in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, because of the close connection between his "knowing" and his "mode of being," no dominant is apparent. McHale acknowledges that his own analysis is primarily on works that infrequently, or rarely, "tip over" from one dominant to another; however, in discussing

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, McHale notices how in Chapter 8 of that novel, Faulkner makes an "isolated" crossing from modernist to postmodernist practices (11). The "tipping over" sequence he cites is countered by a proclamation that while "we cannot raise epistemological questions without immediately raising ontological questions, and vice versa," the dominant orders the work in terms of the *urgency* of a particular interrogation (11). While McHale presents his theory intelligently and rather convincingly, "urgency" is ambiguous, since what may appear to be urgent *initially*, may very well differ from what later appears to be urgent *primarily*. He stops short of considering a very important part of the reading process—re-reading. However, McHale decides:

[Discourse] is linear and temporal, and one cannot say two things at the same time. Literary discourse, in effect, only specifies which set of questions ought to be asked *first* of a particular text, and delays the asking of the second set of questions, *slowing down* the process by which epistemological questions entail ontological questions and vice versa. (11)

Simply put: the most urgent question is the first question. So, what is the first question to be asked of Ford's fiction?

The opening lines of *The Sportswriter* decidedly prompt a question of ontology: "My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter" (4). Given the title of the novel, there is an immediate trespassing of an ontological boundary: the narrator is the sportswriter, and the narrator occupies a position in the fictional realm, and *The Sportswriter* is the novel, and the novel is a tangible object in the "extra-fictional" world. As well, Frank's testimony that this is his story violates the boundary between the world within the novel and the world of the novel's construction, the boundary between the story and the text.

The ontological boundary is not aggressively exploited here, for the difference between “the” sportswriter (as in *The Sportswriter*) and “a” sportswriter (as in Frank’s self-identification) is the only recognized movement from one realm to another. The subtle change in article from “the” to “a” linguistically differentiates the ontological position of the noun “sportswriter”—in the first case the noun represents a title (and a subject), and in the second case it represents a character (and an object). Despite the subtlety, the first question asked of Ford’s fiction is one of ontology: What is the/a sportswriter? This question places Ford firmly within the realm of postmodernism described by McHale.

McHale elaborates on a number of specific ways a writer can affect readers’ questioning of the text, but construction of readers is an important and necessary part of any of these strategies. For instance, he shows how postmodernist writers can foreground questions of ontology and demand reader participation. The use of the second-person pronoun, “you”:

[e]ven more strongly than the first person, it [the second person] announces the presence of a communicative circuit linking addressor and addressee. . . . But *you* is shifty. . . every reader is potentially *you*, the addressee of the novelistic discourse. . . . Postmodernist writing extends and deepens [an] aura of the uncanny, exploiting the relational potential of the second-person pronoun. The postmodernist second-person functions as an invitation to the reader to project himself or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*. (223-24)

When McHale examines Thomas Pynchon’s use of the second-person in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, he determines Pynchon aggressively exploits and manipulates the second-person, ultimately drawing readers, the *you*, into the plotted events, including the doomed theatre at the end of the novel (225). McHale applies his theory of fictional dominants to other works such as John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), William Gass’s *Willie*

Master's Lonesome Wife (1968), and Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971)—all typically experimental and aggressively exploitative narrative forms that use the “you” address in radical ways.

Ford makes use of the second-person pronoun in his fiction, and while his approach is less radical, he achieves similar effects—he redirects the readers' gaze onto the narrative *as* a scripted form. In the opening segment of *The Sportswriter*, Frank poses the question: “Why, you might ask, would a man give up a promising literary career—there were some good notices—to become a sportswriter?” (5). Readers are primarily drawn into the narrative by Frank's assumption of their interest in why he took up sportswriting and stopped literary writing. Ford's use of the second-person pronoun implicates reader involvement, which violates the ontological boundary between Frank's fictional world and the readers' world in much the same way as McHale detected in his study of postmodernist fiction; however, the “you” in Ford's novels emerges as an implicit factor in the direction of Frank's narrative. Questions like “What was our life like?” (9), “But does that seem like an odd life?” (29), “Why did I quit writing?” (42), and on through until “Finally, what is left to say?” (371), show Frank is organizing his narrative around the anticipated interest of some listener/reader, external to his own world, all the while intoning the second person. Frank is aware of constructing a response based on that second person. The questions themselves tend toward ontology: Who is asking these questions?

The fact that the narrative of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* are Frank's story—the story *of* and *about* Frank—makes his involvement in the narrative as both

character and commentator rather unspectacular, but Frank's structural configuration makes him unique. Frank does not limit his narrative to the immediate events of the "plot"; rather, frequent and often lengthy reminiscences about the past, or descriptions of the present, characterize Frank's narrative. As he talks about the present, Frank looks into the past, and brings the relationship between the past and the present into the foreground, but, more importantly, because the narrative is told through Frank, and because the narrative is directed by Frank's interest, a thematic meshing of past and present, a thematic meshing of narratives outside of the present story and the present story itself, is made possible. Structurally, Frank embodies that meeting ground of texts. Directed by his vision, readers see the "story" in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* as a representation of displaced—"real," to use Linda Hutcheon's term—subjects: writing and reading of fiction. The frequent, though subtle, foregrounding of the novels' textuality reconfirms the hovering presence of these two subjects as displaced targets. Specifically, above *The Sportswriter's* themes of grief, uncertainty, and failure, there hover the ontological questions of 'what is a real writer?' and 'what is the relationship between a writer and his work?' Along with *Independence Day's* themes of community and connectedness, the novel indirectly asks the questions 'do writers have a role in a community?' and 'has the writer a viable place in social and national spheres?'—again, questions of ontology, questions appropriate to a postmodern perspective.

Richard Ford designed a unique construction which enables him to tell the story of Frank Bascombe, and, at the same time, investigate questions concerning novels, novel writing, and the role of the novelist. In an interview for *Brick* magazine Ford said that his

aim as a writer was to write “something intelligent, something touching, something to redeem the species” (23). In *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* Ford builds upon strategies of postmodernist fiction to recover something valuable and redeeming for contemporary fiction: the merging of an awareness of fictions, constructions, and designs, and the emotional, psychological, and spiritual elements that motivate and are captured by those structures. Ford does not radically react against modernism, nor does he embrace early postmodernism. Ford synthesizes. He synthesizes those aims expressed by O’Connor, regarding plausibility and character, exposition and development, with methods derived from postmodernism. Ford’s novels replenish postmodernist fiction by establishing something new from the old.

Chapter One: *The Sportswriter* as Postmodernist Fiction

The Sportswriter is set on Easter weekend in 1984—a weekend conventionally marked by grand themes of redemption and resurrection, and a year literarily burdened by George Orwell’s ominous forecast of humanity’s subjection to totalitarianism. For Frank Bascombe—ex-novelist turned sportswriter—this particular weekend is one of personal redemption and private resurrection. Frank is coming to terms with both private and professional losses, namely the death of his son, the break-up of his marriage, and the failure of his literary writing career. His story is played out against both contemporary American social culture, and also the previous decades’ literary culture. At the same time, Ford uses this story to examine the modes of modernist and postmodernist fiction and develop a new hybrid form of fiction. Ford allows readers to see in his fiction a representation of lived experience, and in that representation a measure of certainty and truth; however, he also teaches readers to view fiction and life with a critical eye for illusion, construction, and falsity. Ford’s hybrid encompasses those concepts that lead Frank to accept his life, yet it questions the narratives that construct and design Frank’s world. Consequently, Ford places the grand themes of “redemption” and “resurrection” within a postmodernist perspective.

Frank embarks on a literal journey to Detroit, to interview an ex-football player, and makes a number of shorter trips to visit his girlfriend’s family and his own children who reside with his ex-wife in a neighbouring state. His travels become symbolic routes to discovery of elements of human interaction. However, readers of *The Sportswriter* might recall Ronald Berman’s comments on the idea of drift in American fiction; writing

about Sinclair Lewis, Berman notes: “The idea of ‘drift’ extends itself into metaphor, prepares for the meaningless voyaging and the failed navigation of *The Wasteland* and *The Great Gatsby*. It also extends into metaphor the meanderings by automobile...that play so large a part in [Lewis’s] symbolic realism” (16). At first glance, such a comment seems to foretell the modus operandi of *The Sportswriter*. “Drift” precisely characterizes Frank’s literal and imaginative meanderings, but Richard Ford does not infuse Frank’s drifting with connotations of American failure. Rather, Frank’s movements become a metaphor for life and literature in America during the 1960s and 1970s. Ford connects life to art; his story is fraught with historical, cultural, and literary consciousness, and, indeed, there is much evidence that both Frank, and the fiction by which he is constructed, are not able to escape the past. Ford delivers this message by distinguishing himself from the modernism of Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald, and the early postmodernists of the 1960s and 1970s. Ford merges stories of morality, character, and humanity with playful approaches to language, and this amplifies the construction and design of his fiction. Ford’s subtle engagement with metafictional concerns distinguishes his postmodernist fiction from earlier versions of postmodernism. Ford moves beyond playing with and dismantling the conventions of fiction and relates his critique of fiction to the world it represents. *The Sportswriter* is very much Richard Ford’s attempt to write a fiction worthy and relevant of its time, and as such, the novel offers a variation on the classic literary conflict of innovation and influence. *The Sportswriter* addresses both social and literary concerns. Its final message is that writers can not live and write meaningfully in 1980s America unless they engage the history, culture, and politics of the

world, and embrace the aesthetic concerns that experimentation with language and narrative structures produce to construct that world.

From a narratological perspective, stories conventionally revolve around a series of actions; however, Ford rarely concerns his readers with stories of action, and instead diverts attention away from “drama” and onto the ways people cope with life after the dramatic moment has passed. Ford focuses on “language as human interaction” (Majeski para. 8), and shifts his readers’ gaze between the scripted and spoken levels of the narrative. In other words, to read *The Sportswriter* properly, readers must accept the text’s ironic condition of being simultaneously scripted and spoken. Brian McHale’s theory that postmodernism questions ontological boundaries explains how writers can make their readers aware of the limits and boundaries of worlds. McHale argues that postmodernist fiction essentially resists certainty, control, and continuity, things that characterize modernist narratives, by challenging the constructions, both narrative and linguistic, which promote such illusions. Such challenges depend upon reader participation, which in turn establishes the existence of a world outside the fictional reality. Ford breaks the illusion of fictional reality in a number of ways, but all of his strategies foreground questions of ontology.

Questions of epistemology, however, are not absent from *The Sportswriter*. McHale designates epistemological questions to the realm of modernism, and such questions revolve around deriving sense, reason, and certainty. In the novel, Frank seeks out reasons and constructs his narrative in such a way as to lead readers to identify causes and effects of events in his life. While *The Sportswriter* prompts questions of both

epistemology and ontology, Ford offers contingent reconciliation of modernist and postmodernist dominants, but his reconciliation is primarily based on ontology.

Ford's reconciliation does not settle on one dominant or the other. It is an ironic reconciliation which presents a text in which modernist and postmodernist dominants co-exist. Allan Wilde's theory of postmodernist "suspensive" irony helps explain this provisional reconciliation. Simply stated in the context of Wilde's argument, *The Sportswriter* does not attempt to explain, or settle, or even make compatible its modernist and postmodernist tendencies. Both modernist and postmodernist elements are present, and the text retains doubleness rather than a fusion. Wilde sees modernist irony as that which aspires to paradox; paradox formulates relationship, and hence a direct connection between two things in context. In contrast, postmodernist irony suspends any inclination to connect. *The Sportswriter* establishes such a postmodern irony. Connections and unities, when they are made, are made by readers and not formulated exclusively by the text. The scripted narrative engages readers' visual sense, inviting them to differentiate among the different forms of script and thereby interact with the text. Readers' interaction with the text plays a significant part in the text's language, and this, when considered in McHale's and Wilde's terms, is distinctly postmodernist.

The "story" of *The Sportswriter* is very much about the language and narrative structures people use to make sense of things. In an interview with Sophie Majeski, Ford admits, "It's always easy to write about things that fuck up, things that go kablooey, and people leave and the door slams and that's the dramatic end. But I'm always interested in what happens after somebody walks out the door. I'm interested in what they [*sic*] do

later” (para. 21). When Frank Bascombe begins his narrative in *The Sportswriter*, it is after his divorce, after the death of his first-born son, and after the failure of his literary writing career. What Frank *does* after those dramatic events is try to make sense of them by talking about them, and by talking about how he can remember, re-vision, and retell those events. Ford brings language and speech into the forefront of the narrative by making language and linguistic structures visible, and diverts attention away from conventional action; he breaks the illusion of fictional reality by refocusing on “language as human interaction.”

In *The Sportswriter*, Richard Ford questions ontology by making visible the conventionally “transparent” features of fiction, namely linguistic and structural features. Frank Bascombe is the epitome of a visible narrative structure. Frank is uniquely positioned to be both the means of readers’ vision and the object of readers’ vision; he is the lens and the exhibit; he is simultaneously the viewer and the viewed. The first two sentences of the novel help establish Frank’s “double dimension” by requiring readers to focus first on Frank as the narrative voice—“My name is Frank Bascombe”—and then refocus on Frank as the narrative subject— “I am a sportswriter” (4). While Ford’s manoeuvring is rather inconspicuous at this point, it effectively projects Frank as an ironic “spectacle;” like an eyeglass, Frank can be either transparent or visible. By making conventionally transparent features visible, Ford initiates a habit of shifting focus in his readers. He directs his readers’ gazes simultaneously *into* the narrative and *onto* the narrative.

This simultaneous observation is particularly important to Ford's creation of worlds. He manipulates focus largely through constructing his narrator, and more specifically in the way Frank constructs his vision of the world. For instance, the very first page of the narrative projects language conspicuously into the foreground with the notation of "X" in reference to Frank's ex-wife:

For the past fourteen years I have lived here at 19 Hoving Road, Haddam, New Jersey, in a large Tudor house bought when a book of short stories I wrote sold to a movie producer for a lot of money, and seemed to set my wife and me and our three children—two of whom were not even born yet—up for a good life.

Just exactly what that good life was—the one I expected—I cannot tell you now exactly, though I wouldn't say it has not come to pass, only that much has come in between. I am no longer married to X, for instance. The child we had when everything was starting has died, though there are two others, as I mentioned, who are alive and wonderful children. (3)

There is no dwelling on the fact, in the narrative, that Frank's ex-wife is un-named. The letter "X" is simply provided, even unassumingly provided, in lieu of a proper name; it is as if readers were automatically aware of a language of substitution. While cliché, "X" indeed marks the spot of interest for readers, for it provokes the questions: Why will Frank not speak his ex-wife's name? Why has Ford not provided a proper name? Why "X"?

Because X is mentioned in the opening paragraphs of the novel, readers immediately question whether it is Ford or his protagonist who does not utter the ex-wife's name. Readers familiar with earlier postmodernist fiction will recall this passage from John Barth's 1969 story "Lost in the Funhouse":

En route to Ocean City [Ambrose] sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G ____, age fourteen, a pretty an [*sic*] exquisite young lady, who lived not far from them on B __ Street in the town of D __, Maryland. Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names

in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interesting, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means. (72-73)

Ford is likely inviting his readers to recall Barth's parody of nineteenth-century novelistic tradition and engage his own text with a consciousness of similar statements and styles of the past. From the start, Ford initiates a pattern of recalling and re-contextualizing.

However, Ford's *unexplained* "X" is significantly different from Barth's G___, B___, and D___ because of its unexplained state. Consequently, while the textual presentation is identical, and equally "artificial," the meaning is not; Barth's metafictional commentary secures the boundaries of meaning, while Ford's "X" is open to multiple interpretations.

Readers will consequently wonder: if Frank is narrating his own story, as he most obviously is, then what does he *say* in place of his ex-wife's name? It does not make sense for him to simply say "X"; he would have to use a phrase, like "whom I'll call 'X'," in order for the substitution to be clear. As well, in speech, "X" sounds like "ex" (as in the conventionally shortened version of "ex-spouse"), in which case Frank should have said "my" ex/X. He does not say either of those things, and readers must complete the circuit of meaning when Frank says, "I am no longer married to X" (3), in order to understand that by "X" he means his ex-wife. On the other hand, any number of thematic reasons can justify why Frank does not voice his ex-wife's name: perhaps Frank can not bring himself to voice a name so intimately linked with his grief; perhaps he is symbolically crossing out that part of his life; perhaps in this story *of* and *about* Frank Bascombe, names of significant others are made insignificant in order to sharpen the self-centred focus of the story; perhaps "X" represents an attempt by Frank to protect the

both onto the text and into the text. From the very start of the narrative, readers are made aware that they are both reading and listening, that they are receiving this narrative on two levels: the scripted level and the verbal level. A consequence of this experience is that from early on in the narrative, readers can see the connection (and the difference) between what is happening in the fiction—what Frank is saying—and what is happening with the language and structures used to design that fiction—what Ford is doing. The initial questioning of “X”—why Frank, the fictional character, does not, for some thematically significant reason, utter his ex-wife’s proper name—is ultimately flawed, for in *The Sportswriter* there is a narrator who is conscious of *forms* of language. Ford presents a narrator with a writer’s consciousness, essentially telling his readers to expect certain incongruities between this text and conventional texts. Directing and redirecting his readers’ gaze, Ford insists ontological boundaries be recognized, and then trespassed. He facilitates the vision of language, which is conventionally transparent, as duplicit, as having the power to both delude and disillusion. All of this questioning and directing moves readers to examine multiple layers of meaning, which is an effective way to resist the fixed certainties of modernist fiction and a subtler way to explore multiplicity than was done in early postmodernist fiction.

Language’s power to both delude and disillusion is supported by Ford in a number of ways. On several occasions throughout the narrative, he leads readers to consider the text in terms of how words would sound if spoken aloud. For instance, Frank and his son, Paul, share a common sense of humour in language jokes. Punch lines like “Paddy O’Furniture” and “Rain Czech” (111), or even Ralph Bascombe’s childish

pronunciation of “Cape Cod” as “Cape God” (9), literally make readers look twice at the words on the page. With such jokes, the written words are nonsense, whereas the spoken words achieve clarity and humour. “Paddy O’Furniture” and “Rain Czech” are auditory jokes, so readers are forced to sound out the words in order to “get” the joke. Similarly, Frank’s observation of his girlfriend Vicki’s expression “Sailor-vee” (373), by which she presumably means “C’est la vie,” and his attention to fellow divorcee Walter Lockett’s pronunciation of “Ohio” as if it began and ended with a “U” (84), both require reading with an ear for language. As Ford draws on the aural dimension of language in the text, he makes readers aware of the narrative’s dual qualities as both scripted and spoken.

In many respects, Frank himself is exemplary of the unique relationship Ford creates between the scripted text and its aural context. The word “frank” carries the connotations of forthrightness and honesty, and while speaking the name aloud does not create verbal double meaning, there is an aural aspect to “frank.” For instance, there is a difference between *being* Frank (the noun) and *sounding* frank (the adjective/adverb). This aspect of voice, of how one sounds, is brought to the fore when Frank and his ex-wife meet at the grave of their son. Before he speaks to his ex-wife, Frank wonders what his voice will sound like:

Will it be a convincing, truth-telling voice? Or a pseudo-sincere, phony, ex-husband one that will stir up trouble? I have a voice that is really mine, a frank, vaguely rural voice more or less like a used car salesman: a no-frills voice that hopes to uncover simple truth by a straight-on application of the facts. I used to practice it when I was in college. (11)

It is tempting to dwell on the irony of a first-person narrator named Frank, talking about the frankness of his voice, all the while representing an author’s attempt to be frank with

readers. The levels of frankness in this passage actually undermine any conventional notion of being “straight-on.” However, that irony is superficial, and distracting, since the urgent question here is why Ford would present a writerly character named Frank who is so conscious of language and voice. As Frank describes his ex-wife’s arrival, his consciousness of her language and voice is detailed:

“It’s chilly, still,” she says, in a small, firm voice when she is close enough to be heard, her hands stuffed down deep inside her raincoat. It is a voice I love. In many ways it was her voice I loved first, the sharpened midwestern vowels, the succinct glaciated syntax: Binton Herbor, himburg, Gren Repids. It is a voice that knows the minimum of what will suffice, and banks on it. In general I have always liked hearing women talk more than men. (11)

Frank’s thoughts reveal he is aware of the significance of how he sounds and whether or not his voice will betray his intentions. His thoughts also reveal how carefully he listens for the tone, rhythm, pitch, and accentuation which influence spoken language’s context. Because Frank, the character-narrator, is conscious of the subtleties of voice, and because readers are privy to Frank’s awareness, Ford destroys the transparency of “voice” (or sound). Frank’s experiences as a writer enable the presentation of issues relevant to fiction writing, and in a way encourage readers to be conscious of several things at once: Frank is an ex-writer; he is a fictional figure; he is Ford’s creation. Ford is designing a message of which all these movements in reading are a part.

One implication of Frank’s consciousness is that one person can have multiple voices—a public voice, an intimate voice, perhaps a voice for any occasion. Does Frank not say of his ex-wife’s voice “It is a voice I love”? He implies what he has heard is *one* of a number of her voices, or one of a number of voices he loves—hers, his children’s, others’. Here, Ford subtly broaches the topic of multiple voices by showing how

listening, Frank's listening as well as the readers' listening, is part of perceiving meaning. Ford reiterates the necessity of readers receiving the story on both a scripted and spoken level by again making them aware of both the scripted dimension of the text and its verbal context. Here, Frank is involved in directing the readers' focus because he focuses on the particular sounds of language. Because he participates in directing the readers' focus, Frank becomes aligned with Ford, or with "writer," and multiple voicing is then expressed on another level: Frank is viewed as a voice of Ford—not the *only* voice of Ford, but one of his voices. Consequently, ontological boundaries between writer and character are blurred from time to time, but that blurring ultimately signifies a need to suspend conventional perception, resist confusing character with writer, and resist perceiving character as writer. In all, readers must accept the voice as multiple. Acceptance of multiple voices is another form of acceptance of the scripted and spoken levels of the text.

The blurring of the boundary between Frank Bascombe and Richard Ford establishes an ironic connection between the fictional world and readers' worlds. As many critics have observed, Ford bestows upon his protagonist too many details of his own personal history for Frank's resemblance to his creator to be purely coincidental. Autobiographical detailing can be viewed as yet another way Ford exhibits the "suspensive irony" Alan Wilde uses to define postmodernism (10-13), for the insinuation of writer into character is one way the writer is shown to be involved *in* as opposed to *with* fictional worlds. As well, while Ford's likeness is detectable in Frank, his complete

and total presence is not, which further implies Ford's playful gesture of asking his readers to see certain commonalities, but to see discrepancies also.

Kay Bonetti, in an interview with Ford, succeeds in sketching the key differences between Ford and his protagonist: Ford is writing; Frank has stopped writing; Ford is married; Frank is divorced; Ford is childless; Frank has three children (82). In fact, critics often point out the undeniable connection between writer and character, but just as quickly assure their readers that they themselves are not so foolish as to simply take one for the other. Conventions of reading fiction make it taboo to admit a character can be identified with his author. Rather than sidestepping the elementary interpretive pitfall of completely identifying character with author, and engaging in meaningful examination of why such a dimension is incorporated into Ford's novels, critics of Ford's novels tend to ignore that component altogether. For instance, Edward Dupuy writes in the *Southern Literary Journal* that some of Frank's relenting "seems to be related to Ford's own views," but he quickly follows: "I do not wish to suggest here that Frank is a simple organ, a convenient mouthpiece, for Ford's own literary theory, that Frank is really a veiled Ford" and he cites the differences Ford himself offered in his interview with Kay Bonetti as proof the distinction between the two (97). Dupuy stops short of fully examining the relevance of Ford's presence in his narrator, though he does say that, "without being strictly autobiographical, both Frank and the novel itself exhibit much of Ford's own experience as a writer and a reader" (97). Essentially, as is apparent when the text is closely examined, Ford puts certain details "out there" (or "in there") in his fiction

to be taken as they will—perhaps as a lesson of resistance for his readers as much as a means of manipulating the distance between explicit subject and implied subject.

Ford experiments with language as a trigger to allude to other cultural and/or literary texts and contexts. His experimentation produces a subtle summoning of other texts familiar to his readers, so subtle that the language that emerges from the narrative's fictional context weaves easily into a context defined by, and limited only by, the readers' own consciousness. Quentin Compson's "familial ties" to Frank Bascombe (Hobson 50) is one such way Ford summons a link between his present text and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Associating Frank with Quentin also alludes to Faulkner as Ford's literary ancestor—an influential father figure, or a compatible cousin. Fred Hobson develops a thesis regarding Ford as an uncommon southern writer (41), recognizing that although Ford does not write within Faulkner's tradition, he does write out of that tradition. Hobson's assessment is convincing. Ford does not emulate Faulkner's style as it was in *The Sound and the Fury*. Nonetheless, Ford shows how a single centre of consciousness contains a complicated construction with multiple levels of consciousness.

Certain levels of Frank's consciousness are reminiscent of Faulkner's four voices in *The Sound and the Fury*. Ford's ear for sounds, vocal pitch, and dialect is bestowed upon the consciousness of his protagonist. He also uses monologue to illustrate the way a character's mind works and to illustrate that character's understanding of language. As well, in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* the formal presentation of language and script correlate with various tones of voice or levels of consciousness. Ford, like

Faulkner, gestures toward orality. Noel Polk's observation about Faulkner could very well extend to Ford:

Faulkner turns the clumsy mechanics of the representation of . . . language on paper, what Stephen Ross calls "the visual discourse of our reading," into a highly expressive part of the language itself. At one very simple level, reading, especially the reading of dialogue, involves translating one sense into another: the author translates the aural into the visual, readers translate the visual back into the aural—or should, if they want to understand *The Sound and the Fury*. (143)

Ford's visual presentation of language is clearly inspired by Faulkner.

The Sportswriter contains a number of lessons for reading. In Chapters 12 and 13 Ford conspicuously incorporates different forms of discourse into the narrative to engage readers in the resistance of singular, derivative meaning. The first form is a representation—a transcription—of a telephone answering machine recording (316). The transcribed messages represent what Frank hears, as opposed to what he says or sees. The answering machine messages are visibly differentiated from the rest of the narrative in a number of ways; for instance, a new set of margins arranges the messages almost as if they were verse passages. The visibly brief, self-contained units for each message allude to their context of being spoken in a briefer, more compact form than conventional dialogue. As well, no quotation marks are used to signal the spoken language, even though there are three different speakers delivering three different messages. Finally, the typographic function of italics denotes different tones within the messages; for instance the "*beep*" and "*click*" that begin and end each message respectively are italicized, indicating their sound to be different from the sound of the spoken language of the message. However, the telephone answering machine messages, while quite obviously representative of a form-within-a-form, or even as one of Bakhtin's everyday genres

(*bytovoj žanr*) (288, 428), also subtly assert the necessity of combining reading and listening, the necessity for readers to again accept the ironic condition of the text. The assertion is subtle because it is detected here in the two different functions assigned to the italics font. In Walter Lockett's message, the italics font serves a purpose other than differentiating auditory tone:

Beep. Frank, this is Walter Lockett, Jr., speaking. It's twelve o'clock sharp here, Frank. I was just throwing away some old *Newsweeks*, and I found this photograph of that DC-10 that went down a year or so ago out in Chicago. O'Hare. You might remember that. Frank, you can see all those people's heads in the windows looking out. It's really something. And I just can't help wondering what they must've been thinking about, since they *are* riding a bomb. A big, silver bomb. That's about all I had in mind now. Uhhmm. So long. *Click.* (316-17)

Close reading leads readers to question why the typographic function which differentiates the beeps and clicks is identical to the typographic function which differentiates "*Newsweeks*" and "*are*" from the rest of Walter's message. "*Newsweeks*" and "*are*" do not share the same auditory tone as a beep or a click, and in fact "*Newsweeks*" and "*are*" do not share the same intonation with each other. "*Are*" is clearly supposed to carry a verbal emphasis, while "*Newsweeks*" evidences a rule which governs scripted language—italics indicates titles of magazines. To be absolutely technical, the title of that particular

publication is *Newsweek*, thus making its plural *Newsweeks* (without the italicized “s”), so not only is the word representative of conventionally scripted language, it is also erroneously displayed—and both the signification of a magazine title and its erroneous presentation draw readers’ eyes to the word as scripted language. Regardless, if this is a recording of Walter’s verbal message, then conventions of scripted language need not be applied at all. It is only in the transcription, in the scripted form of the narrative, that conventions of textual presentation need to be followed. Ultimately, Ford effectively directs and redirects reader focus onto the narrative as both scripted and spoken, thus advancing his theme of multiplicity through these dual dimensions of language.

The second conspicuously projected form is a letter (349-50)—not the letter “X,” but a written, typed, or printed document—a variation on the epistolary technique and form customary in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. As Frank reads Walter Lockett’s letter for the first time, readers virtually share Frank’s vision, for readers read Walter’s composition along with and at the same time as Frank. The effect is a trespassing of the boundary between Frank’s reality and the readers’ reality. Readers and Frank are simultaneously engaged in an examination of a document. Ford draws readers into Frank’s world and positions his readers to facilitate a “shared” vision with his protagonist. For instance, Ford visibly contrasts the letter from the other language of the narrative by again employing the italics font. Differentiating the letter from the other text of the narrative is important for two reasons: firstly, it makes visible recognition of typographic contrast a requirement for interpreting the boundaries of the “text-within-the-text;” and secondly, it makes the letter appear to be separate from the other narrative text,

thereby making it appear to be an independent form. Readers, in much the same way as Frank, look upon this letter as a tangible, independent form—Frank holds the letter, and readers see the letter—so Ford successfully creates a shared vision. Frank’s subsequent discussion of Walter’s letter is a further alignment of Frank with a reader position, for his act of discussing the document draws on the similarities between Frank and readers of the novel as “viewers,” as participants in the same act. However, Frank’s series of questions regarding Walter’s letter is a quick reminder that the narrative being *read* is also a narrative being *told*:

All best? Talk about losing your authority! All best, then go boom-blow-your-brains-out?...Whose life ever has permanent mystery built into it anyway?...What else is the ordinary world good for except to supply reasons not to check out early?...And a daughter? (350-51)

Frank’s interests guide the direction of this story. What Frank sees in Walter’s letter—such as how the letter ends, how Walter desired “permanent mystery,” or how Walter may have a daughter—is not necessarily the same thing readers see as being important. For instance, the fact that Walter had considered writing a novel, but quit because he could not think of “[his] own life’s themes” (349), might be significant for readers of the novel. Regardless of what readers see as being important, the narrative continues to be controlled and directed by the interests of a figure inside the fictional reality. The boundary between the fiction’s and readers’ realities is temporarily minimized by the shared experience of reading a letter, but the subsequent monologue reconstructs that boundary by the way it reiterates Frank’s interpretative perspective. Ironically, the letter, which at first produced a shared vision between readers and the protagonist, ultimately produces an effect of accentuating the distance between readers and the protagonist, for

readers now view the letter as a part of the fiction, as part of the construction of fictional discourse.

Ford's use of a text-within-the-text is particularly inventive here, for it does not simply layer the levels of the narrative; it provokes ontological questions regarding Walter's letter: What is the mode of existence of Walter's letter? It is puzzling for readers because while the letter is clearly a part of the fiction, it is temporarily part of both a fictitious reality and their reality. Passage from the fictional reality to the readers' reality is smooth because of the temporary alliance of readers with Frank. Just as Frank's prior alliance with Ford, with "writer," signified a need to suspend conventional perception, his alliance here with readers signifies a similar need. Here, Frank has the consciousness of a reader, but that does not strictly define his role in the narrative—and Frank's quick return to being the object of focus, his quick return to the realm of fictional reality, is a reminder of the need for acceptance of the ironic condition of the text, the need for perceiving multiplicity rather than singularity.

Ford makes it necessary to accept the ironic condition of the text by making conspicuous gestures like using a letter "X" to take the place of a person's proper name, and using texts-within-the-text. However, one of the more subtle yet substantial ways Ford manipulates reader focus throughout the novel is by constantly delaying the action of the plot. "Real-time" is replaced by what seems like a frame-by-frame look at Frank's drifting thoughts, where there is no direct correlation between the length of the narrative and the passing of time. By the end of the novel, after reading over 370 pages, readers realize the narrative captures the events of just one weekend. However, the beginning of

the narrative leads one to believe the story will be quick paced, since a series of short paragraphs refer to what Frank has been doing for the past fourteen years (3). Noticeably, nearly every paragraph begins with some reference to time: “For the past fourteen years...”; “I wrote half of a novel soon after we moved here...”; “Twelve years ago...”; “And since then...”; “My life over these twelve years...” (3). Five of the first seven paragraphs begin with some reference to time, time passing, time past. The constant presence of a time factor creates the impression of paced plot action. However, this illusion is soon broken when Frank begins to tell the events of his present day. Frank starts by saying, “I have climbed over the metal fence to the cemetery behind my house. It is five o’clock on Good Friday morning” (4), and on into a description of the cemetery, an approaching police car, the appearance of a deer, and a description of the neighbours:

My next-door neighbors, the Deffeyes, are playing tennis, calling their scores in hushed-polite early-morning voices. “Sorry.” “Thanks.” “Forty-love.” Pock. Pock. Pock. “*Ad* to you, dear.” “Yes, thank you.” “Yours.” Pock, Pock. I hear their harsh, thrashing nose breaths, their feet scraping. They are into their eighties and no longer need sleep, and so are up at all hours. They have installed glowless bariumsulphur lights that don’t shine in my yard and keep me awake. And we have stayed good neighbors if not close friends. I have nothing much in common with them now, and am invited to few of their or anyone else’s cocktail parties. People in town are still friendly in a distant way, and I consider them fine people, conservative, decent. (5)

While this particular passage has little to do with the novel’s “plot,” it does impress upon readers Frank’s isolation, his divorce, not only from “X,” but from other social bodies as well. This narrative passage becomes a passage of another sort, for it becomes a pathway into Frank’s subconscious, and it is an excellent model of Ford’s “diversionary” tactic. Frank begins by describing the present tense—the conversation, even the sounds, “pock,” “pock,” he hears from the other yard—but then gradually moves away from his

immediate surroundings and into some other idea that is only logically connected to his original comment by a string of associations. In short, the paragraph begins with a reference to immediate, identifiable, next-door neighbors, but it ends with a reference to “people in town”—a virtual zooming out of the perspective lens.

The image of Frank spying on his neighbours through a fence is reminiscent of one of the most famous episodes in American fiction:

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.

“Here, Caddie.” He hit. They went away across the pasture. I held to the fence and watched them going away. (1)

Set on April 7th, 1928, Benjy’s narrative begins William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Ford’s allusion to Faulkner provides yet another “diversion” for Ford’s readers.

Associating Frank spying the tennis match with Benjy spying the golf game leads readers to examine more completely the parallels and intersections of the two novels. Frank and Benjy are peripherally positioned, and though they are fundamentally different characters—Frank is quite lucid and Benjy is an idiot—they share the shadow of “outcast.” Readers make the connection, and the distinction, between the two, and Ford’s gesture toward Faulkner’s novel achieves its intended purpose; it provokes the making of connections between past and present texts, thus indirectly and subtly establishing historical and literary ties to ideas and texts outside the boundaries of Ford’s own novel. Essentially, Ford achieves a “delay” of another sort; the plot action is delayed by the

readers' own search and recovery of information—their participation in the novel's intertextuality.

As Frank's narrative moves away from the immediate action in the plot, there is an impression of the plot action being delayed by a side story. Frank touches on his plans for the day, his intentions to take his girlfriend along on his weekend work trip to Detroit, his thoughts on myths associated with leaving a marriage, his perspective on what it is like to be a sportswriter, and, lastly, his opinion on choices:

A woman I met at the college where I briefly taught, once told me I had too many choices, that I was not driven by dire necessity. But that is just an illusion and her mistake. Choices are what we all need. And when I walk out into the bricky warp of these American cities, that is exactly what I feel. Choices aplenty. Things I don't know anything about but might like are here, possibly waiting for me. Even if they aren't. The exhilaration of a new arrival. Good light in a restaurant that especially pleases you. A cab driver with an interesting life history to tell you. The casual, lilting voice of a woman you don't know, but that you are allowed to listen to in a bar you've never been in, at a time when you would otherwise have been alone. These things are waiting for you. And what could be better? More mysterious? More worth anticipating? Nothing. Not a thing. (7-8)

The section that began with Frank hopping the fence to the cemetery eventually ends with Frank's philosophizing on taking joy in everyday surroundings. The immediate action of the plot has been delayed by a glimpse into the narrator's rambling thoughts. A space on the page indicates the ending of that segment and the beginning of the next, which reads:

The barium-sulphur lights die out over the Deffeyes' tennis court. Delia Deffeyes' patient and troubleless voice, still hushed, begins assuring her husband Caspar that he played well, while they walk toward their dark house in their pressed whites. (8)

The return to the Deffeyes reminds readers of where Frank had departed into some other freely associated thought—a return that makes obvious the delay in physical action in the narrative. Apparently, and despite the eight paragraphs separating the first mentioning of

the Deffeyes and their subsequent return to Frank's consciousness, it is still five o'clock on Good Friday morning.

Ford repeatedly uses delay tactics throughout the novel, and the frequency of the delays in plot action makes Frank's interior monologue, his ever-rambling narrative of thoughts and memories, the substitute or alternative for conventional action. While Frank's thoughts run seamlessly together, readers' experiences of stops and starts in plot action encourage the questioning of where the story is going and how the story is told. Ford's narrative style is reminiscent of the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique, but Ford's narrator is not wholly submerged into a *single* stream of consciousness. If Frank is able to relay lengthy, tangential stories, yet maintain some semblance of real-time, then his narrative must indeed take a peculiar form, for how can he do both? Ford superimposes real-time onto his protagonist's interior monologue, which is very different, for example, from Joyce's modernist interiority. Readers are not constantly with Frank, as they are, for example, with Stephen Daedalus or Leopold Bloom, despite being privy to his thoughts and actions for a lengthy narrative that spans a weekend. For instance, Frank sleeps, and he surely must have used a bathroom over the course of three days, but readers do not accompany him on these daily routines—or not to the same extent as with his other actions, like when he is talking on the telephone or driving. We know Frank sleeps, but it is mostly through insinuation we know this. One section in Chapter 3 ends with Frank's statement, "Give us all a good night's sleep until it's over" (52), and the next section begins with "Hoving Road this morning is as sun-dappled and vernal as any privet lane in England" (52). Apparently, between these two sections, Frank has slept,

and a night has passed. Likewise, at the hotel in Detroit with girlfriend Vicki, Frank lets the sounds from the television show Vicki is watching, and the sounds from the streets outside, lull him to sleep:

I turn and close my eyes and try to sleep as the applause goes on, and outside in the cold Detroit streets more sirens follow the first one into the night. And for a moment I find it is really quite easy and agreeable not to know what's next, as if sirens were going out into this night for no one but me. (141)

Again, the beginning of the next section of the narrative implicates a night has passed and Frank has slept: “Snow. By the time I leave my bed, a blanket of the gently falling white stuff has covered the concrete river banks” (142). Not only does Frank’s narrative delay real-time, and virtually pause plot action for the purpose of adding additional pieces of narrative, it also skips chunks of real-time to omit certain episodes of his life. The delaying of physical action in the plot is a subtle way of manipulating reader focus and breaking fictional illusions, and the omission of certain daily routines reminds readers they are not privy to all of Frank’s thoughts and actions—unlike, for example, their seemingly being privy to Benjy and Quentin Compson’s every thought and action in *The Sound and the Fury*. Consequently, Ford’s readers expect a deviation from modernist narrative procedures. Such narrative strategies ultimately cause the reader to question what this narrative is *really* about.

Ford directs and re-directs readers’ focus so that the narrative and the language become opaque. By making the narrative and the language opaque, Ford engages readers on a visual level. In an interview with Huey Guagliardo, Ford explains how he deliberately tries to engage readers by attempting to “reinvent language”: “[I try] to write sentences the reader does not see through like a clear pane of glass. [I try] to imagine

language as a window whose pane and surfaces you luxuriate in, and, in the process, see beyond” (614). This metaphor is a common one to postmodernist fiction, and Ford alludes to its frequent revival in postmodern discourse when he tells how his attempt to reinvent language is somewhat conditioned by having “read all those wonderful people we now think of as postmodernists” (614). Ford’s shifty narrator, his un-naming of Frank’s ex-wife, his attention to verbal language, his use of texts-within-a-text, and his delaying of physical plot action do indeed make his language opaque. By making language and linguistic structures visible, Ford is not asking readers to ignore the boundaries of conventional fiction, but asking them to see the boundaries as part of the fiction. Here Ford displays a clear break from modernist fiction, in which, as in the examples of Joyce and Faulkner, readers see narrative disarray, fracture, and stream of consciousness, but only as *ways* of narrating and never as a subject of the fiction itself. Ford’s readers examine both the structures and the contents of the fiction in order to see what the narrative is really about. In this case, the importance of examining fiction beyond its narrative subjects, at its “artificial” level, is something that is made clear in the novel’s thematic lines. Ford’s version of postmodernism is one that admits to a dimension of fiction that modernism denied—its artificiality—and at the same time relates fiction, by means of realism, to the social world—something early postmodernism denied. Ford merges modernist and early postmodernist elements into a more refined postmodernist fiction that is more than an examination of self, but less than an illusion of perfectly capturing “the reality of experience” and “uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce 276).

Throughout the narrative, Frank is eager to offer his personal opinions on literature—particularly with respect to how “real” literary writing was not a suitable career for him. Sportswriting, what one would assume to be the subject of the narrative, is actually a springboard for Frank’s thoughts on literary writing. Frank talks about sportswriting as an alternative to literary writing by reflecting upon what sportswriting can offer that literary writing can not, including teaching “that there are no transcendent themes in life” (16), that sportswriting is not “complicated and enigmatic” (42), and that with sportswriting it is not necessary to “know with certainty what to say about the large world” (51). Sports, as a subject, Frank claims, has the “effect of bringing us all together on a good level...[unlike] some pretentious book that only one person’s read” (90). The premise for Frank’s comparison of literary writing and sportswriting is set early in the novel when Frank voices the question: “Why, you might ask, would a man give up a promising literary career...to become a sportswriter?” (4); it is with this question that Frank makes an explicit connection between literary writing and sportswriting, yet the connection is clearly one based on the differences between the two. Frank’s answer implies his narrative will reveal why and how sportswriting is more appealing to him than literary writing:

For now let me say only this: if sportswriting teaches you anything, and there is much truth to it as well as plenty of lies, it is that for your life to be worth anything you must sooner or later face the possibility of terrible, searing regret. Though you must also manage to avoid it or your life will be ruined.

I believe I have done these two things. Faced down regret. Avoided ruin. And I am still here to tell about it. (4)

Frank equates “terrible, searing regret” with “ruin,” and claims to have faced that regret and moved beyond it, or at the very least, lived beyond it. Quite plainly, Frank is

delivering the message here that life goes on after trauma, or as Ford says in his interview with Majeski, “after the dramatic moment has passed.” Frank’s narrative is definitely motivated by a need to see the significance of certain events, but also by a need to see beyond the events themselves to the life that will inevitably follow. Ford constantly revisits this theme of individual experiences, regardless of their magnificence or trauma, as parts of the accumulative whole of existence.

In his testimony of facing regret and avoiding ruin, Frank uses the phrase “for now”—a distinctive term of impermanence—to confirm his intention of revealing more about regret and ruin. What he is “still here to tell about”—his regret and avoidance of ruin—is tied up in his discussion of the merits of sportswriting, which is primarily a discussion of how literary writing, by comparison, failed to teach him about living a worthwhile life. Frank’s perception of literary writers and their relationship to their work illuminates, at least in part, how his disillusionment with literary writing came about.

To begin with, Frank’s perception of the “real writer” is itself a fabrication; it is a conglomerate of literary jargon and catch phrases that give the impression writers live an extraordinary existence. Frank describes the real writer as being “serious” (42), as having feelings of “existential dread” (62), as being more attentive than the average person (76), and as having the ability to see life on a “grand scale” (279). One of the extraordinary talents Frank perceives of these real writers is “the oneness of the writer’s vision” (64). “Oneness” is his way of articulating how real writers appear to be “completely reliable and resistant to nuance and doubt” (64). He claims the best example of this oneness is

found in the Joycean (modernist) epiphany, a fictional device he associates with the harshest of literature's lies. He explains it is false to suggest that

after significant or disappointing divulgements, at arrivals or departures of obvious importance, when touchdowns are scored, knock-outs recorded, loved ones buried, orgasms notched, that at such times we are any of us altogether *in* an emotion, that we are within ourselves and not able to detect other emotions we might also be feeling, or be about to feel, or prefer to feel. If it's literature's job to tell the truth about these moments, it usually fails, in my opinion, and it's the writer's fault for falling into such conventions. (I tried to explain all of this to my students at Berkshire College, using Joyce's epiphanies as a good example of falsehood....) (119)

Frank's consciousness of a "post-epiphany" reality makes his view of life and experience distinctly postmodern, and it also reiterates Ford's historicizing of postmodernity as a period *after* Joyce. Frank sees his lived experiences are not sanctioned by literature, for he has not experienced such certainty at important points of juncture in his life. For Frank, there is a marked delineation between fiction and lived life, with lived life being characterized by awareness of things beyond the immediate moment. In real lived experience, Frank says this is what really happens: "At least a hundred things at once, all competing to take the moment and make it their own, reduce undramatic life to a gritty, knowable kernel" (119). Frank alludes to the multi-dimensions of lived reality—people can think and feel more than one thing at a time, but characters in a work of fiction—or at least in the modernist fiction he had been reading—are usually not presented that way.

Frank's disillusionment with "real" writing shows the absurdity of expecting fiction to provide a one-to-one relation to life. Nowhere is this more apparent than when Frank describes what happened the night his home was burglarized, the night his marriage ended:

X found the letters in the drawer of my office desk while looking for a sock full of silver dollars my mother had left me, and sat on the floor and read them, then handed them to me when I came in with a list of missing cameras, radios and fishing equipment. She asked me if I had anything to say, and when I didn't, she went into the bedroom and began tearing apart her hope chest with a claw hammer and a crowbar. She tore it to bits, then took it to the fireplace and burned it while I stood outside in the yard mooning at Cassiopeia and Gemini and feeling invulnerable....It might seem that I was "within myself" then. But in fact I was lightyears away from everything.

In a little while X came outside, with all the lights in the house left shining and her hope chest going up the chimney in smoke....It reminded me of the smoke that announced a new Pope—a *new Pope!*—if that's believable now, under those circumstances. And in four months I was divorced. (15-16)

During one of the most dramatic moments of his life, Frank is thinking about something far removed from the immediate event. The "oneness of the writer's vision" is certainly not commensurate with his perception. Readers can see the dimensions of Frank's dilemma: fiction promises unequivocal clarity and certainty through its conventions, but experience is clouded by a consciousness of many things; any given moment can be filled with competing meanings brought on by memories of the past and speculations for the future.

Frank also asserts that some moments in his contemporary experience, even moments that are "momentous," need not be defined by any particularly significant thoughts. When Frank tells about the death of his son, he recalls his mind "ceasing":

And for a sudden moment my mind simply ceases—which isn't even so unusual, and there are times when nothing else will help. Sitting next to Ralph's bed at the instant that the nurse came in and said, "I'm sorry, Ralph has expired" (he was actually cold as an oyster when I touched his small clenched fist, and had been dead probably for an hour), at that moment when I knew he was dead, I remember my mind stopping. No other thought occurred to me immediately. No association or memory latched on to the event, or to the next one, for that matter, whatever it might've been. (259)

Frank describes his “anti-literary” lived experience, yet at the same time his description is quite literary. For instance, Frank uses a narrative strategy of subtle repetition when he says “for a sudden moment,” “at the instance the nurse came in,” and “at that moment”—three references to “the moment” in two sentences. The story-like quality of this passage is achieved by Frank’s repetition. The passage continues:

I don’t remember. No lines of poetry. No epiphanies. The room became like a picture of a room, though more greenish and murky for that time of the morning, and then it sank away and became tiny—as though I was having a look at it through the wrong end of a telescope. (259)

In this case, Frank does not recall a moment filled with competing meanings; he recalls not thinking, yet he now describes that experience by using similes. The purpose of Frank using figurative language now, in re-telling the event, is to make clear for the reader, for his listener, what he was (or was not) feeling at the moment of his son’s death. However, the literariness of this description produces a narrative expression after the event, and does not apply to the lived experience of the event itself. Ford distinguishes himself from earlier novelists by making this “literary” dimension an obvious narratological instrument.

Ford also shows how it is absurd to expect fiction to provide a one-to-one relationship to life through the irony of Frank’s perception of literature always being *about something*. For instance, Frank sees “real life” as being significantly different from what is depicted in literature because, as he notes, literature is always about someone thinking about something. In its constant depiction of someone’s thoughts, Frank sees another way literature misrepresents life:

I do not think, in any event, it's a good idea to want to know what people are thinking (that would disqualify you as a writer right there, since what else is literature but somebody telling us what somebody else is thinking). For my money there are at least a hundred good reasons not to want to know such things. People never tell the truth anyway. And most people's minds, like mine, never contain much worth reporting, in which case they just make something up that's patently ridiculous instead of saying the truth—namely, I was thinking nothing. (76)

Frank's description of literature as "somebody telling us what somebody else is thinking" is particularly apt for *The Sportswriter*, since the novel's plot is nearly entirely composed of Ford telling his readers Frank's thoughts. However, when Frank refers to "thinking about nothing," implying that his mind is not always deliberately engaged in a concentrated process, readers still see a continuous, unbroken narrative. For readers, there is never really *nothing* to read; Frank may *say* he is thinking nothing, but readers are still reading something—namely the very passage in which Frank makes that declaration. Readers must accept the ironic form of this passage as both scripted and spoken in order to appreciate fully what Frank is saying. Although Frank's perception is shown, once again, to not be commensurate with the "oneness of the writer's vision," readers must recognize and understand the "oneness" of the scripted narrative. Ford's scripted narrative retains oneness by being selective in what it reports, and by its continuity. As Frank admits, "Life is not always ascendant" (311), although in fiction it would appear so.

Frank's forthright discussion on the lies of literature, especially the falsehood of epiphany, while showing that Frank feels betrayed, allows readers to re-evaluate Frank's narrative and see that there is indeed an epiphany, only it is different from the modernist type Frank describes. Frank's association of the smoke from the burning hope chest with

the smoke that heralds a new pope seems absurd given the context, but, at the time, the “context” was unformed; comparatively, at the news of his son’s death, Frank registers no particular thoughts, but looking back he can describe the moment in detailed terms of similes. Essentially, Ford’s emphasis is not on the character but on perceiving the significance of an event—for, as Frank looks back, he views those moments as significant, but his perceptions come after the fact. Frank’s epiphany comes in the retelling of the events that marked important changes in his life. This postmodernist epiphany involves perceiving not only the significance of an event but also the contextual limitations of that significance. The observation of life not living up to its literary representations is made by Frank as he looks back upon his past, suggesting he was unable to perceive an epiphany while “in the moment.” The literature of the modernists that Frank refers to through Joyce promised him the perception of profound enlightenment during momentous occasions. However, the postmodernist epiphany does not purport to be a part of lived reality; it is a part of narrative reality. Again, the structures of narration are brought to the forefront and readers see the narrative as fiction, as coordinated structures, as construction, and at the same time see fiction’s relation to lived experience. Ford’s postmodernist epiphany in *The Sportswriter* distinguishes itself from modernist epiphany and yet rejects the early postmodernist negation of epiphany. Ford manages to retain the element of “profound insight,” but shows it to be “profound insight” in retrospect.

When Frank fails to experience moments of enlightenment, he becomes disheartened with literary writing, and begins to see it as a forum for lies and deception.

His comments regarding teachers at Berkshire College are clear evidence of his hostility:

[T]he place was all anti-mystery types right to the core—men and women both—all expert in the arts of explaining, explicating and dissecting, and by these means promoting permanence. For me that made for the worst kind of despair, and finally I couldn't stand their grinning, hopeful teacher faces. Teachers, let me tell you, are born deceivers of the lowest sort, since what they want from life is impossible—time-freed, existential youth forever. It commits them to terrible deceptions and departures from the truth. And literature, being lasting, is their ticket. (222)

The “incumbent themes” these teachers taught, those of “eternal returns, the domination of man by the machine, the continuing saga of choosing middling life over zesty death” (223), do not reflect Frank’s life’s themes. His own lived life teaches him that not everything can be explained, and life does not start, stop, or pause as literature portrays it (223). Essentially, Frank sums up his own dissatisfaction with literary writing by saying, “The world is a more engaging and less dramatic place than writers ever give it credit for being” (261), and it is because of this failure to “engage” readers on a level besides the dramatic that Frank ultimately turns away from literary writing. *The Sportswriter*, then, can be read as a critique of fiction that resists and denies its artificiality. In fact, Frank’s failed novels, *Night Wing* and *Tangier*, are sketched by Ford to accentuate their modernist qualities, and, because of Frank’s inability to respond to the fiction that preceded his own, because of his failure to imagine new ways to present his ideas, they are destined to fail as serious novels. This is precisely what Frank means when he says of himself and fellow writer Bert Brisker, “we suffered a failure of imagination...in the most obvious way. We lost our authority” (48).

Consciousness of the artificiality of fiction was what Frank lacked when he attempted to write his literary novels *Night Wing* and *Tangier*. This lack of awareness is evident in the way Frank thought of both reading and writing. As a reader, Frank did not see in fiction a fair representation of what he knew life to be like; as a writer, Frank struggled to depict his genuine feelings in a fictional format. In 1967, shortly after being discharged from the navy, Frank wrote his first novel, *Night Wing*, whose description paints it to be a collage of clichés, pulp sensationalism, and autobiography:

[My novel] was to be about a bemused young southerner who joins the Navy but gets discharged with a mysterious disease, goes to New Orleans and loses himself into a hazy world of sex and drugs and rumoured gun-running and a futile attempt to reconcile a vertiginous present with the guilty memories of not dying alongside his Navy comrades, all of which is climaxed in a violent tryst with a Methodist minister's wife who seduces him in an abandoned slave-quarters, though other times too, after which his life is shattered and he disappears permanently into the Texas oil fields. It was all told in a series of flashbacks. (36)

Incidentally, Frank is a southerner, and he was discharged from the Navy because of a curious pancreatic syndrome that was misdiagnosed as Hodgkin's disease (35). From this description, it seems that the object of Frank's novel is to generate interest in the circumstances that brought all of these events about. For a writer, he is curiously silent about his novel's structures, saying, almost as an afterthought, his novel would be narrated by way of flashbacks.

The narratological significance of the flashback is that it enables an illusion of explanation, explanation because of the vantage point of knowing outcomes. Certainty, particularly in terms of precisely identifying causes and effects, can be achieved by the flashback, and these illusions would appeal to Frank—only not *as* illusions but as truths. From his vantage point, he can re-write his lived uncertainty and make his perceptions

clearer and more solid than they were in lived experience. Frank failed to imagine a way to deny knowledge “in the moment,” yet deem that moment to be significant; Frank wrote only in terms he was familiar with in his studies—hence his imitation of styles he knew: the sensational and the autobiographical—all proven, and consequently unoriginal, strategies. The certainty afforded by the flashback places Frank’s writing in the modernist category; his “in-the-moment” clarity and perception is reminiscent of the modernist style, but given the fact that Frank was writing in the late 1960s, his modernist style would have long been stale.

Ford uses flashbacks quite often throughout *The Sportswriter* but he does so with an express purpose: to avoid explaining. For instance, Frank flashes back to the night his house was burglarized and his marriage ended, and as he is en route to one place or another he flashes back to tell about the Divorced Men’s Club, visits to his palmist, and stolen visits with his children. In each instance the flashback illustrates uncertainty and contingency. Ford’s unconventional flashback advances his theme of exposing artificiality in fiction and distinguishes his writing from both the modernists and the early postmodernists. Frank’s flashing back operates as a fictional representation of human memory—selective, at times random—which is one way Ford relates his fictional world to an external social world; and Frank’s flashing back never operates as an explanation—which is one way Ford retains the unpredictable, unknowable element of experience unlike the early postmodernists. Ford’s postmodernist flashback does not dissolve into an examination of an arbitrary play of language. Instead, it acts as a more subtle postmodernist practice: it draws on elements from both modernist and early

postmodernist practices, but questions their current viability and shows a need for re-visioning.

By the time Frank started writing *Tangier*, in 1970, his approach to writing changed in minor ways from his first attempt at a novel. He explains that *Tangier* “was about a Marine who had deserted the war and wandered across the edges of continents in search of his sense of history, and was told in the first person and also mostly in flashbacks” (38). In his second novel, the story still takes priority, but Frank also confronts the dilemma of *how* to present his story. His depiction of life is more apathetic in *Tangier*, which even he recognizes is a symptom of his growing frustration with how to write his story in a way that was both true to life and representable as fiction:

What I did, as I began writing *Tangier*, which I hoped would have some autobiographical parts set in military school, was become more and more grave—over my literary voice, my sentences and their construction (they became like some heavy metallic embroidery no one including me would want to read), and my themes, which became darker and darker. My characters generally embodied the attitude that life was going to be a damn nasty and probably a baffling business, but somebody has to go on slogging through it. This, of course, can eventually lead to terrible cynicism, since I knew life wasn’t like that at all—but was a lot more interesting—only I couldn’t write about it that way. (46-47)

Frank’s own observation that he, as a writer, was “stuck in bad stereotypes” (46), is evidence of how his frustration stems from trying to conform to conventions whose designs are suitable only for certain types of ideas. Frank’s knowledge of life is different from what he reads life to be like in fiction, but he is at a loss for how to express that knowledge in a fictional format; his inclination is to imitate rather than generate. Finally, when Frank says he suffered “a failure of imagination” (46), and that he had “lost [his] authority” (46), it is clear he is talking about his inability to reinvent established forms

and structures to suit his material. The premises of Frank's novels are indeed cliché, but Frank suffers under the deeper charge of being formulaic as a novelist. He is unable to make something new and unable to expand upon what has been established to bring his fiction into new imaginative territories.

Frank's failed novels provide the perfect points of contrast for Ford's own innovation. By utilizing elements from both the modernist and early postmodernist tradition, and by making the boundaries of modernist and early postmodernist practice conspicuous, Ford successfully presents something new. In *The Sportswriter* Ford draws attention to the framing of a story, its structures and conventions, and he does so not only by making readers aware the novel is about fiction writing, but by alluding to the time frame of 1960s-1970s literary America. Frank's frustration and subsequent failure as a "real writer" seems precisely linked to the fact that he did not write in the tradition of those postmodernists. Frank's novels do not appear to be postmodernist in emphasis, nor does he refer to those who would be his contemporaries when he talks about great writing. Instead, he fails to express his ideas any other way than cynically. He admits he, unlike the Tolstoy and George Eliots, did not "soar off to become great" (46)—a fact he attributes to not knowing how people felt about things combined with the feeling of having reached the end of certainty. The implicit relationship between lived life and fiction is strong here, and so too is Frank's expression of writing only that which he feels certain about—as if great literature must be based on certainties.

Frank's thoughts on why he failed as a writer in the 1960s and 70s allude to a couple of sentiments marking the critical discourse of early postmodernism. Gerald

Graff's statements in his 1973 article "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough" present what he saw as "two strains of postmodernism"—the optimistic and the pessimistic:

On the one hand, there is a tendency to view the loss of a significant external reality as a form of liberation, a release from a binding tradition, a determinate moral order, and an *a priori* definition of selfhood. On the other hand, the sense of being liberated from ancient obligations can easily turn into a sense of isolation, and betrayal directed at the world's failure to yield an objective teleological order.... What links these two strains of postmodernist art together is their common commitment to an apocalyptic view of the world... But one group sees this situation as a ground for celebration, the other as a ground for pathos. (225-26)

As well, Frank's failed imagination can be considered in light of Saul Bellow's predictions in his 1963 article "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," an influential article of Ford's own time of formal and academic study:

[The] works of the first half of our century nourish the imagination of contemporary writers and supply a tonal background of disillusion or elegy.

There are modern novelists who take all of this for granted as fully proven and implicit in the human condition and who complain steadily as they write, viewing modern life with a bitterness to which they themselves have not established clear title, and it is this unearned bitterness that I speak of. What is truly curious about it is that often the writer automatically scorns contemporary life...[b]ut, seemingly, he does not need to study it. (62)

Frank's decision to quit writing in 1971 indicates a dark future for fiction in the postmodern era. Ford shows that if, like the modernists, writers insist on creating illusions but do not admit to their writing's illusory qualities, readers will see such writing as lies, and stop reading. As well, Ford indicates that while formal innovation is a valuable element to the life of fiction, fiction's relation to life, to social reality, is important, an idea postmodernists tended to resist, if not outright reject. The novelist at this crossroad was faced with the challenge to invent. Frank's reaction to modernist and

early postmodernist fiction was to quit literary writing; Ford, by writing *The Sportswriter*, offers an alternative, capturing elements of both eras in a new, imaginative way.

Ultimately, Frank's claim that "[t]he world is a more engaging and less dramatic place than writers ever give it credit for being" (261) responds to Bellow's statement on contemporary fiction, confirming Ford's deliberate incorporation of a literary-historical consciousness that reiterates but then surpasses the debate about postmodernism in American fiction in the 1960s. Frank's disillusionment with writing ultimately leads him to make his claim about teachers being "born deceivers of the lowest sort" (222), but it would be absurd to suggest Ford is himself encouraging readers to dislike teachers; likewise, it would be equally absurd to say Ford is objurgating literary devices which foster illusions of permanence. As critic Jeffrey Folks points out, "Ford is angered by the travesty of literature involved in its misuse for conveying...the illusion of permanence" (76). Frank's dislike of teachers, and his dislike of "real writing," is Ford's way of subverting established perceptions, and his way of challenging readers to think critically. Frank, as both narrative object and perceptive lens, produces Ford's merger of modernist and early postmodernist modes. Frank's dual dimensions afford readers opportunities to see both the humanistic desire for reason, explanation, and certainty, but at the same time see the narratological mechanisms which make worlds and realities fictive constructions. Readers see a new version of postmodernism in the merger of distinct features from both modernism and early postmodernism.

Typically, critics fail to see that Ford continuously guides attention to the surface of the language, to the framing of the narrative, as a way of making the *illusion* visible.

For instance, Jeffery Folks notes how Frank appropriates or invents terms to explain himself, and how he “indulge[s] in a use of abstract terminology” (77), yet “his grandiose philosophizing seems trivial and inconsequential” (77), for he is just as adept at caricaturing the people he associates with. Folks sees Frank’s use of abstract language as a symptom of the “lack [of] coherent significance” (81) of suburban American culture. However, Ford has Frank create his own abstract terminology because Ford wants to bring attention to the language itself. Bakhtin’s comment on individualized terminology comes to mind; he claims it evidences the “epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia” (426). After all, as Frank talks about “mystery,” “anti-mystery,” “literalism” and “factualism,” or “dreaminess,” readers isolate the incidents in which Frank uses those terms, and either connect each incident to the others to determine what he means by them, or test to see if their meanings are consistent—all the while knowing that the use of these terms is limited to this text and relevant only to Frank’s own perception of social reality. In other words, readers flip back and forth throughout the novel to master Frank’s terminology, when, in fact, the terminology does little to directly inform readers of any meaning beyond *The Sportswriter*. Through this act of holding terms against one another and testing their sensibility, readers see that the illusion of meaning is achieved by the terminology. Frank’s abstractions convince readers there is no unitary language. The terminology’s role is to again make visible the narrative’s design.

Frank’s abstract terminology is a gesture by Ford to expose how language can be invented to apply to individualized perceptions, and to show that such language is not

conducive to sharing those perceptions. Folks is right when he states that “Frank’s philosophical discourse is flawed and escapist” (77), but flawed and escapist discourse is the object of Ford’s critique: language, when misused, separates and isolates people. Modes of being can be constructed and made impenetrable by highly individualized languages. Ford criticizes the tendency to become so linguistically specialized that communicating with another person, or at least with another person outside a specialized group, becomes virtually impossible. Such a critique is a thinly veiled attack on literary debates of the 1960s. The argument that Ford’s writing “expresses an urgency concerning the collective future of American society...[and] suggests the absurdity of a privatized solution to the malaise of contemporary middle-class existence” (Folks 73) would actually be strengthened by reading Frank’s philosophizing in this way, for a “private” vocabulary is indeed an absurd gesture towards any collective future. Here, Ford again gestures toward ontology by insinuating the dangers posed by highly individualized existence. If we recall McHale’s questions, “What is world?...What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (10), we see Ford confronting the consequences of the highly individualized world which inhibits the very conception of a social world. In Frank’s philosophy, private and public spheres fail to meaningfully intersect and all fiction fails to achieve its elemental function—to bring people together to share in the experiences of language and life.

Frank’s vocabulary, however, differs in some ways from the highly individualized philosophies to which Ford alludes. Frank’s vocabulary illustrates referential limits. Ford

makes Frank's vocabulary conspicuous not to tout a new vocabulary, but to identify such vocabularies as constructed discourse. The very terms Frank conjures for his abstractions—"mystery," "dreaminess," "factuality"—hardly evoke tones of sophisticated theoretical perceptions. The terms themselves mock the notion of individualized philosophy, and, in that way, Ford distinguishes himself from those postmodernists who insist on specialized vocabularies.

The theme of disillusionment with literary writing leads Ford's readers to ask: If Ford is talking about the failure of literature, then why does he write this novel? What makes *The Sportswriter* so different from the literature Frank detests? In other words, readers once again shift focus from what Frank is saying to what Ford is doing. What Ford is doing is writing fiction that exposes fictionality and artificiality, but he creates a world that incorporates such criticism by asking different questions than those asked by earlier postmodernists. Ford asks readers to interpret a narrative with a conscious acceptance of its fictional construction. This consciousness exposes fiction as a powerful tool of critique, a powerful tool to reveal the ways worlds—fictional and real—are constructed. Huey Guagliardo once asked Richard Ford about Frank's reliability as a narrator: "Do you regard Frank as reliable?" and Ford's response was:

I regard all narrators as works of art. Reliability is for the reader to decide.... I regard him as the thing that all narrators, indeed all fictional characters, are: they're provocateurs....[T]heir reliability is not much of an ongoing concern because they're not real. They're made up. It matters to me and you, as human beings, whether or not each of us is reliable, but narrators don't have to be. They don't need to be, or maybe they can't be....*Characters* don't tell the truth. They hypothesize; they speculate. That's their relationship to their maker, the author; they're speculators about things. They may say things that are useful, and very right, very moving, but their obligation isn't to tell the truth. The *book* may tell a truth by comprising all these other gestures. (616)

A tone of chastisement is detectable in Ford's response, for the interviewer's question evidenced a weak understanding of Ford's fiction. Ford puts reliability, typically a critical literary concern when discussing narration, into a context appropriate for his vision of fiction. He implies that searching for or expecting reliability from a narrator is another way of mistaking fiction for reality, mistaking fiction for truth. In other words, preoccupation with a narrator's reliability will inhibit a vision of the work as fiction.

The theme of disillusionment with literary writing in *The Sportswriter* prompts readers to pose questions that trespass the ontological boundary between Frank's fictional reality and the novel's own real existence. Ironically, the answers to those questions reside in the provocation of the questions themselves: *The Sportswriter* is unlike the fiction Frank detests because *The Sportswriter* is a work of fiction that advocates, even insists on, breaking the illusions of fiction by provoking questions of ontology. *The Sportswriter* does not offer an illusion of permanence, or an illusion of certainty; by its very design it resists conventional reading. A secular notion of redemption and resurrection—themes presented by the very setting of the novel on Easter weekend—becomes more pronounced as readers look at the whole of the novel. Seeing fiction as fiction is redemptive; it liberates reading. Ideas, images, events, and experiences resurrected from the past can beget new insights into self and world when viewed through a lens that makes opaque both structures and contents. Ford elicits the profound significance of seeing the boundaries of fiction as parts of the fiction by setting the novel on the Easter weekend. Themes of redemption and resurrection unite Frank's coming to terms with life after a series of losses with Ford's unique fictional salvation.

The Sportswriter is a model alternative to the literature Frank detests. It takes into account the modernist and earlier postmodernist traditions, yet advocates trespassing the boundaries of conventional fiction by promoting “disillusionment” not as a failure of literature, but rather as a way of engaging readers on more than one level. *The Sportswriter* is different from early postmodernist fiction because it reflects lived social reality, and is not primarily concerned with linguistic and narratological structures as ends in themselves. *The Sportswriter* recovers the tendencies of the modernists and merges them with the meta-fictional inclinations of the early postmodernists. Ford writes his novel into a new imaginative field, one that is respectful of the history of and influences on his novel.

The Sportswriter, while immensely innovative in its own right, is also the foundation for Ford’s further exploration within postmodernist fiction. *The Sportswriter* shows Ford’s aggressive pursuit to create a form for his fiction that encompasses all that he valued from past fictions. In its questioning of the ontological status of fiction and its numerous structural ironies, the novel refines the elements of postmodern fiction theorized by Brian McHale, Alan Wilde and Linda Hutcheon. Here, Ford’s readers are tutored primarily in the means of reading the hybrid of modernist and postmodernist modes that is *The Sportswriter*. In the sequel, *Independence Day*, Ford expands the focus to examine life and fiction in late 1980s America. *Independence Day* encompasses a wider range of private, cultural, and social concerns stemming from Ford’s examination of postmodernity.

Chapter Two: A Fiction of Replenishment: *Independence Day* and Contemporary American Experience

Published in 1995, nine years after *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* is the sequel to Ford's first exploration within postmodernist fiction. The cycle of experience-narration-re-vision continues, both within the narrative and within Ford's examination of the fictional terrain of contemporary American literature. Ontological questions from *The Sportswriter* expand to focus on the theatricality and performative quality of lived life as well as the fictions and fantasies of existence in the social and cultural reality of late 1980s America. Ford re-covers literary grounds with explicit references and responses to "The Declaration of Independence," Ralph Waldo Emerson, and earlier postmodernist fiction writers like John Barth. These intertextual references in *Independence Day* make conspicuous Ford's effort to re-contextualize core American literary expressions, and offer a postmodernist re-examination of self-reliance and independence. Emerson's philosophy and Jefferson's "Declaration" take on new relevance in *Independence Day* as Ford leads his readers to envision his novel as a model of self-reliance and literary independence.

Independence Day continues Ford's merger of modernist and early postmodernist modes of fiction into a new, subtler form of postmodernist fiction. In *The Sportswriter*, Ford foregrounded language by exposing the dual mode of his text as both scripted and spoken. This ironic, doubled mode prompted questions of ontology: What is/are world/s? What makes up worlds? How are worlds differentiated? Ford instigated these questions by synthesizing elements of earlier fiction, elements conventionally considered at odds.

He combined the modernist desire for knowledge and certainty with the postmodernist tenets that certainty is a myth and knowledge is fraught with contingency. He created a fiction that embraced disillusionment of fictionality and at the same time redeemed the fictional format for its ability to represent a vision of a complex contemporary American reality. In *Independence Day* Ford further examines those questions of ontology he prompted in *The Sportswriter*. He produces a vision of ironic doubleness, foregrounds textuality, and combines modernist and early postmodernist modes. Ford continues to challenge conventional narration by revealing the work's structures as both scripted and spoken text. However, even though Ford's approach is consistent with his approach in *The Sportswriter*, his focus in *Independence Day* is different. Ford now looks at the deeper private, cultural, and social implications of perceiving self and world from a postmodernist perspective.

Co-existence of the scripted and spoken word can lead one to perceive *Independence Day* as exemplary of Alan Wilde's description of suspensive postmodernist irony. Suspensive irony resists any totalizing philosophy. Multiplicity, doubleness, and contingency define Ford's text. However, by foregrounding the structure of his text's construction, Ford exposes the limitations of fiction as a system, but he advocates accepting the limitations as a way of understanding fiction's relation to lived existence. Consequently, *Independence Day* does not conform exactly to Wilde's description of postmodernist irony, for Wilde insists that complete acceptance of chaos (49) and complete rejection of connections (146) make postmodernist irony suspensive. Wilde concedes, however, that in his analysis of postmodernist fiction by Donald Bartheleme,

Raymond Federman, William Gass, and Kurt Vonnegut (early postmodernists), there is evidence of “satiric impulses to accept contingency and absurdity [as] a way of ordering”

(144). Subsequently, he concludes that

if the diversity of suspensiveness falls hostage among some contemporary ironists to a more imperious need for order—whether deliberately, as in Gass’s case, or not, as in those of Federman and Sukenick—still that reductiveness... is only a possible response to, not the necessary condition of, postmodern irony. (147)

Because Ford presents Frank as a seeker of connections and constructs the novel so as to resist conventional reading, we could determine *Independence Day* to be of a form that responds to Wilde’s theory by merging modernist and postmodernist tendencies.

In addition to McHale’s and Wilde’s theories, Bakhtin’s ideas on heteroglossia and discourse in the novel are particularly useful to an analysis of *Independence Day*. Much of this novel’s doubleness is in the form of textual duplicity—doubled (or re-written and re-presented) segments of text through intertextuality and layered or stratified discourse. For instance, Ford’s exploration of the density of “independence” in *Independence Day* challenges the conventional meaning of independence as leavetaking. He shows it to be a complex stratification of cultural, literary, historical, and private meanings. Bakhtin’s ideas work very well to aid discussion of Ford’s novel, and complement arguments made by both McHale and Wilde, especially regarding multiplicity and contingency. Doubleness defines Ford’s prose, and that doubleness enables his re-examination of self-reliance and independence both in fiction and in contemporary American life.

The fact that the nine years between publication of *Independence Day* and *The Sportswriter* amount only to five years within the fiction alerts readers that right from the

start they will engage in conceiving the text by identifying factors of its production. Frank makes several references to the time of the previous novel, not *as* a novel—*Independence Day* is not self-reflective in that way—but as “[f]ive years ago,” when he experienced “maybe a kind of major crisis” (91); the time of *The Sportswriter* is a time he now refers to as the “Existence Period”—a time “that comes *after* the big struggle which led to the big blow-up, the time in life when whatever was going to affect us ‘later’ actually affects us” (94). Readers can deduce, then, that Frank is out of his “Existence Period” and on to something else, something else that can be described as the present, but may later be recalled in other terms.

In *Independence Day* Frank is 44 years old and the setting is Haddam, New Jersey, 1989. Frank’s children, likewise, have aged, and the novel advances a pronounced “father-son” theme. In fact, *Independence Day* in part gets its title from the holiday on which Frank takes his adolescent son, Paul, for a weekend trip to the Basketball and Baseball Halls of Fame. The excursion is an orchestrated effort by Frank to engage his son in some modern day “male bonding,” but his attempt to bond with his son fails. The real connections between father and son come not from any elaborate scheme, but in unsuspecting moments. As well, Frank’s new occupation as a real estate agent has him interacting with a displaced couple from Vermont. Frank’s search for a home for this couple certainly takes on social and psychological dimensions, as finding the perfect home becomes a metaphor for finding a suitable, comfortable, deserving, and admirable place in society.

Independence Day examines the “American dream” by demystifying the fictions people use to measure, describe, and live out their lives in late 1980s America. Ford dismantles a number of contemporary myths surrounding family, job, and romance. He also examines the historical and literary perceptions of independence. Ford places these myths within a context of contingency and temporariness, which is a movement more towards refuting the certainty bestowed upon the myth rather than the truth of its contents. Ford’s approach is to focus on the constructedness of fictions by foregrounding the design of his own.

Independence Day merges modernist and early postmodernist elements of fiction by combining the search for meaningfulness and certainty with skepticism and contingency. Ford presents his fiction as a tool to understand experience, a tool through which concepts are examined and analyzed, and which ultimately invites critique. In *Independence Day* Ford provides a narrative without a final word, but only the word for now. Re-vision and re-narration are not new to Ford’s readers. To fully understand *Independence Day*, readers must employ the reading strategies developed in the previous novel, which makes *Independence Day* dependent on *The Sportswriter*. This dependency provides Ford with a way to explore an unconventional notion of “independence,” since at first it seems unreasonable for a novel about independence to be dependent in such an elemental way. However, Ford does not simply write a sequel. In a broad sense, *Independence Day* is a novel about connections, similarities, and links between events past and present, both historically and literarily; in a narrower sense, the novel is about family and individuality confronting liberation, freedom, and separation. The notion of

“independence” upon which this novel is based is ironic. Ford presents a narrative about freedom and self-reliance, yet constructs the narrative in such a way as to expose the risks and limitations of such freedom. A couple of storylines in the narrative display this ironic independence: Frank wants to teach his son independence, yet he hesitates to completely release him from his fatherly, and loving, protection; the Markhams, having given up their previous dwelling and previous careers, search for their dream home and the good life, and reject potentially good neighborhoods precisely because of their fear to commit to whatever is coming next for them in life—a change in their economic status, living out the remainder of their lives in a racially mixed neighborhood, declining health, and so on. Ford’s notion of “independence” can only be described as “stratified.” His notion consists of layers of meanings, layers that at times seem to represent antithetical ideas. Ford’s treatment of “independence” is postmodernist, and his resistance to any totalizing notion of independence testifies to that.

Independence Day builds upon the narrative techniques established in *The Sportswriter*. In *The Sportswriter*, Ford designed a narrative in which language and linguistic structures visibly contributed to the message of the narrative; he created a fiction that encouraged the trespassing of ontological boundaries through the breaking of fictional illusions. *The Sportswriter* taught readers a way to read; it guided readers from the surface to the depths of fiction by shifting from the scripted text to the spoken narrative and then crossing an ontological boundary. Ford exposed the illusions of a constructed text as illusions. In *Independence Day*, Ford is not so concerned with showing readers how to read fiction, but rather with providing a work of fiction that is

based on those former principles; what was explicit in *The Sportswriter* is now implicit in *Independence Day*.

Although Ford continues to break fictional illusions and trespass ontological boundaries by requiring readers to look at the text as both scripted and spoken, he uses techniques that are not as transparently instructional as those in *The Sportswriter*. Delving into the subject of *Independence Day*, and generating a context for its contents, requires readers to entertain intertextuality. For instance, the introductory paragraph to *Independence Day* reads, deceptively, like a traditional realistic narrative, and despite the first-person voice, the unidentified speaker lends a sense of omniscience to the narrative:

In Haddam, summer floats over tree-softened streets like a sweet lotion balm from a careless, languorous god, and the world falls in tune with its own mysterious anthems. Shaded lawns lie still and damp in the early a.m. Outside, on peaceful-morning Cleveland Street, I hear the footfalls of a lone jogger, tramping past and down the hill toward Taft Lane and across to Choir College, there to run in the damp grass. In the Negro trace, men sit on stoops, pants legs rolled above their sock tops, sipping coffee in the growing, easeful heat. The marriage enrichment class (4 to 6) has let out at the high school, its members sleepy-eyed and dazed, bound for bed again. While on the green gridiron pallet our varsity band begins its two-a-day drills, revving up for the 4th: “Boom-Haddam, boom-Haddam, boom-boom-ba-boom. Haddam-Haddam, up’,-at-’ em! Boom-boom-ba-boom!” (3)

This first paragraph’s novelistic third person voice evokes a sense of detached witnessing, and the language lulls readers into its seemingly remote observance with its lyrical cadences. The senses of sight and sound are stimulated in this opening paragraph; the visual imagery of tree-softened streets and sleepy-eyed residents is coupled with the sounds of footfalls and the varsity band. This first paragraph provides a significant amount of descriptive detail, and realistically evokes a truly American setting. The names of the streets and the descriptors of the places observed by the narrator reveal America—

Cleveland Street, Taft Lane, men sitting on steps in quiet camaraderie, and a varsity band warming up. The tone of the opening lines prompts the question: who is telling us about summer in Haddam being “like a sweet lotion balm,” and the world having “mysterious anthems”? The as-yet-unidentified speaker is of interest because readers familiar with *The Sportswriter* will make the connection to “Cleveland Street” and “Haddam, New Jersey” and interpret the first person voice to belong to Frank Bascombe, even before Frank is explicitly identified. Readers quickly become involved in seeking implicit meanings by transferring information from *The Sportswriter* to *Independence Day*; readers quickly become participants in making connections between what is explicitly stated to what those statements imply. Readers go beyond the primary text to generate meaning.

The tones of the opening paragraphs of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, however, are strikingly dissimilar. *Independence Day*’s opening lines do not carry the tone of Frank Bascombe’s voice as it was in *The Sportswriter*; this speaker does not sound like Frank. Frank’s voice was strong and dominant and explicitly linked with the identity of its character, and the opening lines of *The Sportswriter* immediately made readers aware of whose story it was and who exactly was telling that story. The poetic and lyrical quality of the opening of *Independence Day* allies Frank’s voice with an authorial voice. The shift in tone is significant because it makes conspicuous a change in Frank from then to now. Likewise, the contrast in the textual structure of *Independence Day*’s introductory segment and the introductory segment of *The Sportswriter* makes the change in narrative presentation conspicuous for readers familiar with the former novel.

Independence Day opens with more lengthy paragraphs of descriptive details of setting, whereas *The Sportswriter* opens with several short paragraphs, some just one sentence long, detailing Frank's identity and personal history. Ford establishes a sense of familiarity for readers of *The Sportswriter* in the opening of *Independence Day*, but at the same time he introduces a distinct difference. Readers are presented with a mesh of sameness and difference, a narrative representation of continuation with growth and change.

Readers wonder: Can this be Frank if the speaker does not sound like Frank? Can this be Frank's story if the text does not look like Frank's previous story? Ford has initiated a trespassing of ontological boundaries but in a very subtle way, and in a different way than he did in *The Sportswriter*, for now sight and sound are not just senses called upon to perceive the text as scripted and spoken, but also to perceive the context of the material of the narrative in an implicitly intertextual manner. *Independence Day's* opening paragraph initiates a process in readers whereby comparisons and recollections are made between similar or familiar sights and sounds. In this unassuming manner Ford sets the thematic framework for *Independence Day*: it will challenge expectations of similarity and familiarity by demanding close review of the present text—sometimes literally requiring second glances—and by alluding to and incorporating other texts. Readers will be challenged to perceive some things they thought they knew, in new ways.

Readers of *The Sportswriter* were prompted by questions of ontology in the opening lines of that novel: What is the/a sportswriter? However, it is not until the second segment of *Independence Day*—essentially a second introduction—that similar

ontological questions arise. The second introductory segment, which is clearly separated typographically from the first, breaks the idyllic illusion of the first segment with a self-reflective second statement and the introduction of linguistic codes:

Though all is not exactly kosher here, in spite of a good beginning. (When is anything *exactly* kosher?)

I myself, Frank Bascombe, was mugged on Coolidge Street, one street over, late in April, spiritedly legging it home from a closing at our realty office just at dusk, a sense of achievement lightening my step, still holding a bottle of Roederer—a gift from a grateful seller I’d made a bundle for—under my arm. Three young boys, one of whom I thought I’d seen before—an Asian—yet couldn’t later name, came careering ziggy-zaggy down the sidewalk on minibikes, conked me on the head with a giant Pepsi bottle, and rode off howling. Nothing was stolen or broken, though I was knocked silly on the ground, and sat in the grass for ten minutes, unnoticed in a whirling daze. (4)

This second introductory segment is a structural reminder that things may not be as they first seem to be, that a second look is required. This passage also confirms the return of Frank Bascombe—the Frank Bascombe who sounds like he did in the first novel. As well, this segment restores some of the same tones and styles of the previous novel, namely in Ford’s frequent use of conjunctive adverbs and coordinating conjunctions at the start of his sentences. In his brief review of *Independence Day*, William H. Pritchard claims “it’s not surprising that Ford’s favorite word to begin a sentence with is ‘Plus,’ since there’s always something further to be said” (136). Pritchard touches on a significant detail of Ford’s style, since conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs are the grammatical equivalents of saying “there is more,” and they implicitly direct readers to take another look at things. The “second introduction” is the first structural feature of *Independence Day* that advances Ford’s challenge of expectations in both narrative form

and thematic content. Readers question where the narrative really starts since what appears to be the beginning is only part of the beginning.

A Frank familiar to readers of *The Sportswriter* is revealed in the second introductory segment, but there is something different about the way Frank tells his story. This belated revelation makes readers suspicious about the present narrative. The brief episode of uncertainty about the speaker leaves readers wondering why Ford waits until the second segment to reveal the narrator's identity. The arrangement of the narrative's introduction immediately highlights once again Ford's presentation of a dual narrative, both scripted and spoken. As readers try to figure out this new, unobtrusive Frank, they necessarily examine the intertextual consistencies between *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*.

The methods Ford uses to foreground and trespass ontological boundaries in *Independence Day* are not as transparent as those used in *The Sportswriter*, but some are more conspicuous than others. For instance, in that second introductory segment, when Frank says, "in spite of a good beginning," he is self-consciously referring to how he initially started his narrative—referring to the previous four paragraphs depicting a peaceful, tranquil Haddam. With that comment, reader attention is directly diverted from the contents to the structure of the narrative, making the script the object of focus. The ontological boundary between Frank's fictional world and the readers' world is trespassed by the direct projection of Frank's comments outside the realm of his own fictional reality. This conspicuous trespassing of ontological boundaries directs the reader from the present, primary text, to other secondary texts.

Ford's presentation of these two introductions, the "double start" to the novel, is subtler than the metafictional maneuvers of the early postmodernists. Ford presents a first version of Haddam that is cloaked in illusions of peacefulness and tranquility—one that is heavily stylized—and then a second that evokes violence and uncertainty. This second view resists the illusions of typical stylized narration and focuses specifically on the consciousness of the central character. Ford's strategy of exposing the construction of his text is not radical, but is as instructive as other metafictional techniques. By first presenting the stylized narrative from the perspective of a first-person witness, and then shifting more narrowly into the first person's consciousness, Ford exposes the illusory effects of language. Most significantly, Ford's shifting of perspective exposes the illusory devices, but not as an element that undermines all other elements which have traditionally been valued (i.e. character, plot, setting, etc.). In other words, Frank's existence as both character and narrator is no less important for our seeing dimensions of his construction.

The linguistic code introduced in the second introductory segment also resists the illusions of fiction, and Ford uses it to foreground questions of ontology. The self-contained parenthetical sentence, "(When is anything *exactly* kosher?)" (4), asserts a specific linguistic code: the language couched in parentheses is visibly separated from the other sentences, and "exactly" is typographically differentiated from the other words by the use of italics, thereby implying different levels of intonation. The parenthetical statement implies another level of understanding, maybe a more personal level of understanding, between the speaker and readers. Such an implication is strengthened by reference to John Barth's opening paragraph in the title story from *Lost in the Funhouse*:

For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is *a place of fear and confusion*. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, *the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, *which in turn* is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete works, not to mention. Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for “outside,” intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements, the texts of telegrams and newspaper articles, et cetera. They should be used *sparingly*. If passages originally in roman type are italicized by someone repeating them, it’s customary to acknowledge the fact. *Italics mine*. (72)

Barth’s opening resonates in *Independence Day*, especially given the context of Ambrose’s Independence Day holiday at the sea shore. Ford’s narrator admits at two different points in the novel that July 4th is “my favorite secular [holiday]” (7) and later that “it’s my favorite holiday of a non-religious nature” (310). Ford echoes and repeats Barth’s language, connecting *Independence Day* to a postmodernist fictional exemplar. However, Frank (or Ford) neither directly addresses readers as Barth’s narrator did, nor are readers directly implicated by any use of the second person pronoun “you.” The readers’ presence is assumed. More remarkable is the absence of conspicuous meta-narration by Ford. Barth’s meta-narration serves as a way of exposing the conventions of fiction, but Ford offers no such explanation. Instead, Ford implies his methods. Parenthesis and italics are visual manipulations that are first registered as visual differences in script, making them more subtle ways of directing the readers’ attention to the script than Barth’s meta-narration. Therefore, the implied presence of readers discriminating differences in script is the foundation on which the revised form of narration in *Independence Day*’s is based. A question of ontology emerges: How can a

fictional character-narrator depend on *typographic* variations in order to truly *tell* his story? The co-mingling of script and speech assumes this ironic form.

Independence Day exhibits much more elaborate typographic manipulation than *The Sportswriter*. The relationship between the written word and the spoken word was made explicit in *The Sportswriter* by the way listening was brought into the foreground of the narrative. Now, in *Independence Day*, parenthetical expressions, italicized words, and quotation marks imply Frank's use of different voices, or different tones of voice. Those voices introduce satire and irony into the novel, and allude to voices from other myths and fictions associated with contemporary American culture.

Independence Day's multi-leveled discourse is developed by carefully designed systems of typographic variations. Codes of speech and language require readers to interpret the text by negotiating the scripted word and its spoken context. A simultaneous coexistence of the two forms is implicit in several aspects of the novel. The levels of intonation in Frank's discourse become more elaborate as the novel progresses, and the levels themselves depend on the trespassing of ontological boundaries—either by way of readers using knowledge outside the fiction to complete a circuit of meaning, or by way of the language being read on two levels. For instance, Frank describes his search for a home for his clients, the Markhams, in the following manner:

The houses I *could* show them all fell significantly below their dream. The current median Haddam-area house goes for 149K, which buys you a builder design colonial in an almost completed development in not-all-that-nearby Mallards Landing: 1,900 sq ft, including garage, three-bedroom, two-bath, expandable, no fplc, basement or carpets, sited on a 50 –by-200-foot lot “clustered” to preserve the theme of open space and in full view of a fibreglass-bottom “pond.” (39)

The use of italics here, on “could,” adds emphasis and creates rhythm and momentum in Frank’s speech; however, as was the case with “*exactly*” earlier in the second introductory segment, italics visibly differentiates “*could*” from the other words around it, thus implying a different level of intonation. As well, quotation marks differentiate “clustered” and “pond” from the other words, implying their meaning to be ironic; “clustered” is likely a euphemism for “crowded,” and a “pond” with a fibreglass bottom is not really a pond at all—it is artificial and just gives the illusion of being a pond. The emphasis given to these euphemisms makes their functions more conspicuous as deliberate attempts to deconstruct America’s obsession with appearances, even as it makes readers conscious of both the scripted word on the page and the context implied by its pronunciation in Frank’s fictional reality.

Frank’s different tones of voice, tones that connote ironic contexts, dismantle other social and cultural illusions. Frank bemusedly refers to the Markhams’ desire for a “dream” home. “Dream” gives the distinct impression that the Markhams have unrealistic expectations, that they are striving to attain the myth of the perfect home in which to live a perfect life, or, at the very least, they are trying to find confirmation that they are making the right decisions. The “dream” is something the Markhams have to discard if they want to live in reality. Readers are reminded of the different tones of Frank’s voice at the start of the narrative, the idyllic opening, representing how people wish the world to be, contrasted by the revised vision marked by details contrary to the illusion. Deconstruction of the American dream is evident in details like the Markhams’ search for their dream home, Frank’s efforts to be an involved father despite his geographical

distance from his children, and even in the brief glance at juvenile delinquency in Frank's son, Paul. Thus, readers perceive a relationship between Frank's fictional world and the social reality Ford is critiquing.

Ford repeatedly draws attention to cultural fictions, especially those having to do with appearances of financial stability and success—i.e. the Markhams' search for the perfectly under-priced house in a white, middle class neighborhood. Ford also glances at the cultural obsession with sexual gratification, particularly the illusions created for masculine sexual prowess and female sexual satisfaction. *Achieve Super Marital Sex* is a magazine propped on a Motel kitchen countertop—not coincidentally, the very scene in which Frank flirts with and tries to engage chef Char with his gestures, cues, body language, and vocal inflections. However, Ford chooses particular images from the magazine to punctuate the scene, and, by extension, comment on America's obsession with sex. Following panel drawings of various sexual positions, Ford pictures the following:

[O]n the back is a full-page color ad for a thick, pink, anatomically audacious but rather fuzzily photographed dildo that some comical prior reader has drawn a red Happy Face on the business end of... The dildo is referred to in the ad as "Mr. Standard Pleasure Unit," though I'm dubious about what it has to do with the standard marriage realities. Under standard circumstances, "Mr. Pleasure" would be a hard act to follow. (316)

The magazine serves two functions in this scene. Firstly, the images portrayed run parallel to Frank's own adulterated thoughts, or at least they lend an adulterated dimension to his thoughts and actions. Secondly, because Ford places the pornographic magazine in an unlikely place, a kitchen, it works as a comment on how sex seems to saturate much of American society. The back cover image is a product ad, but what the

ad is selling, is, quite literally, an illusion—fuzzily focused, anatomically enhanced, but under the guise of normalcy. Once again, quotation marks lend “Mr. Pleasure” a unique tone. Throughout the scene, Ford’s descriptions of the sex acts fluctuate from satirical—i.e. “Fido-style” (314)—to technical—i.e. fellatio (315)—but never does he radically or violently depict sexuality. The situation of the sexual content in the narrative is what makes it transcend its fictional context, and pairing of satirical and technical phrases makes the contents conspicuous components of the text’s design. Ford’s subtle style of exposing the constructedness of his fiction moves his comment on sexuality beyond the text’s ontological boundaries.

The relationship between the fictional reality and an external reality is perhaps best seen in Ford’s metaphor of realty as reality. The Markhams are literally in transition, moving from one known place to another undetermined place. Frank often makes comments about the Markhams, particularly Joe Markham, regarding fears of wasting time (43), having to “face the degree of unknown involved in buying a house” (42), and facing regret:

As regret goes, theirs, of course, is not unusual in kind. Though finally the worst thing about regret is that it makes you duck the chance of suffering new regret just as you get a glimmer that nothing’s worth doing unless it has the potential to fuck up your whole life. (44)

Frank’s tone of voice helps depict the Markhams as having unrealistic expectations, as looking for certainty nobody can promise. It is easy to see how realty lends itself to be a suitable vehicle for indirectly commenting on or philosophizing about life. As with all metaphors, this one provides concrete images and language for otherwise abstract and vague ideas. Buying a house is equated with envisioning the immediate future. The

dealing and bargaining between agent and client is also a vehicle for exposing the lies, fictions, and illusions in which people participate and which seem to make up lived social reality.

Ford comments on the lies by which people choose to live when he presents Frank as an inconstant and imperfect protagonist. Frank's dealings with the Markhams illustrate this idea. In his treatment of the Markhams he fails to see how *he* is in fact selling them a myth. Frank claims to

go about selling houses the way [he'd] want one sold to [him]: by not being a realty wind sock; by not advertising views [he doesn't] mostly believe in; by not showing clients a house they've already said they won't like by pretending the subject never came up; by not saying a house is "interesting" or "has potential" if [he] thinks it's a dump.... (41)

However, Frank misleads his clients in precisely the way he says he would not: he withholds information and equivocates on details he knows they will not like. For instance, when Phyllis Markham asks of a house they are viewing, "What's it border on the back side?", Frank simply says, "We'll need to look at that" (62), though he knows full well that a prison is housed behind the rear property line. When Phyllis finds this out, she confronts Frank, asking, "Did you know about this?", and he admits he did by scanning down the realty data sheet and saying, "absolutely....Adjoins state land on north property" (71). Phyllis tells him she thought that meant something different—and it is clear to readers that "state property" is definitely different from "State of New Jersey's minimum security facility." Frank's data sheet and Frank himself are deliberately vague.

The inconsistency between what Frank says about real estate and how he actually treats his clients is an indication that he should be viewed with close scrutiny. At this

point in the novel, when Phyllis Markham confronts Frank, Ford reveals a flaw in Frank's self-perception that makes readers conscious of the boundary between Frank's fictional reality and their own reality. Ford brings myths and fictions of realty to the foreground. Although Frank represents a link between the fictional reality and the readers' reality, his status as a fictional device is highlighted. Frank may be instrumental in bridging fiction and society, but he is nonetheless an instrument. Ford uses this ironic method to show his character's limitations as a fictional device, as a means of seeing more fully the subject the device is used to reveal. In this case, Ford exposes Frank's fictionality to better present the idea that lived life involves participation in myths, fictions, and illusions. His readers' disillusionment is neither tragic nor disheartening for it allows them to see fictional devices fully for what they are and accept that they are ways people connect with each other. Ford's design effectively advances that ironic vision of myths, illusions, and fictions by exposing the instruments of their creation.

Ford's exploitation of ontological boundaries uses the language of realty to layer novelistic discourse. By incorporating the language of real estate, or "realty-talk," Ford subtly foregrounds the scripted dimension of the narrative. Words like "sq ft" and "fplc" are categorically within the genre of real estate shorthand jargon. When reading the realty-talk, readers will ask: if Frank is speaking, what does he *say* in place of the scripted abbreviations? Ford's realty-talk can be understood in terms of Bakhtin's novelistic discourse. There is a contest between the realty-talk's presentation as Frank's narrative monologue, his speech (Bakhtin's *reč'*), and its spoken, oral, reality. Ford's realty-talk is exemplary of Bakhtin's novelistic discourse because it is a speech genre that helps

heteroglossia enter the novel (Bakhtin 263). Realty-talk is decidedly double-voiced. It is discourse delivered from two planes: from an authorial plane (Ford's script) and from a narrative plane (Frank's speech). These two planes, however, are clearly ontologically different; therefore, Ford deliberately trespasses ontological boundaries with his presentation of realty-talk. The boundary between the fictional reality and the readers' reality is foregrounded by the questions prompted by the disharmony between script and speech: how can Frank speak words, in his world, if those words have no verbal sensibility? Readers must consequently see the boundary as part of the fiction because there is no unitary reconciliation of the double voice.

Disharmony between the scripted word and the spoken word continues Ford's practice from *The Sportswriter*. Readers will recall the un-naming of Frank's ex-wife, "X," as one instance that created a similar double-voice in the previous novel. Here, however, the real estate jargon functions in a slightly different way, for unlike the unnamed ex-wife, the language of real estate is not representing unknown entities to readers; readers understand "149K" means \$149,000, "sq ft" means "square feet," and "fpic" means "fireplace." The language of real estate makes a connection between the speaker and readers through implied understanding.

Experimenting with stylistic consistency, Ford uses typographic manipulation frequently throughout the novel, but he does not always use the same form of manipulation to signify the same thing. For instance, Ford uses italics on several occasions to indicate a change in tone or context of Frank's thoughts, but not all italicized

print functions to indicate a change in tone. For example, as Frank tries to induce sleep, he creates a lulling rhythm with nonsensical language:

Try burning life's congested Buckeye State biker...There is a natural order of things in the cocktail dress...I'm fluent in the hysterectomy warhead (don't I?)...Give them the Locution, come awn back, nah, come awn, the long term's less good for you...The devil's in the details, or is it God... (157)

The nonsensical sentences are differentiated from the rest of the words on the page by their physical presentation in italics; however, the sentences alone, even when read as being in a different tone of voice, do not make sense without prior knowledge of them as snippets of Frank's thoughts or parts of his conversations with other characters. This part of the narrative is one based on the repetition of text already viewed by readers. There is nothing new about the words and sentences in this passage other than their arrangement, or as Frank states, their "semi-syntactical disarray" (157). Ford's narration is therefore based on doubleness—re-presentation of text. Familiarity with the components of this passage makes the passage, which is most obviously nonsense, less absurd and more clearly a product of Frank's mind—and a product with clear and specific references. For instance, "locution, locution, locution" was Shax Murphy's three words of advice to Frank when he started the realty job (113); "God's in the details...Or is it the devil?" is an overheard piece of conversation between Joe Markham and the owner of a house the Markhams are considering buying (79); "hysterectomy" comes from Phyllis Markham's confession to Frank that she is going to need the operation (75); and "cocktail dresses" comes from Frank's description of Miss Vonda Lusk, the receptionist who works at the Lauren-Schwindell realty office (33). Readers have "seen" before all the words and phrases that make up this nonsensical passage. Here Ford displays how thoughts and

ideas that appear to be new and strange can really just be thoughts and ideas from the past presented in a different way. Ford's preoccupation with exploring layers of meaning and his insistence on having readers participate in constructing meanings are evidenced even in these textual details.

Reader participation is essential to Ford's opening up of his text to release it from unified meaning. He carefully creates informed readers by revealing certain information to them that he will later call on for textual coherency. Frank's "nonsensical" sleep-inducing sentences evidence Ford's crafting of readers. Ford does not use fragments of Frank's thoughts and his interactions with other characters which have not yet been disclosed to readers. All the snippets come from text already *read*. The boundary between Frank's fictional reality and the readers' non-fictional reality is trespassed by the way meaning is restored to the nonsensical passage through readers' completion of the circuit of knowledge. The italicized print, however, does not connote a different tone of voice, but rather makes the intentionally nonsensical passage visually conspicuous. Consequently, an authorial presence is detected here, not just because of the typographic manipulation itself, but because the italicized print makes reference to previously *scripted* text. Even if we accept the narrative as being spoken and thought by Frank, an ontological boundary has been trespassed by Ford since only he has access to go back, repeat, and re-present language in a new scripted form. This authorial presence is a self-reference, which opens the text to multiplicity.

The implication of readers' knowledge of *The Sportswriter in Independence Day* can also be viewed as yet another way Ford re-presents language and text in new forms.

The naming of Frank's ex-wife in *Independence Day* is a case in point. Just as the explicit un-naming of "X" in *The Sportswriter* prompted questioning of the text, in *Independence Day*, the naming of "X" prompts new questions. In the fourth segment of Chapter One, Frank casually reveals the name of his ex-wife:

I live happily if slightly bemusedly in a forty-four-year-old bachelor's way in my former wife's house at 116 Cleveland, in the "Presidents Streets" section of Haddam, New Jersey, where I'm employed as a Realtor Associate by the Lauren-Schwindell firm on Seminary Street. I should say, perhaps, the house formerly owned by formerly my wife, Ann Dykstra, now Mrs. Charley O'Dell of 86 Swallow Lane, Deep River, CT. (7)

The implication is that readers will equate "Ann" with "X." However, not only is X's identity now revealed, but X has two names (or three, counting "X"): Ann Dykstra and Mrs. Charley O'Dell. X's multiple names emphasize the fact that she previously had none, and, at the same time, her "multiple" identities add dimension to her character. Ann is not just "X," nor is she just Frank's ex, nor is she just "Ann," nor is she just "Mrs. Charley O'Dell"—and, ironically, never was she called "Mrs. Bascombe"—but each of these names indicates a part of Ann, yet certainly not the whole. Because readers know her by more than one name (or non-name), Ann is emblematic of Ford's themes of multiplicity and doubleness. While Ann is a minor character in the narrative, she embodies Ford's challenge to the singularity created by conventional narrative consistency by retaining an element of contingency about her.

Of particular importance here is the way Ford transfers the significance of X's identity into his readers' reality, for there is no dwelling on the naming of X in the fictional reality (just as there was no dwelling on the unnamed ex-wife in the previous novel). More questions arise: why does Frank now speak his ex-wife's name? What is so

different about Frank *now* that enables him to speak her name? A number of thematic explanations are possible: perhaps Frank's grief over the break-up of his marriage is resolved; perhaps Frank is no longer "crossing out" his past, but is now more accepting of his own personal history; perhaps Frank is no longer so self-centered that his story need not be focused entirely on himself. Any one, or all, of those possibilities make sense on a thematic level, but the naming of X remains formally problematic.

In *The Sportswriter*, the representation of Frank's ex-wife as "X" alluded to nineteenth-century novelists' practice of omitting names to give the illusion of narrative reality and to John Barth's parody of that nineteenth century fictional convention in his "Lost in the Funhouse"; however, in *Independence Day*, naming Frank's ex-wife, and in such an unceremonious manner, represents a complicated play among the texts. Naming, an act quite routine to fiction writers, is here not so simply a matter of giving a name, but it is the giving of a name *and* the summoning of readers' memories of all previous allusions inspired by the character's lack of a name. Ford makes Frank's ex-wife a stylistic alternative to simply repeating what he had done before—naming her X. Naming X is another way to make formal features prominent in readers' minds, another way to add to the domino effect of textual meaning being derived by its formal contexts. Ford guides his readers toward intertextuality, thereby layering the meanings to achieve a stratified text. To use Bakhtin's terms, Ford's *rassloenie* (stratification) resists the unity of fixed definitions, and in this particular example the fixed significance of signifying a name is resisted (289, 433).

Where the un-naming of X in *The Sportswriter* was formally problematic because the scripted “X” did not translate into reasonable spoken language, the naming of X in *Independence Day* is formally problematic because of disharmony between the texts. For Ford, intertextual reading encourages his readers to recognize patterns or relationships between events; it is the foundation of his presentation of dialogism—Bakhtin’s term for the mode of a world dominated by the interaction of meanings (426). On a small scale Ford provokes readers to recognize consistencies and/or inconsistencies between and within his two Frank Bascombe novels; readers’ questioning of the texts facilitates connections between what has happened before and what happens in *Independence Day*, and connections between what Frank says as opposed to what Frank does. On a larger scale, the connections made by intertextual reading translate into deeper layers of relationships between the literary and historical past and the present. Questions such as “Where have I seen this before?” are not limited to narrative details and Ford’s stylistic manoeuvres in the novels, but also extend to an almost metaphorical conception of literary, historical, and everyday life events. Intertextual reading effectively advances Ford’s examination of fiction and life from more than one angle, indicating that readers should look back at what has happened before for insight into the present. To Ford’s advantage, intertextual reading encourages envisioning shared experiences, emphasizes similarity rather than difference, yet at the same time it also retains that element of change necessary for new contexts. Consequently, *Independence Day* can be read as an extension or continuation of literary tradition instead of a radical break from the past.

Ford experiments with re-presenting the familiar in a new or unusual way in *Independence Day*. For instance, the spoken nature of Frank's narrative is significant not only because it represents the novelistic double voice, but also because Ford reveals different ways spoken language operates to create or frustrate communication between people. In "'Nostalgia Isn't What It Used To Be': Isolation and Alienation in the Frank Bascombe Novels," William Chernecky makes the claim that "[d]ialogue is not a particularly striking means of understanding Frank's world," and that "the 'oral' process of dialogue, like the nature of language itself, is too elusive for true meaning" (160). Chernecky is clearly referring to conventional uses of dialogue, whereby dialogue can offer glimpses into a character's thoughts and motivations, and can establish some sense of certainty and context for characters' actions. Dialogue in *Independence Day* often contests Frank's interior monologue, but rather than undermining the meaningfulness of the dialogue, dialogue effectively foregrounds a boundary between the spoken word and the scripted word. Chernecky is partially right; dialogue alone does little to create an understanding of Frank's world, but because of the visibility of the different levels of speech, because of the reading of the text as both scripted and spoken language, dialogue takes on a function different from its conventional use.

Frank's conversations with his girlfriend, Sally Caldwell, evidence Ford's unconventional use of dialogue. Most significantly, Frank's conversation contradicts his thoughts. For instance, when Frank tries to explain his relationship with Sally early in the novel, he sounds awkward and apathetic:

For ten months now, Sally and I have carried on what's seemed to me a perfect "your place and mine" romance, affording each other generous portions of

companionship, confidence (on an as-needed basis), within-reason reliability and plenty of spicy, untranscendent transport—all with ample “space” allotted and the complete presumption of *laissez-faire* (which I don’t have much use for), while remaining fully respectful of the high-priced lessons and vividly catalogued mistakes of adulthood.

Not love, it’s true. Not exactly. But closer to love than the puny goods most married folks dole out. (8)

It is as if Frank anticipates his listener’s interpretation of his feelings as being those of “love,” so he quickly insists that it is “Not love.” However, in a later conversation with Sally, Frank contradicts his previous thoughts:

“I love you,” I say, totally startling myself. A tide of another nature has just swirled me into very deep, possibly dark water. These words are not untrue, or don’t feel untrue, but I didn’t need to say them at this very moment (though only an asshole would take them back).

“I’m sorry,” Sally says, reasonably enough. “What is it? What?”

“You heard me.” The living room pianist is playing “The Happy Wanderer” much louder now—just banging away. The Japanese man who’s been hearing all about invasive surgeries walks out of the living room smiling, but immediately stops smiling when he hits the hall. He sees me and shakes his head as if he were responsible for the music but now it won’t stop. He heads up the front stairs. Paul and I will be happy to be on floor 3.

“What’s that mean, Frank?”

“I just realized I wanted to say it to you. And so I said it. I don’t know everything it means”—to put it mildly—“but I know it doesn’t mean nothing.” (307)

Because Frank so purposefully avoided using the word “love” in his earlier statement, his declaration of love here is suspect. Frank’s thoughts and actions are at odds; Ford presents a contest between Frank’s monologue and Frank’s dialogue. However, after declaring to love Sally, Frank’s unspoken thoughts turn to the “real” issue, which is not his true feelings for Sally, but his feeling vulnerable because his interactions with her are subject to the tenuousness of language:

I’m wondering, though, what if I’d said “don’t” in front of the verb? Then what? Could that be the way life progresses at my age? A-stumble *into* darkness and *out*

of the light? You discover you love somebody by trying it without “don’t” in front of the verb? Nothing vectored by your *self* or by what *is*? If so, it’s not good.
(307)

In his interior monologue, Frank breaks down his interaction with Sally into an exercise of language and syntax, ultimately questioning the nature of his interactions and connections with people. The contest between Frank’s dialogue and monologue foregrounds the idea of “independence” as a dialogized word. Frank is both connected to and separated from all those people with whom he interacts; “independence” oscillates between “freedom to” and “freedom from”—and never resolves to be only one and not the other. This oscillation is represented by the inconsistency between Frank’s dialogue and his monologue. Ford uses the different modes of speech of his protagonist to draw a vision of contingent independence.

Ford consistently shows how language can “lie” by showing how language can operate simultaneously on more than one level, but he clearly does not advocate seeing the world or our connections to others as being determined solely by language. Frank’s phone conversation with Sally testifies to that. While Frank is talking to Sally about their “love” issue, he is also in the company of, and very much aware of his fellow hotel occupants gathered in the common area, the living-room pianist and the Japanese man (307). This scene has distinct symbolic overtones, and not just because the juxtaposition of “The Happy Wanderer” with a conversation about invasive surgeries creates an absurd, ironic tone, but because Frank is engaged in one act while still being very much aware of what is happening on his periphery. Frank holds two positions at once: conversation partner (to Sally) and hotel guest (to the gathering in the living-room).

When Sally tells Frank, “Everything isn’t just about how you say it,” and that she and Frank “[don’t] mean the same things when [they] say the same things” (311), it is as if she is alluding to Ford’s challenge to conventional narrative dialogue, for she is plainly showing how she understands dialogue to be unable to determine what is true or real. By this point in the novel, Ford’s readers are already accustomed to this recurring theme; after all, implicit in the novel’s double voice is the notion that words alone do not determine meaning. In this particular scene, what is at stake is Frank’s understanding of how language operates, and Sally’s role here is to point out the illusory quality of language. She speaks a truth about the structure of language whereas Frank tries to engage her within and beneath the surface of that reality. Frank’s dialogue with Sally sounds more like an experiment with language than any genuine communicative gesture. His dialogue casts language as a game wherein he balances multiple contextual realities (the living-room gathering, the overheard conversation, and his immediate telephone conversation). As the telephone conversation ends, Frank fails to meaningfully connect with any of the contextual realities: Sally hangs up after saying good-bye “in a not very hopeful voice” (311), and Frank puts on a little performance for those people he suspects have him in their peripheral awareness:

[T]he instant she’s off I depress the plunger and shout into the empty line, “And so you’re nothing but a fucking asshole, are you? Well, I’ll have you killed before Labor Day, and that’s God’s promise.” I snap a vicious look around at the two women, framed by the screen door, peering at me. “I’ll see you in hell,” I say into the dead line, and slam the phone down as the women turn and head hastily upstairs to their beds. (311-12)

Frank's comedic act at the end of his conversation with Sally amplifies the game-like quality of his language. He did not win Sally's attention, so he wins the attention of his audience of strangers.

Readers know Frank's performance at the end of his conversation with Sally is an act. Readers see and understand Frank's motivation in that scene because they were both witnesses to his telephone conversation as well as observers of his behaviour. Ford has made Frank the object of the readers' scrutiny. Figuring out Frank means figuring out his play with language, and the contest between Frank's interior monologue and his dialogue with other people effectively recasts each mode of Frank's language. The different qualities and purposes of language are nowhere more apparent than when Frank tells of his reaction to Ann's announcement to remarry. In his narrative monologue, Frank indulges in a brief fantasy, but in dialogue Frank conforms to social decorum:

“Don't marry him, sweetheart! Marry me! Again! Let's sell both our shitty houses and move to Quoddy Head, where I'll buy a small newspaper from the proceeds. You can learn to sail your skiff off Gran Manan, and the kids can learn to set type by hand, be wary little seafarers, grow adept with lobster pots, trade their Jersey accents, go to Bowdoin and Bates.” These are the words I *didn't* say into the dense millennial silence available to me. They would've been laughed at, since I'd had years to say them before then and hadn't....

“I think I understand all this,” I said instead, in a convinced voice, as I poured myself a convincing amount of gin, bypassing the vermouth. (103)

Frank's interior monologue conveys a message different from his dialogue with Ann. The reasons he gives for not saying what he was thinking—being laughed at and the timing not being right—revolve around the fact that his thoughts did not fit into the social context of his situation. What Frank actually does say comes across as being an exaggerated gesture of social decorum because of its stark contrast to his “truer”

thoughts. The contest between interior monologue and dialogue with other people questions whether dialogue can be a reliable means of connecting with others. Ford indicates that a person's private, individual self often finds itself divorced from a public, communal self, and forced to participate in fostering illusions. Frank's dialogue is largely a performance of interacting with other people, which indicates the falseness, the "lies," and the illusions created by such dialogue.

Ford weaves throughout the novel the idea that social interactions are performances. As in *The Sportswriter*, in *Independence Day* Frank is conscious of catering to an audience, or adopting a suitable persona based on a situation or context. Ford demonstrates this idea by using theatre metaphors to punctuate Frank's interactions with other characters. Frank refers to his weekend tour of sports Halls of Fame with his son as being "staged" for both their benefits (15). As well, body language becomes theatrical, for instance, as it is often the only language shared between Frank and his "mixed-race family" (28) tenants, the McLeods. Larry McLeod "always acts menacing" (29) when Frank stops by to collect the rent, and Betty McLeod has "stopped communicating with words" (30). Frank's interaction with Joe and Phyllis Markham exhibits a more obvious pretense of acting:

[Phyllis says,] "I was just standing there thinking that maybe no one gets the house they want..."

"Well, if I can find it for them they do. And if they can afford it. You *are* best off coming as close as you can and trying to bring life to a place, not just depending on the place to supply it for you." I give her my own version of a willing smile. This is a positive sign, though of course we're not really addressing each other now; we're merely setting forth our points of view, and everything depends on whose act is better. It is a form of strategizing pseudo-communication I've gotten used to in the realty business. (76)

Frank interacts with other characters by catering to the audience, or adopting a persona, but there is danger in those performances. Frank alludes to the harm that comes from living life only through the roles he plays for other people:

[Ann] completely supposed my existence. My life was (and to some vague extent still is) played out on a stage in which she's continually in the audience (whether she's paying attention or not). All my decent, reasonable, patient, loving components were developed in the experimental theatre of our old life together, and I realized that by moving house to Deep River she was striking most of the components, dismembering the entire illusion, intending to hook up with another, leaving me with only faint, worn-out costumes to play myself with. (105)

Frank's roles as husband and father became worn out and unnecessary, and he is not just left by himself, but rather left with a made-up version of himself. The recurring theatre metaphors imply Frank perceives social and interpersonal interactions as performances, as illusions generated by the way people engage in dialogue, and especially by the way they choose to speak aloud certain things and keep quiet about others. Ultimately, readers must conclude that if Frank's speech in both his monologue and his dialogue are performances, then readers are his audience.

Both Alan Wilde's theory of postmodernist suspensive irony and Brian McHale's theory of a postmodernist ontological dominant help explain Ford's creation of character. Ford challenges the concept of unity in his construction of Frank by exposing "self" as a construction, as a product of performances. This construction of character is both suspensive for its purposeful inclusion of multiplicity and at the same time challenges ontological boundaries by positioning the performer, Frank, in relation to an audience outside his fictional realm. Frank is Ford's postmodern character. However, Ford does not prove the notion of character to be less valuable than literary convention dictates.

Rather, Ford represents in fiction the unreliable, uncertain, and shifty nature of self by showing a *fictional self* that is a composite of performances. Since Frank is a fictional construction, his purpose is to function *in relation* to a social reality outside the fictional realm, and not supplant members of that external social reality. The boundary between the fictional and the real is once again foregrounded here; after all, it is Ford's display of Frank as an instructional instrument that makes clear the composition of character. Readers must once again view Frank as a constructed object, must see the fiction as fiction, in order to understand its relation to their reality.

In *Independence Day*, dialogue exposes the "lies of literature" by the way it contests interior monologue. If Ford had used dialogue in a conventional manner, then "dialogue," as a *tool* for creating fiction, would not be brought into the readers' focus. In a sense, Ford is treating "dialogue" as he did "epiphany" in the previous novel; he is directing the reader's gaze onto "dialogue" as a literary tool. As readers discriminate between what Frank says, and what he thinks about what he says, they must examine the text in both its material form as a carefully designed novel, and its fictional form as a spoken narrative. Basically, readers examine dialogue from two angles, again advancing Ford's agenda of challenging expectations, encouraging second glances, and employing the novelistic double voice.

Ford's thematic reconsideration of "independence" parallels this formal reconsideration of dialogue, character, and the visual presentation of language. Ford encourages readers to first consider what is typically thought of as "independence," and to then consider how "independence" can mean something else. Ford's manoeuvring here

welcomes Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia (427), which Ford uses to dialogize "independence" and create duality in the text. The skeptical reading he has been teaching since *The Sportswriter* becomes the way of understanding his subject matter; *Independence Day*'s formal qualities subtly reflect a unique duality that exposes the risks and limitations of not seeing "independence" as a dialogized word.

In a number of interviews, Ford tells how he became interested in writing a novel about "independence"—not so much because of July 4th and its American mythology, but because of the idea of independence. He says that the word "independence" seemed to be recurring frequently in his notes and his thoughts, and for him this was a signal that the word had a sort of "density" to it, a meaning to be found behind the word's "surface conventional [meanings] or associations" (Farnsworth para. 10). Ford explains:

I was very attracted to Bruce Springsteen's song "Independence Day," in which a son sings a kind of lament to his father, especially the line "Just say goodbye, it's Independence Day." I hadn't ever realized that independence in the most conventional sense means leavetaking, putting distance between yourself and other people, getting out of their orbit. So then I thought I'd write about it and see if I couldn't make it something else, if independence could in fact mean freedom to make contact with others, rather than just the freedom to sever oneself from others. (Majeski para. 22)

The context of the parent-adolescent relationship provides Ford an excellent context for exploring independence. Frank's relationship with his adolescent son is defined by struggles to accommodate and accept uncertainty and transition—Paul is no longer a child, yet he is not quite a man; Frank wants to hold his son close, protect him, and at the same time he wants to prepare and direct him into adulthood. "Independence" in this parent-child context is riddled with irony: how does one achieve or teach a freedom that both severs ties and at the same time enables one to "make contact with others"?

This question hovers in the background of *Independence Day*. Ford does not provide an answer as such, but he presents different meanings of “independence” and shows how the word is used to describe very different aspects of lived life. However, some form of leavetaking is involved in every instance of independence Ford presents—sometimes of people, sometimes of ideas, memories, and expectations—but he shows that independence is not *just* leavetaking. Ford’s study of independence begins long before his reflection on the cultural notion of independence that opened this novel; Ford’s “independence” reaches back into *The Sportswriter*, showing its vital function in how his writing relates to other writing and to the world.

The density of “independence” is first alluded to in *The Sportswriter*. Ford first mentions “independence” when Frank describes his ex-wife as having “too much pride and independence” to move back to Michigan after their divorce (*The Sportswriter* 8). “Independence” here, because it is coupled with “pride,” clearly connotes self-sufficiency, or personal will—core American values. Later in *The Sportswriter*, the word is used again as Frank describes “what his parents had taught [him] in their lives [was]...a sense of independence” (29). A “sense of independence” implies the word could now mean something different. “Sense” has to do with perception. A sense of independence implies that there is more than one type of independence. Frank’s parents gave him a perception of independence, which is different from saying they simply taught him to be proud and independent.

Ford links independence to death, namely the death of the father, and in doing so he gestures toward the density of “independence.” “The death of the father” is a layered

phrase when considering Ford, since it applies to him personally, professionally, and historically. Ford's own father died while Ford was still an adolescent, and this had a profound impact on his private life. Professionally, the death of the father can apply to the acknowledged influence of the "three kings" of modern writing (Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald) and Ford's attempts to free himself as writer by dethroning them. Historically, the American colony's separation ended the control of George III, enforcing a symbolic death. The idea of independence arising out of a death is a compelling and commanding one for analysis of Ford's layered discourse.

Between the publications of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, in August 1987, Ford wrote a memoir "My Mother, In Memory" for *Harper's Magazine*. In it the word "independence" is used frequently. Ford uses the word first in the memoir when he tells how his mother sat him down after his father's funeral and told him they "were now going to have to be more independent" (49), meaning "[s]he would not be able to look after [him] as she had done" (49). Later in the memoir, a slightly different meaning is connoted by "independence," as Ford describes not knowing the financial details of his mother's situation after his father's death:

I only mean to say I don't know how much she needed to work; how much money needed to come through; if we had debts, creditors. It may have been we didn't, and that she went to work just to thrust herself in the direction life seemed to be taking her—independence. Solitariness. All that that means. (51)

Certainly, this independence is different from having to fend for oneself, having to look out for oneself, or being proud and strong-willed. Independence, here, is coupled with "solitariness," which adds a darker dimension to the word, since "solitariness" connotes isolation and separation from others. However, Ford's familiarity with Ralph Waldo

Emerson's *Self-Reliance* cannot be ignored here, since Emerson's "solitariness" does not carry the same sombre meaning, though he too couples "independence" with "solitariness." Ford echoes Emerson: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (143). Solitude connotes nonconformity. Given the number of explicit references to *Self-Reliance* in *Independence Day*, Ford's pairing of "independence" with "solitariness" becomes a deliberate though subtle reflection of Emerson's statement. Consequently, what first appears to be a message lined with dark, melancholic implications is actually a message of his mother's praiseworthy value. Ford shows a duality in the meaning of "independence," and that dual meaning can be described in terms of opposition or apparent contradiction without resolution.

Even in the late 1980s, years before the publication of *Independence Day*, Ford touches on an interesting and commanding idea in just a few glimpses into character and lived life. These glimpses motivate the more detailed examination of independence in *Independence Day*, and capture what Ford will expand upon in that novel—the variegated and complicated meaning of independence within a postmodern context.

Ford uses the word "independence" rather sparingly in *Independence Day*. He first uses it in titles of books and documents, which textualizes the word, effectively evoking a cultural context for the inter-textual significance of "independence." Its first appearance in a form other than a title is significant, echoing what Ford had written previously in *The Sportswriter* and in "My Mother, In Memory" —the implication that it is

a parent's duty to bestow a sense of independence upon his or her child. "Independence" first appears in this context in *Independence Day* when Frank talks about being a parent to his son, Paul:

Naturally enough, I can explain almost nothing to him. Fatherhood by itself doesn't provide wisdom worth imparting. Though in preparation for our trip, I've sent him copies of *Self-Reliance* and the Declaration, and suggested he take a browse. These are not your ordinary fatherly offerings, I admit; yet I believe his instincts are sound and he will help himself if he can, and that independence is, in fact, what he lacks—independence from whatever holds him captive: memory, history, bad events he struggles with, can't control, but feels he should. (16)

"Independence" is used here to mean liberation, but not liberation from anything typically thought of as confining. The implication is that it is sometimes the connections people feel toward other things, other people, ideas, even objects, that actually frustrate rather than facilitate new or meaningful contact.

The symbolic value of the July 4th weekend starts to emerge, for readers see the parallel between the large-scale historical events and the smaller scale of events happening between Frank and Paul. The notion of parents not wanting to release their children, yet at the same time seeing their children needing to let go of some things in order to grow, has a narrative parallel in the historical relationship between the "Mother Land" and the colony of America. Throughout the novel, Ford draws upon turbulence, transition, resistance, and struggle to show the different sides of independence, namely a child's revolt and a loving father's incapacity to see himself as a tyrant.

Ironically, Frank, while he sees Paul's need to "let go," does not see himself as part of what needs letting go. Frank does not see Paul's need to distance himself from his father, and that is part of the problem between the father and son—part of the problem in

Frank's perception of independence. Frank has orchestrated the entire weekend to make Paul see things the way he himself sees things, to teach Paul independence—namely through providing him with texts and referring to historical events. A number of grievances the framers of "The Declaration of Independence" had against George III hold obvious symmetry with Frank and Paul's relationship. For instance, the motivation behind Frank's plan to take Paul to the Baseball and Basketball Halls of Fame can be read in this grievance: "He has called together Legislative Bodies at Places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the Depository of their public Records, for the sole Purpose of fatiguing them into Compliance with his Measures" (Jayne 176). If we consider Frank and Paul to be the "law makers" of their lives, partners in their familial relationship, then the rest of the passage seems parallel to Frank's weekend trip. After all, readers will recall Ann's reaction to Frank's announcement of his weekend plans for Paul: "He's not really a big baseball fan, is he?" (248) she says, insinuating how "unusual, uncomfortable, and distant" their meeting ground will be for Paul. Other grievances against the King also have a ring of similarity with Frank and Paul's relationship. For instance, the statement that: "He has Dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly Firmness his Invasions on the Rights of the People" (Jayne 176), could allude to Frank's dissolution of the institution of marriage—not to mention his connection to "houses" in real estate. It was the discovery of Frank's relationship with another woman that forced the family's separation, so it is essentially Frank's infraction that led to the dissolution of the family. "The Declaration" also regards this grievance against the King: "He has refused for a Long Time, after such

Dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the Dangers of Invasion from without, and Convulsions within” (Jayne 176). Frank’s divorce, his movement from one residence to another and back again, the ensuing relationships both he and Ann engage in after their separation, as well as the roles played by other experts, like counselors and psychiatrists who have since been brought into Paul’s life, resonate in this passage. “Invasions from without, and Convulsions from within” is a good expression of the stress placed on the divided family. The claim that “Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury” (Jayne 177) could represent Frank’s repeated and injurious leavetaking and separation from his children. In the narrative, these grievances make sense, thematically, when considered from Paul’s perspective, which makes Frank seem all the more destined for loss—as the King was.

Frank’s approach to helping Paul is plainly laid out in his preparatory reading of Carl Becker’s *The Declaration of Independence* and “The Declaration” itself. At the core of Becker’s book is an issue of perception, particularly with respect to how one should perceive the language of “The Declaration” as both political and literary. One would assume that Frank’s familiarity with Becker’s text influences how he reads “The Declaration of Independence,” for as Frank indicates, “[Becker] thought that the whole Declaration of Independence was an attempt to prove rebellion was the wrong word for what the founding fathers were up to. It was a war over a word choice” (8-9). Becker does make that claim, but he makes that claim while insisting on looking at the

Declaration in two ways: as a formal and stylistic literary composition—in which discourse and formal design are of particular importance—and as a political philosophy for a theory of government (Becker xv). Becker sees the Declaration as “a formal justification of an act already accomplished” (Becker 5), as a way to cast rebellion as a virtue (7-8). Indeed, Becker claims the Declaration is a document of carefully balanced explications and implications; grievances against the King are explicit (6-7), and implicit is the notion that the colonies became parts of the British Empire by voluntary acts (22); and, according to Becker, the balance of explication and implication is all for the purpose of creating a particular effect: “to leave a candid world wondering why the colonies had so long submitted to the oppressions of this King” (203).

Frank’s familiarity with Becker’s analysis conditions his reading of “The Declaration of Independence,” for having read Becker, Frank is able to view “The Declaration” as both a literary composition and a political philosophy. “The Declaration” is a fiction, but one that relates to the world. The implication of this two-fold reading of “The Declaration” is highly significant to the status of literary works. It prompts the inevitable question: Is all discourse fiction? Ford’s novel, however, has shown that such questions are redeeming in themselves. They enlighten readers to the necessity to question. Questioning texts, questioning world, is paramount to understanding Ford’s postmodernist fiction, which is not to say everything *is* a fiction, only that anything *could be*. Perceiving the double-voice is essential for seeing the fictionality of fiction and then accepting it for the role it plays in life. Ford shows that the contemporary novel

exemplifies this notion of baring all, of opening and revealing structures, of disillusioning for the sake of enrichment and replenishment.

Perceiving the doubleness of language is not a simple matter. Ford prepares readers to interpret doubleness by constructing their readiness. Ford's readers have witnessed Frank's construction, too, and consequently understand how he relates to the world. However, Frank's son models an alternative. Readers know Paul relates to the world differently than Frank does because Paul inhabits a different world than Frank's. Paul's way of seeing things, and his subsequent behavior, defines rebellion against his father. Paul's genuine rebellion plays out in the spirit of the rebellion so central to the American value of independence. Thus, Ford represents the generational conflict of rebelling against forefathers. Ironically, Frank fails to see himself as the one upon whom grievances are inevitably cast.

Unlike Frank, fourteen-year-old Paul does not see "The Declaration of Independence" as both literary composition and political philosophy. Paul does not even have knowledge of the details that led to the July 4th holiday and has no context in which to interpret the metaphor at work on this weekend. Frank's gesture of sending "The Declaration of Independence" and *Self-Reliance* to his son is motivated by his belief that Paul's "instinct" will be to regard those documents *as* instructive and insightful guides to living life. However, Frank's plan ultimately fails precisely because Paul's instincts have not developed independently of Frank's. In a telephone conversation with Paul, Frank asks him if he had looked at "The Declaration of Independence," and Paul simply replies,

“No” (20). When Frank picks Paul up for their weekend trip, he talks to him about the goings on of July 2, 1776, and is thinking:

It’s totally relevant—in my view—to Paul’s difficulty in integrating his fractured past with his hectic present so that the two connect up in a commonsense way and make him feel free and independent rather than staying disconnected and distracted and driving him bat-shit crazy. History’s lessons are subtle lessons, inviting us to remember and forget selectively, and therefore are much better than psychiatry’s, where you’re forced to remember everything. (259)

Frank’s statement here is particularly ironic: history’s lessons are subtle and he himself has missed an important subtlety—independence in part revolves around rebelling against the father (or father-figure/leader). Frank has chosen to resolve Paul’s “difficulty” by seeing an “integrated” and “commonsense” connection between the event of America’s independence and Paul’s present life. Frank’s memory of American history is selective and, for that, fictionalized.

Paul’s reaction to Frank’s discussion of the signing of “The Declaration” amplifies the resistance of the son towards the father. When Frank says, “John Adams...said getting the colonies all to agree to be independent together was like trying to get thirteen clocks to strike at the same second” (259), Paul responds by asking, “Who’s John Adams?” (259). When Frank tells him “[t]he original framers...wanted to be free to make new mistakes, not just making the same ones over and over” (260), Paul says, “Framers? Do you mean farmers?” (260). Again, Paul’s response evidences a lack of interest in his father’s agenda—a resistance to Frank’s attempt to be father-teacher. The generational conflict is very pronounced in Paul’s antagonism towards his father.

Frank persistently tries to teach his son, through allusion and subtlety, the facts about growing up and embracing change and transition. Late in the novel, when Frank

responds to Paul's question on the significance of Cooperstown, he even refers to his agenda as being a "syllabus": "'Baseball was supposedly dreamed up here in 1839, by Abner Doubleday, though nobody really believes that.' All info courtesy of brochures" (294). Important to the reading of this passage is the recognition that Frank does not tell Paul the information came from brochures; only readers know that detail, only readers see the source of Frank's knowledge. Frank continues by saying to Paul, "'[Baseball is] just a myth to allow customers to focus their interests and get the most out of the game. It's like the Declaration of Independence being signed on the Fourth of July, when it was actually signed some other time.' This, of course, is straight from avuncular old Becker and probably a waste of time now. Though I mean to persist" (294). The brochures and Becker show readers Frank's construction of his discourse and knowledge, a construction of which Paul is neither a part nor aware. Ford again highlights Frank's construction to readers, so when Frank continues his conversation with Paul, readers see how arbitrary his assertions must seem to Paul. Frank says:

"[Baseball is] shorthand to keep you from getting all bound up in unimportant details and missing some deeper point. I don't remember what the point is with baseball, though..."

"So this is all just bullshit," Paul says, watching out.

"Not exactly. A lot of things we think are true aren't, just like a lot of things that are, you don't have to give a shit about. You have to make your own assessments. Life's full of little potted lessons like that."

"Why, thank you, then..." He looks at me with amusement, but he is scornful....

Though I'm still not to be turned aside, under the syllabus topic of separating the wheat from the chaff, or possibly it's the woods from the trees. (294-295)

Paul rebels with sarcasm and irony. He resists his father's ordering of information by making ridiculous statements and farcifying Frank's gestures. To confirm this point,

readers now see a veritable soup of metaphors: metaphors of real estate, Independence Day, baseball, and now the additive cliché expressions of “separating the wheat from the chaff” and “the woods from the trees.” Frank is grasping for the language that will facilitate communication between himself and his son, but the symbolic language structures fail, and the concrete images and language of his metaphors do not effectively capture or communicate his urgent message.

Frank’s use of symbolic language to teach his son new perceptions exaggerates the flaw of Frank’s own perception. While Frank’s efforts are admirable, readers see that pointing out myths and falsities, whose purposes, according to Frank, are to create a sense of community, is confusing for Paul since his private turbulence is defined by feeling different and separated from the norm. Paul could glean from Frank’s advice that he should uphold a myth, adopt a façade, that his feelings at that point are “unimportant details.” Paul’s response to Frank’s advice evidences his confusion. In an unsuspecting moment of genuine communication he says: “I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do” (295). Frank’s assumptions of Paul’s instincts being sound, his being able to “help himself if he can,” and his perception “that independence is, in fact, what he lacks” (16) are misplaced. They sabotage his attempt to meaningfully communicate with his son. Paul’s instincts are clearly not developed enough to perceive his father’s subtle message, and because Paul will never share Frank’s world of experiences and insights, because Paul is a product of reactions and rebellions against his father’s generation, his response to Frank will always seem irrational and incomprehensible. This irrationality is shown again when Frank revives the “independence” metaphor by saying, “You know...those

guys who founded this whole place thought if they didn't shake loose of old dependencies they'd be vulnerable to the world's innate wildness—" (297), to which Paul responds, "By place do you mean Cooperstown?" (297). Of course, Frank meant America, not Cooperstown. Paul asserts independence by willfully misinterpreting Frank's words. Frank can not say or do anything to change his son's perception, given Paul's determination to revolt against his father because of his natural resistance to his father's generation.

Paul's behavior towards his father's acts of guidance is typically adolescent; he reacts with mockery and sarcasm, plainly displaying for readers how father and son do not reach common ground. The tone of "The Declaration" is again echoed here; the colonies pit their grievances against the King because they see the King's treatment of them as being like that of an overbearing father towards an adolescent. Paul's mockery and physical attack on Frank's copy of *Self-Reliance* is emblematic of Paul's revolt against his father, and even more symbolic of the conflict Ford places at the core of his examination of independence. Paul's acts of independence are not recognized by Frank, nor are they even recognized as such by Paul. Paul begins by mocking *Self-Reliance*:

" 'The great man,'" Paul reads in a pseudo-reverent Charlton Heston voice, " 'is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.' Blah, blah, blah, blah-blah, blah, blah. Glub, glub, glub. 'The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character.' Quack, quack, quack, quack. I am the great man, the grape man, the grapefruit, I am the fish stick—". (291)

Paul's quacking and playing with language antagonizes Frank, but it also responds directly and immediately to Emerson's advice. In that passage, Emerson discourages his

readers from conforming to language and ideas that have become “dead,” meaning that repeating or simply mimicking what has been said and done in the past is weak, that it “scatters your force.” Paul’s nonsensical language is one way of rebelling against his father’s reverent esteem of Emerson’s text. When Paul suddenly rips the page from the book, Frank calls him a “complete nitwit asshole” for doing so (191). While it is not evident to Frank, readers see that Paul’s “instincts,” while immature and unsophisticated, are to react against a pushy father. Paul folds the torn page and proceeds to eat it, clearly another radical and antagonizing action towards Frank. However, Paul can again be seen as taking Emerson’s advice—though not in a way Frank would expect. Emerson preaches in *Self-Reliance*: “[w]hoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist” (141). Essentially he is advising his readers to read his text, take its messages into account, but to then “do your work” (144)—be a nonconformist. Paul literally ingests and digests Emerson’s text, perhaps in the most perfectly nonconformist way.

While the conversation in this last passage primarily confirms Paul’s rebellion against his father, it also reveals something more about Frank. Frank does not see himself as an “old dependency” needing to be shaken loose. Frank does not see that his attachment to teaching his son an important life lesson is actually frustrating rather than facilitating meaningful communication. Ultimately, Frank’s persistence illustrates that one can be blind to the very principles one is trying to impose when strong emotions, despite the best of intentions, are involved.

One would think that perceptual blindness, especially in those trying to teach and explain, would be a character flaw; however, in this context Frank’s blindness actually

indicates something promising. While it does little to help the relationship between Frank and his son, and in fact contributes to a near literal blindness for his son, it does uphold the idea that love is a very demanding and consuming emotion. Basic, even primal, human emotions play a role in determining the behavior used to isolate oneself or connect oneself to others. This development offers promise not typical of the general moral malaise often associated with postmodernist fiction. Frank eventually sees his own weakness when he realizes he does not know what is best for his son. As he says, “The first adult conversation a man can have with his son is one in which he acknowledges he doesn’t know what’s good for his own child and has only an out-of-date idea of what’s bad” (329). He continues to offer advice, such as “You’re trying to keep too much under control” (329), and “You can’t make everything fit down right. Everything doesn’t fit down right. You have to let some things go, finally” (351). The irony of Frank’s advice is clear—he needs to be more self-aware, take his own advice. The very notions he is trying to instill in his child—relinquishing control, letting go—are contradicted by his unwavering insistence that his advice and knowledge be accepted and applied.

There is a point, however, when Frank is finally, and permanently, swayed from his agenda. As he and Paul look out over the stadium field, a team of “fantasy” players takes position (352). O’Malley’s Fantasy Baseball Camp players have photos taken with placards labeling them the Braves or the Athletics and then the players move onto the field, indulging in their desire to act out a day in the life of a major league player. This simulation of reality is the backdrop for Frank’s conversation with Paul about letting go of things he can not control. The irony of this scene is pronounced by the juxtaposition of

Frank with those players. Frank, like those fantasy players, is trying to live out the day in an illusion. Frank is not really being honest with Paul about his own uncertainties, or his own struggle with independence, and, unlike the fantasy players, Frank is not self-aware enough to see his act *as* an act. The real turning point for Frank comes when his son asks Frank if he, Paul, might have been abused (351). Frank is clearly shocked and quite hurt:

Now would be the moment to bring to light what a quirky old duck Jefferson was—the practical idealist *qua* grammarian—his whole life spent gadgeting out the mysteries of the status quo in quest of a firmer foothold on the future. Or possibly I could borrow a baseball metaphor having to do with some things that happen inside the white lines and those that happen out.

Only I am suddenly stopped cold. Not what I'd planned. (352)

From this point on in the novel, for the remainder of Frank's narrative, he retires his agenda of subtle innuendo about life's lessons, and immediately a gloomy tone takes over, almost as if he feels defeated because his agenda for the weekend did not fit as he had planned. Frank is shocked into a new level of self-awareness, and starts to see the futility of his agenda. He does not mention "The Declaration of Independence" to Paul again, nor does he allude to any historical or literary parallels. Instead, he notices that the "ballpark has a lazy, melancholy carnival fruitiness afloat with it now" (353). This scene represents a turning point in the novel because Frank, who was so intent on teaching and guiding his son, has gone off course, and gives up on the metaphors and symbolism of independence and revolution—the ways he tried to tell Paul rather than show Paul how to live. The gloom he perceives indicates his frustration and defeat.

Frank's abandoning of his agenda may represent a turning point in the novel, but it does not mark the end of Frank and Paul's struggle. The images of rebellion and revolt are now pronounced in the physical interactions between father and son. Symbolic

parallels between Frank and Paul and the larger historical events of the July 4th commemoration continue. When Frank and Paul enter the batting cage area, it is intended to be a pause on their way to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Frank decides to take a few swings, but as his frustration builds from failing to make contact with the balls pitched at him, Paul's sarcasm and mockery builds, and their interaction with each other turns sinister. Frank despises Paul's attitude, and almost in revenge he goads Paul on to try the batting cage. His words fail to persuade Paul, and this failure seems to mount onto his previous failed attempts to "reach" his son. A physical struggle ensues, and the image of battle, of revolution is manifested. Frank's frustration peaks, and his frustration is both physical and linguistic, for he says, "I come toward him suddenly, pity and murder and love each crying for a time at bat. It is not so rare a fatherly lineup. Children, who sometimes may be angels of self-discovery, are other times the worst people in the world" (358-359). Metaphors of sport and religion replace Frank's metaphors of rebellion and independence. Frank and Paul embrace in an awkward hug-wrestle, in which Frank wants to "squeeze" Paul into "giv[ing] up the demon, renounc[ing] all, collaps[ing] into tears only [he] can minister to" (359). In other words, Frank wants to physically force Paul to change, to see things his way, and at the same time to need him and to depend on his fatherly guidance. He says, "I don't entirely know what I'm doing, or what I want him to do: change, promise, concede, guarantee me something important will be better or pan out, all expressed in a language for which there are no words" (359). Clearly, this is a language for which there are no words, as his grappling among metaphors testifies. Frank's grip on Paul draws blood from a pre-existing wound, and this

image of parent-child battle, this image of a parent with his child's blood on his hands, completes the image that has always been in the background—the image of independence spawning rebellion, and words leading to bloodshed.

For Frank and Paul, the cost of rebellion has been both physical and psychological, and, ironically, while Frank has been intent on teaching Paul a sense of independence, he neglected to tell Paul, or even to fully realize for himself, the costs of independence. Frank did not teach “independence” as liberation, freedom, and opportunity to make contact with others, or as possibly loneliness, injury, and uncertainty.

Paul's entering the batting cage, and his subsequent self-induced injury, is the climax of the physical action in the novel, and the climax of his rebellion. Frank observes:

[T]o my surprise, [Paul] takes a short-ungainly step forward onto the plate and turns his face to the machine, which, having no brain, or heart, or forbearance, or fear, no experience but throwing, squeezes another ball through its dark warp, out through the sprightly air, and hits my son full in the face and knocks him flat down on his back with a terrible, loud, *thwock*. After which everything changes. (361)

When Frank describes Paul as he departs into the ambulance as being “like a war casualty” (367), the image of rebellion is complete. Paul is a war casualty. He had just done battle with an imposing force, his father, and while battle does not promise revolution and does not guarantee independence, Paul's battle with his father, and even his self-induced injury, produces significant results.

The climax of *Independence Day* occurs during the less dramatic episode surrounding Paul's preparation for surgery. Ford holds true to his claim that he is

interested in what happens after the dramatic moment has passed (Majeski para. 22). In a novel whose primary action involves the thoughts and perceptions of the protagonist, the climax must revolve around a change in that protagonist's thoughts, thus highlighting the character's design and construction. As Paul awaits surgery, Frank enters the hospital room and the doctor, Dr. Tisaris, signals for Frank to be silent, to not reveal himself to Paul. At first, this gesture by Dr. Tisaris seems odd, since one would assume doctors would want children to know their parents are close by for reassurance. However, Ford uses Dr. Tisaris's actions to bring about the narrative circumstances necessary for insight into Frank's character. Frank is in his son's presence, but his son does not know it; therefore, Frank has the opportunity to witness what Paul is like when his father is not around. Ford gives Frank an unusual direct-observer perspective of his son's behavior in his son's world, unconditioned by his father's presence. Thinking he is alone with the doctor, Paul starts to unload some of his thoughts, and the scene is emblematic of personal independence: "Tell my dad he tries to control too much. He worries too much too" (381), and then later:

"Do you have any kids?" Paul asks....

"Nope," she says, smiling jauntily. "Not yet."

I should stay now, hear his views on child rearing, a subject he has unique experience with. Only my feet won't hear of it and are itching back, shifting direction, then shoving off, getting out of range fast across the bullpen, headed for the doors, much as when I heard him years ago conferring ardently with his made-up "friends" at home and couldn't bear it either, was made too weak and sick at heart by his inspired and almost perfect sufficiency.

"If you have any," I hear him say, "don't ever—" Then that's it, and I am quickly out through the metal doors and back into the cool watery room for relatives, friends, well-wishers, where I now belong. (382)

Frank's description here is symbolic of his role as pitcher—he has been lobbing ideas and philosophies at his son all weekend—and his relentless efforts are crystallized in the image of a baseball smashing into the face of his son. Frank sees himself as the one against whom grievances have been cast, and for a loving father who was just trying to find a way to help his son, this is shockingly traumatic. Ford chooses not to reveal Paul's advice here because he needs to remind readers that this scene is not about Paul, but about Frank's realization that his son is becoming independent. Paul has formed an opinion of his parents, has thought critically about them, and is not so readily led by them anymore. Seeing his child's developing self-sufficiency, Frank then sees that he does not belong in that hospital room, like an invader, but his place is outside the room—symbolically representing Frank's withdrawal from his son's orbit, no doubt a difficult move for a determined and loving father to make. Again, England's withdrawal from the American colony plays in the background, reinforcing the historical theme of rebellion, revolution, independence.

The postmodernist tenet of textual uncertainty is represented in the climax of *Independence Day*. Frank leaves the hospital room, but his physical leavetaking is not the action Ford emphasizes. Frank's new perception is symbolized by his departure from the room, a symbolic gesture of walking away from the idea of controlling his son's transition into adulthood, walking away from the compulsion to determine what comes next. Ford presents independence as having qualities of leavetaking and reconnection simultaneously, and Frank's own thoughts confirm as much. When Frank says of the Markhams, who have acquiesced and are now renting his property on Clio Street, that

there are “certain fires gone out; other, smaller ones being ignited” (416), he alludes to his own transition. As well, readers piece together Frank’s new perception, and Ford involves his readers in this aspect in order to resist presenting unity and resolution within the text.

In the last chapter of the novel, Ford provides distinct images of release and transition, two qualities he associates with independence. The Markhams let go of the idea of finding the perfect house, and actually end up renting Frank’s property, one Joe Markham once referred to as a “shot gun shack” (87) because it was in a black neighborhood. As well, Karl Bemish, Frank’s birch beer stand employee, offers very sharp insight into Frank’s character when he says to Frank:

What I think is, Frank, you *seem* one way and *are* another, if you want to know the gospel truth....You’re a conservative in a fuckin’ liberal’s zoot suit...And that’s why you have so much effing trouble with your son. Your message is all mixed up. You’re lucky he’ll have anything to do with you at all. (432)

Karl’s insight reinforces readers’ perception of Frank because he says what readers have detected early on: Frank has an imperfect perception of himself. Karl’s character functions as a reader within the text, since Karl reads Frank’s mixed messages and comes to the same conclusion readers of the novel have. Finally, Frank, too, comments on the “false promise of the Sixties” he has been holding onto:

We want to feel our community as a fixed, continuous entity...as being anchored into the rock of permanence; but we know it’s not, that in fact beneath the surface (or rankly all over the surface) it’s anything but. We and it are anchored only to contingency like a bottle on a wave, seeking a quiet eddy. The very effort of maintenance can pull you under. (439)

This statement is an admission for Frank, an admission of what he has been struggling with by trying to live out a suitable compromise between what the sixties promised and

what life provides. The Markhams' decision to rent from Frank, Karl's opinion of Frank, and Frank's admission, provide images of letting go, release, and represent density in independence.

Independence saturates this novel, both its contents and construction. Richard Ford's literary independence is a product of his merger of modernist and early postmodernist modes of fiction, and his subsequent questioning of the ontological status of fictions both in the literary realm and in lived social reality. He writes about life in contemporary America, and writes about it in a fictional format appropriate to its literary-historical time. *Independence Day* builds upon the postmodernism of *The Sportswriter* by expanding upon the first novel's ironic doubleness. Ford examines the private, cultural and social implications of a postmodernist perspective by investigating themes of theatricality and performance in lived experience, and by showing how they relate to the fantasies and illusions projected by American culture. Ford contributes to a postmodernist aesthetic of contingency, uncertainty, and doubleness by writing a fiction that challenges ontological boundaries and provokes examination of contemporary American experience.

Conclusion

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* show there is a difference between “reacting against” and “reacting to” the literature that precedes them. One of the problems with trying to place Richard Ford in context with other postmodernist writers is the flaw of literary criticism that compels readers to pit authors against something or someone—in this case modernists and early postmodernists—in order to generate dialogue concerning the author’s work. Critic Frank Shelton deems it necessary to consider Ford a “new realist” for the ways he explored “the nature of the American experience” (147) by reacting against the modes of fiction produced in the 1960s and 1970s and refusing to “experiment with the form of fiction” (149). Shelton’s statement evidences a quite narrow consideration of experimentation and a rash categorization of Ford as a novelist. The metafictional aspects of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* are easily missed if reader look for imitation of the 1960s’ and 1970s’ procedures. *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* refuse to conform to the methods of early postmodernism, and Ford creates a subtler yet equally innovative fiction. Ford uses these novels to synthesize modern and postmodern literary elements into a new hybrid form.

Ford’s Frank Bascombe novels are hybrids of modernist and postmodernist fiction. Modernist fiction’s tendency to explain its subjects within a myth of social and cultural unity, and its use of a singular self to order and centralize control, attempts to embrace knowledge as a totality. Frank’s claim in *The Sportswriter* that teachers are “all expert in the arts of explaining, explicating and dissecting, and by these means [promote] permanence” (222) is a thinly veiled critique of that modernist tendency. The teachers to

whom Frank refers are literary academics, so Ford's indirect target reveals itself quite plainly. However, Frank's narrative in both *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* is delivered as a sort of explanation. The *sujet* of the novels exhibit a modernist tendency. Frank is telling his audience why his marriage ended, why he quit writing novels, and why his son is behaving in a delinquent manner. He back-tracks to past events as a way of giving insight into the present, so readers know such details as how he and his ex-wife first met, when their family dog was accidentally killed, what he, Frank, was thinking the night his ex-wife discovered a stash of letters he had from another woman, and readers even know that Frank had not had an extra-marital affair (at least not a sexual one) with this other woman—though he engaged in several others. Readers know how Frank came to be an owner/operator of a birch beer stand, and that he felt intense dislike for the crippled ex-football player he interviewed for his sports magazine, and readers learn quite a bit about Frank's step-brother, Irv Ornstein, with whom he has had no contact since his mother's death but who happens to be at the scene of his son's assault by a mechanically pitched baseball. All of this information is offered by Frank as a way of explaining, but what makes the novels innovative is that this information does little to make sense of the present. It creates a context, but it does not offer a unified explanation based on that knowledge. The modernist element is there, but it is there as a *part* of the novels' message and not as the whole.

Ford has designed *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* for intertextual reading. He subtly mirrors other texts, like William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," while at the same time explicitly referring to

Self-Reliance and “The Declaration of Independence.” Ford’s subtle manoeuvres are sometimes in the form of an image—like Frank peering at his neighbours in the style of Benji peering through the fence at the golf game—and at other times mere words elicit intertextuality—like the pairing of “independence” with “solitude” as a reference to Emerson’s *Self-Reliance*. Readers are constantly re-contextualizing familiar sights, sounds, and images while reading *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, and Ford’s constant display of textuality and constructedness pronounces his view that lived life is at least partly the experience of textuality. Frank’s status as narrator/character epitomizes self as construction of texts. In both novels Ford makes Frank into a product of both the spoken word and the scripted word, thus highlighting the textuality of the novels.

This emphasis on textuality creates a doubleness of meaning and a co-existence of modes of discourse. Ford designs the novels to challenge ontological boundaries as readers must accept the novels’ ironic condition of being simultaneously spoken and scripted. Consequently, readers see the narrative on multiple levels, and they read more than what Frank divulges in his thoughts and speech. Because of this perception, the *fabula* is distinctly postmodernist, for it requires reading both beyond the narrative and into the narrative’s design. Readers see the artificiality of the fiction, and they read it as part of the fiction. Ultimately, readers see that meanings can be reassigned and born anew from what previous language had set down.

Ford’s development of postmodernist techniques places him firmly within an evolving postmodern aesthetic. Ford advocates trespassing boundaries between modes of discourse and, therefore, between worlds, which puts into practice Brian McHale’s theory

of a postmodernist ontological dominant. However, Ford's trespassing is not as radical or subversive as earlier postmodernist fiction, and so his novels do not match identically with those McHale placed in that category. In a similar way, Wilde and Hutcheon's theories construct an appropriate scope of postmodernist irony—suspensive irony—in which to discuss Ford's resistance to fixed meanings within the text. However, Ford's novels do not coincide directly with suspensive irony either, for they do not exhibit the reductive and negative philosophy of what Wilde calls a minified reality: “all is for the worst in the worst of all possible worlds” (143). Ford does not embrace chaos, does not put forth a view of the world as grim and comic, or superfluous and unpleasant—all of which Wilde associates with suspensiveness (144-46). Ford reacts to such qualities in fiction by having his protagonist express sincere dislike of the cynicism that accompanies such fiction. The danger of these fictions is that they become so focused on the individual that connections to others—people and texts—are lost completely, and fiction is divorced from any connection to lived life. When forced to pick between fiction and life, there is a risk that readers, like Frank, will “turn from literature back to life” (*The Sportswriter* 47).

In his 1992 Hopwood Lecture, “What We Write, Why We Write It, and Who Cares,” Ford proclaimed his dislike for what he saw deconstructionists doing: “turning students of literature against literature” (374). With *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* Ford re-introduces society and social ideas to postmodernist fiction and, quite literally, turns students of literature back to literature through intertextuality in his own novels. Writing after the earlier, more formally radical postmodernists, Ford's way of not conforming, his way of doing his own work instead of imitating theirs, is to present

novels that are to be read with a consciousness of their fictiveness, the fictiveness of contemporary life, yet an awareness of the connection fiction has to lived social reality. Ford perfectly embodies Emerson's nonconformism, for as Emersonian scholar Cyrus Patell points out, the genius of self-reliance as an ideology is that "it enforces conformity at the very moment it extols individuality" (441). This ironic nonconformism suits Ford well, for his novels advance that same ironic theme: see my fiction as fiction and at the same time see that it sanctions lived life. In that Hopwood lecture, Ford makes the statement: "As a writer, I don't believe in 'groups.' Generalities...have never been sufficiently consistent with my experience" (379). One wonders, what must Ford think of "categories" as a *reader*? As readers we construct discourse around labels and categories, but as readers of Ford's fiction we are left to concede that whatever becomes the category for the best next thing after early postmodernism, *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* will be in it.

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