Novel Arguments argues that innovative fiction — by which is meant writing that has been variously labeled as postmodern, metafictional, experimental — extends our ways of thinking about the world, rejecting the critical consensus that, under the rubrics of postmodernism and metafiction, homogenizes this fiction as autonomous and self-absorbed. Play, self-consciousness, and immanence — supposed symptoms of innovative fiction’s autonomy — are here reconsidered as integral to its means of engagement. The book advances a concept of the “argument” of fiction as a construct welding structure and content into a highly evolved and expressive form. The argument, not the content, is established as the site of a fiction’s “aboutness,” and thus the usual emphasis upon the generalities of innovative form is replaced by a concern for the logic of specific literary effects.

Close readings of five important innovative novels by Donald Barthelme, Ishmael Reed, Robert Coover, Walter Abish, and Kathy Acker show how they articulate matters of substance, social engagement, and ideological currency by virtue of the act of innovation. Walsh deftly argues for a new understanding of fictional cognition at the theoretical level, and, in an act of unmatched critical creativity, discards altogether the flattening totalities of received postmodern formulations.
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Preface

My interest in innovative fiction began with questions that must occur to everyone concerned with contemporary writing: What, at this stage in its history, can the novel do? What is it good for? I felt that the innovative fiction many American writers were producing from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties offered an impressive range of answers to those questions. I wanted to think more carefully about what those novels were doing, and how they were doing it. It seemed appropriate to concentrate upon American writers, and not only because so much more innovative fiction came out of America than anywhere else. One of the reasons for that was the strong critical response to such writing in America, both positive and negative, which was itself related to the multiple social and cultural polarizations of the sixties. Yet in one respect this response was strangely uniform: the terms in which the enthusiasts of innovative writing sought to explain its innovation were almost indistinguishable from those in which its detractors sought to dismiss it. The growth and decline of interest in innovative fiction over this period seemed to reflect less a contest between views of innovation than a shifting evaluation of the same view. And since this view had to do with what innovative fiction was supposedly not doing (engaging with reality, being serious, even making sense), it gave little support to my own feeling that these writers had greatly enhanced the novel’s means of doing these things. The case for innovative fiction as a valuable extension of our ways of thinking about the world was left largely unargued.
The book I have written attempts to make that argument, in general terms as well as by appeal to specific examples. In doing so, it pays close attention to the history of innovative fiction’s reception in America, in the hope of releasing such fiction from a critical debate that has both sustained and discredited it. My intention has been to demonstrate and explain the nature of the misrepresentation, by advocates and opponents alike, that has consistently distracted criticism from an understanding of how innovative novels work. In chapter 1, I outline my own view of the means to such an understanding. I pursue that objective through the remaining five chapters, each of which is devoted to the interpretation of an exemplary work.

In the opening chapter I first identify the quality by which innovative fiction has been characterized throughout the period in question: its autonomy. Innovative novels, in various ways, have been taken to reject the fundamental concern with their social context that is an axiomatic for the realist novel. I show how this view gained currency from the misinterpretation of innovative writers’ own comments, and from the critics’ attempts to articulate the idea of autonomy in terms of emergent theoretical preoccupations. In particular, I consider the idea of autonomy in its three most common manifestations: as play, as self-consciousness and as immanence. The presence of these qualities in innovative fiction has been taken as a sign of its autonomy; my contention is that the apparent theoretical foundations for this, notably in structuralism and post-structuralism, have no such implications. Rather, a proper attention to the novels themselves reveals these same qualities in a new light, as integral to their means of engagement. In trying to specify what such a proper attention would be I have advanced a concept of the argument of fiction, as a means to displace criticism’s too purely formal interest in innovation. I contrast the utility of this perspective on innovative fiction with the obfuscating results of criticism’s obsession with postmodernism, and show the paradoxical self-referentiality of that discourse. It turns out that the self-referentiality of postmodernist criticism leaves it susceptible to the charge of autonomy in a way that, strikingly, does not apply to the use of metafictional self-reference by innovative writers.

One of the points about innovative fiction I want to insist upon is that, contrary to the impression of uniformity conveyed by much
critical discussion, it has been remarkable for the diversity of its forms and the breadth of its preoccupations. My choice of writers and novels to discuss at length was influenced more by the wish to convey this diversity than by any misguided attempt to make them individually or collectively representative. The novels I have chosen span a period from 1975 to 1986—that is, from somewhere close to the peak of critical enthusiasm for innovative fiction to a point well down the decline in its status; or, from the urbane affability of Donald Barthelme, whose short stories were concurrently appearing in The New Yorker, to the subcultural intensity of Kathy Acker, writing and living abroad in London. My analysis of these novels seeks to demonstrate, by attending closely to the dynamics of form and substance, that they each achieve an effective articulation of their particular concerns by virtue of their innovation.

I have been using the phrase “innovative fiction” as if its meaning were self-evident, but since this is hardly the case I had better make some attempt to explain myself. In fact, “innovative fiction” is a quite deliberately vague label—it is intended to suggest the broadest of literary orientations, not a taxonomic category or a coherent aesthetic ideology, and certainly not a literary movement. It is an avoidance, for just this reason, of the several current terms that might be supposed to intersect with it. The two most prevalent alternatives, “postmodern fiction” and “metafiction,” are inadequate to such a criterion, as well as being the subject of the more particular objections I raise in the opening chapter. I want a term that remains open to literary possibilities, rather than foreclosing them, and accordingly the only categorical definition of innovative fiction I can countenance is a negative one.

I would define innovative fiction, then, by distinguishing it from an equally capacious idea of realist fiction: it is not realist fiction in that it does not adhere to an aesthetic founded upon mimesis. I must immediately insist that this distinction is not antithetical, but a matter of degree. Any adequate concept of the realist tradition needs to recognize the extent to which mimetic criteria have varied throughout its history, and to register the equilibrium it has always negotiated between mimesis and the needs of narrative mediation. Also, such archetypally modernist forms as stream-of-consciousness writing
should be acknowledged as obedient to fundamentally mimetic imperatives. While innovative fictions cannot be understood in mimetic terms, they are always mimetic to a certain degree. Indeed, no intelligible narrative can manage entirely without mimesis, which is as irreducible as its temporality and causality. The distinction rests, then, upon innovative fiction’s relative subordination of mimetic criteria, and the logic of this subordination is that mimetic representation is not conceived of as the primary vehicle of its engagement with the world.

Mimetic principles dictate that realist fiction efface its formal attributes in the interests of immediacy, whereas innovative fiction is characterized by the prominence and inventiveness of its forms. But this does not equate innovation with constant formal novelty—such a definition implies that unconventional forms are exhausted in the use, and condemns innovative fiction to be eternally fugitive from the formally déjà fait. It is common enough for hostile critics to dismiss innovative fiction by discovering sources for its formal strategies, so revealing that it has “all been done before”—as if this proved it in some way fraudulent. I think it a mistake to situate recent innovative fiction in some anxious relation to the modernist avant-garde, not because any particular idea of modernism is by now defunct, but because the metaphor of the avant-garde is. Contemporary innovative writers do not present themselves as the van of formal experimentation’s triumphant march through literary history, because such a linear progress no longer seems applicable to the art of fiction. Instead, they are taking up the multitude of possibilities made available to that art by a less deferential attitude towards the aesthetic law of mimesis.

Of course the idea of innovation does imply a “making new” of some sort, but it is not of form in isolation, for form cannot be dissociated from substance. Innovative fiction aims instead at a making new of fictional cognition—its originality lies in neither its form nor its substance but in its argument. I offer this term as my best attempt to name a concept central to the reading of innovative fiction. The argument of a novel may be provisionally defined as the formal articulation of its substance, the substance articulated in its form. The word “argument” is current in literary terminology as the
abstract of a work: Milton offered such arguments before each book of *Paradise Lost*, as did Addison for Dryden’s translation of the *Aeneid*; and Fielding, invoking the aura of epic origins, appropriated the practice to the contents pages of his novels. It would take no great neologistic enterprise to transfer this sense from the abstract to the work itself, and there already would be a term that to some extent subsumes the aspects of substance and form: “argument” as (an abstract of) both the significant content of the work in hand, and the narrative structure expressing that content. But I can appeal to the more general senses of the word in order to clarify and consolidate this double aspect. The *OED* offers several senses in which “argument” is to be understood as discursive matter of a particular sort; but also the sense in which it indicates the form of a discourse, as “a connected series of statements.”¹ “Argument,” then, can mean the *structure* of proof, or its *material*. A more general formulation of these two possible applications of the word gives me the duality of reference—to the form of the referent and to its substance—that I need. The distinction can be seen in common usage: “the argument is about . . .” takes the form as given, and proceeds to the particulars of substance; but “the argument is that . . .” assumes the substance, and seeks to elucidate the form of the reasoning. The term “argument,” then, contains both formal and substantial senses in exactly the right relation, that of complementary *aspects* of the same phenomenon.

Defined in this way, the argument of a novel can be understood as the sum of its effects. It is not to be confined to the rational and assertive, but includes the imaginary, the interrogative, the aesthetic and especially the emotional qualities of the novel. By paying attention to the argument of fiction, I have tried to show how to avoid treating the form of innovative fiction as the whole of its rationale. Criticism that falls into this trap, whether it is with enthusiasm or distaste, robs fiction of its specificity and finally renders it trivial. As I hope my discussion of these novels will show, it is far from that.
Acknowledgments

This book began as a doctoral thesis, under the supervision of Tony Tanner; my thanks go first of all to him, for the measure of his criticism and for his generous advocacy of my work ever since. I would also like to thank John Harvey, Rod Mengham, Ian Bell and Jean Chothia, who have all read and commented upon this work at various stages, and been active in their support. My editors at Cambridge University Press, Vicki Cooper in Cambridge and Susan Chang and Stephanie Doyle in New York, have been industrious in my interest. I am grateful to Selwyn College, Cambridge, for the Keasbey Research Fellowship in American Studies during which this project was completed.