Introduction

The title of this book states its thesis, that through the works of these authors there runs a common theme in the musical sense, an original air that appears in ever changing guise among the fourteen books considered here, variations on a story that has the kind of multipurpose inner harmony that in music is an essential prerequisite to a canonical theme. It is only because they are read here together, of course, that from these texts something like a canon emerges; reading them in light of each other, putting them together in a particular way, is a critical activity that finds, however, a distinct counterpart in canonic composition. A canon true to its name is a puzzle, as are, for example, the fourteen enigmatic circle canons recently discovered on the inside back cover of a copy of the Goldberg Variations annotated by the composer; written in Bach's own hand, they are based on the first eight notes of the ground of the aria on which the preceding thirty variations were composed. They are not, however, written out in their entirety. Instead, clues are provided to indicate the kind of canonic treatment required in each case—the number of voices, the point at which these voices should enter. Yet a great deal is still left to the ingenuity of the reader, in particular the manner in which the later voices imitate the first: though they are all rigorous copies of the subject, they may well be inverted, reversed, and/or begin at a different pitch (indeed, at least two of these new additions to the Bach canon can be solved in more
than one way).\footnote{1} The name of this form of imitative composition derives from καθώς, rule; it calls for the discovery and application of a hidden rule, and in each case a different one, a rule somehow suggested by the nature of the theme and by whatever clues are given. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this illustrative quotation:

1609, Douland, *Ornith. Microl.*, 48: A Canon . . . is an imaginarie rule, drawing that part of the Song which is not set downe out of that part which is set downe. Or it is a Rule, which doth wittily discover the secret of a Song.

Like Nicholas of Cusa's conception of human history, this process of drawing out what is already there is the *explicatio* of a *complicato*. Douglas Hofstadter, in his recent *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, raises an interesting question about this drawing-out procedure: "How hard are you allowed to pull?" For there are instances—the solving of enigmatic canons, the transformation through DNA from molecule to organism—when "the pulling-out may involve such complicated operations that it makes you feel you are putting in more information than you are pulling out" (*GEB*, 159).\footnote{2} Drawing, however, upon the example of the genetic meaning contained in DNA, "one of the best possible examples of implicit meaning," he argues that even here, where "[i]n order to convert genotype [molecule] into phenotype [organism], a set of mechanisms far more complex than the genotype must operate on the genotype" (*GEB*, 160), the arduousness and complexity of the pulling-out process are not in themselves evidence that any meaning was added through the interaction of message with interpreter, or of DNA with its necessary chemical context, that was not already there. The test is whether the original message has "enough compelling inner logic that its context [the chemical context necessary for DNA to become, through the transcribing RNA, protein; or the cultural context necessary for a composition of J. S. Bach (in the form of a record sent swirling through space, according to Hofstadter's example, without benefit of a record player, to be picked up by some alien but highly intelligent civilization) to be deciphered and enjoyed] will be restored automatically whenever intelligence of a high enough level comes in contact with it. If some message did have that context-restoring property, then it would seem reasonable to consider the meaning of the message as an inherent property of the message" (*GEB*, 164). Even a molecule of DNA, Hofstadter maintains, "sent out to seek its fortune in the universe" would contain enough inner logic to enable a highly advanced civilization "to deduce from its chemical structure what kind of chemical environment it seemed to want and then supply such an environment" (*GEB*, 175).
Providing a context is the aim of this book, although it is not easy to say which is the context and which the original message: Fowles, Irving, and Barthes (and Goethe and Balzac) both illuminate and are illuminated by Tobit, as well as by each other. And it is not clear that what they wrote was influenced by that text from the Old Testament Apocrypha in the traditional sense. But read in the perspective of Tobit, Fowles’s most recent works of fiction, Irving’s novels, and Roland Barthes’s *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* begin to show a unity they had not revealed before, both in themselves and among each other. It is their repetition of the story in Tobit that brings them together; that such a reunion of texts of independent origins is possible is surely due to what could be called the compelling inner logic of that original text. Like the first eight notes of the bass of the Goldberg Variations’ aria, that ancient account of how Tobias became Sarah’s eighth and final husband is so constructed that its story doesn’t end when its plot does, but continues, its hero reappearing in the person of at least eight later protagonists: Charles Smithson, Daniel Martin, T. S. Garp, Fred Trumper, Werther, Daniel d’Arthez, Roland Barthes, and a certain Phaedrus.

What follows, then, is simply the result of the discovery of something akin to Dowland’s imaginary rule, a reunion of texts and heroes that makes it possible to see that, separately, they had already been drawing out the secret of that noncanonical theme.
