Unnatural Voices

Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction

BRIAN RICHARDSON
To my brother, Alan

Extraordinary reader, intimate friend, and great companion, who many years ago joined me on a beach in Mexico where we first read Joyce and Proust
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Narrative theory, despite its emphasis on narration and narrators, has not yet systematically examined the impressive range of unusual postmodern and other avant garde strategies of narration. At the same time, though postmodernism is certainly the most important and successful literary movement of the last half century, it is one that has often proven resistant to traditional narrative theory. This book is intended to rectify these unfortunate absences. It explores in depth one of the most significant aspects of late modernist, avant garde, and postmodern narrative—the creation, fragmentation, and reconstitution of narrative voices—and offers a theoretical account of these unusual and innovative strategies. This is an empirical study that describes and theorizes the actual practices of significant authors, instead of building on a priori linguistic or rhetorical categories; such an inductive approach is essential because many extreme forms of narration seem to have been invented precisely to transgress fundamental linguistic and rhetorical categories. By drawing on a wide range of examples and utilizing the work of postmodern narrative theorists, I hope to give these practices the thorough analysis they deserve. I will also take care to identify substantial if unexpected antecedents in earlier texts by authors ranging from Gogol to Conrad as well as apposite modern and contemporary works not usually considered from this perspective. In addition, I include some discussion of
the work of Samuel Beckett in each chapter, thus providing a single (if knotty) thread that runs throughout the book.

The first chapter, “Transgressing Self and Voice,” begins with a brief inventory of a number of innovative contemporary uses of narrators and narration, including narration by animals, small children, corpses, machines, and a Minotaur, which move ever further away from conventional human speakers. We will look briefly at the career of Robbe-Grillet, and follow out the varied construction and deconstruction of the narrators of his fictions. The chapter goes on to provide a theoretical overview of recent deployments of narration and describes a new kind of textual drama that hinges on the disclosure of the unexpected identity of the narrator at the end of the work. The chapter outlines the existing range of first, second, and third person forms, including such unusual types as “it,” “they,” and passive voice narration. I then contrast these practices with current theories of narrative poetics which are unable to fully comprehend the distinctive difference of such work. While concentrating on postmodern works, I also pay attention to earlier and adjacent forms, noting salient continuities and ruptures.

The second chapter studies second person narration in depth, identifying three major forms of second person fiction, reflecting on its functions and nature, and commenting on the reasons for its utilization by authors from a number of minority or disenfranchised communities. The third chapter traces the development of fiction narrated in the first person plural from its unexpected origins in Conrad’s Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ to its more familiar present incarnations and its less known postcolonial avatars. This chapter elucidates the play of unreliability, the knowledge of other minds, and the constitution of a collective subject in these texts. I also discuss “we” narration as a vehicle for representations of intersubjective feminist, agrarian, revolutionary, and postcolonial consciousnesses. The fourth chapter surveys recent developments in multiperson narration, that is, texts that employ both first and third or, in some cases, first, second, and third person narration. It also discusses indeterminate speakers and logically impossible acts of narration. It assesses claims and debates that stretch from Lukács to feminism and new historicism concerning the ideological valence of specific kinds of narration. Having completed three chapters of analysis of the most prominent alternative forms of narration, I then go on to offer a flexible model that can situate all of these odd but increasingly common voices.

These analyses in turn are followed by explorations of new areas
of experimental narration that have not been studied from the vantage point of a comprehensive approach to the theory of narration. I begin (in Chapter Five) with an examination of three curious narrating figures that exist at the limits of the utterable: The first is what I call the “interlocutor,” or the voice that asks questions that the rest of the narrative then answers. This feature, found in the catechistic chapter (“Ithaca”) in Joyce’s Ulysses, is fairly common in postmodern fiction, and occupies an unusual and unstable position between narrator and narratee. The second is the phenomenon of “denarration,” voices that erase the texts that they have been creating, such as found in the sentences, “Yesterday it was raining. Yesterday it was not raining.” The last, which I call the “permeable narrator,” slips (or is collapsed) into other minds and discourses and speaks what should be impossible for it to know; this is a favorite strategy of Beckett, especially in the trilogy, and is common in subsequent French fiction and elsewhere. I conclude this chapter with a brief analysis of distinctively postmodern types of unreliability. Chapter Six surveys unusual narrators and anti-mimetic kinds of narration in contemporary drama, focusing on the more outrageous practices of Stoppard, Duras, David Henry Hwang, Paula Vogel, and (naturally) Beckett. I focus on plays in which the nature and identity of the narrator constitutes part of the drama of the work, where offstage voices construct events, and the contents of one mind contaminates another.

The seventh chapter reassesses the question of the implied author and argues for the continued viability of this concept by assembling a range of texts that have two or more historical authors and either one or more implied authors. I also examine works by a single author that seem to emerge from antithetical aesthetic stances and speculate on the implications of such texts for a theory of the implied author. I discuss the limits and utility of the concept, and point to places where the author’s voice seems to override that of the narrator. Booth’s concept of the “career implied author” is reassessed and found relevant for the analysis of the larger oeuvre of writers throughout the history of fiction. I go on to take up the understudied topic of multiple implied readers in a work and compare it to the case of multiple implied authors of a single text. I conclude with a new model of the narrator–implied author–historical author continuum.

In the final chapter, I summarize the main argument of the book and go on to discuss further the modernist origins and historical antecedents of the anti-realist practices of so many contemporary works. Finally, I end with a description of a general “anti-poetics” of narrative.
for these and other anti-representational works to be conceived as a supplement and foil to the traditional poetics based on mimetic and “natural” narratives. I advocate the move away from rigid typologies and Chinese box-type models of embedded speakers and toward an alternate figuration that stresses the permeability, instability, and playful mutability of the voices of nonmimetic fictions. It is hoped that this book will fill a large gap in narrative theory, contribute to scholarship on Samuel Beckett and on modern and postmodern fiction, and help provide enhanced coverage, precision, and conceptual modeling for the theory and analysis of narrators and narration.
This book has benefited greatly from the generous comments of many colleagues. I am especially thankful to Monika Fludernik, William Nelles, and Porter Abbott, who read and commented on most or all of the chapters. Deep thanks also to those who read and commented on individual sections or chapters: Robert Ford, Jennifer Riddle Harding, Emma Kafalenos, R. B. Kershner, and Gerald Prince. As always, Sangeeta Ray helped me greatly at several levels, scholarly, professional, and personal. Finally, particular thanks go to Jim Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, who deserve a special narratological term such as Superreader for their hard work, generous advice, and brilliant editing.

In 1954, Wolfgang Kayser warned that if we lose sight of the fact that the narrator is “someone” who “tells a story,” the novel is dead: “The death of the narrator is the death of the novel” (34). As it would turn out, Kayser could not have been more wrong. Narrative literature was about to explode with a wide range of post-anthropomorphic narrators while philosophy (soon to be followed by critical theory) was beginning its half-century assault on humanism. The significance of this shift should not be minimized—by moving beyond merely human narrators, texts begin to tamper with or destroy outright the “mimetic contract” that had governed conventional fiction for centuries: no more can one assume that a first person narrator would resemble a normal human being, with all its abilities and limitations (excepting, of course, a never-remarked-upon ability to produce a highly narratable story that reads just like a novel).

If we look back on the broadest trajectories of the history of the use of the narrator in fiction it will become apparent that such a move was probably inevitable. Two main features stand out in the development of fictional technique since Defoe: the exploration of subjectivity (beginning with Sterne’s play with unexpected associations of ideas and continuing with Jane Austen’s development of free indirect discourse); the other is the rise of the unreliable narrator, which had been present in epistolary fiction and gained new prominence by the time Dostoevsky’s “Notes from the Underground” (1864) appeared.
In addition, narrative fragmentation and unexpected reconstructions, begun by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* (1767), were redeployed by a number of Romantic authors including Byron (*Don Juan*, 1824), Heine (*Buch le Grand*, 1827), Pushkin (*Evgeny Onegin*, 1833), and in numerous works of Jean Paul.

Each of these developments suggests further steps along the same path: one goes from unreliable narrators to incompetent ones to delusional and then completely insane storytellers. One starts with flawed narration, goes on to more fragmented forms, and ends with the semi-coherent and utterly opaque. The represented consciousness is increasingly abnormal: we move from Woolf’s Septimus Smith to Faulkner’s Benjy to Beckett’s Molloy to Nabokov’s Charles Kinbote. The first person narrator with a full name and clear identity in earlier fiction becomes one who implies pseudonymity by stating, “Call me Ishmael”; the next move is the anonymous narrator of the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses* (1922) followed by the unnamed though intimate narrator of *Invisible Man* (1953) who, it might be noted, mentions that The Brotherhood had him change his name but never informs us of either the old or the new name. In Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1953), there is simply a disembodied voice that does not have a name; this movement culminates in the multiple dubious narrators collapsed together in the more extreme *nouveaux romans*.

With virtually all earlier fiction having been written in either the first or third person, how could experimental writers fail to move on to the “we” form that combines them, or the “you” that confuses them, and then go on to explore the possibilities of narration from the perspective of “they,” “one,” a pronounless passive voice, and new, invented pronouns until one reaches the anthology of pronominal forms that make up Maurice Roche’s *Compact* (1966)? In what follows, I will begin by indicating the large range of the unusual narrators and consciousnesses of contemporary fiction, go on to address particular questions of narrative theory posed by these odd words, and discuss unusual pronominal forms and comment on their functions, thereby preparing the way for the extended accounts of second, first person plural, and multiperson narration that will take up the three chapters that follow. Finally I will attempt to categorize some prominent types of non- and anti-mimetic narration.
The kinds of posthuman narrators that have appeared in the last several decades are protean. In addition to the demented narrators of Beckett or the mute storytellers in Calvino’s *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969), we find, to note only some of the most prominent cases, voluble corpses (Beckett’s “The Calmative,” 1946), impossibly eloquent children (in John Hawkes’ *Virginie: Her Two Lives*, 1981), a ghost whose narrative is unreliable in Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1951), sophisticated storytelling animals (a horse in John Hawkes’ *Sweet William*, 1993), the Cretan Minotaur in Borges’s “The House of the Asturion” (1949), a disembodied voice that narrates compulsively (Beckett’s *The Unnamable*), a mind that can perceive the unspoken thoughts of many others (Rushdie’s *Saleem Sinai*, 1981), a television set that appears to display the confused memories of the protagonist (Grass’ *Local Anaesthetic*, 1969), a cybernetic device that allows one person to experience virtually the perceptions of another (Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, 1984), and even storytelling machines (in Stanislaw Lem’s *The Cyberiad*, 1967). In a trajectory that will frequently appear in the pages that follow, we will note how reflection on a typically postmodern practice can stimulate literary historical reflections that yield unexpected antecedents: narration from the other side of the grave is found at least as far back as Machado de Assis’ *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881), while bestial narrators and focalizers (whose function is not merely allegorical) stretch back to Tolstoy’s story “Kholstomer” (1886) as well as Virginia Woolf’s literal snail’s-eye-view of the events in “Kew Gardens” (1919). It should be readily apparent that a model centered on storytelling situations in real life cannot begin to do justice to these narrators who become ever more extravagantly anti-realistic every decade.

Play with the real or imagined gender of the narrator has also been a staple of contemporary fiction, especially gender impersonation, transformation, and obfuscation, and this has produced its share of critical puzzlement. “Stream of consciousness” writing, or “autonomous interior monologue,” as Dorrit Cohn more precisely terms it, has been unable to resist impersonating the mind of the other gender since the origin of this practice. I am referring not only to Molly Bloom’s monologue but to Schnitzler’s early psychonarration, the 1924 novella,
“Fräulein Else.” Since these texts appeared, numerous authors have attempted such sustained transgendered representations, including Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986), which simultaneously provides a woman’s narration (which is doomed to be suppressed) and resolutely refuses to narrate or otherwise speak for the African character, Friday. Likewise, the assiduous, realistic, and decidedly male first person narrator of Julian Barnes’ 1984 novel, *Flaubert’s Parrot*, abruptly gives way in the eleventh chapter to the obviously fictive first person narration of Flaubert’s lover, Louise Colet, who offers to provide the other half of the story. Other, more radical play with gender includes the strange first person narration of Evelyn, the man who will be made (against his will) into a biological woman in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and whose consciousness and narration will be transformed as completely as his/her body is.

The strategy that causes the most consternation among conventional readers, however, is the refusal to identify the gender of the narrator, especially when the narrator is involved in sexual acts. This situation is provocatively foregrounded in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992). As Susan S. Lanser observes in her discussion of sex, gender, and narration, “the unnamed autodiegetic narrator of [this book] is never identified as male or female”; since the plot revolves around the narrator’s love of a married woman (and, before that relationship has begun, the narrator has sexual relationships with both male and female characters), “that silence and the extent to which it destabilizes both textuality and sexuality drive this novel at least as much as its surface plot” (“Queering” 250). This situation also appears in June Arnold’s *The cook and the carpenter: a novel by the carpenter* (1973), where the characters are referred to exclusively by an invented, genderless pronoun, “na.” Since the cook and the carpenter form a union, a similar dynamic of reception develops until the gender of the characters is revealed at the end of the text. Needless to say, these works appear to refute the speculation of a few narratologists like Mieke Bal (122) who argue that since narrators are verbal constructs rather than actual people, they are not gendered and therefore should properly be termed “it” rather than “he” or “she.” After all, being a fictional construct does not mean being ungendered: many fictional entities from unicorns to divine beings to implied authors are quite definitively gendered.³

Another seminal transformation that has occurred involves the relations between author and narrator. Since early modernist fiction (if not before), it has been crucial to differentiate carefully between
the author and the narrator of a work, and never to assume uncritically that the speaker of the text represents the ideas of its author. The concept of the unreliable narrator, a foundational modernist type of narrator, presupposes such a clear division. “Marcel” in *In Search of Lost Time* is not Marcel Proust, and Stephen Dedalus, when he writes in the first person at the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is not identical with James Joyce. This distinction, which furthermore helped give rise to the concept of the implied author, is often eroded or assaulted by many postmodern authors, who cannot resist interpolating characters who bear their own names and life history into the fictional world they have created. In many cases, these incursions are largely innocuous ontologically; they differ little from Chaucer’s depiction of a bad storyteller named Chaucer in “The Tale of Sir Tophas.” They are, that is, fictional characters that resemble their authors just as a character called Napoleon or Richard Nixon in a fictional text may (or may not) resemble the historical original but is in the final analysis merely a fictional construct. Other such incarnations, however, are much more transgressive of this boundary. Some of Nabokov’s stories, such as “First Love,” were published both as fiction and as autobiography. The work of W. G. Sebald glides in and out of the categories of documentary prose, essayistic reflection, and narrative fiction. The author of the nonfictional preface of Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* asserts he is the governing intelligence of the text that is dimly perceived by his protagonist. Kurt Vonnegut incorporates his personal testimony of the Allied firebombing of Dresden into an antiwar novel, and affirms the historical accuracy of his descriptions and the identity of the character Vonnegut and the author: “That was me. That was the author of this book” (125).

Still more relevant to this study are the many odd, unusual, or impossible speakers found in contemporary works. These figures are also much more challenging to traditional narrative theory, which is typically based on the mimesis of actual speech situations. If a narrative is, as commonly averred, someone relating a set of events to someone else, then this entire way of looking at narrative has to be reconsidered in the light of the numerous ways innovative authors problematize each term of this formula, especially the first one. Summing up nearly all of the theorizing on “point of view” since the time of Henry James and Victor Shklovsky, Gérard Genette writes that the novelist must choose between two narrative postures, either “to have the story told by one of its ‘characters,’ or to have it told by a narrator outside the story” (*Narrative* 244). It is, however, precisely this choice
that is rejected by so many contemporary authors. As we will see in some detail in the next chapter, second person prose is perhaps exemplary in this respect; the “you” invoked will at different points seem to be one of the characters; at others a narrator outside the story; it may furthermore seem to refer to a narratee or the actual reader who holds the book. We find this blurring of person cunningly represented in one of the “you” passages in Fuentes’ *La Muerta de Artemio Cruz*:

“Cuando Catalina pegue el oído a la puerta que los separa y escuche tus movimientos; cuando tú, del otro lado de la puerta, te muevas sin saber que eras escuchado, sin saber alguien vive pendiente de los ruidos y los silencios de tu vida detrás de la puerta, ¿quién vivirá en esa separación?” (1115). (“When Catalina puts her ear to the door that separates her from you and listens to your movements; when you, on the other side of the door, move without knowing that someone hangs upon the sounds and silences of your life: who will live in that separation?” [30]). It is precisely the space between the perceiver and the perceived over which the “you” narration hovers. Revealingly, Genette goes on to express his consternation at the new fiction that “does not hesitate to establish between narrator and character(s) a variable or floating relationship, a pronominal vertigo in tune with a freer logic and a more complex ‘personality’” (246). It is precisely this “logic” that needs to be investigated, and this “vertigo” that needs to be savored.

We might then begin by emphasizing that much recent fiction rejects a mimetic model. Thus, a conventional work like *Roxana* or *Great Expectations* is modeled on the nonfictional genre of the memoir or autobiography. Its narrator can only know what an autobiographer can know, and must remain ignorant of other minds as well as of facts that s/he has not learned (such as the contents of private meetings by discreet individuals). This is why, for example, Dorrit Cohn, following Philippe Lejeune, states that first person works of fiction can be differentiated from autobiographies only by explicit, usually paratextual indications of fictionality or if the name of the narrator differs from that of the author (*Distinction* 58–60).5

Likewise, a traditional, mimetic third person fiction will typically follow the basic conventions of biography or the history of a family, with the exception that the narrator is able to know what goes on in the minds of one or more characters.6 A first person narrator cannot know what is in the minds of others, and a third person narrator may perform this, and a few other such acts, but may not stray beyond the established conventions of depicting such perceptions: the thought of...
one character may not be lodged within the mind of another without any intervening plausible explanation. These rules, however, have always been more frail and arbitrary than narrative theorists have usually wanted to acknowledge. Nikolai Gogol in his 1842 story, “The Overcoat,” draws attention to both of these conventions. As his protagonist is strolling in the streets of St. Petersburg at night in his new overcoat, he sees a salacious figurine in a shop window and smiles. The narrator asks a few rhetorical questions concerning the cause of this smile, before going on to aver that there is no creeping into a man’s soul and finding out what he thinks. Throughout the text, however, he has been doing just that, revealing private thoughts, disclosing scenes that were unobserved, and generally assuming the prerogatives of a third person narrator—even as he complains that his memory is growing dim and he cannot recall all the details of the events he narrates. Gogol is obviously mocking these conventions and refusing to be bound by them; he is clearly telling his reader that when it comes to narration, he can do whatever he pleases—a sentiment many current novelists obviously share. Even the high modernists who perfected the verisimilar presentation of an individual consciousness could not resist violating these basic rules. Proust’s Marcel knows what transpires in Swann’s mind as well as any third person narrator could, and Joyce could not resist planting a few stray private thoughts of one individual within the consciousness of an unwitting other in the later parts of Ulysses (see Peake 268–69).

We can get a sense of some of these developments in the practice of narration and the representation of consciousness by glancing briefly at the way Alain Robbe-Grillet treats these related issues at different points in his career. His first stories seem to be unconnected, hyper-objective acts of pure description; each in fact plays with different facets of perception. “In the Corridors of the Metro” (1959) is typical in this regard and represents a distillation of the techniques of many of the early short texts, beginning with “Three Reflected Visions” (1954): “Corridors” can be read as a series of inconsequential descriptions and unrelated events or, if a single perceiving subject is postulated, we have continuous narrative progression as seen through the eyes of a mobile though unmentioned focalizer. “The Way Back” (1954) is a brief story that is significant for its exploration of the possibilities of “we” narration. In Le Voyeur, Robbe-Grillet’s second published novel (1955), the rather ordinary thoughts of a certain Mathias are set forth minute by minute for a third of the book. A blank page in the text then appears. Afterwards, we learn that a terrible crime has been committed, and
Matthias seeks desperately to fill the void represented by those missing minutes. It is up to the reader to fill in the literally unspeakable crime that Mathias has clearly committed, thereby becoming the “voyeur” of the title.

In his next novel, La Jalousie (1957), Robbe-Grillet employs what has been termed the je-néant or absent-I narrator. As Dorrit Cohn points out, “the changing angles of vision and spatial distances, the obsessive repetitions of language and scene, insistently prompt the reader to postulate a human eye (and ‘I’) behind the voice—not just a camera eye” (Transparent 207) All the events of this text are indeed perceived through the eyes of a figure who is never named or referred to, and whose existence must be deduced from obscure hints hidden within the descriptions, including those noted by Cohn. We have, as it were, individualized perception without an identified perceiver. The inferred perceiver, the jealous husband, is certainly the sole focalizer of the text, and may or may not be its narrator, since it is not certain that he is responsible for the words of the book. Here we have instead, as in “In The Corridors of the Metro,” a most unusual figure that we might name the “hidden focalizer”; Robbe-Grillet’s works from this period simultaneously flirt with an arch objectivism that goes far beyond the “camera eye” technique of a Dos Passos or Isherwood and also present an unusual, extreme subjectivity with a minimum of mediation. The work can be viewed, that is, as the epitome of either narrational objectivity or subjectivity.

In Dans le labyrinthe (1959), Robbe-Grillet ties up a confusing series of self-negating narrative strands by abruptly announcing that a minor character in the story, the doctor, is in fact its narrator; this is very possibly a parody of a similar stratagem that had just been enacted by Camus (which I will shortly discuss). The narrator of La Maison de rendez-vous (1965) is, like every other figure in the text, something of a cardboard figure that imperfectly represents a human being. His narration is filled with contradictions, repetitions, and variations that, as a character in the world he depicts, he cannot begin to explain. Finally, in the flagrantly and self-consciously contradictory narrative that makes up Projet pour une révolution à New York (1970), two men are seen in the bushes bordering a park. One character asks a thirteen-year-old who they are; the girl responds: “That’s easy: one is Ben-Said, the other is the narrator” (57). We have come to the end of a trajectory; the narrator now is only an empty name to be parodied.
The third person is not what it used to be. Roland Barthes’ denunciation of it, despite his playfully extreme language, is fairly representative of its fall from favor among modernist and postmodern writers as well as theorists writing after Lubbock and Sartre. Barthes (Barthes) states: “‘he’ is nasty: it is the nastiest word in the language: the pronoun of the non-person, it nullifies and mortifies its referent; . . . If I say ‘he’ of someone, I always have in mind a sort of murder by language” (171). Other theorists like Audrey Jaffe, William Nelles (“Omniscience”), and Jonathan Culler have recently qualified or debated the traditional notion of omniscience; as Culler states, “the fundamental point is that since we do not know whether there is a God and what she might know, divine omniscience is not a model that helps us think about authors or about literary narration” (23). In another sphere, Dorrit Cohn (Distinction 132–49) and Margot Norris (216–36) show how the third person narrators of Thomas Mann and James Joyce display a demonstrable and idiosyncratic subjectivity that often makes them less than fully reliable. Indeed, Joyce’s third person narrations regularly incarnate what Hugh Kenner has called “the Uncle Charles principle,” in which the discourse of the narrator is infiltrated by language typical of the character being described, as we may observe in the opening sentence of “The Dead”: “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was literally run off her feet”; the words she might use to describe herself here find their way into the pen of the narrator.7 Gordon Collier likewise examines “subjectivized third person narration” in Patrick White’s The Solid Mandala, introducing a critical term that we should probably expect to see more widely used in studies to come.

These examples do not begin to exhaust the many possibilities that recent writers have brought into being. Hypertext narrators further problematize the idea of omniscience and even of third person narrative by creating a series of narrative possibilities that a reader must then convert into a single story, one which, by definition, cannot have been fully known in advance of its reading. And, as we will see in a later chapter, Beckett and others demonstrate how third person narrators can erase the narrative world they have just created. In his essay, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?,” Roland Barthes resurrected the archaic linguistic form of “the middle voice,” which indicates the speaking subject is affected by the action depicted by the verb, to represent the practice of the modern scripteur, and Brian Macaskill (1994) and Mario Ortiz-Robles (2004) have shown how this concept can be employed in the analysis of specific narratives. Another recent theoretical essay should be mentioned here, Henrik Nielsen’s analysis of
the impersonal voice in first person fiction, which argues compellingly that in literary fiction, “one cannot be certain that it is the person referred to as ‘I’ who speaks or narrates, and therefore . . . we need to posit an impersonal voice of the narrative” (133). If some theorists are demonstrating the subjectivity of much third person fiction, others are complicating our notion of first person narration.

And what of the opposition itself? The distinction Genette finds so foundational (and which Stanzel and others cover by referring to fundamental first and third person narrative standpoints) is one which many recent writers cannot resist inverting. Since these playful joustings with this convention deserve to be better known, I will take a couple of pages to delineate some of the more interesting transgressions. At the end of Camus’ La Peste (1947), as Didier Husson (1991) has noted, the narrator who has guided us through the novel reveals himself to be the principal character, Dr. Rieux; for the entirety of the novel he has disguised his identity and spoken of himself in the third person. Robbe-Grillet’s more radical appropriation of this move in Dans le labyrinthe, which changes the novel from a heterodiegetic to a homodiegetic one, calls into question the real significance of a relation that can be altered so easily. In other works that utilize this device for different purposes, we might even state that part of the plot is the determination of the true identity of the narrator’s relation to the discourse. In “The Shape of the Sword” (1944), Borges’ protagonist recounts, in the third person, the story of a cowardly traitor; only by the end of the tale do we realize that the narrator has been describing himself all along. Genette, we may note in passing, discusses this example in Narrative Discourse (243–47) only to conclude, rather strangely, that “the Borgesian fantastic, in this respect emblematic of a whole modern literature, does not accept person” (247). This statement is clearly false; the plot of the story and its reception is precisely about the consequences of person in narration. We may term this specific practice a “pseudo–third person” narrative, and identify a dramatic analogue in Beckett’s appropriately titled short play, “Not I,” in which a monologist appears to be speaking about another but is in fact unwittingly referring to scenes from her own life. The same strategy also appears in other works of these two authors, as we will see; for now we may simply point to Beckett’s Company, a text that constitutes a sustained, self-conscious exploration of pronominal positions, as the alternation between a “you” and a “he” is revealed in the end to be a spurious distinction, a futile attempt by an isolated individual to engender company.

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Another text that contains abrupt revelations or complications of the actual gendered identity of the narrator is Calvino’s *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959). At the beginning, it is a third-person narrative of the postmodern adventures of several of Charlemagne’s paladins, including Raimbaut’s pursuit of the amazonian warrior, Bradamante. Some thirty pages into the novella, however, the author of the narrative makes her presence known and reveals herself to be a nun in a convent who is trying to imagine the foreign scenes she recounts. At the end of the text she again employs the first person and discloses that she is in fact the very Bradamante she had been describing in the third person—and as the object of a male quest. The strategy of narration thus tends to negate the ideological valence implicit in the story’s teleology, that of the (con)quest of the female. Once again, a third person text is abruptly transformed into a more subjective narrative perspective. This innovation in narration is much more widespread in practice than is generally acknowledged. Novels by Anthony Powell (*A Dance to the Music of Time*, 1975), Doris Lessing’s 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook* (as interpreted by Beth Boehm), Margaret Drabble (*The Waterfall*, 1969), Margaret Atwood (*The Blind Assassin*, 2000), and, most flagrantly, Ian McEwan (*Atonement*, 2001) also include this transformation.9 And as Suzanne Keen explains, in Iris Murdoch’s *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (1983), the narrator first appears to be a traditional third person teller, but is revealed in the end to be “involved in the action with the characters of the story world. Evidently, ‘N’ has interviewed all the participants in order to gain the copious evidence of their thoughts, feelings, and motivations that would usually be plausible only as funneled through an external authorial narrator” (41). Murdoch, that is, demonstrates how a first person narrator might possibly, within the bounds of realism, write accurately as a third person teller seemingly privy to the thoughts of others. The other narrators tend to be rather less scrupulous concerning the sources of their apparent knowledge of other minds; in the case of McEwan this produces a kind of pseudo-focalization in which the thoughts of several individuals are presented as if by an omniscient third person narrator, but it is one who turns out to be merely a character who uses her imagination to attempt to intuit the probable or possible thoughts of the others.10

The same move can be made with the second person. In Joyce Carol Oates’s story “You” (1970), we are presented with what I would call a pseudo-second person narrative. The first third of the story seems to be a straightforward example of what I will call standard second person narration, in which the protagonist, focalizer, and governing
consciousness of the text is a single figure designated by the second person pronoun. Such an assumption is strengthened by narration that seems to depict the stream of thoughts of the titular character: “It strikes you that this is an important scene, an emotional scene. People are watching you anxiously. You might be in a play. Not one of those crappy television plays . . .” (365). A little more than a third of the way into the story, however, a first person narrator emerges; it turns out that the tale’s narrator is the neglected teenage daughter, and the “you” refers entirely to the daughter’s imaginative construction of the probable events, physical and mental, of her mother’s life. Once again, the plot of the narrative and the poignancy of the events turn on the revelation of the narrator’s actual identity, as the text’s play with the conventions of narration and its reception is disclosed.

All of these examples follow the same logic: the nature and identity of the narrator becomes itself a miniature drama as a familiar narrating situation is established throughout the text only to be utterly transformed at the end. The heterodiegetic narrator outside the story turns out to have been in there all along; the seemingly daring narrative “you” is instead a more conventional apostrophe, the story of another is revealed to be the story of oneself. The conventional practice is deployed until it is turned inside out, revealing the artificiality of a perspective, whether designated “third person” or “heterodiegetic,” that can be so easily inverted. And it will be noted that the move is always away from traditional objectivity and omniscience, from the third person to the first. The foundation that Genette and others would use to ground their models of narrative is far more tenuous than usually imagined, and only lasts until the whim of the author intervenes. As Michel Butor has clarified in one of his theoretical essays, “in the novel [the] distinction between the three grammatical persons is much less rigorous than it can be in everyday life; they are linked to each other” (Inventory 62). Or, to draw on a self-reflexive statement on this subject by one of Beckett’s speakers in Stories and Texts for Nothing that articulates the fluidity (and, perhaps, the possible arbitrariness) of such differentiations: “it wonders, that voice which is silence, or it’s me, there’s no telling, it’s all the same dream, the same silence, it and me, it and him, him and me, and all our train, and all theirs, and all theirs” (139).

In contemporary fiction, one narration is collapsed into another, and one consciousness bleeds into a second one, or a foreign text inscribes itself on a mind. These anti-mimetic interpenetrations can take numerous forms, such as the extremely odd third person narra-
tation of much of Beckett’s *Watt* (1953) which is abruptly “claimed” by a first person narrator, Sam, halfway through the book—an act which unmoors both narrative perspectives since a character narrator should not have been able to produce the text we have been reading up to the point of his admission of authorship. An extreme, metaleptic form of this conflation appears in Borges’ story “The Circular Ruins” (1940), which culminates in the protagonist’s realization that he and his thoughts are an illusion, that someone else is dreaming him. Still other types of contaminated subjectivities will be noted in the description of “conflated narrators” below.

Narrators can diverge from normal human speakers in still more ways. The narrator at the beginning of Caryl Phillips’ *Crossing the River*, a novel composed of four novellas separated in time and space, opens with a preface narrated by one who states: “For two hundred years I have listened to the many-tongued chorus. And occasionally, among the sundry restless voices, I have discovered those of my own children” (1). The narrative further contains interpolations of one speaker’s thoughts within the mind of another, temporally distant speaker, planted there not by any naturalistic knowledge or preternatural telepathy, but simply by a daring auctorial fiat. This gesture both conveys the sense of a traditional tribute to the ancestors and explores the realm of a posthuman sensibility which, according to Katheryn Hayles, “privileges informational pattern over material instantiation” (2); it can serve as a foretaste of the kinds of extreme acts of narration I will cover in this book.

Up to this point, I have tried to identify the most interesting and striking deployments of voice, perspective, and narration over the past fifty years. These are not random changes; we can in fact observe a number of distinct yet complementary trajectories these innovations have taken. There is a general move away from what was thought to be “omniscient” third person narration to limited third person narration to ever more unreliable first person narrators to new explorations of “you,” “we,” and mixed forms. There is a similar movement from the psychological novel to more impressionistic renderings of consciousness to the dissolution of consciousness into textuality, and a corresponding move from human-like narrators to quasi-human, non-human, and anti-human speakers, as the figure of the narrator as a recognizable human being recedes into an ever greater eclipse. The basic categories of first and third person narration or homo- and heterodiegesis, themselves based on foundational linguistic oppositions articulated by Benveniste, are repeatedly problematized and violated
by experimental writers. For the most part neither of the major theoretical approaches can begin to comprehend this plethora of new work for the simple reason that it rejects the type of mimetic representation that both theories presuppose.

The rest of this book is intended to provide broad analyses, working models, and theoretical conceptualizations of this neglected twentieth-century tradition of non- and anti-mimetic fiction. In the remaining paragraphs of this chapter, I will describe the range of pronominal perspectives that have been employed in narration in recent years, and then go on to devote a chapter each to the three most important forms: second person, first person plural, and multiperson modes. This analysis will conclude with a flexible model of the varieties of contemporary narration at the end of the fourth chapter. The second part of the book will go on to explore a number of other salient and even more transgressive techniques typical of postmodernism before setting forth a workable model of the narrative transaction capacious enough to include these unruly practices.

We may begin with the two most widespread, important, and perhaps unnerving narrational stances: the “you” and the “we” forms. Among the virtues of these pronominal stances is the protean range of each: “you” is particularly devious, since it can refer to the protagonist, the narrator, the narratee, or the reader; authors using this form regularly play on this ambiguity as well as on its multiple possible meanings. It also can be used in three different ways: in its standard form, it designates a protagonist, oscillating between the functions of the first and the third person. It can also approximate the ordinary function of the pronoun “one” in its “recipe” function (e.g., “Begin by meeting him in a class, a bar, a rummage sale”); finally, this pronominal form can also refer to the reader holding the book. “We” is fluid in a different way; it can grow or shrink to accommodate very different sized groups and can either include or exclude the reader. It too, though in a more subtle manner, also typically rejects the basic dyad of first and third person.

Other forms are considerably less common but equally interesting. In L’Opoponax (1964), Monique Wittig has written a novel from the perspective of “one” (on); ironically, it was translated into English as a “you” narration (to the horror of the author), as if it was felt that the “one” narration would be too alienating. The German equivalent, man, is dominant in many successive paragraphs near the beginning of Adalbert Stifter’s “Bergkristall” (1845); Fludernik notes that there are three novels that extensively employ this mode, the first of which
is Joseph Roth’s *Radetzkymarsch* (1932). Third person forms have also seen some interesting variations. Joseph Conrad and Maurice Roche, as we will see below, have sections of their works written in a passive voice that dissolves the agency of individual characters. There are brief “it” passages, as Fludernik has noted, in Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* and in John Fowles’ *Mantissa*; these also appear in the work of Beckett. Other works depict a collective subject largely or entirely designated by the pronoun “they”: D. H. Lawrence’s story “Things,” George Perec’s similarly named novel *Les Choses*, two chapters of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*, and Monique Wittig’s novel *Les Guérillères*, and much of the discourse of Nathalie Sarraute’s later novels refers almost exclusively to a “they.” Wittig’s subject is further limited to the female “they” form (*elles*) that is possible in French. Other feminist authors have further extended the parameters of third person fiction. June Arnold, in *The cook and the carpenter*, created a gender neutral pronoun, “Na,” to refer to all people regardless of gender. Kathy Acker’s story “Humiliation” (1990) is written entirely in a prose devoid of pronouns that thwarts individual agency (“Since wanted to be a writer, tried to find her own voice. Couldn’t. But still loved to write. Loved to play with language” [115]) and is thus perfectly suited to embody the story’s titular theme and oscillates oddly between first and third person perspectives. Finally, we should also observe how a traditional narrative stance, “I,” can be transformed and defamiliarized by dividing the letters that compose the word in French (*j/e*), as Monique Wittig does in *Le Corps lesbien* (1973) as she once again seeks a form of narration that will represent a distinct female experience.

In almost all books that center on narration, there comes a point when the theorist notes that what is meant by first or third person narration is not the pronoun being used, but the position of the narrator. Thus, autobiographies written in the third person such as Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* or *The Education of Henry Adams* are nevertheless related from a first person standpoint; likewise, one may address oneself in the second person without transcending the normal boundaries of the position of the first person. This is equally the case with still stranger examples such as Henry James’ awkward use of “one” to refer to himself at the beginning of *The American Scene* or Rimbaud’s use of “he” to designate a past self the writer felt he had discarded. I cannot, however, make the same confident claim with all the examples I am assembling here. I am not certain what to do with Kathy Acker’s essentially pronounless narration, that intimate presentation of a single
subjectivity that occasionally uses a third person genitive pronoun, such as “her.” One presumes that this kind of narration would normally occupy a third person position, though in this example Acker seems to be making it do the normal work of the first person. This ambiguity is precisely the point of the story: her practice thus represents an evacuation of agency. We will pause here and treat this and the more extreme examples just noted as typical instances of the conceptual indeterminability and defamiliarizing power of such innovative techniques that will be discussed at length in the three chapters that follow.
Bibliography of “We” Narratives

1. NARRATIVES ENTIRELY OR LARGELY IN THE “WE” FORM

Franz Kafka, “Josepina, die Sängerin, oder Das Volk der Mäuse,” 1924
Ignazio Silone, Fontemara, 1930
Raja Rao, Kanthapura, 1938
Richard Wright, 12 Million Black Voices, 1941
Mauro Senesi, “The Giraffe,” 1963
Michael Butor, “La Gare St. Lazare,” 1964
Gabriele Wohmann, stories in Gegenangriff, 1971, and Laendisches Fest, 1975
Pierre Silvain, Les Eoliennes, 1971
Ayi Kwei Armah, Two Thousand Seasons, 1973
Arlette and Robert Brechon, Les noces d’or, 1974
Donald Barthelme, “We dropped in at the Stanhope . . . ,” 1978, in The Teachings of Don B., 1992
Julio Cortázar, “Queremos Tanto a Glenda,” 1981
Mark Helprin, “North Lights” in Ellis Island and Other Stories, 1981
Edouard Glissant, La Case du commandeur, 1981
———. Mabogany, 1987
John Barth, Sabbatical, 1982
Joan Chase, During the Reign of the Queen of Persia, 1983
Nathalie Sarraute, Tu ne t’aimes pas, 1989
Jeffrey Eugenides, The Virgin Suicides, 1993
Joyce Carol Oates, *Broke Heart Blues*, 1999
Jill McCorkle, “Billy Goats,” 2001
Yiyun Lee, “Immortality” and “Persimmons,” 2005

2. NARRATIVES SUBSTANTIALLY IN THE “WE” FORM

Henri Barbusse, *Feu*, 1916
Mario Vargas Llosa, *Los Cachorros*, 1967
Edouard Glissant, *Malemort*, 1975
Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988

3. NARRATIVES WITH SIGNIFICANT SECTIONS IN THE “WE” FORM

Gustave Flaubert, beginning of *Madame Bovary*, 1857
Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, 1924
Victor Serge, *Naissance de notre force*, 1931
Albert Camus, *La Peste*, 1947
Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, Chapter 15, 1951
Carlos Fuentes, “Alma Pura,” 1964
Maurice Roche, *Compact*, 1966
Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *A Grain of Wheat*, 1967
Jean Echenois, *Nous trois*, 1992
NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. I am here using the translation and paraphrasing of Patrick O’Neill (76). See his very different critique of treating the narrator in anthropomorphic terms (76–82).

2. See William Nelles’ article, “Beyond the Bird’s Eye: Animal Focalization,” for a perceptive overview of some of these techniques.

3. This thesis on the gendering of narrators in turn is further corroborated from a different angle by Daniel Punday’s canny work on the implicitly embodied form of even the most austere narrators (2003: 149–84). For a stimulating account of the ideological maneuverings of female authors who employ male narrators, see Scott Simpkins’ 1992 article on “narrative cross dressing” in Sand and Shelley.

4. I discuss these and similar cases in a forthcoming article on postmodern authors as fictional characters.

5. And as we will see in Chapter Five, even this relation can be skewed in unexpected ways.

6. Even those contemporary biographers or historians who “record” the thoughts of their protagonists are making educated guesses; unlike the novelist, they do not know what went on in their subject’s mind.

7. For an earlier discussion of the “contamination” of the narrator’s language by that of a character, see Stanzel 192–93.

8. For a different reading of the play of voice and narration in this work, see Margolin (1990), who affirms that “the voice tries to give life to a ‘you’ lying on his back in the dark by telling him his whole life story from beginning to end” (431).
9. For a theoretically informed account of Powell’s practice, see Felber (1995, 156–61); Drabble’s novel will be discussed below.

10. For a discussion of the narrative ethics of such a practice, see Phelan (2005).

11. The only work I am aware of that moves in the opposite direction is Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), which concludes with the following admission: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. . . . And she has and this is it” (252). Since this is a nonfictional work, issues of omniscience do not arise. In the end its effect is rather like that of Norman Mailer describing himself in the third person in *The Armies of the Night* (1968).

12. This passage is translated by and cited in Ann Jefferson (1980: 100); she provides a good introduction to many of the more famous and extreme forms of narration in the *nouveau roman*.


14. On the differences between French, German, and English usages and implications of this pronoun, see Fludernik (1996, 232–35). It might be noted that the English translation does not employ the pronoun “one” to translate “man.”

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. For several other titles, see Fludernik’s bibliography (1994); for additional items, see Schofield (1999).

2. See, however, Irene Kacandes, who considers many second person texts as works in “the apostrophic mode” (2001, 141–96).

3. For additional discussion of the shifting of pronouns in Butor, see Morrissette (“You” 13–18), Passias, van Rossum-Guyon (114–74), and Kacandes (157–62).

4. DelConte makes a comparable point, observing that this novel suggests “that in the eighties, free choice was illusory. Second-person narration exemplifies this cultural climate, for it manifests in narrative technique the notion that someone or something outside of yourself dictates your thoughts and actions” (205).

5. Carlos Fuentes’ *La Muerta de Artemio Cruz* is the only text I know of to use the future tense for standard second person narration.

6. For a thorough discussion of gender and the reader(s) of this novel, see Teresa de Lauretis’s excellent article, “Reading the (Post) Modern Text.” In it she notes, for example, that the narrative’s “you” does address a female reader for six pages, after which Calvino seems to need to reassure the male reader that the book is not losing sight of him (139–40).

7. Jonathan Holden similarly observes that “most poems that deploy the blurred-you are far more effective when delivered by the poet in person to a live audience” (54).

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. In rare cases, such as Donald Barthelme’s short text, “We dropped in at the Stanhope . . . ,” the “we” speaker remains unidentified throughout, creating an
irreversible estrangement effect.

2. For an exhaustive account of these possibilities from the perspective of linguistics, see Margolin (“Telling” 116–19).

3. Even during this scene, however, there is a significant return to a collective consciousness that is signaled by the reversion to “we” form: the solidarity of the men reappears while they selflessly work to free Wait from his berth below deck (66–73).

4. There may even be an allegorical image of this preternatural narrator in the figure of the captain, who is said to be “one of those commanders who speak little, seem to hear nothing, look at no one—and know everything, hear every whisper, see every fleeting shadow of their ship’s life” (125); his inexplicable omniscience is an apt analogue for the oscillating perspectives of the uncanny voice of the text.

5. Ian Watt identifies a single narrator, specifically, “a special kind of privileged narrator who functions as a collective voice (101). Others postulate two (or even more) narrators. Jakob Lothe identifies two main kinds of narrator, one homodiegetic, the “narrator as character” (I as personal pronoun); the other heterodiegetic “they as personal pronoun” (97), and goes on to claim that these two basic narrating perspectives are repeatedly modified and fused; ultimately he identifies six types of narrating positions. Still others find the text’s narration to be a mistake: Jeremy Hawthorn refers to the work’s “technical confusions in the manipulations of narrative perspective and distance” (101) and Marvin Mudrick condemns Conrad’s “gross violation of point of view” (72).

6. More helpful perspectives on Conrad’s play with voice are offered by John Lester, who argues that Conrad’s narrative technique is “more controlled and more inventive than he has generally been given credit for” (170) and Bruce Hendricksen, who states that the text “deconstructs the subject who narrates by juxtaposing a third-person narrative voice that refers to the crew as ‘they’ with a first person voice that says ‘we’” (27).

7. She does, however, occasionally possess surprisingly detailed knowledge of situations she is unlikely to have encountered, as Paul Brians points out (39).

8. As Brians notes, she states that “there are only twenty-four houses in the village. This seems tiny indeed, until we realize she is counting the houses of Brahmins” (34).

9. For an analysis of Glissant’s three “we” novels, see Celia Britton; on the relation between Glissant and Chamoiseau, see Dawn Fulton.

10. Thus, one Yukon Native begins the story of her life with a history of her nation, the histories of her mother and other close relatives, and the origin myth of her people. “She does not even get to her own birth until page 52 (and then it is buried in a long list of her brother and sisters arranged in birth order)” (174).

11. The fusion of recently deceased tribesmen in the collective living subject, as “they” merges with “we,” deserves quotation: “They would sit in the snow outside the door, waiting until from longing we joined them. We would all be together on the journey then, our destination the village at the end of the road” (5).

12. “We” narratives continue to proliferate and gain recognition: two of the stories in Yiyun Li’s prize-winning collection, A Thousand Years of Good Prayers (2005), are written in the first person plural.

13. Monika Fludernik has identified a number of other texts that alternate “we” and “I” narration; these include Mauro Senesi’s “The Giraffe” (1963),
Gabriele Wohman’s “Fahrplan” (1968), John Barth’s *Sabbatical* (1982), and Jean Echenois’ *Nous trois* (1992). Fludernik notes that in these cases the *we* text usually represents an extended first person narrative, for example, in rendering the experience of childhood or of rural life, “and it therefore includes the first-person narrator in a larger community of playmates or village folk” (“Natural” 224). See the appendix to this volume for still more titles of other recent “we” narratives.  
14. Indeed, the most recent criticism and theory of “we” narrations often explicitly rejects the parameters of realism: Britton (136), Woller (346–48), Fulton (1113n3).  
15. Genette simply asserts that “the collective witness as narrator” is an unremarkable variant of homodiegetic narration (1980, 245n).

**NOTES TO CHAPTER 4**

1. Two important partial exceptions to this practice are Franz K. Stanzel’s *A Theory of Narrative*, which includes a fine discussion of alternating first and third person pronominal reference in, for example, novels written by a protagonist that at times refers to himself in the third person, such as *Henry Esmond* (99–110); and Hazard Adams, who points toward a more fluid model of the narrative transaction in “Critical Constitution of the Literary Text: The Example of Ulysses.” Genette also describes several interesting examples of alternating persons in *Narrative Discourse* (243–47), only to deny the importance of person as a category of narrative analysis.  
2. Thus, the rational self speaks in the first person, and always depicts the id in the third person. Interestingly, the id keeps attempting to use the first person plural, a practice which the disgusted I strenuously resists.  
3. The specific novels referred to here are Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, Drabble’s *The Waterfall*, Laurence’s *The Fire Dwellers*.  
4. For a compelling overview of the book’s narrative stances, see Suleiman, 44–49.  
5. For a perspicacious account of the complexities of Barthes’s position, some of which are necessarily slighted in my summary remarks, see Andrew Brown (123–25). In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes had affirmed that “he” is a typical novelistic convention,” while the “I” can take “its place beyond convention” (35).  
6. See Cohn (*Distinction* 163–80) for a sound refutation of this farfetched notion.  
7. The few times we encounter the woman expressing herself in the first person occur primarily when her nemesis discovers and reads her old journals and letters the better to manipulate her. That is, we read her first person accounts through his eyes.  
8. For a more extended discussion of this pronominal strategy, see Ostrovsky, 76–78.  
9. For additional discussion of how women and gays have used the second person and other uncommon pronominal forms to combat stereotyping and enhance potential reader identification, see Fludernik, “Persons.”  
10. Much subjunctive second person narration could be rewritten using “one” instead of “you” with little change in meaning, as the following sentence suggests, “To get there you follow/one follows Highway 58...” This similarity may have led Wittig’s translator to use the English word “you” to render the ubiquitous
“on” of L’Opoponax. Wittig’s subsequent annoyance over this choice suggests an important difference between the two, a difference I suspect is rooted in divergent narrative persons.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. This is equally true of a third superficially similar type: in La Chute, the narrator Clamence appears to be telling a story to an offstage audient, partially repeating that person’s replies and responding to his questions as they occur or are imagined (“You are in business, no doubt? In a way? Excellent response!” [8]).

2. For an excellent recent discussion of the catechistic form of “Ithaca,” see Thwaites.

3. Senn, it should be noted, has no use for Hayman’s arranger: “If you want to label this entity—it or him or why not her or them?—Narrator or arranger you are in good critical company, but you won’t find these personifications here [in Senn’s work]” (45).

4. As Monika Fludernik observes, one encounters narratological “difficulties at the end of the episode, which resists transformation [into conventional categories of narration] because the questions ‘Womb? Weary?, ‘With,’ ‘When,’ and ‘Where’ cannot be interpreted realistically or made to tally with the preceding description of Bloom’s posture in his bed” (“Ithaca,” 94–95).

5. The earliest example of this “interpretive” kind of denarration that I am familiar with occurs in the ninth canto of Camões’ The Lusiads, in which the riotous adventures of Vasco da Gama’s crew on the Island of the Blessed, after being described with brio, are then stated to be merely allegorical depictions of the men being ravished by honor.

6. In addition to compelling examples from Pynchon, Brooke-Rose, Sukenik, and others, McHale cites the actual erasing of events in Clarence Major’s Reflex and Bone Structure: “It’s Dale who stands there, mouth open, watching us. I erase him” (20, in McHale, 99).

7. It will be helpful to quote Robbe-Grillet’s description of Beckett’s use of this practice: “in Beckett, there is no lack of events, but these are constantly in the process of contesting themselves, jeopardizing themselves, destroying themselves, so that the same sentence may contain an observation and its immediate negation” (New Novel, 33; cited in Begam, 217).

8. The most thorough treatment of this general phenomenon can be found in Carla Locatelli’s Unwording the World, which concentrates on Beckett’s fiction after 1972. For useful discussions of textual negations in Molloy, see Dearlove (64–67), Hill (72–78), and Connor (56–63), who observes that “Time, and the present moments or states of which it is made up, is endlessly reimagined, so that the present moment not only repeats another moment belonging to the past, but reconstitutes that moment” (62).

9. Here I must disagree with Brian McHale, who asserts that “the ‘erased’ state of affairs still persists, if only as a kind of optical afterimage” (1987: 99). I believe the examples adduced here show instead that denarration effectively undoes the earlier assertions, rendering them as if they had not occurred, as is the case with other statements (false statements, typographical errors, lies) once we learn the actual state of affairs.
10. Cohn’s paper ("Discordant") identifies other theorists, such as Susan S. Lanser, who earlier had identified comparable distinctions; for the most capacious model of unreliability (which includes six types), see Phelan (2005, 49–53).

11. I am here both drawing on and straying from Emma Kafalenos’ ingenious narratological account of indeterminacy in postmodern fiction (1992).

12. H. Porter Abbott discusses this kind of narrational slippage from a different perspective in his chapter on Beckett in Diary Fiction (201–2).

13. The reading I will be offering tends to corroborate the critical position set forth by Andrew Kennedy; it is opposed to scholars like J. E. Dearlove who asserts, “Beneath the apparent and artificial diversity of traditional associations is the universal figure of a self coming into being via its self-perceptions, of a narrator creating himself through his own narration” (61). Such a stance ultimately begs the question “a self” and “his own” narration, positions Beckett resolutely undermines. For a more nuanced and compelling framing of this issue that suggests Beckett “expresses an openness to the possibility of an extralinguistic personal force” that is “quite compatible with The Unnamable’s suspicion of the knowing voice” (54–55), see Porter Abbott (1996: 52–62 and passim). For a catalogue of statements in the trilogy relevant to this debate, see Rabinovitz (95–101).


15. There are of course still more possibilities, several of which have been set forth by Gary Adelman (2004), 67–75, esp. 73.


17. I do not, however, entirely agree with Begam’s conclusion, that the space of the in-between “not only refuses to resolve itself into either of these two terms but renders impossible their very articulation” (156). This unresolved opposition of both terms remains; Beckett does not allow us to move beyond it via a Derridean notion of écriture.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. For an overview and bibliography of narration in drama, see my articles on the subject (the later of which is partially reproduced in this chapter).

2. It can also function as a generative narrator, as it does in cases of Cocteau and Benmussa described below.

3. For a deft analysis of the interplay of voice and text in this play, see Kristin Morrison’s book on narration in the drama of Beckett and Pinter (214–18).

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. For an excellent, nuanced critical summary of this debate, see Phelan (2005, 38–49).

2. This is the only one of several definitions still circulating that I will defend, or believe to be defensible. See Nünning for a thorough refutation of many of these conceptions.

3. It is also the case that Eliot’s narrators present themselves as male; at one point, one refers to the act of stroking his moustache.
4. For a magisterial account of the multiple yet unknowable identity of the actual authors and redactors of Beowulf, see Nelles, who concludes that its historical author “is composed of at least seven flesh-and-blood people, among whom the initial creator is by far the least concrete” (“Implied” 23).

5. Genette makes this statement after adducing the admittedly monovocal work of collaborators like the brothers Goncourt; he does not consider any of the more challenging cases I mention below.

6. As David Hawkes notes in his introduction, the final chapters seem to be written by “someone who was very familiar with [Tsao’s] drafts and wanted a different ending” (18).

7. The reviewer for The Nation wrote, “One fancies Mr. James hypnotically persuaded to take his place in the circle between facetious Mr. [John Kendrick] Bangs and soulful Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and caused to produce an excellent parody of himself, as if in spite of himself” (Bendixen, xxxvi).

8. Naturally, some individual voices do emerge; they do not perfectly blend together into a single implied author (for example, there is a pronounced shift in tone between the farcical first chapter and the much more serious, feminist-inflected second chapter).

9. I pursue this analysis further in my article, “Bad Joyce.”

10. Or perhaps it is that all authors of Harlequin romances aspire to reproduce the tone and sensibility of same implied author.

11. This does not imply that there is any easy way to determine such a correspondence, only that one may bring external evidence (essays, journal entries, conversations with friends) to bear on this question in a way that is pointless concerning, say, geographical correspondences.

12. For a recent discussion of this issue, see Lanser, “(Im)plying” 156–59.

13. For an elaborate schema employing eleven different levels including the actual author, our notion of the historical author, the arranger, the narrator, etc., see Hazard Adams, “The Critical Constitution of the Literary Text” (90–110).

14. For another example of a clear distinction of a discontinuous historical author, implied author, and narratee, see Nelles’ discussion of Gulliver’s Travels (43–45).

15. See also pp. 25–44 and 192–206.

16. I develop this position at length in my article, “The Other Reader’s Response.”

17. The best account of the gender of reading remains Patrocinio Schweickart’s foundational essay, “Reading Ourselves,” in which she states: “Reader response cannot take refuge in the objectivity of the text, or even in the idea that a gender-neutral criticism is possible” (38–39).


NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

1. For a discussion of the postmodernism of Ulysses, see my article, “The Genealogies of Ulysses.”

2. See Ferrer (1990, 65–96) for an extended discussion of the oddities of this kind of narration, which he tentatively calls prosopopaea.


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