Narralogues: Truth in Fiction (review)

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Ronald Sukenick, *Narralogues: Truth in Fiction.* SUNY series, *The Margins of Literature,* edited by Mihai I. Spariosu. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. 132 pp.

Ronald Sukenick professes ignorance of narrative theory and claims to derive his authority to reflect theoretically on narrative entirely from his experience as a writer of innovative fiction. The profession of ignorance is a bluff. Sukenick is, after all, the author of a prior collection of essays and manifestos on fiction (*In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction*, reviewed in *Poetics Today* 6 [4] [1985]: 801), a theoretically sophisticated history of the postwar American avant-garde (*Down and In: Life in the Underground*, reviewed in *Poetics Today* 9 [3] [1988]: 680), and much earlier in his career, a book-length exegesis of Wallace Stevens's poetry. On the other hand, his claim to the authority of a practitioner of innovative fiction is certainly well founded. The author of six novels and three short-story collections spanning more than thirty years, Sukenick figures among the founders and standard-bearers of American postmodernist fiction. In the present book he combines his two roles of theorist and practitioner in a series of pieces—six new (seven counting the introduction), four reprinted from previous volumes—that are simultaneously stories and essays, fictions and theoretical reflections, narratives and philosophical dialogues: "narralogues." (Presumably a "narralogue" is generically akin to what Sukenick's fellow-postmodernist Raymond Federman calls "critifiction.") Moreover the form of these hybrid texts perfectly mirrors their content: they are narrative arguments for regarding narrative *as* argument. Sukenick seeks to free fiction from the obligation to mimesis—an obligation that has degenerated, in its contemporary form of mass-market make-believe, into what Sukenick contemptuously dismisses as "fictition"—and to renew its lapsed association with rhetoric, an association to which the alternative tradition of the novel, descending from François Rabelais, Marquis de Sade, Laurence Sterne, Denis Diderot, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Victor Shklovskii (in *Sentimental Journey*), Henry Bataille, Samuel Beckett, and Henry Miller, amply attests. "Narrative fiction," Sukenick writes, "makes contingent statements about the world—the only kind you can importantly make, when all is said and done—whose main virtue is that they displace even more contingent, less reliable statements while at the same time recognizing their own contingency. The model is rhetoric: a series of persuasive statements that displace less persuasive statements" (p. 71). Each piece addresses, by means of a fictional dialogue or series of dialogues, one or another aspect of narrative's rhetoricity. For instance, in the first piece, entitled "Gorgeous," the main topic is the opposi-

tion between univocal "truth" and narrative "versions," and the situation is a peripatetic dialogue between characters named Jacob and Esau as they approach the Jaffa Gate to Jerusalem's Old City. The main topic of the second, entitled "Chat," is rule governedness, and the setting is (appropriately) a French château. The third, "A la Bastille," addresses literature in its institutional and economic dimension, and takes place (again appropriately) on an American college campus, while the fourth narralogue, "Art Brute," reflects on writing's mediated nature, its various modes of existence as print, performance, and digital text. The longest piece, "Narralogue on Everything," divides into two parts. In the first part, a young novelist named Waldo (presumably an allusion to the popular children's puzzle "Where's Waldo?"), a recurrent character throughout these narralogues, reflects on the career, poetics, and intellectual genealogy of who else but Ronald Sukenick, who figures here (perhaps implausibly, perhaps not) as a latter-day Emersonian. In the second part, Sukenick himself appears as a character and conducts a kind of roundtable discussion on the state of the art across a range of postmodernist art forms (painting, music, installation art, and performance art as well as writing). Of the four reprinted pieces, two ("What's Watts," on Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, and "Divide") come from the short-story collection *The Endless Short Story*, and the other two ("Death on the Supply Side" and "Name of the Dog") come from *Doggy Bag*. In all of these pieces, the new ones and the reprints alike, Sukenick is predictably hard to paraphrase but eminently quotable. On artistic criteria he writes, "There are no artistic criteria, there are just the criteria of everyday life—intellect, spirit, information, relevance, utility, elegance, perception, etcetera . . . . The same ones we apply to any craft or intellectual pursuit. Special criteria make the arts into a power trip, irrelevant and impotent, except as another way for so-called experts to bully people who aren't in on the game" (23–24). On literature as an institution he writes, "The point is that literature is a money laundering scheme. Just like museums and symphony orchestras. Like the opera. Fine art. Ballet. Even jazz clubs. Mostly they don't make a profit—they're money losers. Thank god for the Mafia and the Robber Barons. Thank god for the drug cartels" (31). On the Bible he writes, "[Waldo] believed books should be literally true. The way people believed that the Bible was true. People believed that the Bible meant what it said, even if they didn't believe it. Belief was a choice, but the intention of the Bible was not metaphorical" (63). On the fiction of Ronald Sukenick he writes, "As Waldo read through the book and saw what Sukenick did with story, morphing it into pure argument at times, at times modulating back to story telling in various combinations with argument, but all contained within a narrative flow that was itself an ongoing argument—seeing all this

in Sukenick's book, it finally hit him that there was, since narrative contained all these possibilities within its own potential, absolutely no need for a partitioned, self-contained practice of criticism or critical theory" (73).

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Vladimir Tumanov, *Mind Reading: Unframed Direct Interior Monologue in European Fiction*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1997. viii + 142 pp.

Tumanov's book deals with the most "extreme" form of literary interior monologue, namely texts cast in their entirety as direct ("unframed") representations of the inner discourse of the protagonist (or "thinker," as Tumanov calls him or her) without any narratorial mediation. This category of texts is more or less identical with the one termed by Dorrit Cohn (1978: 217–65) "autonomous monologue," to which she has devoted a chapter in her well-known book *Transparent Minds*. The corpus of this literary form is rather limited, and the "Penelope" section of James Joyce's *Ulysses* may be regarded as its locus classicus. The four monologues Tumanov deals with in his book are seemingly even more autonomous than "Penelope," since the character's inner discourse is presented in them entirely "on its own," without any narratorial mediation in other parts of the text (whereas "Penelope" is framed within the overall narratorial context of Joyce's novel). These four texts are Vsevolod Garshin's "Four Days" (1877), Edouard Dujardin's *Les lauriers sont coupés* (1887), Arthur Schnitzler's *Leutnant Gustl* (1900), and Valéry Larbaud's *Amants, heureux amants . . .* (1921).

Tumanov's study focuses on the ways the unframed direct interior monologue (UDIM) constitutes "an attempt to create a realistic illusion that the reader is allowed to eavesdrop on someone else's private internal discourse" (5). Tumanov, however, is well aware that the UDIM merely gives an *illusion* of private communication and in fact constitutes the very communicative act that it supposedly tries *not* to imitate—that of writing. Therefore the UDIM exists in a state of constant tension between two different goals. Tumanov terms these goals the "quasi-mimetic," which reflects the relationship between the internal addresser and addressee in the self-communicating mind of the thinker, and the "informatory," which is the communicative act transpiring between the author and the reader.[1]

Tumanov views the texts he analyzes as the outcome of compromises between these two goals. To what extent do the various writers, on the one

1. The existence of this communicative act in fact problematizes Tumanov's use of the adjective *unframed* to define the UDIM form (as well as Cohn's use of the adjective *autonomous* for the same purpose), since the interior monologue always remains rhetorically framed, even when it is formally unframed.