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The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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INTRODUCTION

The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction

“What happened to the omniscient author?” Gone interactive.

—Jeanette Winterson, *The Powerbook 27* (2001)

In the first year of the new millennium Helen published a novel which one reviewer described as “so old-fashioned in form as to be almost experimental.” It was written in the third person, past tense, with an omniscient and sometimes intrusive narrator.

—David Lodge, *Thinks 340* (2002)

THIS QUOTE from the last paragraph of David Lodge’s novel *Thinks* captures with ironic pithiness the central premise of this book and the paradox it seeks to investigate. Despite long being considered a relic of the nineteenth-century novel, the ostensibly outmoded figure of the omniscient narrator has become a salient feature of contemporary British and American literary fiction. From the 1990s, and particularly since the turn of the millennium, a number of important and popular novelists have produced books which exhibit all the formal elements we typically associate with literary omniscience: an all-knowing authorial narrator who addresses the reader directly, offers intrusive commentary on the events being narrated, ranges freely across space and time, provides access to the consciousness of characters, and generally asserts a palpable presence within the fictional world.

These authors range from relatively new writers such as Zadie Smith, Adam Thirlwell and Nicola Barker, to established literary figures such as Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace and Rick Moody, to literary icons such as Tom Wolfe, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, and Don DeLillo. They include writers who have won or been shortlisted for two of the most significant literary prizes in the Anglo-American world, the Booker and the Pulitzer, such as David Lodge, A. S. Byatt, Gail Jones, and Edward P. Jones. Many of these writers have received sustained scholarly attention for their significance to postmodern and postcolonial fiction, and have generated much debate about the contemporary novel through their nonfiction writing, notably Wolfe, Wallace, and Franzen.

Despite the critical scrutiny these writers have received, their collective contribution to the development of new modes of omniscient narration in contemporary fiction has yet to be recognized. Indeed, criticism today still seems to be in thrall to an historical narrative about the anachronicity of omniscience fostered by modernism. For instance, Timothy Aubry opens a 2008 article on the “politics of interiority” in middlebrow fiction with this claim:

Although occasionally called upon to perform certain emeritus functions, the omniscient narrator has retired decisively from the scene of contemporary United States fiction. In the place of this appealingly wise but problematic figure emerges an array of speakers no less ignorant, prejudiced, and confused than the reader. . . . A modernist innovation originally, the refusal of omniscience has become a fixed principle, especially within what is frequently referred to as middlebrow fiction. (85)

Aubry’s characterization of an omniscient narrator as “appealingly wise” betrays the continued association of this narrative voice with canonical works of nineteenth-century fiction, and hence an unwillingness to consider how formal conventions of omniscience may have been adapted to a different historical context, invoking a different figure of authorship.

One reason for the critical neglect of contemporary omniscience is that surveys of the novel today—unlike, say, Joseph Warren Beach’s *The Twentieth Century Novel* (1932)—tend to concern themselves less with formal developments than with interpretative criticism in relation to broader theories of nationalism, history, gender, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Excursions into literary form are rare, and may be summed up by Brian Finney’s claim in his 2006 book, *English Fiction Since 1984: Narrating a Nation*, that what unites British novelists of the last two decades

is a belief that “an omniscient narrator is an anachronism” (12). Even avowedly formalist and narratological accounts of contemporary fiction continue to cast omniscience as an outmoded narrative voice which writers have rejected in favor of more radical experiments with form. This, for instance, is Brian Richardson’s argument in his 2006 book, *Unnatural Voices*. In an exhaustive survey of twentieth-century fiction, Richardson claims that 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” (13). There is much truth to these general claims, of course, but the emergence of new types of omniscient narration complicates their currency and requires a re-evaluation of existing histories of novelistic form.

This book seeks to answer why so many contemporary writers have turned to omniscient narration, given the aesthetic prejudice against this narrative voice which has prevailed for at least a century. The Anglo-American study of novelistic method which emerged early in the twentieth century established conventional critical wisdom regarding omniscient narration. According to this tradition, exemplified by Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), the artistic “progression” of the novel can be understood as a series of innovations to efface the intrusive presence and superior knowledge of the author. The most favored form of narration in this tradition was that of a third-person narrator who does not comment on the action, and tells the story solely from a character’s perspective, revealing only what that character could know: in other words, the modernist impersonality championed by Henry James. As a result, the omniscient narrator employed in classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels has been considered both technically obsolete and morally suspect in the twentieth century. “In the age of perspectivism,” Eugene Goodheart pointed out in 2004, “in which all claims to authority are suspect, the omniscient narrator is an archaism to be patronized when he is found in the works of the past and to be scorned when he appears in contemporary work. Omniscience is no longer an entitlement of the novelist” (1).

An aesthetic prejudice against omniscient narration, based on a claim for its artistic supersession and historical redundancy, continues to be perpetuated by the industry of creative writing programs, from which the majority of new writers now emerges. Handbook after handbook on fiction writing reiterates the poetics of modernist criticism enshrined in the Anglo-American study of novelistic method by dispensing the “practical” advice that limited third-person narration offers the technical solution to

the disadvantages of other “points of view,” as well as reminding readers that omniscient narration is too old fashioned to sell books.¹ In a 2007 writing handbook, *How to Write Fiction (and Think About it)*, Robert Graham claims that: “From the earliest literature all the way through to the end of the nineteenth century, the author speaking, the author acting as an omniscient narrator, was standard practice” (47). Graham asserts that omniscient narration has fallen from favor since Chekov, before providing this advice to aspiring writers:

If you’re going to use an omniscient narrator in the twenty-first century, chances are you will not want to wear your omniscience on your sleeve; nobody likes a show-off. . . . Alternatively, you need to use a tone so arch, so dripping in irony, that the reader is bound to realise you know fully well the omniscient narrator went out of fashion in 1899. (56)

How, then, are we to evaluate novels which employ an ostensibly redundant nineteenth-century form in the twenty-first century?² Are they conservative and nostalgic by virtue of their form, or are they experimental and contemporary in their use of this form? We are accustomed to an historical trajectory of the novel which holds that modernist and postmodernist fiction throughout the twentieth century can be characterized, in part, as a rejection of the moral and epistemological certainties of omniscient narration. But to claim, along with Goodheart, that “omniscient narration is a lost cause, a sign of successive triumphs of modernism and postmodernism” (2) is to operate with a static understanding of novelistic form. In this book I argue that the contemporary revival of omniscience in fact emerges out an encounter with some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction.

Movements in contemporary fiction have been described by various new millennium terms such as “hysterical realism,” “recherche postmodernism,” “neo-realism,” and “neo-Victorian fiction.” These terms indicate that postmodern fiction, as it has been defined in classic studies of the 1980s by Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon, continues to undergo new developments. In his 2005 book, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, Gerhard Hoffmann identifies the last decade of the twentieth century as a period in which the “post-postmodern” novel emerged, characterized by “the return to traditional forms of narrative and storytelling” but without “a return to the belief system of traditional realism” (623). In this book I approach omniscient narration as the exemplary narrative voice of post-postmodern fiction. My contention here is that while the philosophical

underpinnings of classical realism were challenged by postmodern fiction, the ironic appropriation of formal elements of omniscience, exemplified by the intrusive narrator of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), has now been absorbed into mainstream literary fiction, facilitating a general shift away from the modernist ideal of an impersonal narrator and toward an aesthetic of maximalism in which the narrator's voice is always present.

I want to further argue that the reworking of omniscience in contemporary fiction can be understood as one way in which authors have responded to a perceived decline in the cultural authority of the novel over the last two decades. Claims for the death of the novel have been a critical commonplace since the mid-twentieth century, part of the rhetoric of postmodernism, but the latest iteration accompanies significant widespread shifts in the literary-historical conditions which determine the status and function of the novel in the public sphere. These determining conditions over the last decade or so include: increased sales and cultural capital for literary nonfiction such as memoirs, the personal essay and popular history; the commercial orientation of multinational publishing houses, large chain bookstores, and online booksellers such as Amazon; the competing claims of cinema, television, and new media; the broader challenge to traditional print culture presented by technological advances in online publishing, print on demand, ebooks and ebook readers such as the Kindle and the iPad; and the attendant proliferation of demotic opinion in public debate via blogs, customer reviews, and opinion polls made possible by the same technology. All of these conditions contribute to a sense of the fragmentation of the public sphere and a diminishment of the cultural capital of literature and literary fiction.

These conditions feature in current discourses of anxiety about the cultural status of literature, ranging from broader social concerns about literacy in the age of digital media to more specific literary debates about the social function of the novel. Sven Birkerts provides an epochal framework for this anxiety in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, originally published in 1994 and reissued in 2006. "The decade of the 1990s," Birkerts claims, "was a classic historical watershed" (xi), marking the irrevocable influence of digital technology on the way people think and relate to each other. For Birkerts, "the societal shift from print-based to electronic communications is as consequential for culture as was the shift instigated by Gutenberg's invention of movable type" (192). The effect, he argues, was to transform our sense of society being composed of isolated individuals who seek solace in the introspective contem-

plation and subjective immersion in deep time afforded by literature, to one of information seeking citizens interconnected by a digital grid which keeps them perpetually in the present moment. This “network consciousness” (202), Bikerts argues, is at odds with the experience of inwardness cultivated by serious reading, and this explains the waning influence of literature in contemporary culture. A natural consequence is that “the writer’s social and cultural status is as low as it has been for centuries. If there is anything consoling to be said, it is that the *need* for the writer is right now probably as great as ever” (208).

The claim that digital technology has had a significant influence on modes of thinking, on interpersonal relations, on the nature of reading, and on the material form of print literature itself, is, I think, uncontroversial. Many scholars, however, eschew Bikerts’s nostalgic lament for the supersession of literary fiction. Michael Wutz’s 2009 book, *Enduring Words: Literary Narratives in a Changing Media Ecology*, exemplifies a field of scholarship devoted to the study of intermediality, tracing the effects of modern technology, from the gramophone and photography to the internet, on the structure of literary fiction, and on the materiality of books themselves, to demonstrate the enduring power of the printed word to productively engage with new technologies.³ This field of scholarship nonetheless accepts the premise of a diminished cultural status for literary fiction. As Joseph Donatelli and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young claimed in the introduction to a 1995 special issue of *Mosaic*: “It is not surprising, therefore, that a period which is witnessing the slippage of the authority of the book as a media form, should pay such close attention to the circumstances under which it first gained prominence” (2).

The tenor of Bikerts’s lament also resonates throughout public discourse. A palpable sense of escalating crisis is no more overtly expressed than in the 2004 National Endowment for the Arts report, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* and the 2007 follow-up *To Read or Not Read: A Question of National Consequence*, issued with the imprimatur of the federal government and supported by a battalion of statistical data. The executive summary of the 2004 NEA report claims that it “contains solid evidence of the declining importance of literature to our populace. Literature reading is fading as a meaningful activity, especially among younger people” (ix). The key findings suggest that the “percentage of adult Americans reading literature has dropped dramatically over the past 20 years” (ix); the decline in literary reading is accelerating; this decline can be correlated with the competition of “an enormous array of electronic media” (xii); and represents a larger social problem because

it “foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation” (xii). The Summary and Conclusion section, in fact, provides methodological qualifications to these “findings,” and in opposition to the rhetoric of a crisis of book culture manifested in these reports, Ted Striphas asserts, in *The Late Age of Print* (2009), that “books remain key artifacts through which social actors articulate and struggle over specific interests, values, practices, and worldviews” (3). However, he says, the late age of print means “books exist in a more densely mediated landscape than ever before” (3).

The emergence of contemporary omniscience, I would venture, can be situated within the discourses of anxiety generated by this densely mediated landscape. The concerns about book culture which I have outlined are present in the nonfiction writing of many of the authors under scrutiny in this book, and arguments for a causal link between perceptions of literary decline and the cultural projects of postmodern or late postmodern or post-postmodern novelists have been made respectively by Jeremy Green, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, and Robert McLaughlin.

In *Late Postmodernism* (2005), Green states that his book “addresses the ways in which literature, particularly the American novel, has been described under the rubric of postmodernism and asks how these accounts should be modified in the light of recent literary activity” (3). For Green, this literary activity is the body of work produced in the 1990s by both the first “generation” of postmodern writers such as Pynchon and Barth, and later writers such as DeLillo, Richard Powers, and David Foster Wallace. Green’s book, however, as he makes clear, “is less a typology by which new writing might be categorized, than an attempt to comprehend the conditions under which literary novels are now written and understood. These conditions shape the readership, the literary and political ideologies, the self-understanding, and the aesthetic choices available to writers” (3). Green’s main goal, then, is to elaborate what he calls the literary field, the institutional conditions of novelistic production and reception which, in the 1990s, featured “widespread dismay over the current conditions and future prospects of the novel” (5). According to Green, the literary field has shaped a sense of crisis of which novelists of late postmodernism are acutely aware and seek to negotiate through their writing:

The novelist’s sense of impending obsolescence is bound up with a perceived loss of cultural authority. Although the backward glance that imagines better times for the novel earlier in the century—with the novelist at the center of a de facto coalition of high, low, and middlebrow

cultural interests—is fanciful and nostalgic, the anxiety over present conditions remains powerful and indicative of genuine change. (7)

In very similar fashion, Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* (2006) investigates the sense of cultural crisis engendered specifically by television and new technologies which threaten to undermine the authority of print culture and hence of those who write novels. The question which Fitzpatrick takes up in her book, “is not whether print culture is dying at the hands of the media, but rather what purpose announcements of the death of print culture serve” (3). Her claim is that

the anxiety of obsolescence, a cultural pose struck by the beleaguered postmodern novelist, has at its root three discourses with which it is mutually constitutive. These discourses—the death of the novel, the threat of new technologies, and the rise of postmodernism—all bespeak obsolescence in the interest of creating a protected space within which a threatened form might continue to flourish. (47)

Through case studies of the work of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, Fitzpatrick focuses specifically on the gendered and racial implications of this cultural pose, arguing that it operates discursively as an attempt to shore up the high cultural elitist position of largely white male authors, with television figured as the feminized space of mass culture: “This is, at its root level, the function of the anxiety of obsolescence: the release of the white male author from responsibility through an at times histrionic concern for his own imminent demise, a conversion of the forms and gestures of oppressed cultures to his own project of maintaining his cultural (and social) centrality” (233).

Green and Fitzpatrick argue, like Striplhas, that, despite protestations of doom, the novel continues to flourish in terms of both aesthetic achievement and cultural importance, albeit under changed and complex conditions. They also point out how anxiety over the fate of the novel and the authority of fiction writers is manifested in the way authors establish a public voice to frame the reception of their fiction. “As writers have become aware of these shifts,” Green argues, “they have tried to make sense of the new pressures and difficulties of an altered cultural landscape through their writing, through essays and statements, but above all within novels themselves” (15). Both Green and Fitzpatrick proceed to read their chosen authors’ specific concerns—cultural memory, the public sphere, and the political vocation of the novel for Green; and the machine, the

spectacle, and the network for Fitzpatrick—as thematized and dramatized largely at the level of story or plot structure.

My focus in this book is specifically on the formalist category of narrative voice, and, rather than providing interpretations of individual works as thematic explorations of cultural crisis, I wish to demonstrate how the narrative voice of contemporary omniscience is symptomatic of the broad anxiety within the literary field over the cultural capital of literary fiction, and hence the public authority of the novelist. I do not mean to assert that each writer under scrutiny here has deliberately chosen omniscient narration out of concern for their relevance to contemporary culture, but that the increasing presence of this narrative voice as a viable option for writers can productively be related to changes in the institutional conditions of literary production and reception. If there is a crisis of cultural authority at play in the literary field, it makes sense that a mode of narration vested by convention with the highest narrative authority would become ripe for renovation. How contemporary writers have adapted the narrative authority of classic omniscience to a more fragmented and relativistic intellectual environment is at the core of this book. “If religion is the opium of the people,” comments the narrator of *White Teeth*, “tradition is an even more sinister analgesic, simply because it rarely appears sinister” (193). This aphoristic statement is a typical assertion of narrative authority which nonetheless evinces a modern skepticism toward two discourses of authority which have informed the concept of omniscience.

Evidence for my claim that a turn to omniscience is vitally linked to a sense of the novelist’s cultural authority can be found in the statements of authors themselves. In 1993, the Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist Richard Russo delivered a lecture to students which was later published as “In Defense of Omniscience.” In this lecture he argued that the capacity to handle “true” or “full” omniscience is a mark of the strongest novelists and at odds with the advice dispensed in writing workshops. Russo describes as advantages the qualities of omniscience which the Anglo-American tradition exemplified by Lubbock criticizes: it is the best way to provide the “necessary information” of the story, and it has a clear and confident authorial voice: “there is always a narrator, a voice that embodies a clearly defined attitude, an authorial pose, a consistent and recognizable way of seeing and understanding” (12). Russo is not just describing narrative technique here, but a figure of authorship embodied in the narrative voice: “Omniscience means, of course, all knowing, and it favors writers who know things and are confident about what they know and generous enough to want to share their knowledge” (15).

His conclusion is instructive for the way he wishes to promote the authority of the mature, professional writer in contemporary culture, showing how such an author can respond to the challenge of omniscience. He does so in the context of explaining why apprentice writers shy away from this mode of writing:

Omniscience, in the end, is a mature writer's technique. Our being drawn to it has something to do with years, with experience of life, with the gradual accumulation of knowledge and pain and wisdom. Omniscience not only invents a world; it tells us how that world works and how we should feel about the way it works. Few writers at twenty-five or even thirty are ready to assume such a mantle. Omniscience is permission to speak and speak with authority we know we really don't have, about a world that in our century (in any century?) is too complex to know. Ultimately, omniscience forces us to pretend we know more than we do, and we're afraid we'll get caught. (17)

This attempt to claim cultural authority for the novelist is also a pragmatic strategy, for Russo's lecture was a way of preparing the public reception of his 1993 novel *Nobody's Fool*. It is clear that he is inviting readers to see the omniscient narrator of his novels as not only a voice who knows about the fictional world, but the voice of Russo himself imparting his accumulated wisdom about life. This is a traditional understanding of authorial omniscience, shored up by Russo's argument that omniscient narration, the "voice of choice" for the eighteenth century, and the point of view most suited to the Victorian novel, is "the point of view that has never been anything but the mainstay of storytelling in our own century, regardless of the literary movement then in vogue (experimentalism, minimalism, postmodernism, any other 'ism')" (9). My aim in this book is not to offer a quantitative survey of recent fiction across all genres, from popular to highbrow, to determine the extent to which omniscient narration features. In talking about the "return" of omniscience, I mean to address contemporary novels whose use of omniscient narration can be related to the "literary movement" of postmodernism and thus to identify new modes of omniscience which differ from that defended by Russo.

Omniscient narration is not simply one "point of view" for writers to choose from among others, for the presence of this narrative voice in contemporary fiction carries the weight of association with the supposed high point of the novel itself: a period before the competing claims of new

media forms, from radio, to cinema to digital age multimedia, in which a public sphere sought guidance in ethical conduct from literature, and novelists could assume, at least in the rhetoric of their narration, a shared set of cultural values with their readers. In his 1968 book, *The Form of Victorian Fiction*, J. Hillis Miller argued that the standard Victorian convention of the omniscient narrator “is so crucial to nineteenth-century English fiction, so inclusive in its implications, that it may be called the determining principle of its form” (63), describing this narrator as the voice of a “general consciousness.” Scholes and Kellogg explain in *The Nature of Narrative* why this convention of the omniscient narrator lost authority as a viable point of view in the twentieth century. They argue against the accepted view that it fell out of favor because writers discovered ways of “dramatizing” a story without the need for authorial commentary or exposition, instead claiming that omniscient narration became philosophically untenable as a result of a broader shift in cultural sensibilities:

The whole movement of mind in Western culture from the Renaissance to the present—the very movement which spawned the novel and elevated it to the position of the dominant literary form—has been a movement away from dogma, certainty, fixity, and all absolutes in metaphysics, in ethics, and in epistemology. . . . With this broad cultural development in mind, we can see how the authoritarian monism of the fully omniscient mode of narration has become less and less tenable in modern times, while the multifarious relativism of that same mode has seemed increasingly relevant. (276)

In other words, presenting the multiple perspectives of characters remained a feature of twentieth-century fiction, but not their subordination to the single ideology of an author’s omniscient narrative voice. “It is not the narrator’s narrating that disturbs the modern reader,” Scholes and Kellogg claim, “nor his employment of multiple perspectives, it is the resolution of these perspectives into a single truth or reality” (277).

This is a compelling explanation for the “disappearance” and continued untenability of omniscient narration which has retained its currency today, and when examples of omniscient narration in postwar fiction have been discussed, they have generally been described in terms of nostalgic anachronism or “playful” parody. For instance, Morton P. Levitt argues in *The Rhetoric of Modernist Fiction* that the use of omniscience after the war was a deadly conservative reaction to modernist experimentation. He calls this the “New Victorianism” and proceeds to savage more recent

novels by Muriel Spark and Margaret Drabble as extensions of this conservatism. “Again and again,” Christian Gutleben claims in *Postmodern Nostalgia*, “the prerogatives of the omniscient narrator are usurped in the retro-Victorian novel” (105), arguing that the very use of the form in historical fiction is necessarily parodic.

Neither of these postures characterizes contemporary omniscience for me. But if there has been a “revival” of omniscience, does this mean the whole movement of mind in Western culture changed in the last two decades? Certainly not, so we need to be more supple with our identification of a narrative mode with a philosophical or ideological view. We find today fictional works with an “authoritarian monism” at the level of narrative voice which nonetheless demonstrate an awareness of the relativity of this voice in relation to extraliterary discourse in the public sphere. Which is to say that contemporary omniscient narrators retain the intrusive presence of earlier narrators, but not the assumption that they can address a sympathetic general readership with universal comments about society and human nature. “I know you are not convinced by this,” says the omniscient narrator of Adam Thirlwell’s *Politics* in a direct address to readers. “You are unpersuaded. Where is the realism? you say. Where is the accuracy of the European novel? Where is the truth to nature of Balzac or Tolstoy?” (131).

Kent Puckett claims, in *Bad Form*, that the nineteenth century “saw both the European novel and an omniscient narration whose voice was the voice of that novel’s cultural authority come into their own” (6). If omniscient narration is so closely identified with the form and status of the nineteenth-century novel, I am interested in the specific claims for cultural authority which enable this narrative voice to function in contemporary fiction. By virtue of the fact that the omniscient narrator has traditionally been seen as the “voice” of the author, this mode of narration invokes a particular figure of authorship, and hence relies upon the prevailing status of the novel to authorize its presence in literary culture. With this in mind, we can see that the “universal” moral authority of the classic omniscient narrator is indeed unavailable to contemporary writers, for they can no longer claim the luxury of being spokespersons of authority, asserting accepted truths on behalf of a general consciousness. Writers today must situate the omniscient authority of their narrators in relation to other extraliterary claims to knowledge or expertise in postmodern culture where literature can no longer claim to be a privileged discourse.

I am mindful here that it is easy to both caricature nineteenth-century omniscience and to overstate the cultural authority which novel-

ists enjoyed: to assume that the intrusive commentary characteristic of much Victorian fiction aspires to singular truth rather than simply being an authorial opinion, and that the garrulousness of its omniscient narrators is evidence of a privileged status for their authors. To do so is to subscribe to modernist (and postmodernist) critiques of the authoritarianism of omniscience, and to perpetuate current lamentations for an idealized past in which everyone read literature and novelists wielded greater influence and respect. Equally, however, it would be absurd to claim that literary form is static or that the institutional conditions and cultural status of literature have not changed.

It is interesting to note that, by the mid-twentieth century, when the modernist ideal of effacing the textual presence of the author, of a retreat from overt opinion into the interior lives of characters, became entrenched as an aesthetic principle, it was buttressed by both the “intentional fallacy” of the New Criticism, and the fundamental narratological distinction between an author and narrator. In other words, the meaning and structure of a work could be separated from consideration of authorial intent. Yet at the same time, the presence of the author in the public sphere became increasingly important to the marketing of fiction. This can be evidenced by the advent of the *Paris Review* interviews in the 1950s, establishing the genre of the author interview, and the emergence of writers festivals around the globe. In these forums, alongside a public presence in journalism and books of essays, authors are called upon to explain the genesis and motivations of their work, and to comment on broader social issues which their fiction engages with, as if to supplement what cannot be made overt in the fiction. These opportunities for authors to assert a public presence beyond their fiction may seem to give the lie to the cultural irrelevance of novelists, but the more an author operates within the marketplace of celebrity the less distinct novelists become as privileged cultural figures. Such a tension was on display in the much publicized and critically discussed decision of Jonathan Franzen to refuse an invitation to appear on Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club. As Franzen wrote, of the reception of his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*: “I had already realized that the money, the hype, the limo ride to a *Vogue* shoot weren’t simply fringe benefits. They were the main prize, the consolation for no longer mattering to the culture” (“Why Bother?” 38).

The figure of authorship associated with the favored narrative voice of modernism, the Flaubertian/Joycean impersonal artist laying bare the psychological interior of characters, today seems a less viable trope than that of the author as an intellectual intervening in contemporary

cultural debates. Contemporary omniscient narrators perform this trope most overtly, and one way to understand the difference between classic and contemporary omniscience lies in the different figures of authorship they project, not just as an artist in the literary field, but as an intellectual in the broader public sphere. Two of the best-known assertions of novelistic authority in classic omniscience are Austen's famous defense, in *Northanger Abbey*, of the novelist's capacity to offer "the most thorough knowledge of human nature" (34), which she pits against the value of commonplace books and periodicals, and the "belated historian" of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* who has "so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven" (142). We can see how these comments, taken as the voice of the author, lend themselves to the characterization of the nineteenth-century novelist as sage knower of human nature and guide to ethical conduct. Contemporary novelists are more accurately characterized as public intellectuals competing with other nonliterary discourses of "knowledge": journalistic, historical, scientific, critical, etc. As Franzen claimed in an interview: "The poetic, the subjective, and particularly the *narrative* account of what a person is and what a life means—I feel like the novelist's vision is engaged in a turf war with the scientific, biological, medical account" (Antrim).

No other narrative voice or "point of view" is as contested as that of literary omniscience, and this is because the term refers to both the author and the narrator. This slippage between the two, however, encouraged by the analogy with God, is precisely what makes manifestations of literary omniscience a barometer for the figure of authorship which circulates in public discourse. Rather than maintain a strict narratological distinction between author (or creator) and narrator (or knower), I think it is important to understand how the combination of these two concepts produces narrative authority. Most of the authors I have mentioned have produced manifestos, essays, interviews or critical works in which their thoughts on the cultural function of contemporary literature are clear, and which seek to establish the conditions by which their work may be received.⁴ It is possible, then, to establish a discursive continuum from narratorial commentary in a work of fiction (by which I mean narrative statements whose ideological provenance cannot be attributed to a character) to critical pronouncements in a work of nonfiction which establish mutually reinforcing claims for an author's cultural capital. Rather than interpreting a novel through an author's paratextual statements I want to situate an author's fictional narrative voice as one element of public discourse alongside their nonfictional "authorial" voice.

This approach is particularly apposite for understanding the function of contemporary omniscience because critics of the novels I have identified typically condemn their narratorial commentary as inartistic authorial intrusion. For instance, in his article “Character in Contemporary Fiction,” Brian Phillips claims that the characters in Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* often lack life because “Franzen adjourns to analysis and the ease of his own vocabulary” (640) when he is unable to manage the subtleties of free indirect discourse (FID). Phillips’s example is this internal analysis of character motivation: “how sweet the optimism of the person carrying a newly scored drug that she believed would change her head; how universal the craving to escape the givens of the self” (324). If we eschew aesthetic prejudice, however, we can see the narrative voice of *The Corrections* precisely as an invocation of Franzen’s authorial voice in his famous 1996 *Harper’s* essay, which offers a critique of “the retreat into the self” (80) and “the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture” (91).

This essay, which was republished in the wake of the novel’s success as “Why Bother?” in his collection, *How to Be Alone*, outlines Franzen’s lament for the novel’s loss of authority since the nineteenth century and its increasing obsolescence in contemporary society as a result of “the banal ascendancy of television, the electronic fragmentation of public discourse” (36). *The Corrections*, then, is an overt example of a novelist’s deployment of omniscient narration as part of a broader project to reassert the authority of the novel in contemporary culture. The fact that *The Corrections* has been simultaneously championed as signaling a return to the social realist novel after the death of postmodernism and a post-postmodern extension of postmodern language games that combines realism with experimentation, is indicative of the paradox of contemporary omniscience.

The discursive continuum between narrative and authorial voice moves in both directions, for novelists seek to establish their cultural authority through a range of genres, while still promoting the central significance of fiction as their source of “knowledge.” So, for instance, when in the wake of the London bombings in 2005, the *Times* publishes an opinion article by Salman Rushdie titled “Muslims Unite! A New Reformation Will Bring Your Faith into the Modern Era,” surely the “authority” of his opinion rests upon the fact that he is the author of *The Satanic Verses*? This novel is one of the first examples of what I am calling contemporary omniscience, and, by virtue of the controversy it generated, is a touchstone for the way we understand the role of fiction in and as public discourse. Melanie Phillips went so far as to claim, in *Londonistan*, that

the “Rushdie affair became a rallying call for Muslim consciousness,” generating a radical Islamist presence in British public life which eventually resulted in the London bombings. The Rushdie affair also crystallized the paradoxical relation between artistic freedom and freedom of speech. One relates to the right for an artist’s aesthetic decisions to be judged outside a moral framework; the other relates to a citizen’s right to voice unpopular opinions without fear of persecution. In conflating the two under the banner of Western democracy, defenders of the novel are claiming Rushdie’s right to voice an opinion in public, while asserting that the novel, as a work of fiction, cannot be taken as a literal opinion. This tension is mirrored by the formal distinction between author and narrator which *The Satanic Verses*, in its experiments with literary omniscience, deliberately complicates.

In 2005, Rushdie was ranked as number ten on *Prospect Magazine’s* list of 100 global public intellectuals, and this is not on the strength of his nonfiction work. The contemporary novelist who aspires to influence cultural opinion can best be described as a form of public intellectual: a thinker and writer who is able to speak to a general audience on a range of public issues from a base of specific disciplinary expertise. So Martin Amis’s nonfiction work, *The Second Plane* (2008) becomes an extension of his fictional exploration of masculinity into social commentary, in which jihadism is anatomized as the product of threatened masculinity. In the Author’s Note to *The Second Plane*, Amis makes a bold bid for cultural authority based on this fictional work: “Geopolitics may not be my natural subject, but masculinity is” (x). As Amis said in an interview for *Vice* magazine: “When September 11 came along, I wasn’t prepared for anything as interesting as that to happen in my lifetime. If I had to explain what my novels were about in one word it would be masculinity, and here was masculinity in a whole new form . . . The social history of man is simply sex” (Knight). In this sense, the cultural capital of novelists is determined by the extent to which their fiction is taken up as a contribution to both public debate and literary-critical scholarship, authorizing them to speak in other nonliterary modes of discourse.

Contemporary Omniscience and Narrative Theory

None of the foregoing questions and claims can be properly addressed without also examining what omniscient narration actually is. This is no easy task, for, despite the seeming unity of the term, trying to define it

in a formal sense demonstrates the slipperiness of the concept it labels. Indeed, one of the central claims of this book is that investigating what constitutes contemporary omniscience will help us reconsider the formal category of omniscient narration itself. According to Gerard Genette, in *Narrative Discourse*, the paradox of poetics is that “there are no objects except particular ones and no science except of the general” (23). Existing theoretical accounts of omniscient narration derive largely from the study of classic nineteenth-century novels. While narrative theory acknowledges historical shifts in fashion, it operates with a synchronic understanding of omniscient narration as a static element of narrative, produced by the structural relationship between focalization and voice. A central premise of this book is that narrative authority is not a purely immanent feature of a text, to be recuperated from a formalist study of narrative conventions such as privilege or level. The authority of these conventions is historically contingent and must be granted by readers, as evidenced by this quote from Morton P. Levitt: “to criticize Trollope for being omniscient is ludicrous; to criticize Murdoch or Drabble for being omniscient is necessary” (7). A study of contemporary fiction will enable us to approach the category of omniscient narration as a mutable practice of novelistic craft sensitive to historical and cultural contexts.

In an instructive historical irony, a theoretical debate about omniscience has emerged in the first decade of the new millennium, at roughly the same time that a revival of omniscient narration has reached a critical mass in contemporary fiction. A dramatization of this debate would see Nicholas Royle and Jonathan Culler lined up for a concerted new millennium attack on literary omniscience, and Barbara K. Olson and Meir Sternberg carrying out a staunch rearguard defense. And yet, so far, besides terminological wranglings and abstract theorizing, the debate has not led beyond re-examinations of nineteenth-century fiction, such as William Nelles’s 2006 article “Omniscience for Atheists: Jane Austen’s Infallible Narrator” in which he claims that the godlike attributes of omniscience cannot be assigned to Austen’s work. The debate, which I address in more detail in chapter 1, revolves around the viability of the analogy between author/narrator and God which the term omniscience presupposes, and its parameters are largely epistemological and theological: how and how much does an omniscient narrator “know” about the fictional world; and what sort of figure or entity can be considered omniscient?

By virtue of the fact that omniscience refers to the all-knowing quality of the narrator, and is typically associated with the privilege of “non-natural” access to characters’ consciousness, it has tended to be discussed

within the category of focalization. A major theoretical problem arising from this focus is the common understanding that all third-person (heterodiegetic) narrators are omniscient: they either have degrees of limitation on their access to knowledge about the fictional world; or they choose to reveal or withhold omniscient knowledge according to the dictates of the story. Literary omniscience is thus largely defined by the epistemological “privilege” of the narrator, and narrative authority becomes a manifestation of the amount of diegetic information this narrator possesses or wields. For instance, in *The Dictionary of Narratology*, Gerald Prince defines authority as: “The extent of a narrator’s knowledge of the narrative situation and events. An omniscient narrator (*Tom Jones*, *The Red and the Black*) has more authority than one who does not provide an inside view of the characters” (9). In this sense, a narrator’s authority refers to their capacity to tell a story, to the conventional reliability of their narration.

The authority of omniscient narrators, furthermore, is a product of their status as narrating agents ontologically distinct from the story world. In *Narrative Fiction* (1983), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes: “It is precisely their being absent from the story and their higher narratorial authority in relation to it that confers on such narrators the quality which has often been called ‘omniscience’” (95). If a narrator’s formal status as heterodiegetic (i.e., not a character in the story being told) and extradiegetic (i.e., occupying the highest level of discourse outside the story) grants them the “quality” of omniscience, then we have limited methodological tools for distinguishing between different historical manifestations of omniscience.

My aim in this book is to investigate how the conventional authority of omniscient narrators over a fictional world relates to the cultural authority of their authors in the public sphere. This requires a different approach to literary omniscience from that which foregrounds epistemological concerns. Cultural authority refers to the status of authors in the public sphere, their visibility and capacity to influence public opinion through their fiction. It is thus contingent upon historical context and measured by critical standing. The very anxiety about a decline in the cultural authority of novelists is predicated upon the possibility of this contingency. The fact that omniscient narration fell out of favor as a viable narrative voice in literary fiction indicates that its formal narrative authority is also subject to the contingency of literary fashion and critical reception.

The first step, then, is to understand what has been considered problematic with the narrative authority of omniscient narration. While omni-

science is typically characterized as a narrator's privileged access to the consciousness of characters, works of omniscient narration are criticized on aesthetico-moral grounds for overtly asserting an authorial presence in the telling of a story and thus breaking the mimetic illusion, dictating the response of readers, and denying the autonomous selves of characters. In these terms, the authoritative possession of knowledge is less of a concern than the assertion of power through overt rhetorical attempts at influence.

The next step is to consider what authorial image is modeled by omniscient narration. While the quality of omniscience is analogous to that of God, its conventional authority is established by the traditional equation of narrator and author. As Francine Prose remarks in *Reading like a Writer*: "The omniscient voice in Dickens always sounds far more like the voice of Dickens than the voice of God" (108). Likewise, William Nelles claims that "the model for Austen's infallible narrators is not God in heaven, but Jane Austen" (128). When one considers the broader questions of the institutional conditions of literary production and the prevailing discourses of anxiety over the cultural authority of the novelist which I outlined earlier, asking whether contemporary omniscient narrators are as godlike in their knowledge of a fictional world as their nineteenth-century forebears will yield little insight.

In contrast to the prevailing theoretical emphasis on narratorial knowledge, then, I approach omniscience as the rhetorical performance of narrative authority which simultaneously invokes and projects a historically specific figure of authorship. This theoretical move will establish a shift in analytical focus away from static concerns with narratorial privilege and toward a more dynamic study of narratorial performance, enabling an investigation of the discursive relationship between narrative voice and the extrafictional statements of authors in the public sphere. My use of the term performance here bears a relationship to the distinction in Chomskyan linguistics between a speaker's competence (a knowledge of language) and performance (the actual use of language). An omniscient narrator's competence (i.e., putative knowledge of the fictional world) is a theoretical postulation. Only in performing this knowledge, through a range of rhetorical strategies, does a narrator claim the authority of omniscience. Indeed, this rhetorical performance is how we determine a narrator's "competence."

To study the rhetorical performance of contemporary omniscient narrators, a more dynamic approach to narrative authority than the possession of knowledge is required. By narrative authority, I mean the status of narrating agents which emerges out of a relational exchange involving

both the rhetorical assertion and the institutional conferral of authority. This relational exchange is not specific to omniscient narration; it is fundamental to the communicative act in all forms of narrative fiction. Likewise a figure of authorship can be projected by or inferred from any narrative voice, such as a first-person confessional narrative being paratextually framed and received as a fictionalized autobiography, the author's personal experience lending testimonial authenticity to the character narrator.

In the case of omniscient narration, the authority of the narrator over characters is not simply a convention of form granted by "third person" status, but rhetorically performed by "extranarrative" elements such as evaluative commentary and reflexive statements of creative control (of lack of it) over these characters, and by various modes of representing consciousness. The authority of the narrator over the narratee is not only a product of the omniscient narrator's mediating presence between narratee and characters, but again a rhetorical performance in the form of narratorial commentary, and particularly an apostrophic instantiation of the narratee via direct address.

These two formal features of narrative authority—the relation between narrator and character; and the relation between narrator and narratee—both establish the framework for a reader's encounter with the text and its author. Narrative commentary, such as an aphoristic statement with relevance to the extratextual world, has greater authority when uttered by an omniscient narrator rather than a character or first-person narrator, not simply because of that narrator's formal (extradiegetic-heterodiegetic) status but because it is most likely to be attributed to the author who must assume responsibility for that statement in a way they would not have to were it attributed to a character (which was the crux of the trial over Flaubert's *Madam Bovary*). With character narrators, authorial opinion involves what James Phelan calls "mask narration." Quoting passages from *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Big Sleep*, Phelan writes: "In these passages, Hemingway and Chandler use their respective character narrators to voice their own beliefs. Both authors, I daresay, would be comfortable with the idea of having these passages lifted from their novelistic contexts and put on posters attributing the thoughts to them rather than to their character narrators" (*Living* 202). In omniscient authorial narration, the intrusive commentary is more likely to be attributed directly to the author, without masking.

The narrator–narratee relation in omniscient narration establishes a model for the author–reader relation, but the key difference is that narrative authority at this extrafictional level is contingent upon a work's

critical reception. Much narrative theory interested in reader response conceptualizes this response in terms of the “real” reader’s private encounter with a text, their ethical judgments, their cognitive processing. I intend to approach author–reader relations in a discursive sense, by which I mean narrative voice is one discursive and generic mode by which an author utters statements in the public sphere, and the cultural authority of this voice is contingent upon its critical reception, rather than the private response of individual readers. The narrative authority of authors, as opposed to narrators, then, refers to the public assertion of authorial opinion via the narrative discourse of their fiction, and the granting of this authority by its public reception.

My argument is that contemporary omniscient narration is an overt attempt to parlay the conventional authority of a fictional narrator into cultural authority for the author, or, to put it another way, into cultural authority for narrative fiction itself. This does not mean that a narrator’s knowledge of the storyworld is unimportant to the narrative act, rather that engaging the narratee’s desire for knowledge of the storyworld becomes a way of engaging the reader’s desire for cultural insight.⁵

The following chapters in this book are organized around the question of narrative voice and its relation to authorship. They take as their base the classical narratological concept of voice, what Genette calls the “narrating instance,” and test the usefulness of this concept in the face of subsequent refinements, criticisms and rejections from the perspective of rhetorical, cognitive and feminist approaches to narrative theory. Throughout the book I analyze how the formal features of omniscient narration are deployed to rhetorically perform narrative authority in a broader cultural context framed by the anxiety of obsolescence. Each chapter demonstrates how the methodological requirements for investigating the nature of contemporary omniscient narration call for a reconsideration of key elements of narrative theory, from the relationship between voice and focalization, to the representation of consciousness, to the narrative communication model.

Chapter 1 anatomizes the main theoretical problems associated with literary omniscience: the theological (the viability of the analogy between author and god); the epistemological (the difference between omniscient narration and other modes of third-person or heterodiegetic narration); and the ontological (the division and overlap between narrator and author). I argue that one of the reasons for the theoretical instability of the concept is that definitions have shifted in response to historical developments in novelistic form and according to the prevailing critical

climate of the time. I proceed to offer a genealogy of the term and chart its theorization in Anglo-American formalism and structuralist and postclassical narratology, before elaborating my approach to the narrative authority of omniscient narration in opposition to scholarly debates which have emerged in the new millennium.

The next four chapters identify and classify four modes of contemporary omniscience and the figures of authorship they project, especially through extranarrative or extrarepresentational statements, including direct addresses, intrusive commentary and self-reflexive statements. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of the narrating instance and how it facilitates narrative authority. Chapter 2 more fully elaborates how contemporary omniscience is situated within a turn to post-postmodern fiction before offering cases studies of the *ironic moralist* (Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, David Foster Wallace, Adam Thirlwell). The most prominent aspect of this mode is the direct address to readers through which narrators self-consciously grapple with the “universal” moral authority of the authorial narrator in the wake of metafiction.

Chapter 3 discusses *the literary historian* (Gail Jones, Michel Faber, Edward P. Jones, David Lodge), an omniscient narrator who asserts the historiographic value of imaginatively reconstructing history in fictional form, both drawing upon and challenging the authority of scholarly approaches to the archive. The key aspect of this mode is the temporal distance of the modern “time of narrating” from the historical past, in which extratextual historical knowledge is drawn upon to legitimize proleptic commentary. Chapter 4 provides case studies of the *pyrotechnic storyteller* (Nicola Barker, Rick Moody, Zadie Smith, as well as Rushdie and Wallace). Drawing upon Richard Aczel’s “qualitative” approach to narrative voice as the stylistic evocation of subjectivity it analyses the ways in which stylistic expressivity establishes the intrusive presence and linguistic control of the narrator. In chapter 5, I examine the *immersion journalist* (Tom Wolfe) and the *social commentator* (Don DeLillo, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers), a narrator whose “omniscience” operates in the hyperbolic sense of displaying polymathic knowledge. Typically these narrators offer a paradigm for explaining the conditions of human behavior, such as neuroscience, genomics, the forces of capitalism and history, manifested in commentary and internal analysis, which competes with the conventional authority of the novelist’s insight into human nature.

Chapter 6 addresses the question of “double-voiced” language in contemporary omniscient narration, investigating how the conventional “privilege” of access to character thought operates through FID. My argu-

ment is that theoretical accounts of FID have established an interpretive frame of alterity which perpetuates aesthetic and ethical prejudices regarding the historical progression of novelistic form toward the liberation of characters from narratorial control. The chapter proposes a model of FID as a self-conscious narratorial performance of the process of character thought and point to the self-reflexive experimentation with FID across all four modes of contemporary omniscience. A feature of this experimentation is *shared linguistic habitus*, in which readers' assumptions regarding idiomatic attribution are challenged by a deliberate interplay between stylistic contagion (the "infection" of narratorial language by a character's idiom) and narratorial usurpation (the narrator's linguistic intrusion in a character's interior monologue). As well as interrogating the relation between speech and thought, this self-reflexive experimentation facilitates a post-postmodern concept of *characterological cognitive self-awareness*, in which characters not only think, but reflect upon their own cognitive processes, including their lexical choices, in the act of reflection.

In chapter 7 I address the question of omniscience in the context of a different voice, that of the first-person narrator. First-person omniscience is another prominent form in contemporary fiction, and typically has been seen as a parodic critique of the claims for authority made by classic omniscience. The chapter demonstrates how Genette's concept of *paralepsis* (an infraction of the dominant code of focalization in which a narrator provides more information than is licensed by this code) has become a synonym for omniscient character narration (a narrator saying more than he or she knows), and transformed into a cognitive frame by which this mode of narration can be described as "unnatural." This approach is criticized as a product of the *epistemological fallacy* in narrative theory. I draw upon David Herman's concept of hypothetical focalization as an alternative to *paralepsis* and argue that characters employ hypothetical focalization to perform omniscience in the narrative act, relying upon the imagination rather than unnatural knowledge to authorize their stories. By virtue of invoking the figure of the novelist, rather than that of the autobiographer or the memoirist, these narrators project an authorial desire for a more relativized mode of omniscience in contemporary fiction.

Chapter 8 elaborates the broader methodological ramifications of my investigation of narrative voice. Keeping in mind the relationship I have established between contemporary omniscience and cultural anxieties about the decline of literature and the diminished status of novelists, I propose a *discursive narratology*, a formalist study of narrative which is capable of addressing the nature of fiction as public discourse and the

role of the author in the construction of narrative authority. The chapter offers a critique of the ways in which the “real” reader has been theorized in contemporary narratology and reader response theory, and argue for an approach to the author as a concrete textual agent in the structure of narrative communication. Drawing upon Susan Lanser’s theory of an “extrafictional” voice, and Genette’s theory of the paratext, I present a discursive reformulation of the narrative communication model. This approach emphasizes the public nature of fictional narratives and their reception, rather than the mechanics of private individual reading.

In my proposed model, the paratext is reconceptualized as a Foucauldian discursive formation, with the narrative *discourse* of fiction situated alongside other nonliterary discourses in the public sphere, from authorial statements to readers’ textual responses. The typical agents of narrative communication are thus reconfigured as a series of textual sites within which subject positions can be adopted and articulated along a discursive plane (rather than an inside/outside conception of the fictional text), with narrative authority emerging from the relations between subject positions in this formation.