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## The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Dawson, Paul.

The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Omniscience and Narrative Authority

Omniscience is not simply a hyperbole, it is an incoherent and flawed plot device in a story that critics and theorists have been telling for a hundred years and more. Why retain the concept of omniscience at all?

—Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* 206

IN THIS CHAPTER I elaborate my approach to narrative authority in contemporary omniscient narration by reconsidering existing theories of literary omniscience. My claim is that formalist accounts of omniscient narration have developed and altered in response both to different manifestations of the form in the history of the novel, and to the prevailing critical orthodoxies which have accompanied this history. I will begin with a brief discussion of self-reflexive references to omniscience in the following two extracts. The first is from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848):

If, a few pages back, the present writer claimed the privilege of peeping into Miss Amelia Sedley's bedroom, and understanding with the omniscience of the novelist all the gentle pains and passions which were tossing upon that innocent pillow, why should he not declare himself to be Rebecca's confidant too, master of her secrets, and seal-keeper of that young woman's conscience? (171)

The second is from Martin Amis's *The Information* (1995):

And I made the signs—the M, the A—with my strange and twisted fingers, thinking: how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don't know *anything*? (63)

Both passages are examples of intrusive omniscient narration in which the narrators reflect on their own authority as storytellers, and present themselves not just as narrators, but as novelists, as the author of the book we are reading. I have chosen these two examples, of course, because both of them make specific reference to the function of literary omniscience as a form of knowledge. If we conduct a classic taxonomic study of these two novels, we will see that both narrators display all the knowledge of their respective fictional worlds that is characteristic of omniscience, in terms of access to consciousness and spatio-temporal freedom. So in terms of narrative perspective there is little difference, although the Amis novel is less panoramically ambitious, focalizing mainly through the protagonist, Richard. In terms of narrative voice, both novels are narrated in the third person by authorial narrators who are outside the frame of representation. So we can tick off the list of formal properties and classify synchronically the two novels as omniscient.

And yet there is surely a palpable difference between the performative stances which these two narrators adopt. In the Thackeray passage there is a confident and playful assertion of the novelist's privilege of omniscient knowledge, whereas in the Amis passage there is a manifest anxiety about the narrator's omniscient authority. In fact, Amis's narrator is not grappling with a failure of diegetic knowledge, but a failure of novelistic insight resulting from his own limitations as a person. He is reflecting scenically on his own experience in order to ask whether he can satisfy his role as an observer of human nature.

Both of these novels enact what for me is the key feature of literary omniscience: the performance of narrative authority through intrusive narratorial commentary, which "personalizes" the narrator. If there is a formal difference between these two examples, it lies in the way they engage the reader, in how they establish different modes of narrative authority as omniscient story tellers. These formal differences can productively be understood with reference to the historical shift in the cultural status of the novel, from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

In the passage from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* cited above, the narrator follows up his rhetorical question about access to consciousness by providing an account of Becky's thoughts and of her social context required

for the “history” being written. In describing Becky’s regrets over turning down a marriage proposal which would have secured her a prosperous life and increased social status, the narrator engages the narratee directly:

In this natural emotion every properly regulated mind will certainly share. What good mother is there that would not commiserate a penniless spinster, who might have been my lady, and have shared four thousand a year? What well-bred young person is there in all Vanity Fair, who will not feel for a hard-working, ingenious, meritorious girl, who gets such an honourable, advantageous, provoking offer, just at the very moment when it is out of her power to accept it? I am sure our friend Becky’s disappointment deserves and will command every sympathy. (171)

Thackeray’s narrator solidifies this ironic identification with Becky’s plight with reference to his own experience, when he claims: “I remember one night being in the Fair myself, at an evening party” (171). In this breach of the story/discourse division, the narrator relates a first-hand observation of how impending marriage into a higher social rank will alter a person’s standing: “If the mere chance of becoming a baronet’s daughter can procure a lady such homage in the world, surely, surely we may respect the agonies of a young woman who has lost the opportunities of becoming a baronet’s wife” (172).

This section is a good example of J. Hillis Miller’s claim that the Victorian narrator is immanent rather than transcendent, possessed of an omniscience which moves within the community of the story being narrated. Miller draws attention to a quality of Thackeray’s omniscient narrator which

identifies him as a perfect example of a spokesman for the general consciousness of the community. This is his use of the editorial “we.” The novel is punctuated by direct addresses to the reader in which he is encouraged to think of himself as one of a vast number of other readers who share similar experiences of life and similar judgments of it. We are asked to identify ourselves with one another and with the narrator who speaks for us until by a kind of magical sympathy we lose our identities, are drawn into the group, and taken all together come to form a ubiquitous chorus of judgement. (72)

Miller calls this a “rhetoric of assimilation” (72) which in “establishing the reader’s participation in a community mind surrounding the individual

minds of the characters in the story gives the strength of a universal judgment” (78).<sup>1</sup> So the diegetic authority, the omniscient knowledge, of Thackeray’s narrator, established in the prefatorial chapter as “the Manager of the Performance” and a puppeteer, is supplemented by this extradiegetic appeal to a common reading public. This “community mind” is obviously a rhetorical construct rather than a sociological fact, and the judgments it endorses, as the preface intimates, are those of a “man with a reflective turn of mind” who will be in sympathy with the narrator’s stance toward the characters.

The editorial “we” is largely absent from contemporary omniscience, as it is from Amis’s *The Information*. Amis’s narrator is as equally intrusive as Thackeray’s but he cannot so readily invoke a community mind. He thus requires recourse to a different means of character evaluation. The protagonist, Richard Tull, is a failed writer, his dedication to avant-garde experimentalism heightened by the obscene popular success of his friend with a work of middlebrow fiction. “Essentially Richard was a marooned modernist,” the narrator tells us. “Modernism was a brief divagation into difficulty; but Richard was still out there, in difficulty. He didn’t want to please the readers” (170). Richard’s struggle as a writer, which provides the narrative momentum of the novel, is in fact a struggle over the concept of the universal. “And writers *should* hate each other, Richard naturally believed. If they mean business. They are competing for something there is only one of: the universal” (312).

In an argument over when Richard will finish his novel, whether it will end up being published and earning money, his wife, Gina, says: “I don’t know if you still really believe in it. Your novels. Because you never . . . Because what you . . . Ah I’m sorry, Richard. I’m so sorry” (87). This line of dialogue is followed by a brief paragraph of narration which completes Gina’s unfinished sentence: “Because you never found an audience—you never found the universal or anything like it. Because what you come up with in there, in your study, is of no general interest. End of story. Yes, this is the end of your story” (87–88). This passage could be the narrator’s rendering, via omniscient knowledge, of Gina’s unvoiced thoughts, or the rendering of what Richard *thinks* are her unvoiced thoughts, doubling as an internal dialogue with his own self-doubts. It could also be the narrator’s address to his character, for Richard’s anxiety is echoed, both ironically and agonistically, by the narrator who struggles throughout the book with the “universal” authority of his own omniscience.

Richard’s difficulties in finishing his book are paralleled by his diminishing sexual potency (at one stage using anxiety over “the death of the

novel” as an excuse to his wife for his poor sexual performance) and much of the book deals with his experience of a midlife crisis. In one scene Richard experiences a spontaneous erection while his young son is moving about innocently on his lap:

This used to cause him disquiet, and struck him as something he had better shut up about. But, again, he was enough of an artist to have faith in the universality of his own responses. He asked around among the dads and found that it was so. It was general—universal. It still struck him as essentially perverse. When you thought of all the other occasions which cried out for hard-ons that never came. And here you not only didn’t need one. You didn’t even want one. (195)

While Thackeray’s narrator describes himself in the book as “an observer of human nature” (177), moving through *Vanity Fair* in person, drawing upon the novelistic convention of omniscient access to character thought to supplement his moral commentary, the observations of Amis’s narrator are more introspective. The effect is not to undermine his authority, but to ground the legitimacy of his observations in his own experience. The passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, in which the narrator questions how he can be omniscient when he doesn’t know anything, comes from a section of commentary which begins: “This whole thing is a crisis. This whole mess is a crisis of the middle years” (62). In what follows it becomes obvious that these lines refer not only to Richard’s life, but to the book itself, perhaps its genesis if we wish to read it autobiographically, but more importantly its form.<sup>2</sup> The next line reads: “Every father knows the loathed park and playground in the unmoving air of Sunday morning (every mother knows it Friday evening, Tuesday afternoon—every other time)” (62). This “universal” comment about parenthood is personalized by the narrator’s own account of a time in the playground when he was approached by a child who proceeded to spell out letters in sign language. The narrator believes the child is deaf and dumb and leans forward, attempting to decipher the letters, “suddenly braced for revelation, frowning, essaying, as if the boy could tell me something I really might need to know” (63). When the boy announces that he has spelled out his own name this precipitates the narrator’s crisis of omniscience, a sense that he lacks the knowledge of human nature, the “information,” necessary to write a novel. His strategy is not to build this sense of crisis into the structure of the novel in metafictional fashion, but to reassert his authority by a confessional identification with his character: “I wrote those words five

years ago, when I was Richard's age. Even then I knew that Richard didn't look as bad as he thought he looked" (63). Amis's narrator, then, confesses to readers rather than engaging them in a dialogue. And rather than asserting the "universal" through detached observation and an assumption of collective agreement, he offers it provisionally through individual introspection (the line "Every father knows" echoing Richard's knowledge of universality derived from having "asked around among the dads"). This is what allows the narrator to claim: "Intimations of monstrosity are common, are perhaps universal, in middle age" (64).

It is clear that Amis's narrator is gendered, as his strategy is to identify with Richard's perspective. This strategy foregrounds the relativity of the narratorial commentary, which is replete with stereotypical statements about gender differences: "She was a woman. She knew so much more about tears than he did" (9). A gendered narrator uttering "perhaps" has less conventional authority than a nongendered one uttering unmoored extrapresentational statements. One can see at work here both a recognition and a disavowal of the role gender politics has played in rendering the concept of the "universal" untenable. Vera Nunning locates *The Information* within a trend of contemporary fiction which she describes as "a merging of realism and experiment" (249). According to Nunning, in this book Amis "parodies nearly all the characteristics of nineteenth-century authorial narration and refuses to conform to the dogmas of political correctness" (249). I would suggest that *The Information* is less a parody than an agonistic encounter with these characteristics, and that its refusal of "political correctness" is an element of this agon. For instance, after describing the beauty of Gina (focalized through Richard), the narrator offers this version of the editorial "we" in a search for universality:

We are agreed—come *on*: we are agreed—about beauty in the flesh. Consensus is possible here. And in the mathematics of the universe, beauty helps tell us whether things are false or true. We can quickly agree about beauty, in the heavens and in the flesh. But not everywhere. Not, for instance, on the page. (15)

In the difference between the performance of narrative voice in these two novels, emblematic of the nineteenth and the late twentieth century, I encounter the need for a diachronic account of shifting modes of omniscient authority. This diachronic account would not be so much one of the historical decline and revival of a narrative convention (hence map-

ping onto the standard evolutionary model of the progression of the novel from authorial to figural narration), but one of the historical mutability of this convention. And if this mutability resides largely in the narrative function of commentary, then its relation to a certain figure of authorship becomes more important than the nature of narratorial knowledge. With this in mind I intend to revisit and reconsider the scholarship on literary omniscience, drawing attention to the historical mutability of the concept itself, and lay the groundwork for a contextual approach to omniscient authority.

### The Problem of Omniscience

It is relatively easy to list the formal features of omniscient narration and offer the eighteenth-century novels of Fielding, and the novels of Victorian authors such as Thackeray, Dickens, and Eliot, as canonical exemplars. Many scholars have pointed out, however, that these novels don't always fit the mold of theoretical definitions. Wilhelm Fuger offered a prominent critique along these lines in his article, "Limits of the Narrator's Knowledge in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*." Analyzing the functional limitations which Fielding's narrator places on his privileged knowledge, Fuger concludes that "there is no such thing as a fully omniscient narrator and that this spectral figure may only be a construct invented by literary theorists" (288). Once we attempt a rigorous definition of omniscient narration and its manifestation in particular works of fiction, once we attempt to theorize the form and its effects, we are presented with a number of difficulties which continue to be debated. These include: the viability of the comparison of authorial narrators to God; the relation between author and narrator; the difference between omniscient narration and other third-person modes; and the constitutive features of literary omniscience.

First, how important is the foundational analogy with divinity and the ensuing trope of a godlike storyteller? To what extent can this analogy be divorced from its theological implications without rendering the descriptive term redundant? As David Lodge ("The Uses") and Nicholas Royle point out, omniscience describes an author's relation to their creative product, and the narrator's relation to the fictional world, in religious, and specifically Christian terms. "To assume the efficacy and appropriateness of discussing literary works in terms of 'omniscient' narration," Royle argues, "is, however faintly or discreetly, to subscribe to a religious



(and above all, a Christian) discourse and thinking” (260). God forbid! Whether or not this association with Christian thinking is an ideological problem, when the analogy is deployed as a theoretical paradigm for a certain type of narration it leads to the postulation of a supernatural narrator ontologically distinct from character narrators and the narrators of nonfiction. In *Authorial Divinity in the Twentieth Century*, Barbara K. Olson argues that the author/God analogy and the omniscient narrator/God analogy must be taken seriously for their theological implications. Her claim is that writers throughout history have been influenced by the implications of this analogy for their creative acts, celebrating or rejecting comparisons with God, or being troubled by the conceptions of divinity which follow from their artistic beliefs. Her argument is that we should not even be debating the analogy—we should be studying what sort of God is implied by both the testimonies and authorial experiences of writers, and the narrational acts they employ. There is no doubt this analogy has informed many writers and their fictional projects, but it does not follow that it ought to be the basis for a theoretical definition of narrative form.

The term and its applications certainly invite us to consider the relationship between author and narrator. Does literary omniscience refer to the act of writing and its genesis in authorial imagination, or to the act of narration and the knowledge of the author’s storytelling proxy? While in previous centuries omniscient narration was understood as the method by which an author narrates in his or her own voice, formalist distinctions between the two assign creation to the author and knowledge to the narrator, begging the question of what sort of narratorial figure can claim omniscience. More importantly they divorce narratorial commentary from its provenance in an author’s voice. As Meir Sternberg points out, in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, the term omniscient author is logically redundant, for if it refers to the creative power of authors it must apply to all works of fiction. For Sternberg, omniscient narration only makes sense when referring to the super-knowing qualities which the author has conferred upon the narrator as a storytelling delegate.

We are then led to the problem of what textual features are constitutive of omniscient narration: what are the minimal conventions necessary to a definition of literary omniscience which would enable us to label some narratives omniscient and others not? The “privilege” which omniscient narrators supposedly possess that other narrators do not is knowledge of

characters' hearts and minds. The common distinction between "full" and "limited" or "restricted" omniscience to describe the amount of information a narrator provides about the fictional world and the interior lives of characters raises epistemological questions: how can a narrator be partially all-knowing? If they can reveal the thoughts of one character, why not all? These questions frame the problem of omniscience in abstract logical terms. The response, articulated most forcefully by Sternberg (*Expositional Modes*, "Omniscience"), is that an omniscient narrator is indeed in possession of full knowledge about the fictional world, but chooses to reveal or withhold information according to the dictates of the story. Such an approach effectively grants omniscience to all third-person narrators, although it does point to the fact that omniscience would be better understood as a rhetorical performance of knowledge.

From the omniscient author to the "omniscient author convention" to the omniscient narrator to omniscient *narration*, the range of cognate terms employed over the last century, along with the multiplication of narratological alternatives, manifest the historical changes in critical thought about novelistic form and the difficulty of explaining the concept of omniscience in a literary context. Most critics and theorists, however, continue to employ the term as an easy shorthand, a lingua franca across literary studies, while typically qualifying their usage with prefixes such as "so-called" or with scare quotes. Within the tradition of narratology, according to Wallace Martin, "[w]hen focalization is not treated as an independent category in the definition of point of view, 'omniscient narration' becomes a kind of dumping-ground filled with a wide range of distinct narrative techniques" (146). The diffuseness of literary omniscience might prove resistant to easy classification, but that doesn't make the term untenable as many have claimed. The necessary first step is to chart this range of techniques and ask how they have come to be grouped together.

This task cannot be approached in an abstract fashion because the theoretical instability associated with literary omniscience is a result of its historically shifting usage, from a metaphor of authorship to a formal category of narrative, with emphasis placed on different aspects at certain points in the history of criticism, depending on the prevailing novelistic aesthetic and theoretical climate, leaving us today with a series of sedimentary layers of meanings and functions. What is most vital is to investigate the reasons why certain works of fiction are labeled omniscient, and what characteristics are emphasized in this labeling. This will help us to understand different historical manifestations of the form.

## A Genealogy of Literary Omniscience

A genealogy of the terms “omniscience” and “omniscient” in a literary context reveals the shifting preoccupations of theories of the novel and the histories of novelistic form which they tell, explicitly or implicitly. I will begin with the foundational metaphor. The constitutive feature of the analogy between author and God is not a narrator’s perfect knowledge or absolute power, but an author’s creativity. The analogy stems from the Renaissance comparison of the poet with God in which, unlike classical antiquity where he is inspired by God, the poet possesses a faculty of imagination like that of God. This concept was introduced to English criticism by Philip Sidney in “An Apology for Poetry” (1595). According to Sidney: “the poet, disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as were never in Nature” (7). Sidney’s “second nature” is what we would call a heterocosm. The idea of an all-knowing author is a secondary product of this theory of creativity.

Dorrit Cohn and Nicholas Royle both point to Friedrich von Blanckenburg’s 1774 *Essay on the Novel* as the earliest critical application of this analogy to the novel, quoting this line: “A writer, lest he wish to dishonor himself, can not hold to the pretense that he is unacquainted with the inner world of his characters. He is their creator: they have received from him all their character traits, their entire being, they live in a world that he himself has fashioned” (qtd in Royle 256). Robert Ellis Dye points out that this passage refers to the authorial construction of character, an author’s ethical responsibility to develop a convincing interior life, and is not tied to a particular narrative voice or the qualities of a narrator: “Blanckenburg is talking, then, about the author-creator of any literary work, and not specifically about the narrator’s field of vision in the novel” (132).

Henry Fielding claims this analogy for the novelist in *Tom Jones* (1749). “This Work, may, indeed,” the self-reflexive omniscient narrator claims, “be considered as a great Creation of our own” (459). The narrator goes on to condemn any “little Reptile of a Critic” who finds fault with parts of the book before having finished reading the whole. “The Allusion and Metaphor we have here made use of, we must acknowledge to be infinitely too great for our Occasion; but there is, indeed, no other which is at all adequate to express the Difference between an Author of the first Rate, and a Critic of the lowest” (459). The allusion to God, then,

is founded on the metaphor of creation, used to separate the artist's capacity for invention from the critic's parasitic reliance on older arbitrary rules of judgment.

If the concept of literary omniscience can be seen as emerging from a theory of creativity, the analogy with God need not be retained when we see how the theory of creativity develops in literary criticism. The analogy, considered blasphemous before the sixteenth century, was the first step in internalizing earlier theories of inspiration, leading to the Romantic ideal of the original genius. Coleridge's "secondary imagination" becomes a mental faculty designating not only the reproductive imagination described by neoclassical critics and supported by the philosophy of Locke and Hobbes, but the poet's creative power, which is an echo of the primary imagination, itself "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (167). This concept leads eventually to a secularized democratization of creativity in twentieth-century theories of the unconscious as the source of creativity.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to English theories of the novel, omniscience is first mooted as a method of storytelling among others. In her "Life of Samuel Richardson" (1804), Anna Laetitia Barbauld assesses Richardson's work in relation to the "three modes of carrying on a story" (xxiii): the narrative or epic, in which "the author relates himself the whole adventure"; the memoir, "where the subject of the adventures relates his own story"; and a third way, "that of *epistolary correspondence*, carried on between the characters of the novel." Barbauld describes the narrative or epic mode as "the manner of Cervantes in his *Don Quixote*, and of Fielding in his *Tom Jones*. It is the most common way." She describes the method in this way:

The author, like the muse, is supposed to know everything; he can reveal the secret springs of actions, and let us into events in his own time and manner. He can be concise, or diffuse, according as the different parts of his story require it. He can indulge, as Fielding has done, in digressions, and thus deliver sentiments and display knowledge which would not properly belong to any of the characters. (xxiii)

Although she does not use the word "omniscient," instead making an analogy with the muse to explain the all-knowing qualities of the author (which indicates that the author's creative power is the source of knowledge which animates the narrative), Barbauld elaborates the familiar range of conventions, from the author's own voice, to access to consciousness ("the secret springs of action"), to the freedom to shift from scene to sum-

mary (“concise, or diffuse”), to the provision of commentary. The point here is that only when the author narrates in his own voice, rather than the voice of a character, does he have license (according to the laws of realism) to reveal all that he knows of the fictional world he has created.

The earliest use of the word omniscience in a literary context that I have found in English appears in 1848 in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. It is clear that Thackeray uses omniscience to denote the privilege of knowing the secret thoughts of characters, and in declaring himself master of these secrets the comparison with God is clear (for he searcheth the heart and knoweth the mind). It is also clear that Thackeray understands this privilege purely as a convention of authorship, for the narrator draws attention to the fact that he is a writer and a novelist, indicates the arbitrariness of shifts in point of view, and even describes his omnipresence in terms of pages, not the spatio-temporal coordinates of the fictional world. In short this passage is a rhetorical performance of omniscient authority, for the “privilege” of the novelist is not only access to the thoughts of characters but the capacity to assert an authorial presence by speaking directly to the reader in his own voice. The relation between these two features largely dictates the way in which omniscience is understood throughout the centuries.

Barbauld’s taxonomy of storytelling methods is carried through by Walter Raleigh in *The English Novel* (1894), where he explicitly uses the term omniscient to describe authorial voice. In classifying the three methods of telling a story, Raleigh writes:

The first and most usual way is that the author should tell the story directly. He is invisible and omniscient, a sort of *diable boiteux*, who is able to unroof all houses and unlock all hearts, and who can never be questioned as to how he came to a knowledge of the events he narrates. There are stories that can be told in no other way than this; the favourite way of Fielding, Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray. At a slight sacrifice of dramatic force the events of the story are supplied with a chorus, and at any time that suits him the author can cast off his invisible cloak and show himself fingering the “helpless pieces of the game he plays.” (148)

There are similarities with Barbauld here, the capacity to unlock all hearts, the convention of infinite knowledge, but there is less emphasis on techniques than on a particular figure of authority, one which appears to be immanent in the fictional world, invisible, yet always able to assert his presence. One could argue here that the difference in emphasis stems from

the fact that while Barbauld had only Cervantes and Fielding as examples, Raleigh had the whole range of Victorian fiction. Again, although using the word omniscient, Raleigh does not invoke an analogy with God. His description of the *diable boiteux* (meaning “lame devil,” or Asmodeus, demon king) recalls an earlier instance of the term in Dickens’s correspondence. In an 1865 letter discussing the origins of his periodical, *Household Words*, Dickens writes of the necessity to “get a character established as it were which any of the writers may maintain without difficulty.” This character would be “a certain SHADOW,” a “kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent intangible creature” whose knowledge is granted not by creative power but by its capacity to inhabit the private spaces of the urban world, to “go into any place” and “be in all homes,” and thus able to articulate “the spirit of the people and the time,” to speak as a general voice, not just that of the author (qtd in Forster 511).

According to David Pike, “the ‘Asmodean flight’ was a common emblem for the problematic power of the omniscient narrator” in the nineteenth-century realist novel. “On the one hand the term lays claim to supernatural knowledge on the part of the novelist; on the other hand it intimates the moral taint that could become associated with a fictional overreaching and revelation of things perhaps better left hidden” (85). The Asmodean desire to unroof houses continues to be referenced in contemporary omniscience, self-consciously in this passage from Michel Faber’s neo-Victorian novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White*: “All of the household, except for William, is under the sheets, like dolls in a doll’s house. If the Rackham house were such a toy, and you could lift off its roof to peek inside, you would see William in shirt-sleeves at his desk, working on correspondence: nothing to interest you, I promise” (200). Similarly, Amis’s book, set in modern London, opens: “Cities at night, I feel, contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing. It’s nothing. Just sad dreams. Or something like that. . . . Swing low in your weep ship, with your tear scans and your sob probes, and you would mark them” (3).

Another early appearance of the word “omniscience” is in an 1874 review of Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd* by Henry James, who writes: “the author has evidently read to good purpose the low-life chapters in George Eliot’s novels: he has caught very happily her trick of seeming to humour benignantly her queer people and look down on them from the heights of analytic omniscience” (85). Here an immanent, roving, all-knowing narrator is not emphasized so much as one who is able to analyze and judge from on high. An understanding of omniscience as the

psychological investigation of character motivation became more prominent as a result of the influence of George Eliot. Susan Lanser claims that classic realism, exemplified by Eliot's novels, emerges from the contradictory "narrative imperatives" of "knowing and judging, or representation and ideology" (*Fictions of Authority* 85). From the late nineteenth century "omniscient" and "analytic" were often used interchangeably. This can be seen in Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Fiction* (1943), which outlines various types of narration, including where "the story may be told by the omniscient author, or analytic author, the author who does undertake to present the working of the mind of one, or more, of the characters, and who may investigate and interpret motives and feelings" (659).

An important shift in the way novelistic method was approached in English literary criticism, and hence how omniscience was theorized, is indicated by Vernon Lee's 1895 essay "On Literary Construction." For Lee, "the most important question of all" (19) when considering novelistic construction is that of point of view, indicating growing interest in how readers are oriented to the consciousness of characters. Drawing on the analogy of perspective in painting, Lee writes:

This supreme constructive question in the novel is exactly analogous to that question in painting; and in describing the choice by the painter of the point of view, I have described also that most subtle choice of the literary craftsman: choice of the point of view whence the personages and action of a novel are to be seen. For you can see a person, or an act, in one of several ways, and connected with several other persons or acts. You can see the person from no particular body's point of view, or from the point of view of one of the other persons, or from the point of view of the analytical, judicious author. (20)

Here we find an anticipation of narratological theories of focalization, from the spatial orientation of characters, to access to consciousness, to ideological perspective, with "the point of view of the analytical, judicious author" (again with George Eliot as the exemplar) situated as one perspective among others in a novel. It is an important conceptual shift from modes of telling to modes of perception which will later become elaborated in James's famous "house of fiction" metaphor in his preface to the *Portrait of a Lady*.

The twentieth-century concept of omniscience as a type of authorial intrusion in the form of excess narrative information rather than scenic dramatization is anticipated by George Gissing in an 1885 letter:

It is fine to see how the old three-vol. tradition is being broken through. One volume is becoming commonest of all. . . . Thackeray & Dickens wrote at enormous length, & with profusion of detail; their plan is to tell everything, to leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic, I think, is this later method, of merely suggesting; of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist is omniscient; I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life,—hinting, surmising, telling in detail what *can* so be told, & no more. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentment. (166)

Gissing offers an early argument for the redundancy of omniscience resulting from new methods of narration which have coincided with changes to the book publishing industry. This is a sentiment which James himself would agree with and, of course, James famously eschewed the heights of analytic omniscience—“the mere muffled majesty of irresponsible ‘authorship’” (*Art of the Novel* 328)—in his own fiction as he sought to apply the principle of dramatization not only to the action of the story, but the consciousness of his characters. According to Joseph Warren Beach in his 1918 book, *The Method of Henry James*: “Mr. James is seldom or never, in his later work, the ‘omniscient author.’ He has a great scorn for this slovenly way of telling a story. It is only in his earlier work that he sometimes allows himself to step in and give special information to the reader,—information which he could not have had from the person or persons who are for the moment most concerned” (57). With the increasing prominence of new modes of third-person narration, omniscience became a problem for critics of the novel to address.

### Point of View and the Omniscient Author Convention

When comparing the methods of telling employed by English novelists, both Barbauld and Raleigh described the value of the epistolary mode as combining the intimacy and immediacy of a character narrator with the freedom of the authorial narrator. The arguments which Barbauld and Raleigh make about the relative merits and disadvantages of authorial omniscience and character narration are still in circulation today, but we will no longer encounter claims that epistolary fiction is the more dramatized and hence mediating position between these two modes. From the early twentieth century this privileged technical solution has been firmly associated with third-person narration limited to a character’s perspective,



which Norman Friedman described as “to have the story told as if by a character in the story, but told in the third person” (1164). This critical formulation, of course, is a response to the development of modernist fiction and its impulse toward “dramatization” for which Henry James was the most vocal champion and, in English fiction, pioneering exemplar.

There is no need to rehearse in great detail here what is common knowledge: that James’s prefaces to the New York Edition of his collected work, in which he elaborates in autobiographical fashion his fascination with locating a center of consciousness for his narratives, necessitating a rejection of many aspects of omniscience (such as overt commentary and exposition and multiple points of view), became the basis for a poetics of fiction codified by Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921).<sup>4</sup> In this book, Lubbock claims: “The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story” (251).<sup>5</sup>

Lubbock’s study of point of view in the novel is inseparable from an historical conceptualization of novelistic method as an artistic evolution: a dynamic struggle of authors to rid their fiction of their own presence as omniscient storytellers. This progressive development of point of view, for Lubbock, culminates in James’s *The Ambassadors*, and from James’s ideas he elaborates an evaluative aesthetic criterion of showing rather than telling. The significance of *The Craft of Fiction* for theories of omniscience is twofold: first, it describes, through detailed analyses of Tolstoy, Thackeray, Flaubert, and James, the formal features of omniscient narration in operation in specific texts, only to register it as a technically outmoded point of view, and thus provides an historical and critical framework for condemning the use of omniscient narration in the twentieth century. Secondly, in doing so, it highlights the paradox of presence and absence which has animated later theoretical debates about literary omniscience. On the one hand, the means by which the novel is able to move beyond omniscience is the effacement of authorial presence; on the other hand, the resulting orientation of “point of view” to character consciousness manifests precisely the privilege of omniscience: laying bare the secret recesses of character’s minds and hearts.

It is interesting to note that whenever Lubbock uses the term “omniscience” it is not in reference to character consciousness, but all the techniques which display authorial presence, that is, an author telling rather than showing. For Lubbock, as for Vernon Lee, point of view concerns the means by which readers can be supplied with their own point of view,

without the mediating presence of authorial consciousness. In Lubbock's poetics, the omniscient author tells a story from his point of view, interposing his mind between that of the reader and the character: "He tells it as he sees it, in the first place; the reader faces the story-teller and listens" (251). Omniscience, then, is manifested in certain elements of a narrative, from "intrusive" commentary to exposition, the pictorial summary of events instead of the dramatic rendering of scenes, anything which does not place readers in a character's center of consciousness and thus betrays a mediated authorial point of view, a panoramic picture of how the author "sees" the world. "By convention," Lubbock writes, "the author is allowed his universal knowledge of the story and the people in it. But still it is a convention, and a prudent novelist does not strain it unnecessarily" (115).

Besides the dissenting voice of E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), Lubbock's work set the terms for subsequent critical works which reinforced the modernist aesthetic in formalist criticism. Joseph Warren Beach's *The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique* (1932) is a good example of the critical industry which developed from Lubbock's pioneering work. To introduce the chapter titled "Exit Author" Beach writes:

In a bird's eye view of the English novel from Fielding to Ford, the one thing that will impress you more than any other is the disappearance of the author. In Fielding and Scott, in Thackeray and George Eliot, the author is everywhere present in person to see that you are properly informed on all the circumstances of the action, to explain the characters to you and insure your forming the right opinion of them, to scatter nuggets of wisdom and good feeling along the course of the story, and to point out how, from the failures and successes of the characters, you may form a sane and right philosophy of conduct. (14)

It can be seen here how the emphasis on authorial intrusion becomes a critique not just of breaking the mimetic illusion, but of asserting a moral control over the reader by virtue of obscuring the character. In the 1950s, critical accounts of the trajectory of novelistic experimentation toward authorial effacement were updated by Robert Humphrey's *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* and Leon Edel's *The Modern Psychological Novel*. "In the old novels," Leon Edel wrote, "the omniscient author was nearly always present and nearly always addressing an audience" (138). Edel and Humphrey install *Ulysses* rather than *The Amba-*

sadors as the high point of the development of the novel. In *The Rhetoric of Modernist Fiction* (2006), Morton P. Levitt extends this tradition into the new millennium when he reiterates modernist experiments with point of view as a specific rejection of omniscience: “Tracing the movement out of omniscience is surely, as I understand it, the most useful clue to the emergence of the Modernist novel” (125).

And yet Flaubert and Joyce provide the touchstone of modernist aesthetics in two famous comments which make specific reference to the author/god analogy. “The author in his book,” Flaubert wrote in correspondence with Louise Colet, “must be like God in the universe, everywhere present and nowhere visible. Art being a second nature, the creator of this nature must employ analogous procedures” (319). This is echoed in the dialogue of Stephen Dedalus, hero of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (233). In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), his corrective to what he considered the damaging aesthetic dogma of showing rather than telling, and the evasion of ethical questions inherent in the privileging of authorial impersonality, Wayne Booth engages with the paradox of omniscience which I pointed out earlier:

There is a curious ambiguity in the term “omniscience.” Many modern works that we usually classify as narrated dramatically, with everything relayed to us through the limited views of the characters, postulate fully as much omniscience in the silent author as Fielding claims for himself. Our roving visitation into the minds of sixteen characters in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, seeing nothing but what those minds contain, may seem in one sense not to depend on an omniscient author. But this method is omniscience with teeth in it: the implied author demands our absolute faith in his powers of divination. We must never for a moment doubt that he knows everything about each of these sixteen minds or that he has chosen correctly how much to show of each. In short, impersonal narration is really no escape from omniscience. (161)

Booth argues that modernist impersonality is not an escape from “authorial presence,” which Lubbock and his followers claimed, because he locates omniscience in the implied author, the norms and values of the author’s second self which inform the text, and not in a set of narrative conventions. In other words, omniscience is a moral as well as a techni-

cal choice, and Booth's counterargument indicates that critiques of authorial intrusion are never purely aesthetic. It is clear, though, that Booth is describing omniscience in terms of privileged access to character's consciousness. The effect of this is to foreground this conventional privilege, rather than overt authorial presence, as the constitutive feature of literary omniscience, thus licensing use of the term to cover virtually all narratives in the third person.

This is evident in Norman Friedman's 1955 essay, "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept," in which he undertook to provide a synoptic overview of theories of point of view and addressed the problem of omniscience by expanding it to include precisely those modernist novels which had been deemed to have eschewed it. Friedman provides a taxonomy of various points of view along a scale from telling to showing, understood in relation to the degree of presence of a narrator, whether the narrator is the author or a character. At one end of this scale is "Editorial Omniscience," in which "'omniscience' signifies literally a completely unlimited—and hence difficult to control—point of view" (1171). This point of view is characterized by the preponderance of summary over scene in which the author's voice dominates. According to Friedman: "The characteristic mark, then, of Editorial Omniscience is the presence of authorial intrusions and generalizations about life, manners, and morals, which may or may not be explicitly related to the story at hand" (1171). Here we have the typical account of omniscient narration as the intrusive presence of the analytic judicious author: "it is a natural consequence of the editorial attitude that the author will not only *report* what goes on in the minds of his characters, but he will also *criticize* it" (1172). Friedman goes on to classify increasing limitations on this originary mode of storytelling, from "Neutral Omniscience" to "Multiple Selective Omniscience" to "Selective Omniscience." The only form of third-person narration which is not described as a type of omniscience is "The Dramatic Mode" in which no mental states are reported (1178).

### Narratology: Who Sees and Who Speaks?

The Anglo-American study of novelistic method and the pedagogy of creative writing, which emerged from it, are distinguished by their concern with authorial craft, with the aesthetic decisions authors make in constructing a work of narrative fiction, and with evaluating the efficacy of those decisions. As I have pointed out, this tradition is virtually predicated

on the assumption that omniscient narration is a technically outmoded method of storytelling, and an aesthetic which by default sees the key features of omniscience as impediments to the mimetic illusion necessary for realist fiction. I have also shown how this critical tradition emerged out of an encounter with the modernist novel and the preoccupation with “point of view.”

In the second part of the twentieth century, this critical tradition is all but subsumed by the development of narratology, which stems from structuralist linguistics and seeks to identify a grammar of narrative fiction of which novels are particular manifestations. In classical narratology, exemplified by Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, we are not presented with an account of the methods of storytelling available to an author, but with an taxonomy of discrete elements of narrative discourse. This tradition, too, emerges out of an encounter with modernism (for Genette, his touchstone is Proust, rather than James or Joyce) but eschews interpretation and evaluation.

In Genette’s work, the formal elements traditionally unified under the category of the omniscient author convention become dispersed across multiple taxonomies: spatio-temporal freedom is understood in terms of order (analepses and prolepses); scene and summary are understood in terms of duration (or narrative speed) as well as mood (distance); narratorial knowledge and access to consciousness are understood in terms of focalization; and authorial voice is understood in terms of the narrating instance (time of narrating, person, level, and the functions of the narrator).

Two key methodological distinctions provided by Genette, which separate his work from earlier studies of novelistic method, complicate a unified narratological account of omniscient narration: the separation of author and narrator (divorcing the narrating instance from the instance of writing); and the analytic distinction between voice (who speaks) and focalization (who sees). Genette’s claim that a narrator such as Balzac’s “knows” about the fictional world he is reporting in the narrative, while Balzac himself only imagines the events of the narrative he has invented (214), means that we cannot understand narratorial knowledge as the product of an author’s creative power. We may accept by convention the authoritative knowledge of a heterodiegetic (third-person) narrator, but we are left with the epistemological question of how to account for that narrator’s knowledge. Genette’s claim that we must separate narration from perception means that we have to find ways to divide the perceptual and ideological features of point of view amongst these two categories. How-

ever, Genette refers specifically to omniscience only in his section on focalization. Furthermore, in defining focalization as the regulation of narrative information, but classifying types of focalization according to degrees of access to character's consciousness, Genette is demonstrating that revealing character's thoughts had become the prevailing definition of literary omniscience.

With focalization defined as the regulation of narrative information based on a principle of degrees of restriction, Genette outlines a tripartite typology which includes: non- or zero focalization, internal (variable, fixed or multiple) focalization and external focalization. Following Todorov, Genette defines zero focalization as a case of the narrator saying more than any of the characters knows, which becomes the narratological alternative to the omniscient point of view.<sup>6</sup> He points out that "the division between variable focalization and nonfocalization is sometimes very difficult to establish . . . and yet on this point no one could confuse Fielding's manner with Stendhal's or Flaubert's" (192). This point should indicate that the difference between the work of these novelists is not one of focalization so much as voice, and it is furthermore not a difference which can be accommodated by the idea of person, since they are all heterodiegetic.

Some basis for understanding the relationship between focalization and voice is provided by the last, least developed, and little discussed aspect of voice in Genette's method: the function of the narrator. Here Genette identifies a foundational *narrative function*, that is to tell the story, and then posits four extranarrative functions which a narrator can perform: the *directing* (referring to the organization of the narrative itself); the *communicative* (engaging the narratee); the *testimonial* (referring to the relationship the narrator has with the story); and the *ideological* (commentary on the action which establishes the authority of the narrator's presence) (255–59). This last function seems most pertinent to omniscient narration: "the narrator's interventions, direct or indirect, with regard to the story can also take the more didactic form of an authorized commentary on the action" (256). In *Narrative Discourse Revisited* Genette further points out that "the use of commentarial discourse is somewhat the privilege of the 'omniscient' narrator" (130).

It can be seen here that the more hazy ideological features of point of view have been assimilated into the function of the narrator, while the perceptual aspects are retained in the category of focalization. Genette declines, however, to establish a typology of these functions which would relate back to his other categories of voice and mood. Narrative theory since Genette has sought to clarify the relationship between focalization

and voice, and typically the emphasis has been on expanding the concept of focalization or perspective.

The most significant revision of Genette's work was offered by Mieke Bal, who asserted the theoretical necessity for a further division between the focalizer (the subject of perception) and the focalized (the object of perception). The focalizer, or "agent" of perception, can be attached to a narrator who is external to the storyworld, or to a character who is within the story world. Furthermore, focalization can be from without, centering on observable action, or from within, centering on character's thoughts. In this typology, omniscient narration can be correlated with an external narrator or narrator-focalizer who has the capacity to focalize from without or from within.

Bal's reformulation of focalization theory has the tendency to be largely visual in its orientation, which is one reason why Genette avoided the term "point of view." Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in *Narrative Fiction*, sought to further develop Bal's theory by adding a range of "facets" of focalization. These facets are divided into the following categories: the *perceptual (space and time)* in which the external focalizer has a bird's eye or panoramic view and can focalize simultaneously on events in different places; the *psychological (cognitive)* in which the external narrator has unrestricted knowledge of the represented world; the *psychological (emotive)*, referring to the narrator's detached objectivity and capacity to focalize from within to penetrate the consciousness of characters; and the *ideological*, which reveals the authoritative norms of the text through which characters and other ideologies can be evaluated.

In this version of narrative theory, the "focalizer" is called upon to explain a lot of features, but ultimately none of them can be adequately understood without its relation to the external narrator. In her discussion of narrative voice in a separate chapter, which retains Genette's concept of level and person, Rimmon-Kenan writes:

The extradiegetic narrators of *Tom Jones*, *Père Goriot*, and *Sons and Lovers* are in no sense participants in the stories they narrate (hence they are both extradiegetic and heterodiegetic). 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)

So on the one hand all the features of omniscience are dispersed throughout separate facets of focalization, on the other hand they are

unified under the category of narrative voice, which provides the authorization for the focalization. In response, Seymour Chatman rejected the idea of a narrator who can focalize, arguing that the analytic distinction between story and discourse means narrators can never see the storyworld, they can only report it (“Characters and Narrators”). In Chatman’s formulation, then, we would understand omniscient point of view as the narrator providing an ideological slant on the filtered events of the narrative.

### Postclassical Narratology

Narrative theory since Genette has been far more concerned with focalization than with voice, or, more accurately, it has been concerned with discussing the relation between voice and focalization in the broader context of narrative perspective or mediation. This is evident from the many post-Genettian reformulations of focalization theory, some of which I have discussed, to the number of books which continue to be devoted to the topic, to the whole orientation of postclassical narratology grounded in cognitive science, from possible worlds semantics (Herman), to the scripts and schemata of frame theory (Jahn, Fludernik), to the psychonarratological empirical study of reader response (Bortolussi and Dixon), Theory of Mind approaches (Palmer, Zunshine), and neurobiological accounts (Young), all of which build upon the concerns latent in Vernon Lee’s and Percy Lubbock’s discussion of point of view as the means by which readers’ minds are oriented to the perspective of fictional minds.

The reasons for the relative lack of attention to voice in narrative theory are several: a general critical climate of skepticism about voice as the stylistic expression of authorial identity; the influence of deconstructive critiques of the metaphysics of presence, of logocentric approaches to writing as speech embedded in the metaphor of voice (see Gibson); and a general impulse, consistent with a modernist aesthetic, to demonstrate that narrative fiction need not possess a narrator, from Chatman’s “non-narrated” narratives to Banfield’s “empty deictic centre” to critiques of the narrator as an anthropomorphic construct of readers. These come together in the general theoretical and critical orientation across literary studies and within narratology toward investigating the role of readers in the construction of narrative meaning.

My argument is that we will not arrive at an adequate understanding of omniscient narration unless we assimilate focalization, or perspective in the broader sense, into the category of voice and approach it as a rhetori-



cal strategy of the narrator. Monika Fludernik claims that the narratological distinction between voice and focalization is theoretically untenable, because “[t]he linguistic clues for determining focalization . . . are the same clues as those employed to determine voice” (“New Wine” 633). She goes on to reject the concept of voice as an interpretive illusion. And yet she recognizes that, in practical terms, “readers” rely upon this illusion to make sense of a narrative: “It then turns out to be a useful strategy to hypostasize the existence of a narrator figure who is telling us the story and whose presence and existence seem to be vouchsafed for by the stylistic features of authorial diction” (623). I would suggest that the concept of narrative voice is an interpretive strategy of reading precisely because it is a rhetorical strategy of authorship, and that focalization is constructed from voice in the way that story is constructed from discourse.

The separation of author from narrator, the narrowing of omniscience to access to consciousness, and the focus on reception have all served to inform the postclassical emphasis on omniscience as “unnatural” or “non-natural” knowledge. The most influential work in this regard is Fludernik’s *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*, which proceeds from the basis that narrative fiction is modeled on, and “narrativized” in terms of, cognitive frames derived from naturally occurring oral storytelling situations. “Authorial narration,” Fludernik claims,

performs the naturally impossible by yielding to the human narrator the authority of a quasi-godlike historian of human affairs. This contradiction, the very non-naturalness of the historian’s omniscience, is, however, naturalized in the frame of empirical enquiry which authenticates a scientific metaphor for the narrator’s exercise of omniscience. (167)

She argues that the reason why access to consciousness, or “mind reading,” is at the forefront of discussions of omniscience is that it “violates expected natural frames” (167).

In the introduction to *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, Willem van Peer and Seymour Chatman argue there is a need for narratology to move beyond product analysis to process analysis, which “changes the basic research model from the question, *What* is the perspective in this story? to *How* is perspective in this story brought about?” (7). Contemporary narratology approaches this question largely in terms of how readers process perspective. For my purposes, I think we need to harken back to prenarratological concerns with novelistic *method*, and ask how authors bring about perspective in a story. We can then ask the question *why*:

For what broader cultural purpose do authors construct narrators who employ different types of focalization as part of a rhetorical assertion of narrative authority?

Developing a methodological approach to this question will gain more from the other significant movement in postclassical narrative theory: that of rhetorical narratology. James Phelan provides a neat *précis* of this approach in *Experiencing Fiction*: “The first principle is that narrative can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (3). The phrase “on some occasion” can be taken as a rough equivalent of Genette’s narrating instance. If, for Genette, voice is understood as where (level) and when (the time of narrating) in relation to the story the narrator (person) is narrating from, rhetorical narratology suggests the need for greater attention to the functions of the narrator: to whom and why is the narrator narrating? Furthermore, Phelan emphasizes the doubled communicative situation of narrative fiction, with twin communicative tracks between author/reader and narrator/narratee, which readers must negotiate as part of their “experience” of fiction. This approach, while also oriented toward the way readers engage with narratives, and particularly the aesthetic and ethical judgments which readers make, is grounded in a study of the relation between narratorial voice and (implied) authorial intention, which invokes certain readerly stances. These rhetorical considerations, for me, are the basis of an approach to the narrative authority of contemporary omniscience. Before outlining my approach, I will address the debate about omniscience which has emerged in the new millennium.

### Contemporary Debates

According to William Nelles, Jonathan Culler, “will-he-nil-he, appears to be a lightning-rod in the current debate over omniscience” (128). In his 2004 article “Omniscience,” Culler undertakes the task of clearing up the problem of omniscience, from an explicit position of disdain for its theological overtones. He asserts that omniscience “is not a useful concept for the study of narration, that it conflates and confuses several different factors that should be separated if they are to be well understood—that it obfuscates the various phenomena that provoke us to posit the idea” (184). For Culler, there are four textual “phenomena” that produce effects generally understood as omniscience: the performative authority of reliable

narrative declarations about the fictional world; the reporting of character's private thoughts; overt self-reflexive statements which draw attention to the invented nature of the fictional world; and the synoptic overview of events as a means of producing a kind of universal wisdom.

Culler carefully sifts through each phenomenon, explaining how the term omniscience is inadequate to describe its effects, and concludes by suggesting the need for an alternative vocabulary. It is hard to argue with his dissection of these phenomena, but ultimately Culler's essay seems to prove nothing except what most narratologists accept: that omniscience is an imperfect analogy. Narrative theory has of course long employed a range of alternative or near-alternative terms, from "extradiegetic heterodiegetic narration with non or zero focalization" (Genette) to "authorial narration" (Stanzel) to "narrator-focalizer" (Rimmon-Kenan), to "psychonarration" (Cohn). The term "omniscient narrator" still persists in the wider scholarly community and in the public sphere, however, and its continued traction is presumably the occasion for Culler's essay. I am happy to continue using the term with its attendant narratological imprecisions, for it is embedded in our critical lexicon and none of the existing alternatives quite manages to encompass the narrative freedom (in terms of panoramic scope and narratorial judgment) which the trope of a "godlike" narrator suggests.

One alternative to omniscience which Culler favorably invokes, in order to bypass the traditional analogy with God, and more accurately explain at least one of his phenomena, is "telepathy." This term is proposed by Nicholas Royle in his 2003 book *The Uncanny*. Royle argues, in fact, that omniscience, focalization, and point of view are all critical fallacies, part of an institutionalized metadiscourse of narrative theory which does not attend to the complexities of actual literary works. Royle wants to do more than abolish an unproductive critical term, though; he wants to reconceptualize our approach to literary history, and our understanding of modern narrative fiction. For Royle, the disappearance of God, or should we say, the authority of God, in the eighteenth century, can be read in the hyperbolic appropriation of the term "omniscience" to denote human knowledge.

He further argues that in the late nineteenth century, at the moment when omniscience becomes a common term in literary criticism, the concept of telepathy emerges in the discourse of psychology. "Telepathy," Royle claims, "is both thematically and structurally at work in modern fictional narratives, and calls for a quite different kind of critical storytelling than that promoted by the religious, panoptical delusion of omni-

science” (261). From brief readings of Dickens, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, Royle moves to an examination of Salman Rushdie’s 1981 book, *Midnight’s Children*, where, in the character and narrative voice of Saleem Sinai, “the telepathic here accedes to a new level of explicitness” (269), demonstrating that the structure of fictional narration is fundamentally telepathic rather than omniscient.

What the novel instead offers is the metadiscursive trope of “omniscient third-person” reconfigured as “telepathic first-person”—in other words, it demonstrates in a new, even unprecedented way the fundamentally telepathic (rather than omniscient) structure of fictional narration more generally. (269)

As evidence, Royle cites an interview in which Rushdie admits he began writing *Midnight’s Children* in an omniscient third-person voice before abandoning it. What, then, I find myself asking, are we to make of Rushdie’s 1988 book, *The Satanic Verses*, where surely *omniscience* accedes to a new level of explicitness? Where the narrator self-consciously addresses us as god, or the devil, the creator of a magic realist world? Where the protagonist is visited by this God, who happens to look like Rushdie himself? In the first chapter of this novel Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha float safely to the ground after falling from a plane which has been blown up by terrorists. Toward the end of this chapter we find this passage:

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and—potence, I’m making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type—angelic, satanic—was Farishta’s song?

Who am I?

Let’s put it this way: who has the best tunes? (10)

God’s visitation to Gibreel later in the novel is described in these terms: “He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff, and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected” (318). The link between God, the narrator, and the author is made clear when the narrator admits late in the novel that he visited Gibreel, despite a noninterventionist policy:

I'm saying nothing. Don't ask me to clear things up one way or the other; the time of revelations is long gone. The rules of Creation are pretty clear: you set things up, you make them thus and so, and then you let them roll. Where's the pleasure if you're always intervening to give hints, change the rules, fix the fights? (408)

*The Satanic Verses*, for me, is in fact a convenient historical marker of the moment where, critical fallacy or not, omniscient narration, uncannily, like the return of the repressed, returns in serious literary fiction, but in a different form. In saying this, I mean that *The Satanic Verses* requires critics of the novel to engage with the way Rushdie plays with the conventions of omniscient narration. The same holds true for the number of prominent novels published in the two decades since *The Satanic Verses* that employ omniscient narration.

In asking whether the term “omniscience” is useful for understanding the effects of particular phenomena of narrative fiction, Culler's essay raises the question of whether any narrative can usefully be classified as omniscient, and thus whether the formal category proposed by critics actually exists in literary practice. In response, I would suggest that the idea of omniscience does not “confuse and conflate” different factors for which the term is used as a dumping ground. Rather, that certain works of narrative fiction produce the overall effect we have labeled omniscience by combining all four phenomena Culler identifies (and others, such as temporal range). So, once they have been separated for the purposes of analysis, the relation between these phenomena needs to be understood.

Culler's first two phenomena—authoritative reportage of the story world and of characters' thoughts—also hold true for internally focalized heterodiegetic narratives (and the first for external focalization). Culler himself points out the difficulties of considering these narratives in terms of “limited” omniscience or of narratorial reticence: it effectively confers omniscience on all extradiegetic heterodiegetic narratives. The last two phenomena, however—narrators who self-consciously claim authorship of the work, and narrators who dispense universal wisdom—which are more specific to a typical understanding of omniscient narration (i.e., telling rather than showing), draw upon the epistemological surety of the first two for the authority of their claims. In classical narrative theory, these first two phenomena can be understood in terms of focalization, while the latter two can be understood in terms of narrative voice.

Meir Sternberg provides a lengthy riposte to the challenges mounted

by Royle and Culler in his 2007 article, “Omniscience in Narrative Construction: Old Challenges and New.” He argues that, according to Genette’s own understanding of focalization as a means of regulating narrative information, heterodiegetic narrators cannot possess restricted knowledge; they merely display a restricted performance of knowledge.

Thus the focalizings called “internal,” whether “fixed” (*The Ambassadors*), “variable” (*Madame Bovary*), or “multiple” (*Rashomon*), and “external” (Hammett’s *The Glass Key*): all typically exhibit an all-knowing (mind reading, omnitemporality, omnipresence) that keeps the given “focalized” information short of what its power makes accessible and might reveal at will to the last “nonfocalized” detail. (757)

For Sternberg, who takes umbrage to Culler’s anti-theism, the author is by definition omniscient and the narrator is the author’s super-knowing delegate: “the narrator is constructed in God’s image to perform the required discourse job with authority, epistemic at least” (763). This narrator’s divulgence of omniscient knowledge ranges from omniconmunication to free suppression, depending on the artistic strategy required. In one sense, accepting Sternberg’s claim that all heterodiegetic narrators are omniscient would neutralize epistemological considerations, and allow us to focus on the more important rhetorical function of narratorial performance. I’m inclined, though, to use the term omniscient narration as a label only for certain types of fiction, rather than as a general category of narrative: those works which actualize a panoramic intrusive narrator, which perform omniscience, rather than those narratives which report without comment, or in which commentary does not reveal a sense of the narrator’s personality.

In his follow up to Culler’s article, “Omniscience for Atheists: Jane Austen’s Infallible Narrator,” William Nelles provides the most thorough and strict test of omniscience as a paradigm for literary narratives. “Discussions of omniscience,” Nelles argues, “assign it a broad and variable range of characteristics, many of which have little to do with omniscience per se” (120). He defines omniscience as a toolkit which authors employ to produce narrators with the godly powers of omnipotence, omnitemporality, omnipresence and telepathy, or mind reading. Nelles’s claim is that because these four features “are denied real human beings” they “are uniquely reserved to omniscient narration” (121). As a result, exposition cannot be included because it often conveys information which is com-

mon knowledge to characters, and commentary on a character's thoughts is excluded because once these thoughts are known, a narrator does not require omniscience to comment upon them.

Nelles thus excludes the key feature of intrusive commentary from a definition of omniscient narration. And yet surely commentary, in the form of judgment of characters, is an important "privilege" of God? As Susan Lanser writes in her account of nineteenth-century classic realism: "It is only a slight exaggeration to suggest that upon this narrator rested the demands and powers of divinity itself, trusted at once to know all and to judge aright. . . . Realist 'omniscience,' then, means far more than a narrator's privileged knowledge of fictional facts" (*Fictions of Authority* 85–86). Furthermore, if literary omniscience is "pretend omniscience," as Nelles says, why could a human narrator not assume the "qualities" of omniscience in the act of narration? Whether or not the narrators of these novels are sufficiently godlike to warrant the description omniscient is not my concern. They obviously display a constellation of formal qualities which produce an effect that must be named, and named as distinct from other modes of heterodiegetic narration.

### Omniscience and Narrative Authority

The broader claim which I intend to elaborate is that omniscient authority needs to be located in the function of the narrator, and that we need to approach the narrating instance in terms of how it invokes a historically specific figure of the author. The overriding effect which the various formal elements of omniscient narration both enable, and are underpinned by, is that of a specific rhetorical performance of narrative authority. By this I mean the heterodiegetic narrator's authority to pass judgment on the fictional world, and the authoritative resonance of these judgments in the extradiegetic or public world of the reader. Essential to this authority is a coherent narrative persona who serves as a proxy for the author. Contemporary narrative theory has generally been reluctant to engage with this effect because it is at odds with recurring assertions that third-person narratives need not possess a narrator. This is the essence of Culler's critique of omniscience: that we posit a narrator to explain unnatural knowledge and then are left to explain what sort of narrator could possess this knowledge.

My understanding of omniscient narration, then, is that the term is a trope, a figure of speech denoting a particular type of narratorial per-

formance, not simply a quality of narratorial knowledge.<sup>7</sup> We need not take the notion of an “all-knowing” narrator literally. We could enter into an epistemological debate about how and how much a narrator knows, whether limited omniscience is logically possible, but I don’t think this would be of much use for textual analysis. The debate over what sort of narrator could possess omniscient knowledge also strikes me as unnecessary. The Anglo-American study of novelistic method may have used the term omniscience, but it never posited a divine or superhuman narrator: it simply accepted the convention of the “omniscient author” telling the story directly. Narratology has productively complicated this conflation of author and narrator, but it has also created problems with accounting for narratorial knowledge. In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, Richard Walsh challenges several central concepts of narrative theory by presenting “a number of attempts to vindicate rather old-fashioned ideas in new terms” (1). One of Walsh’s challenges is to the concept of the narrator, arguing that all fictional narratives are narrated either by a character or by the author. As a result, omniscience “is not a faculty possessed by certain class of narrators but, precisely, a quality of authorial imagination” (73).

I would qualify Walsh’s argument only by suggesting that authors can imagine a personalized “second self” to narrate their story, effectively establishing themselves as extradiegetic characters. For if, as Walsh points out, character narrators, such as Humbert Humbert or Huck Finn, “are at least as strongly characterized in the telling of their tales as they are in the role of protagonist” (71), then surely the same must apply to authorial narrators. This effect of authorial “characterization” is achieved most overtly by commentary which asserts the omniscient narrator’s superior knowledge to the characters in terms of his or her moral sagacity, intellectual breadth, and psychological and social insight. With this commentary, Wayne Booth argues in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “the narrator has made of himself a dramatized character to whom we react as we react to other characters” (212). Booth describes this dramatized narrator as a companion and guide to readers, encouraging them to establish a relationship with the author’s “second self.” The term omniscient narration, then, is best used to describe a certain type of narrative in which a heterodiegetic narrator, by virtue of being an authorial proxy, functions as an extradiegetic character, setting up a communicative rapport with the reader in order to rhetorically highlight the value of the narrative to a broader extraliterary public sphere.

The value of understanding omniscience in terms of narrative authority is evident when examining the grounds on which the concept and



examples of the form are criticized. Omniscient narration is never taken to task for providing access to characters' consciousness, for this is seen as one of the distinguishing features of fiction itself, but it has long been attacked, on aesthetic, ethical and ideological grounds, for foregrounding the presence of the author-narrator. Consider this quote from W. J. Harvey's 1979 essay on George Eliot's omniscience: "I take it as axiomatic that the omniscient author convention becomes objectionable only when the author intrudes" (88). Furthermore, it is "the intrusive moral comment" (98) which is of most concern. This chief characteristic of omniscience, authorial presence, is a performance of narrative authority over both characters, in the moral judgment of them, and readers, in assuming their complicity with this judgment. The narrative authority which arises from judgment is central to denunciations of the religious associations of omniscience. It is the basis of Culler's atheistic disdain for authors "playing God"; it is at the heart of Sartre's famous attack on Mauriac; it underpins Bakhtin's critique of the monologic novel; and it is figured as the source of repressive panopticism by theorists such as Mark Seltzer and D. A. Miller, who link narrative omniscience with Michel Foucault's concept of modern disciplinary surveillance.

By virtue of referring both to authorial creativity and narratorial knowledge, literary omniscience cannot be understood in purely formalist terms, and narrative authority cannot be a product simply of formal conventions. This is because the performance of authority is bound up with the author's cultural status and the circulation of the novel in the public sphere. Understanding what historically specific figure of cultural authority omniscient narrators project to assert the importance of their fictional narratives, and fiction in general, to public discourse is the most important aspect of this study.

Scholes and Kellogg provide a history of this figure when they approach the ways in which "point of view" developed from ancient narratives to modern fiction in terms of "the problem of the authority of the narrator" (242). They offer an early criticism of the analogy with God presupposed by omniscience, and demonstrate how Fielding, building upon the influence of Cervantes, offers a model of omniscient narration which draws upon the authority of three figures: the bard, the *histor*, and the maker. The bard draws its lineage back to the Homeric epic, in which the epic poet appeals to the inspiration of the muse rather than tradition to authorize his performance (242). The *histor* draws its lineage back to ancient historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, where again, rather than tradition, the narrative is authorized by the critical spirit with which he approaches his sources. The "intrusive" commentary offered by the *histor* "is simply

the *histor* going about his business” (266). In his novels, Scholes and Kellogg argue, Fielding’s “narrative persona” (267) models his authority on the epic bard and the *histor*, while also drawing attention to the fictitious nature of his narratives: “in practice he sometimes adopts the role of *histor* (there are things he cannot find out), of bard (he can reveal unspoken thoughts when he wants to), and of maker (he admits he is making things up)” (268).

Scholes and Kellogg thus provide an excellent model for linking the various formal features of omniscience to particular figures of narrative authority. What must be noted is that the development of this mode in Victorian fiction, while still demonstrating the relevance of these figures, presents in the omniscient narrator a different kind of authority: that of the novelist, and especially the novelist as ethical guide. As Susan Lanser writes, the Victorian omniscient narrator possesses a “self-authorizing authority” grounded in, “not, as it was a century earlier, the illusion of empirical evidence, but (tautologically) the narrative voice itself” (*Fictions of Authority* 85–86). Which is to say, narrative authority is the function of a certain kind of cultural capital for the novelist.

### Authority, Gender, and Authorship

To develop an approach to narrative authority which understands omniscience as an historically contingent and culturally located mode of narration, feminist narratology offers the most productive resources. Here I turn to Susan Lanser’s *Fictions of Authority*. In this book Lanser develops a feminist poetics of narrative voice centered on attempts by women writers to assert their cultural authority in a gendered public sphere. By positing a link between “social identity and narrative form” Lanser emphasizes that the rhetorical strategies authors employ to establish the authority of their narrative voices must be understood in the social context of their reception:

Discursive authority—by which I mean here the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice—is produced interactively; it must therefore be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities. (6)

The social identity which has traditionally carried the most discursive authority is that of white educated men, and hence the status of a narrator

is received in relation to this dominant power. For Lanser, then, the question of narrative authority cannot be separated from the discursive formations which produce what Foucault called the author function, generating modes of authorship which can be adopted or challenged by various narrative strategies. As such, she claims:

the emphasis of this book is on the project of self-authorization, which, I argue, is implicit in the very act of authorship. . . . [T]he act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it—like my own act of writing a scholarly book and seeking to publish it—is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence. (7)

In the course of her book, Lanser discusses the historically shifting negotiation of masculine authority by women novelists through their strategic deployment of narrative voice, and articulates three “narrative modes” which she calls authorial, personal, and communal voice. “Each mode,” Lanser explains, “represents not simply a set of technical distinctions but a particular kind of narrative consciousness and hence a particular nexus of powers, dangers, prohibitions and possibilities” (15). This approach requires Lanser to reconfigure some of the categories of classical narratology to investigate particular figures of authorship which emerge from them. One of these is Genette’s distinction between extradiegetic and intradiegetic, which Lanser reframes, not so much in terms of level, but in terms of the connection of these levels to the narratee. This leads her to make a “distinction between private voice (narration directed toward a narratee who is a fictional character) and public voice (narration directed toward a narratee ‘outside’ the fiction who is analogous to the historical reader)” (15). Given that the capacity to speak with authority in public discourse has traditionally been a male privilege, Lanser’s introduction of the public voice enables her to make considerations of gender a vital contextual complement to formalist discussions of level and to narrative authority in general.

The narrative mode which Lanser calls the authorial voice is the most relevant to this book because this is her term for the authority vested in omniscient narration. Where Rimmon-Kenan had accounted for the authority of omniscient narration in purely formalist terms, produced by the extradiegetic and heterodiegetic status of the narrator, for Lanser, the relation between narrator and narratee established by this status must be

correlated with the public relationship between author and reader which it invokes:

The mode I am calling authorial is also “extradiegetic” and public, directed to a narratee who is analogous to a reading audience. I have chosen the term “authorial” not to imply an ontological equivalence between narrator and author but to suggest that such a voice (re)produces the structural and functional situation of authorship. (16)

For Lanser, the “privilege” of the omniscient authorial voice resides in a rhetorical invitation for readers to equate the narrator with the author, speaking directly to them. In discussing the textual specificities of this act of self-authorization, Lanser makes what I think is a key distinction between omniscience as the narratorial performance of authority and other forms of heterodiegetic narration in which access to consciousness is at the fore. This distinction is between narratorial acts of representation (reporting the fictional story) and extrarepresentation, which involves “reflections, judgments, generalizations about the world ‘beyond’ the fiction, direct addresses to the narratee, comments on the narrative process, allusions to other writers and texts” (17). Lanser employs the term “authoriality” to refer to the extrarepresentational practices of “heterodiegetic, public, self-referential narrators,” arguing that these narrators make greater claims to discursive authority than more reticent narrators, because they “expand the sphere of fictional authority to ‘nonfictional’ referents and allow the writer to engage, from ‘within’ the fiction, in a culture’s literary, social, and intellectual debates” (17). So here Lanser is giving more weight to what Genette called the ideological function of the narrator in order to understand the narrative authority of omniscience in terms of the gendered and public nature of voice.

Having established that narrative authority must be understood as emerging from the relationship between narrative voice and a particular figure of authorship, I will turn, in the following chapters, to the manifestation of this relationship in contemporary omniscient narration. An important question to consider is the extent to which the modes of narrative authority and the figures of authorship which constitute contemporary omniscience must be understood in terms of gender. The first observation to make is that contemporary omniscient narration seems to be largely a phenomenon of male writers. A. S. Byatt has been a vocal defender and dedicated practitioner of omniscient narration, citing

George Eliot as her model. But the practice of asserting discursive authority through an intrusive third-person narratorial presence founded on the conventional “privilege” of zero focalization has, to my knowledge, been taken up by far fewer female than male novelists. Hence, of the fifteen authors whose work I will be classifying and providing cases studies of, only three of these are women: Gail Jones, Zadie Smith, and Nicola Barker. The next step is to consider the extent to which this gender imbalance carries methodological implications.

In her earlier work, *The Narrative Act*, Lanser offers a series of claims regarding the conventional assumptions readers make about the gender of authors and narrators. First, that “in the absence of textual information to the contrary, a certain degree zero of narrator identity is presumed,” and that “the unmarked case for both writing and narration is the male case: writers and narrators are presumed male unless the text offers a marking to the contrary” (166). She also points out that, despite this degree-zero assumption, readers will conventionally equate the unmarked voice of a heterodiegetic public narrator with the social identity of the author. So if readers note that the author of the book they are reading is female, this “signals a female narrative voice in the absence of markings to the contrary” (167). These claims strike me as uncontroversial, and are clearly relevant when considering the long held practice of female authors adopting male or androgynous pseudonyms to take advantage of a default assumption of normative male authorship.

It would seem important to note, then, that if omniscient narration by convention has the highest narrative authority, this authority must be gendered male. We might then think about the formalist definition of the “privilege” of omniscience. Traditionally this privilege has been equated with the “godlike” capacity to know the interior lives of characters, and one could easily extend the implications of the metaphorical comparison to the ultimate “male” authority of god. However, I have argued that epistemological and theological approaches to omniscient narration are less important than considerations of the rhetorical performance of omniscient authority. In which case, the key “privilege” of omniscience is the authority to speak with influence in public discourse, particularly through what Lanser calls “extrarepresentational acts.”

This enables a productive link between Lanser’s contextual narratological approach to authorship and narrative authority and the broader accounts of a crisis in literary authority which I have argued underpins the emergence of contemporary omniscience. Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s claim for the gendered nature of the anxiety of obsolescence proves salient

in this regard. For Fitzpatrick, public lamentations over the loss of the novelist's cultural authority in the face of electronic media can be correlated with white male authors simultaneously appropriating a disingenuous position of marginality and figuring the mainstream as feminine. Toward the end of her book, Fitzpatrick claims that underneath the anxiety of obsolescence "lies a concern about the continuing role of the white male subject in contemporary society" (230), an "overwhelming cultural theme, which may appropriately be called, after Nina Baym, a melodrama of beset white manhood" (231). For Fitzpatrick, the disinvitation of Jonathan Franzen from Oprah Winfrey's Book Club is a key example of a conflict between an embattled white manhood equated with literary culture and the feminized space of popular mass media: "the otherness of the electronic media to the 'higher' art of the novel parallels the otherness of women and racial and ethnic minorities to the experience of white men" (232). The anxiety of obsolescence, then, is not animated so much by an attempt to reclaim a broad cultural authority in the form of attracting more readers, as it is by a desire to protect an elitist masculine literary culture from the threat of otherness.

Here we might find a useful hypothesis for why male authors are predominantly the ones who have renovated omniscient narration—typically regarded as the voice in fashion at the high point of the novel's cultural authority—but inscribed this narrative voice with a more relativized and agonistic mode of narrative authority, as in the case of Martin Amis with which I opened this chapter. Returning to Lanser's claims about the gendered nature of narrative voice, then, in the case studies of the modes of contemporary omniscience which follow, I will endorse Lanser's claim that the degree zero of narrator identity is male, and draw attention to the occasions when narrators explicitly mark their gender to facilitate the link with authorial voice which I am claiming is essential to narrative authority. The textual marking of gender occurs precisely through the extrarepresentative narratorial intrusions which perform an omniscient narrator's authority. I will also show how, in approaching fiction as a mode of public discourse, the conventional equation between a narrator's and an author's "social identity" in Lanser's terms enables an author's nonfictional statements to be read as extrarepresentative commentary on the same discursive, rather than diegetic, level. Hence my claim that narrative authority arises out of relations between author and reader which are also governed by extratextual relations. Understanding the contingency of authority as an appeal to the public authority of the author we can start to theorize the different functions of omniscience in specific historical periods.