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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 3

### Prolepsis and the Literary Historian

THE SECOND MODE of contemporary omniscience, which I will call the *literary historian*, relies upon the authority of the historical record and the possibilities of imaginatively recovering private or occluded moments in history opened up by postmodern theory and explored in “factional” works such as Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s Ark*. Unlike “historiographic metafiction”—a form which Linda Hutcheon claims the term postmodern fiction should be reserved for (40)—this mode displays a faith in the literary imagination to supplement the historical record, rather than undermine the narrative “truth” of history. Some examples would be stories from Gail Jones’s two collections of short fiction, *The House of Breathing* and *Fetish Lives*; Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*; Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*; David Lodge’s *Author, Author*, and my own short story, “Thomas Pennington’s Fetich.”

In these works, the traditional metaphor of the novelist as historian, established by the prototypical omniscient narrator of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, becomes literalized in the figure of the contemporary narrator as historian engaged in historical and historiographic debate. Like contemporary historical fiction in general, this mode of omniscience stresses that the inner lives of protagonists (the purview of the novelist), and the

lived experience of everyday people or of historical personages, is important to our understanding of earlier periods and past events (the purview of the historian). There are different manifestations of this literary historian, from the biographical narrator of Lodge's *Author, Author* (which I will discuss in the final chapter), which is modeled on the nonfiction novel exemplified by *Schindler's Ark* (winner of the Booker Prize for fiction), to the fantastic historians of magic realism in which the fictionality of an imaginative intervention in history is made palpable. For instance, Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* (1986) opens with this line:

In eighteenth-century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages . . . forgotten today . . . because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in history: to the fleeting realm of scent. (3)

Similarly, Isabelle Allende's "Phantom Palace" (1992) charts the fate of native Indians in Latin America who "lived in peace since the dawn of time" before the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors, and who "came to be so skilful in the art of dissimulation that history did not record them, and today there is no evidence of their passage through time" (201).

Formally speaking, the most significant aspect of contemporary historical fiction is the way it establishes a quantifiable temporal gap between the modern narrating instance and historical past of the story. The effect is that the narrator's omniscient authority is simultaneously heightened and problematized by their distance from the events of the story. Contemporary historical fiction thus exploits the implications of the aspect of narrative voice which Genette called the time of narrating. According to Genette:

The use of a past tense is enough to make a narrative subsequent, although without indicating the temporal interval which separates the moment of the narrating from the moment of the story. In classical "third person" narrative, this interval appears generally indeterminate, and the question irrelevant, the preterite marking a sort of ageless past. (*Narrative Discourse*, 220)

In the mode of the omniscient literary historian, the "temporal interval" is not only determinable (spanning the years between the historical period which the story is set in and the present day of the narrative

discourse, which by convention we could date as coterminous with the book's publication), it is crucial to the function of the narrative as a form of history: the preterite marking a datable past. Furthermore, the rhetorical effects of the time of narrating employed in this mode cannot be understood in purely narratological terms, for the temporal interval between story and narration is established by reference to historical facts which are not only posterior to the events of the story, but are referable to the actual world of the reader, and hence falsifiable as narrative "report." The narrating instance invokes the extrafictional historical record to establish a temporal distance unyoked from tense structures, with contemporary historical fiction often employing the "immediacy" of the present tense without being simultaneous narration. This sense of history, rather than the panchronic omnitemporality of divinity, is the temporal model of contemporary omniscience.

One device for drawing attention to the narrating instance is the direct address to modern readers, as in this line from Süskind's *Perfume*: "In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women" (3). Another is the use of prolepsis, defined by Genette as "any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (40). For Genette, this means interrupting the present moment of the story to make room for an account of the future, and he uses the term "reach" to measure the temporal distance between the narrative present and the proleptic event. More specifically, the omniscient literary historian employs *external* prolepses, that is, reference to events beyond the duration of the story, such as this line from Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*: "Of Jack the Ripper she need have no fear; it's almost fourteen years too early, and she'll have died from more or less natural causes by the time he comes along" (7). These external prolepses can then be said to be *extratextual* because they reference the actual world of the historical record. In my story, "Thomas Pennington's Fetich" (2004), the opening paragraph contains the line "An epidemic of syphilis festers in the unspoken limbs of polite company, and will continue until the discovery of Salvarsan in 1909" (200). The "reach" of this reference is one year beyond the protagonist's contraction of syphilis at the chronological "end" of the story in 1908.

This temporal model underpins the narrator's capacity to parade the archival research of the author through a number of narrative strategies. There is expositional summary linguistically indistinguishable from biographical or historical nonfiction, such as this passage from A. S. Byatt's

*The Children's Book* (2009): "The year 1881 was a year of beginnings. A number of idealist, millenarian projects and groups were founded. There were the Democratic Federation, the Society for Psychical Research, the Theosophical Society, the Anti-Vivisection movement. All were designed to change and reinvent human nature" (45). There are references to contemporaneous publications, such as in David Lodge's *Author, Author*:

Mr Gladstone himself was moved to write an immensely long article about it in the May issue of *The Nineteenth Century*, entitled "Robert Elsmere and the Battle for Belief," describing it as "brilliant but pernicious," which gave a huge further boost to sales. (97)

And there is a welter of descriptive detail which would not be found in fiction set in the present. All these narrative strategies are designed to establish verisimilar authenticity, while simultaneously offering a narrative predicated on the assumption that the omniscient narrator "knows" something about history which the historical record cannot. This knowledge is the product of the authorial imagination, either through fantasy or through sympathetically reconstructing the private side of history via the available archival evidence.

### Gail Jones, "On the Piteous Death of Mary Wollstonecraft" (1992)

The opening two paragraphs of the short story "On the Piteous Death of Mary Wollstonecraft," by the Booker Prize–longlisted Australian writer Gail Jones, exemplify the mode of the literary historian. The story begins with a lyrical present-tense account of the protagonist's consciousness: "She arises momentarily from the deepsea of unconsciousness, trawls up her drowned mind through fluid dimensions" (105). It is an intimate imagining of the character's mind in a moment of distress: childbirth as we later discover. The next paragraph signals an abrupt shift to an impersonal authoritative voice with the foreknowledge of history. It reads like a biographical encyclopedia entry, with the exception that it is rendered in the future tense: "She is about to die, this Mary Wollstonecraft. Born in the year 1759, she will die at thirty-eight of post-partum complications. She is the controversial and august author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Both famous and feminist in her own uncongenial time" (105). The two key features of omniscience—access to consciousness and intru-

sive authorial presence—are sharply juxtaposed, with the biographical information lending authority to the fictional imagining of the character’s interior. In foregrounding the gap between the historical record and the private lives of historical personages, Jones’s story both highlights its fictionality and seeks to legitimate fictional speculation as a form of historiographic enquiry.

After the opening two paragraphs there are a series of fragmentary sections which I take to be instances of Wollstonecraft’s life flashing before her as she dies. There are the immediate events leading up to her death, that is, the birth of her daughter Mary, and then a series of memories relating to her husband, William Godwin, and her lover, Gilbert Imlay. The focus, however, is on Wollstonecraft’s state of mind in the last hours of her life. There are two overt instances of zero focalization—of the narrator saying more than the characters know—which establish the difference between classic and contemporary omniscience in the mode of the literary historian. The first occurs after Wollstonecraft has given birth:

“A daughter,” she whispers. “Once more a daughter.”

Mrs Blenkinsop notices the ambivalence in her mistress’s voice. Mrs Blenkinsop fails to notice, however, that here are evident the symptoms of another subsidence, that Mary Wollstonecraft is busy sliding back into her own body, a body in which, at this very moment, some torment of the womb, some organic agitation, tricks her into thinking that she has not yet delivered. (107)

Here the narrator tells us not only what Mrs Blenkinsop doesn’t know but what Mary herself doesn’t know about her own body. In the next overt performance of omniscience, the narrator relativizes her “impossible” knowledge by appeal to the proleptic voice of history. We have a paragraph which begins: “Mary closes her eyes and knows, as mothers are reputed instinctually to know such things, that the baby will die” (109). The next paragraph undercuts this maternal instinct:

Had she been better clairvoyant Mary Wollstonecraft would have known that her daughter Mary would live for fifty-three years and achieve a fame ratified in the twentieth century by that most pompous and preposterous of all institutions, Hollywood. “The Rights of Women” will historically prove a difficult concept; her daughter’s “Frankenstein,” however, is a convenient cultural nightmare. (109)

The irony of this passage is generated not by the narrator's impossible knowledge of the "future," but by reference to the historical record, and by a form of cultural commentary only possible from the narrating instance of the present day. This external anachrony is unnecessary to the story: its extranarrative function is designed purely to establish the narrative authority of the contemporary narrator in relation to the historical record, setting up the rhetorical purpose of the story, which is made explicit in the final section. This section shifts from a present-tense account of Wollstonecraft's death to a past-tense denouement in which the ill-considered memoir which Godwin wrote after her death is blamed for the reputation of "Villainous Depravity" which Wollstonecraft gained.

Foolishly confounding Virtue and Truth, William Godwin wrote a memoir of his deceased wife's life. In it he hoped to memorialise the Excellent Woman. He spoke of Imlay, of Fuseli, of suicide attempts, illegitimate birth, sexual passion and intellectual voluptuousness. "Mary Wollstonecraft" became synonymous with Villainous Depravity. (119–20)

So in a sense Jones is trying to set the historical record straight by writing a piece of fiction, to inhabit the cracks of biographical knowledge, to transgress the epistemological limits of historiography. If Wollstonecraft's life became the source of salacious biography, what Jones is trying to do is recover this life, provide it with some dignity by imagining the moment of her death. The rhetorical function of the narrator, then, is to achieve this approach to Wollstonecraft's life by negotiating the shifts between external commentary and internal focalization made possible by literary omniscience.

### Omniscient Narration and Neo-Victorian Fiction

Given that the omniscient narrator is commonly seen as synonymous with Victorian fiction, any account of contemporary omniscience must address its manifestation in the popular genre of neo-Victorian fiction. As most scholars in this field would note, the temporal relation between narrating instance and story is crucial to the effects of the fictional encounter with history. On this basis, Christian Gutleben's *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* distinguishes between subversive and nostalgic invocations of Victorianism in

contemporary fiction: those which erase the temporal gap or at least do not specify it are typically nostalgic; while those which maintain a temporal distance from the past are typically subversive. In the case of historical novels set in the Victorian past, Gutleben makes a distinction between serious reconstruction (in the form of mimetic pastiche) and ludic parody. In this latter category he includes omniscient narration, for parody “seems particularly relevant for the retro-Victorian novel’s use of the omniscient narrator” (102). This claim is based on the common assumption in neo-Victorian studies that historical fiction dealing with this period “uses” a Victorian model of omniscience, rather than employing contemporary omniscient narration to explore the Victorian past.

Drawing upon Margaret Rose’s definition, Gutleben claims that parody operates by inviting then disappointing generic expectations from readers. Omniscient narration in neo-Victorian fiction is then said to be parodic because it includes elements we would not expect in Victorian fiction. Gutleben’s chief example of the ludic reworking of omniscience is at the level of focalized content provided by the narrator, evidenced in explicit sexual descriptions which violate the codes of decorum employed in nineteenth-century fiction. Discussing the novel *Ark Baby*, Gutleben writes: “the text subverts this anticipation by violating one of the most sacred taboos in Victorian fiction: sexual explicitness. The principle of omniscience is retrieved but pushed to the limits which traditional fiction was not ready to explore” (103). The juxtaposition of a Victorian setting with “the sauciness of the narrative instance,” Gutleben claims, means that “what is at stake here is not the parody of a text but of a literary convention, i.e. the omniscient narrator” (104). Even if we accept that the omniscient narrator’s discussion of sexuality is a ludic parody of Victorian conventions, it simply tells us that neo-Victorian fiction is another mode by which omniscient narration finds its way into contemporary fiction. However, defining this omniscience almost exclusively in terms of parody strikes me as formulaic and inaccurate.

In discussing A. S. Byatt’s Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession*, Gutleben argues that “Byatt organizes her narrative apparatus so as to playfully question the Victorian novelistic conventions” (108). So when Byatt’s narrator, who must occupy a contemporary narrating instance in order to tell the modern day story of two academic biographers, takes up the nineteenth-century story and describes the romance of the two Victorian protagonists, “a strictly Victorian voice could not have accounted for” the sexual thoughts and actions of these characters. As a result, “the narrative instance who decides to reveal these indications, although it mimics tra-



ditional omniscience, realistic trait-connoting descriptions and decorous Victorian language, can consequently only adopt a parodic stance towards its Victorian referent” (108–9). If this a parody of Victorian omniscience, it is not necessarily a parody of omniscient narration itself.

“Byatt’s final (ab)use of the God-like omniscient narrator” (110), Gutleben claims, occurs in the postscript to the novel. Here the narrator provides information about the past (an illegitimate child produced by the affair between two Victorian writers) which the modern academic biographers of these writers will never know. For Gutleben, this revelation puts readers in possession of information which enables them to see the limitations of the biographical enterprises of the academic characters. For me, however, this revelation is not an “abuse” of omniscience. It demonstrates again an attempt to employ the convention of omniscience to establish the authority of the novelist in relation to that of the biographer, not to undermine this convention. Byatt herself wrote: “My instinct as a writer of fiction has been to explore and defend the unfashionable Victorian third-person narrator—who is not, as John Fowles claimed, playing at being God, but merely the writer, telling what can be told about the world of the fiction” (“True Stories” 102).

### Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002)

The narrative voice of *The Crimson Petal and the White* is an enigmatic one. Is she a Trollopean guide? Or just a trollop, a prostitute who seizes the reader’s hand and won’t let go? I leave you in that voice’s care.

—Michel Faber, “Tale of a Street Walker”

In a book chapter that identifies *The Crimson Petal and the White* as a “classic” of the contemporary neo-Victorian novel, Georges Letissier claims that “the double temporal perspective, with the twenty-first century looking back on the nineteenth century, with the benefit of hindsight, as it were, leads to what could be called *hyperomniscience*” (119). This hyperomniscience, which I call the “proleptic voice of history,” is established by the narratorial direct address which draws attention to a contemporary narrating instance. The novel opens with this paragraph:

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you’ve read, that you know

it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether. (3)

For Maria Teresa Chialant this opening establishes the omniscient narrator as an “urban flâneur in the Dickensian mode,” recalling the “certain shadow” of Dickens’s Asmodean narrator. For John Mullan it establishes an “intrusive author” modeled on George Eliot’s Victorian omniscient narrator; and for Mary Ellen Snodgrass, it implies “a metafictional I-thou relationship with the postmodern reader” (112). It is also a claim for narrative authority, the authority to tell a story, based on the narrator’s assertion that this work of historical fiction will provide a more authentic account of Victorian London than other stories. Here we have a rhetorical performance of omniscient authority in which the narrator highlights the spatio-temporal gap between modern narrating instance and historical story before claiming to overcome the epistemological limitations of this gap by taking the reader back in time. The narrator performs this “time travel” with the metaleptic trick of encouraging readerly identification with a narratee, and then situating the narratee within the fictional world via the autotelic second person. The third paragraph establishes a metaphorical conflation of the reader seduced by the narrative promise of a book and a customer seduced by the sexual promise of a prostitute:

And yet you did not choose me blindly. Certain expectations were aroused. Let’s not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you’re too shy to name, or at least show you a good time. Now you hesitate, still holding on to me, but tempted to let me go. When you first picked me up, you didn’t fully appreciate the size of me, nor did you expect I would grip you so tightly, so fast. (3)

This is by way of introducing readers to the lowest rung of Victorian society, and one of the minor characters, Caroline, a prostitute who lives in Church Lane. According to narratologists who draw upon possible worlds and deictic shift theory, readers engage with fiction by cognitively relocating to the storyworld. The direct address of Faber’s narrator is a self-reflexive strategy designed to locate readers on the same ontological level as the characters: “From where you stand you can actually see the shiver of distaste travelling down between Caroline’s shoulder-blades” (11). This immersion of readers in the fictional world simultaneously maintains the narrator’s intrusive presence as the guarantee of its authenticity. By virtue

of referring only to a generalized “you,” the narrator is, in Robyn Warhol’s terms, an engaging one, even to the extent of ensuring it enables different genders to participate in the role of narratee: “Yes, it’s alright. She’s sleeping now. Lift the blankets and ease your body in. If you are a woman, it doesn’t matter: women very commonly sleep together in this day and age. If you are a man, it matters even less: there have been hundreds here before you” (8).

Although the story is narrated in the present tense, the time of narrating is retrospective rather than simultaneous, designed to highlight the fact that the narrator’s capacity to immerse readers in a fictional world is a product of the author’s knowledge of history: “Apart from the pale gas-light of the street-lamps at the far corners, you can’t see any light in Church Lane, but that’s because your eyes are accustomed to stronger signs of human wakefulness than the feeble glow of two candles behind a smutty windowpane. You come from a world where darkness is swept aside at the snap of a switch” (5).

The novel follows the path of Sugar, a prostitute, from a brothel in Church Lane to mistress then governess in the employ of William Rackham, aspiring man of letters who becomes a business magnate when he inherits his father’s perfume-manufacturing company. As Kathryn Hughes writes, in a review for *The Guardian*: “Michel Faber has produced the novel that Dickens might have written had he been allowed to speak freely. All the familiar tropes of high-Victorian fiction are here—the mad wife, the cut-above prostitute, the almost-artist, the opaque governess—but they are presented to us by a narrator with the mind and mouth of the 21st century.”

The novel’s explicit descriptions of sex—“Minute upon minute she lies on his thigh, milking him, slyly inserting her middle finger into his anus, deeper and deeper, pushing past the sphincter” (116)—is said to be what sets it apart from Victorian omniscience and hence makes it a parody of the form, demonstrating that the all-knowing narrator of nineteenth-century fiction had many social limitations on what could be said. However, the novel can also be said to use the convention of omniscience to supplement its historical reconstruction of the Victorian period. The ultimate example of zero focalization is this:

In Agnes’s head, inside her skull, an inch or two behind her left eye, nestles a tumour the size of a quail’s egg. She’s no inkling it’s there. . . . No one will ever find it. Roentgen photography is twenty years in the future, and Doctor Curlew, whatever parts of Agnes Rackham he may examine,

is not about to go digging in her eye-socket with a scalpel. Only you and I know of this tumour's existence. It is our little secret. (218–19)

Here the narrator shares his omniscience with readers to establish trust and to demonstrate that what may have been narrated as madness or hysteria in a Victorian novel could have been the result of not possessing the hyperomniscience of this novelist.

The omniscience is on occasion coy, or “deliberately suppressive” in Sternberg’s terms, about the psychology of characters, but supplements this reticence with historical knowledge:

Ah, to know that you'd have to get deeper inside her than anyone has reached yet. I can tell you the answers to simpler questions. How old is Sugar? Nineteen. How long has she been a prostitute? Six years. You do the arithmetic, and the answer is a disturbing one, especially when you consider that the girls of this time commonly don't pubesce until fifteen or sixteen. (34)

These regular narratorial intrusions supplement the welter of descriptive detail, the Jamesian solidity of specification, which operate historiographically, with scenic construction building up layers of ethnographic thick description: “Like many common women, prostitutes especially, her name is Caroline, and you find her squatting over a large ceramic bowl filled with a tepid mixture of water, alum and sulphate of zinc” (6). Descriptions such as these also constitute what Michael Riffaterre calls “diegetic overkill,” the “representation of ostensibly insignificant details, the very insignificance of which is significant in a story as a feature of realism” (30). The significance in this regard is that they declare the factual research underpinning the fictionality of verisimilitude, as well as distinguishing this as a modern rather than contemporaneous account of the period. The foundation of this omniscient narrator’s authority, then, resides not in a postmodern parody of the convention (its overt sexuality, the key Victorian figure of the governess being a prostitute, the resistance to closure similar to Fowles’s multiple possible endings), or in a nostalgia for the certainties of the past encoded in the form itself, but in the figure of the contemporary historian whose research licenses evaluative commentary: “Morally it’s an odd period, both for the observed and the observer: fashion has engineered the reappearance of the body, while morality still insists upon perfect ignorance of it” (66).

The acknowledgments page, with its references to historical sources, and Faber's public statements about the endorsement of his research by professional historians are designed to highlight the extratextual historical authority of these narratorial observations. Faber begins an essay titled "Eccentricity and Authenticity: Fact into Fiction," with a reference to how the book "has generally been praised for its period authenticity," culminating in an invitation to write this article for the *Victorian Institute Journal* (101). Faber's article, then, is an attempt to claim the extratextual authority of the historian to underpin the authenticity of his work as "a highly convincing time-travel experience" (101). In doing so, Faber distinguishes his work from postmodern encounters with history, describing the process of composition as a move away from the influence of postmodernist fiction. Faber reveals that in the course of writing his novel he discovered a number of historical inaccuracies. In the early draft, "my response to my error was not to remove it, but to flaunt it" (101), adding a footnote in which he acknowledges the error but dismisses it for the sake of the story:

This disclaimer, simultaneously cloying and arrogant, makes me cringe now, but it arose naturally out of the late-1970s literary climate I grew up in. Post-Modernism encouraged me to assert my freedom to do whatever I pleased. I was The Author; I was in charge. The reader must be reminded that this story was an artificial construct. Text must be playful, must discard the shackles of bogus mimesis, must define itself against the pointless inhibitions of the 19th century bourgeois novel. The very notion of "history" was rotten to the core; all "fact" was falsification. (102)

Faber suggests that his arrogance diminished when he realized that "the deconstructionist desire to expose the apparatus of narrative was nothing new" (102). In other words, as many critics have pointed out, self-reflexivity has long been a part of the novelistic tradition. He then set about to make his novel as historically accurate as possible. According to George Letissier:

*The Crimson Petal and the White* illustrates the classical format of the neo-Victorian novel, which has now discarded the postmodernist, deconstructionist stance of earlier post-Victorian fictions, such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Possession*, or *Poor Things*, to quote but a few, to

embrace the more traditional form of the three-decker, or “large, loose, baggy monster” of its Victorian forerunners. (113)

This reinforces my point that postmodern metafiction self-reflexively reintroduced omniscient narration, enabling this voice to be absorbed into the mainstream, and that post-postmodern fiction demonstrates a textual awareness of this legacy. Faber may have rejected postmodern playfulness in favor of a return to the realist novel, but he did not dispense with the intrusive omniscient narrator who was the instrument of this playfulness, evidenced by a line such as this: “If you are bored beyond endurance, I can offer only my promise that there will be fucking in the very near future, not to mention madness, abduction, and violent death” (190). The novelistic authority he asserts in relation to history is not one which seeks to demonstrate the essential fictionality of historical writing, but one which claims fiction can contribute to a knowledge of history. Rather than estranging the reader from immersion in the fictional world, the narratorial direct address is designed to engage the reader’s belief in the authority of the author’s historical knowledge, his capacity to invent a possible world.

### Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (2003)

I always thought I had a linear story. Something happened between the time I began the real work in January 2002 of taking it all out of my head and when I finished months later. It might be that because I, as the “god” of the people in the book, could see their first days and their last days and all that was in between, and those people did not have linear lives as I saw all that they had lived.

—Edward P. Jones, “An Interview”

Edward P. Jones writes as God might, were He to publish fiction. Specifically, Jones mobilizes a relatively unusual verb tense to embed the future in the past, making every incident in his characters’ lives simultaneously present to the stories’ omniscient narrator-cum-celestial census taker.

—Jenny Davidson, “Great Jones”

Edward P. Jones’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Known World* has a more complicated relationship between its omniscient narration and its exploration of history than my previous examples of the literary historian, one which throws open for debate the connection between authenticity

and authority in the public sphere. *The Known World* is set in antebellum Virginia, and centered on free blacks who owned slaves in the fictional county of Manchester. The narrator's ideological position is clear in this comment on the black plantation owner, Henry Townsend: "He did not understand that the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first syllable of the word *master*" (64). The title refers to a tapestry of America hung on the county sheriff's wall, and constant references to the characters' perspectively circumscribed "worlds" are a motif of the book, with lines such as: "the eating of it tied him to the only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life" (2); "Mildred made him see that the bigger Henry could make the world he lived in, the freer he would be" (113); and "there was a whole world off to the right that the photograph had not captured" (189).

The title is particularly resonant in a formalist and historiographic sense: what sort of narratorial knowledge is required to explain this fictional world, and what can be known about this aspect of American history in the actual world? The crux of the book's treatment of slavery is found in this passage of internal focalization: "Moses had thought that it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white man, but God had indeed set it twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind. Was God even up there attending to business anymore?" (9).

In formalist terms, the narratorial "god" of this strange world (as Jones refers to himself in the above-quoted epigraph) exemplifies the unrestricted information of zero focalization. The omniscient narrator maps out a panoramic perspective of Manchester County, with a spatio-temporal range beyond the knowledge of any character, proleptically reaching as far forward as the late twentieth century to explain the outcome of events, and revealing the interior lives of multiple characters, including what they do not know about themselves: "So he rode on, not even knowing that he just wanted some peace, and not knowing, until much later, that he wanted back all that he had lost" (227). The narrative structure is relentlessly anachronous, opening with the death of the black slave owner, Henry Townsend, in 1855 and shuttling back and forth in time. The temporal reach is established by historical coordinates, with the narrator referring to an "1806 act of the Virginia House of Delegates" which "required that former slaves leave the Commonwealth within twelve months of getting their freedom" (15) and employing external anachrony to mark the story as anterior to the modern narrating instance. The narrator refers beyond the limits of the story to inform readers that

in 1909 the colored people of Richmond unofficially named a street after a deceased slave, and then: “In 1987, after a renewed drive for renaming led by one of Delphie’s great-granddaughters, the city of Richmond relented, and it put up new signs all along the way to prove that it was official” (205).

The most striking quality of the narrator is again the persistent use of prolepsis, with the action regularly interpolated with brief accounts of the ultimate fate of even the most minor characters:

As the crowd made its way back down to the lane, some of the children were at the front, and at the head of those children was Elias and Celeste’s oldest, Tessie. She began skipping but an adult told her that a human being had died and skipping should be left off to another day. Tessie would soon be six years old and being the child of her parents that she was, she listened and stopped skipping. Tessie would live to be ninety-seven years old, and the doll her father was making for her would be with her until her last hour. She and the doll, long missing the cornsilk hair her father had put on it, would outlive two of her children, and the doll would outlive her. (67)

The proleptic comments are so profuse that rather than plot-motivated advance notice (they anticipate events which will not be later narrated, although often still within the temporal reach of the story), they create a sense of past and future being narrated simultaneously with the narrative present. Here is part of a scene featuring Sheriff Skiffington and another character, Clara, discussing Clara’s slave, Ralph, as the sheriff prepares to depart:

“I’ll take your word that everything will be fine”—and she tipped her head in the direction of the back of the house where Ralph was. They, Clara and Ralph, would live another twenty-one years together. Long before then he became a free man because the War between the States came and found them. Skiffington got into the carriage. (162)

What the narrator tells us about the future of these minor characters is generally not significant to the plot, and, indeed, the violent death of major characters at the end of the novel is never proleptically anticipated. The significance lies in how these recurring prolepses not only authoritatively perform the narrator’s complete knowledge of the fictional world, but project a conception of the omniscient narrator as a kind of empa-



thetic local historian who invests peripheral slave characters with a life as much worth knowing as their white owners or the central protagonists:

Belle's second maid, who had never been sick a day in her life, would die the night after Belle did. Her name was Patty and she had had three children, one dead, two yet alive, Allie and Newby, a boy who liked to drink directly from a cow's teat. Those two children would die the third night, the same night the last of Belle's children died, the beautiful girl with freckles who played the piano so well. (33)

Coupled with the anachronous nonlinearity of the plot, the proleptic intrusions make it almost impossible to feel located in the "narrative present" for any length of time. For instance, when narrating Henry Townsend's 1855 death in the opening pages, the narrative anticipates a scene in which Henry's former teacher, Fern Elston, will discuss his life: "After the war between the states, Fern would tell a pamphlet writer, a white immigrant from Canada, that Henry had been the brightest of her students" (7). This scene is duly narrated later in the novel, in which the pamphlet writer is given a name, Anderson Frazier, and the conversation a date, August 1881 (107). Throughout the rest of the novel, the narrator constantly refers readers back to this conversation on "that day," even though it is still in the future for the characters:

"Zeus," Fern said, "please ask Colley to come here. Tell Colley to bring the rifle and a pistol." When she married the second and third times, Zeus would be with her. *Indeed, as she talked to Anderson Frazier that day in 1881*, he was inside the house, occasionally looking through the curtain at the backs of their heads. He brought out lemonade to Anderson after Fern offered him some.

"Yessum," Zeus said. (250, emphasis added)

This passage has an analeptic reference embedded in a proleptic statement. The effect is to frustrate the teleological conception of history as cause and effect. What the omniscient narrator knows about the history of Manchester County could not be known to historians. It is not only knowledge of the minds of characters, but of unrecorded and unrecordable information: "Had someone counted up what crops the fields had to give, it would have come to more than \$325 a slave" (226). In *The Known World*, the omnitemporal freedom of omniscience is deployed to model a form of historical writing which would be possible if historians could

transcend epistemological limitations and attain complete access to the world of the past.

Ultimately, given the subject of the book, a little known aspect of the history of slavery, the question raised for readers must be not how does the narrator know about the fictional world and minds of characters, which is accepted as a convention of fiction, but how much does the *author* know about this aspect of history in the actual world being referenced? That is, the authority this narrator claims is not based purely on the formal techniques of omniscient narration, or on the “unnatural” powers of a quasi-divine consciousness, but on the figure of the author as a literary historian. The narrator’s “quality” of omniscience is supplemented by a rhetorical deployment of the apparatus of historiography in the service of this claim for authority. First there is reference to contemporaneous “primary sources.” One of these is the pamphlet, *Curiosities and Oddities about Our Southern Neighbours*, written by the Canadian pamphlet writer, Anderson Frazier, after his meeting with Fern Elston:

The pamphlet on slaveowning Negroes went through ten printings. Only seven of those particular pamphlets survived until the late twentieth century. Five of them were in the Library of Congress in 1994 when the remaining two pamphlets were sold as part of a collection of black memorabilia owned by a black man in Cleveland, Ohio. That collection, upon the man’s death in 1994, sold for \$1.7 million dollars to an automobile manufacturer in Germany. (106)

This “extrarepresentational” information lends the impression that the narrator’s knowledge of the storyworld relies upon the archival research of the author. The “impossible” knowledge of the narrator, however, highlights the limitations of knowledge derived from primary sources: “Had Anderson not been white and a man, had the day not started out hot and gotten hotter . . . Fern might have opened up to Anderson” (109). Another historiographic device is reference to scholarly histories of the period, enabled by the temporal distance of the narrating instance:

The town and the county went into a period of years and years of what University of Virginia historian Roberta Murphy in a 1948 book would call “peace and prosperity.” For the people who depended upon slaves, this meant, among other things, that not one slave escaped, not until after Henry Townsend died. The historian—whose book was rejected by the University of Virginia Press—would also call Skiffington “a godsend

for the county.” . . . In the history of the county, the chickens, all of which managed to live until 1856, were a momentous event ten places below the tenure of John Skiffington as sheriff, according to this one historian, who became a full professor at Washington and Lee University three years after her book was published. (43–44)

The first sentence gives the impression of the authorial narrator quoting scholarly sources to establish the authenticity of his narrative. What follows, however, is a stinging ideological critique of the scholarship of “this one historian.” The novel’s exploration of the question of history is thus manifested in the rhetorical strategy of the narrator to employ regular intrusions such as these which explicitly pit the unfettered knowledge of literary omniscience against the epistemological constraints of historiography. The narrative authority which emerges from this strategy is paradoxical: on the one hand the apparatus of historiographic scholarship is drawn upon to discursively establish the authenticity of the narrative, and on other hand this scholarship is shown to be misguided and inaccurate. Anderson Frazier’s pamphlet, as well as Roberta Murphy’s book, and that of the other historians referenced, such as K. Woodford from Lynchburg College (207), are fictional. Clearly they serve the purpose of lending verisimilitude to the fictional world of Manchester County and highlighting the omniscient narrator’s diegetic authority. The more complicated authenticating strategy is the recurring reference to documents we know to exist in the actual world: the U.S. Censuses from 1830 to 1860.

As Tim Ryan writes in *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery since Gone with the Wind*, *The Known World* is “continually sceptical about the ability of human discourse to adequately represent the past, and the novel persistently emphasizes the limitations of the discipline of history. For example, the narrative satirically draws attention to the problematic nature of antebellum censuses—sources frequently utilized by contemporary historians” (194). As early as page 7, this engagement with the census is established:

In 1855 in Manchester County, Virginia, there were thirty-four free black families, with a mother and father and one child or more, and eight of those free families owned slaves, and all eight knew each other’s business. When the war between the states came, the number of slave-owning blacks in Manchester would be down to five, and one of those included an extremely morose man who, according to the U.S. census of 1860, legally owned his own wife and five children and three grandchildren.

The census of 1860 said there were 2,670 slaves in Manchester County, but the census taker, a U.S. marshal who feared God, had argued with his wife the day he sent his report to Washington, D.C., and all his arithmetic was wrong because he had failed to carry a one. (7)

A phrase such as “according to the U.S. census of 1860” suggests the opening figures are based upon this primary source, while the next sentence asserts the inaccuracy of its data. The narrator presents no evidence to prove the failings of the census, or whether the original statement is produced from the census or not. Does this narrator know what the census does not because of access to historical fact? Is this access the result of sympathetic imagination? Here we see the fantasy of omniscience, indeed the fantasy of fiction, as a desire to correct or at least supplement the historical record.

The authority of this omniscient narration is nonetheless reliant upon a figure of the novelist as literary historian able to contribute to debates about history, rather than as maker “using” historical research to tell a story. The effect may be to undermine the authority of historians to know the past, but instead of a postmodern critique of history as fiction, we are presented with a fiction which purports to know the strange world of the past with greater authority. As Ryan argues, “while the novel constantly emphasizes that human experience is too complex to be captured in language and while it insists that histories are undependable and limited forms of discourse, it also acknowledges that there is a significant and concrete reality toward which such texts gesture” (196). It is the very reference to historical discourse which grounds the capacity of the narrator to project a concrete fictional world:

Louis, the son, was also Robbins’s slave, which was how the U.S. census that year listed him. The census noted that the house on Shenandoah Road where the boy lived in Manchester was headed by Philomena, his mother, and that the boy had a sister, Dora, three years his senior. The census did not say that the children were Robbins’s flesh and blood and that he traveled into Manchester because he loved their mother far more than anything he could name and that, in his quieter moments, after the storms in his head, he feared that he was losing his mind because of that love. (21)

This passage draws attention not to the human error involved in census taking, but the limitations of data collection itself in capturing the

unofficial relations between humans, the incapacity of the census to know the private lives of people. And yet despite pointing out the methodological flaws of the census, such as the 1840 census taker's inability to properly discern whether someone is full-blooded Indian or not, and his miscalculation of the square miles of Manchester County, the narrator uses the census to lend discursive authority to his own narrative statements: "On one page of the census report to the federal government in Washington, D.C., the census taker put a check by William Robbins's name and footnoted on page 113 that he was the country's wealthiest man" (23). These sorts of statements gesture outwards to lend the impression that the author has consulted the records in order to construct his figure of the omniscient literary historian. "While frequently subverting and satirizing the limitations of the discipline of history," Ryan points out, "*The Known World* also acknowledges that we have no choice but to rely upon it to some degree" (201).

The figure of the omniscient narrator as literary historian is pitted against other figures of authority, from census takers, to pamphlet writers, to academics, drawing attention to the unreliability of their methods. Race is also factor. Apart from Anderson Frazier being white, we have this reference to an historian: "In 1993, the University of Virginia Press would publish a 415-page book by a white woman, Marcia H. Shia, documenting that every ninety-seventh person in the Commonwealth of Virginia was kin, by blood or by marriage, to the line that started with Celeste and Elias Freeman" (352). While the narrator does not undermine these statistics, mention of this historian's race invites us to consider the obvious—that the history of slavery is written by whites—and to ponder the race of the narrator. Given Susan Lanser's default equation of the gender of omniscient narrators with the social identity of a book's author, the same could be said for race here, constructing a figure of reliable historical authority empathetic with his characters.

According to Michael Riffaterre, the paradox of fictional truth can be described as the generic function of verisimilitude, rather than accordance with factuality. However, if we approach fiction as a mode of public discourse the reliability of this narrator's omniscient knowledge is ultimately dependent upon the narrative's discursive contribution to history in the public sphere, as opposed to the scholarly archive. According to a review in the *New York Times* by John Vernon: "Among the many triumphs of *The Known World*, not the least is Jones's transformation of a little-known footnote in history into a story that goes right to the heart of slavery." This demonstrates that one of the functions of historical fiction is to

bring knowledge of the past into the broader public sphere, authorizing the novelist to speak about history. In an interview for the BookBrowse website, Jones states: “The county and town of Manchester, Virginia, and every human being in those places are products of my imagination.” He goes on to explain that references to other counties and towns, and historical figures “were employed merely to give some heft and believability to the creation of Manchester and its people.” This sort of artistic license does not undermine the credibility of the novel’s exploration of history. The most important aspect of the narrator’s authority is the status of the census data, for this underpins the authenticity of the author’s treatment of slavery. Jones freely admits that he also fabricated census records for the purposes of verisimilitude, affording “a hard background of numbers and dates that makes the foreground of the characters and what they go through more real.” That the census figures, the publications and state acts and the historians referred to are fictional, only demonstrates further an attempt to assert the cultural authority of the novelist to “know” the past, even as this must be framed as an encounter with the archive in order to claim the power of the novelist to demonstrate the real lesson of history.

Despite Jones’s protestations that he did not research his book, the historian Thomas J. Pressley has shown, in an article for *The Journal of African American History*, how the information in *The Known World* largely correlates with that of available data from the 1830 U.S. Census, transcribed by Carter G. Woodson, the “Father of Black History.” Pressley demonstrates that “in several Virginia counties, free black slaveowners reached 25 percent or more of the free black heads of families. Thus Jones’s Manchester County is well within the general range” (86). His conclusion is that “Edward P. Jones’s historical novel successfully meets major tests of statistical plausibility for its historical period—whatever may be its degree of success or failure in satisfying the various other literary or aesthetic criteria by which readers may evaluate it” (86). Pressley’s article was occasioned by the fact that Jones’s book brought this aspect of history to light in the public sphere. He then uses this attention to test the fictional statistics in the novel against that provided by Carter Woodson’s scholarship, and to argue for more scholarly use of Woodson’s statistical information.

For Katherine Clay Bassard, in “Imagining Other Worlds,” the ongoing conflict between Augustus Townsend who bought himself and his family out of slavery, and his son, Henry, who became a slave owner, dramatizes scholarly debate about the extent of benevolent and commercial black slave owning, with Augustus epitomizing the “Woodson thesis”

(that most black slave owners bought only their family members) and Henry its refutation (412). Despite his claims to have eschewed research, and particularly the sort of historical detail which Michel Faber claimed as crucial to the authority of his reconstruction of Victorian England, Jones nonetheless speaks with authority in the public sphere about this debate. In response to an interviewer's question about how common it was for free blacks to own slaves, Jones asserted:

I don't have any hard data but I'm quite certain that the numbers of black slaveowners was quite small in relation to white slaveowners. The fact that many people—even many black people—didn't know such people existed is perhaps proof of how few there were. In addition, as I note in the novel, husbands purchased wives and parents purchased children, and so their neighbors may have come to know the people purchased not as slaves, as property, but as family members. Finally, owning a slave was not a cheap proposition, and the economic status of most blacks back then didn't lend itself to owning a human being. (“An Interview”)

The phrase, “as I note in the novel” is significant for the way Jones wants to use the authority of his omniscient narrator to undergird his right to speak in public about the history of slavery. This narrative voice, with its rhetorical deployment of the discourse of history to supplement his impossible knowledge of the past, becomes an occasion to establish the cultural authority of the novelist in the public sphere.

The intrusive presence of the omniscient narrator, engaged in an ongoing critique of historical evidence, even as he reveals impossible knowledge of the fictional world and its characters, is crucial to the rhetorical effect of the novel. For Tim Ryan, the effect is to indicate “that the notion of accurate history is a contradiction in terms. Representations of slavery are always necessarily imaginative narratives, and, the text implies, the creative omniscience of the novelist seems more compelling than the compromised empiricism of the historian” (195). Ryan argues that the novel “defamiliarizes slavery” not only through its subject matter, but its “formal strategies,” by deploying the structure of the Victorian novel, describing it as “a sort of *Middlemarch* of American slavery” (204). According to Ryan: “On the one hand, this choice allows *The Known World* to pursue traditional social realism, but, on the other, the novel is also an ironic and parodic invocation of an earlier literary form” (205). Why the need to make this claim? Ryan suggests the novel is not “purely a faux-Victorian panorama” because it employs “postmodernist or magic realist elements”

such as the persistent prolepses and references to historical documents: “*The Known World*’s commitment to traditional realism and its informed engagement with historiography is balanced by its skeptical attitude toward history as a discipline and its unsettling metafictional characteristics” (205). Ryan’s analysis of the novel’s uneasy relationship to historiography is compelling, but it seems unnecessary to say that a part of its strategy is a parody of nineteenth-century omniscience, rather than simply a deployment of conventions of omniscience in the service of the narrative. What makes it post-postmodernist for me is precisely the sense of faith in an actual if ultimately unknowable past, and the belief that the “creative omniscience” of the novelist is one method for trying to know this past, as opposed to undermining the project of historical scholarship. In other words it posits fiction as a mode of historiography and sets up the novelist as a kind of literary historian. This strategic use of omniscient narration, rather than the “invocation” of an earlier form, is a means of establishing the cultural authority of the novelist in the discursive treatment of the past.