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## The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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## CHAPTER 5

# Polymathic Knowledge, the Immersion Journalist, and the Social Commentator

THE FOURTH MODE of contemporary omniscience contains both the *immersion journalist* and the *social commentator*. The narrator as immersion journalist is a fictional counterpart of the narrators of documentary non-fiction novels, such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and is exemplified by the work of Tom Wolfe, who shifted from the New Journalism to the social novel with the publication of his first novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The desire to diagnose and report a social problem through the techniques of omniscience links Wolfe's immersion journalist with the social commentator, under which I would include Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, and Richard Powers's *Generosity*. The narrative authority here operates by deploying the capacious knowledge of the narrator to analyze postmodern culture. If omniscient authority must be granted by the reading public, rather than unselfconsciously assumed by the narrator, "all-knowing," in this case, has come to mean less a divine or telepathic knowledge of the human interior, than a polymathic knowledge of how the world works. "Time and again," James Wood complained in a post-9/11 assertion that hysterical realism and the social novel must be abandoned, "novelists are praised for their wealth of obscure and far-flung social knowledge. Richard Powers is the best exam-

ple, but Tom Wolfe also gets an easy ride simply for ‘knowing things’)” (“Tell Me”). In other words, contemporary narrators “know” more than any character not simply because of their omniscient privilege, but because of their intellectual scope. In a 2003 article, Judith Shulevitz refers to the work of DeLillo and Franzen, among others, when she claims, somewhat ruefully, that “novelists, in short, have become our public intellectuals—our polymaths, our geographers, our scholars of the material world. And yet, oddly, you will find very few intellectuals in the modern novel” (B31). The intellectuals in the novels under scrutiny here are the narrators themselves, extradiegetic characters who function as proxies for the author. And the polymathic knowledge which the immersion journalist and social commentator deploy to underpin their narrative authority manifests itself in intellectual encounters with competing nonliterary paradigms of knowledge, from evolutionary science to the forces of history.

### Tom Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004)

This is why God invented journalists. A journalist is as good as an omniscient narrator any day. Good at piecing the story together from the raw data, at hearing the many voices. You can't miss him. He's the guy in the white suit.

—Susan Reynolds, “Down from the Mountains”

In this section I will discuss Tom Wolfe’s third novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, in terms of its contribution to the contemporary mode of the omniscient narrator as immersion journalist. Wolfe’s position in relation to the development of twentieth-century fiction is staked out in two manifestos: his introduction to *The New Journalism* and his article “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast.” The central premise binding these two manifestos is Wolfe’s claim that serious writers in the 1960s turned to avant-garde experimentation with fabulism, absurdism, surrealism, metafiction, the novel of ideas, etc., in the belief that realist fiction was a redundant genre incapable of capturing the fragmentation and absurdity of twentieth-century existence. Yet, for Wolfe, this was precisely the period in which realist fiction should have been flourishing, for the cultural revolution of the sixties and the global juggernaut of American society offered an abundance of material about how we live. There is an evolution across these manifestos, however, in terms of what the solution may be to this abandonment of American society by writers. In 1973, Wolfe argued that journalists were taking up the slack from fiction writers and producing nonfiction

novels, employing the techniques of fictional realism—which he identifies as dialogue, scenic narration, status detail, and point of view—to report on actual events. By 1989, Wolfe was no longer championing the emergence of the New Journalism at the expense of the novel, but exhorting the revival of the social realist novel precisely in order to reclaim the territory lost to journalism.

In his introduction to *The New Journalism* Wolfe describes how this form of writing emerged out of dissatisfaction with the style of traditional objective reportage. The point of his introduction to this anthology, however, is not to recount the impact on journalism of this new hybrid style of nonfiction; it is to situate the New Journalism in relation to the American novel after World War II, and indeed to the history of literary fiction itself. He claims that the journalistic experimentations of the sixties introduced a new literary genre. Within a decade or so, the extended form of this literary journalism, the nonfiction or documentary novel, had the effect of “dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century” (15).

The success of the New Journalism, for Wolfe, can be attributed to its commitment to social realism. The nonfiction novels of writers such as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Hunter S. Thompson are placed as the heirs to a form abandoned by postmodern fiction (although he doesn’t use this word). What gives the nonfiction novel credibility as a social document, for Wolfe, is the fact that it records real events. He points out that major novelists such as Dickens or Balzac have always employed reportage, only this element has been seen biographically rather than as a generic feature of the novel itself. “It took the New Journalism to bring this strange matter of reporting into the foreground” (28). For the nonfiction novel makes reportage an explicit feature of the novel itself.

The irony of Wolfe’s declamations is that he has since abandoned New Journalism and the nonfiction novel to become a writer of fiction himself. He announced this change with his 1989 manifesto, “The Billion Footed Beast.” David Lodge had claimed that the nonfiction novel was itself a postmodern genre emerging out of the rejection of realism, but Wolfe’s essay, subtitled “A literary manifesto for the new social novel,” suggests that it was simply a means of reintroducing social realism to novelistic form. By this stage Wolfe himself had recently published *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Despite his bold claims for nonfiction as a literary genre in previous decades, Wolfe writes that he always feared a realist novel would come along and render irrelevant his nonfiction about American cultural life. It never did, he claims, and his essay is both a call to arms to fiction

writers and a justification of his own turn to fiction. This was partly motivated, he candidly admits by

the question that rebuked every writer who had made a point of experimenting with nonfiction over the preceding ten or fifteen years: Are you merely ducking the big challenge—The Novel. Consciously, I wanted to prove a point. I wanted to fulfill a prediction I had made in the introduction to *The New Journalism* in 1973: namely, that the future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him. (50)

The new social novel would still make a feature of its commitment to reportage and to charting contemporary American life, but it would no longer have the imprimatur of fact. My argument here is that Wolfe's new social novel is another means of reviving the omniscient narrator in contemporary fiction, a narrator whose authority invokes the authorial figure of the novelist as a type of immersion journalist.

Central to Wolfe's construction of narrative authority for *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, and to his operation as a public intellectual, is the "extrafictional" voice of this novel emerging out of its prefatorial material and linking it to his 1973 account of the New Journalism, his 1989 manifesto for the social realist novel, and his 2001 essay collection *Hooking Up*. Wolfe might argue that the style he developed in his nonfiction has now become a style for the writing of fiction, but he is compelled still to point out that his work is the product of journalistic immersion. The preface to this book, in which he acknowledges the help of staff and students at a range of universities, and the input of his two daughters, firmly establishes the authenticity of the book by demonstrating the depth of research behind it. Advance publicity also let it be known that Wolfe spent several years visiting universities, attending undergraduate parties and observing student life. This is an appeal not just to verisimilitude (the nonfiction credo "this actually happened" becomes in fiction "this actually happens") but to the authority of the narrator. Wolfe's narrator is omniscient in every sense, even to the extent of knowing what the characters don't know about themselves, but the omniscience doesn't rely upon moral authority, it relies upon journalistic research.

The appeal to observational fieldwork established by this voice provides a kind of ethnographic distance from the characters as the source

of omniscient knowledge, both grounding and relativizing the narrator's authority. Two key elements of narrative authority in this book are the generational/sociological distance of the narrator from the characters and the anthropological/ethnographic mode of character analysis. Throughout *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, the detailed scenic construction is supplemented by explanatory commentary. For instance, after an expletive-laden exchange of dialogue between two college basketball players we have this line: "Without even realising what it was, Jojo spoke in this year's prevailing college creole: Fuck Patois" (35). This observation is followed by a linguistic analysis of these subcultural speech habits, describing with examples the multiple grammatical uses the word fuck can be put to. Following this paragraph is a line of narration in which the narrator parodically adopts the patois himself: "The fucking freshman in question was standing about twenty fucking feet away" (36).

These supplementary explanations clearly establish a tone of bemusement and an irony which relies upon the appeal to an implied reader who is not familiar with the world being reported. In the following two quotes we have evidence of Wolfe's narrator "reporting" on youth culture through expositional commentary:

"Aw-right!" said another huge black youth with a shaved head who was sitting next to the white giant, whereupon the two black giants bumped each other's fists together in a celebratory gesture called "pounding."  
(102)

Charlotte recognized none of them, but pastel cashmere sweaters in the Reading Room at night screamed out . . . *sorority girls!* So did the little bags they held in their hands. The girls were back from what sorority boy-scouters called a "candy run." (560)

Another observation that seems to deliberately flaunt the generational distance of the narrator from his characters occurs when Charlotte meets her first friend at Dupont College. After introducing themselves to each other as Bettina and Charlotte, this line follows: "They were members of the first generation to go through life with no last names" (145).

As well as this pseudo-sociological generational distance, the narrator draws upon the framework of evolutionary science to chart the inevitability of Charlotte's absorption into the libidinal preoccupations of college students. A recurring phrase in the novel, and the title of one of the chapters, is: "the conscious little rock." This phrase comes from a lecture on

neuroscience which Charlotte attends, sparking her interest in the field. According to this lecture, genetic coding controls our actions to such an extent that free will may be a myth: humans may be nothing more than conscious little rocks. Buoyed by her lecturer's praise for her work, Charlotte walks through campus thinking the students around her are "blithely ignorant of the fact that they were merely conscious little rocks, every one of them, whereas . . . *I am Charlotte Simmons*" (285). In a later chapter detailing Charlotte's crush on a handsome frat boy, we have the following line of narration embedded in a passage of narrated perception: "With that, the conscious little rock moved her head ever so slightly closer to his and ever so slightly parted her lips" (342). This line hammers home the irony of Charlotte's belief in her own capacity to stand above mating rituals hardwired by genetic coding. The chapter ends with an ironic rendering in free indirect discourse of her mantra of individuality: "In all of Dupont College, only *she* was Charlotte Simmons!" (342).

The mock anthropological distance of the narrator which provides the overarching approach of the novel is highlighted to the point of caricature in this comment during a scene where Charlotte hears shrieking in the campus hallway:

A girl came running from the entry hall into the Common Room. She shrieked again. She was slim and blond and wore shorts that showed off her perfect legs, and the shrieks were ones that any girl on earth could have interpreted. They were the cries of the female of the species feigning physical fright at the antics, probably physical, of the male. (145)

The omniscient narrator's capacity to divine and articulate motivations which characters themselves are little aware of is based less on exploration of the character's individual psyche, than on the same anthropological observations offering biologically determined explanations of gendered behavior:

She knew this was the moment to put a stop to it. The thought of his starting to "hit on" her again was unpleasant and even frightening . . . and yet she didn't *want* to put a stop to it. The present moment was much too early in her experience for her to have expressed it in a sentence, but she was enjoying the first stirrings, the first in her entire life, of the power that woman can hold over that creature who is as monomaniacally hormonocentric as the beasts of the field, Man. (181, original ellipsis)

The presence of the narrator is felt not only through overt commentary or evaluation, but almost as a silent observer, a peripheral character. Generally a character, especially Charlotte, is used as a deictic anchor but the presence of the author as an immersion journalist tends to be signified by the explanatory references employing the second-person pronoun:

Soon all three cashmeres were standing around the skank, and the whisper party had begun. In these Reading Room whisper parties, girls whispered entire conversations, they whispered chuckles, they popped consonants and sighed vowels until everyone within earshot wanted to cry out “Shut the fuck up!” Nothing could be any worse than these whispered conversations, which got under your hide like an unreachable itch. Charlotte put her hand up to her eyes like a blinker, to make sure *they* didn’t recognize *her*. (560)

Here we have the scenic narration of an event in the library largely through Charlotte’s perspective. The first line linguistically orients us to Charlotte’s perspective with its absorption of her metonym (cashmeres) and slang noun (skank) into the narrational idiom. There is then a shift into iterative narration to explain to the narratee what a whisper party is. The use of the second-person pronoun (“which got under your hide”) in this context gives the effect of a narrator who knows from observation what a whisper party is like and is now looking over Charlotte’s shoulder to assimilate the expositional report into her perspective. This is how the figure of the immersion journalist as an “immanent” presence is built up throughout the book, beginning from the opening paragraph:

Every time the men’s-room door opened, the amped-up onslaught of Swarm, the band banging out the concert in the theater overhead, came crashing in, ricocheting off all the mirrors and ceramic surfaces until it seemed twice as loud. But then an air hinge would close the door, and Swarm would vanish, and *you* could once again hear students drunk on youth and beer being funny or at least loud as they stood before the urinals. (3, emphasis added)

This immanent narratorial presence, the fictional equivalent of Wolfe’s immersion research, lends a kind of eye-witness authority to the evaluative comments through the novel, such as this description of a frat house party: “Gales of laughter, clapping, whistling, unintelligible shouts. By this stage of the evening, the brothers were drunk enough to believe that Vance’s

verbose buffoonery actually gave the brotherhood an aura of elegance” (466).

The historical importance of Wolfe’s faith in fictional realism is that, for Wolfe, postmodern fiction, as a result of its penchant for formal experimentation, has retreated from any obligation to deal with contemporary culture. What establishes his work as an example of post-postmodernism, is the appeal of its omniscient narrative authority not to the convention of the Victorian novel but to the figure of the journalist. Or rather, in his attempt to remake the Victorian novelist as a journalist and revive this figure in the form of a contemporary omniscient narrator.

### Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (1997)

Only all-seeing God, some might say, could highlight the sidetracks and U-turns, the back-doubles and sudden veerings-off. Only a god or a novelist.

And Don DeLillo duly starts this, his eleventh novel, in a mode of thrilling bravura, of rip-roaring godlike omniscience.

—William Boyd, “‘The Course of True Life’”

While *Underworld* is a multi-voiced novel, shifting between first- and third-person narration, its narrative authority is established by the celebrated prologue, originally published as a stand-alone piece, “Pafko at the Wall”, in *Harper’s* magazine in 1992, providing a frame which subsequent sections are assimilated into. The prologue takes the classic form of zero focalization, sweeping through the consciousness of multiple characters as it ranges across a panoramic description of the 3 October 1951 National League playoff between the Dodgers and the Giants, won by the Giants with a Bobby Thompson home run, subsequently glorified in sporting history as “the shot heard ’round the world.” The description both “reconstructs” the famous baseball game, or, more specifically, the feeling of being at the game, through its attention to scenic detail and its showy use of a periodizing argot, and separates it from the narrating instance by a narratorial awareness of the game as a spectacle embedded in American cultural memory and associatively connected with Cold War history. The simultaneous immediacy and nostalgic distance is facilitated by the conjunction of present-tense narration with prolepsis, by the use of direct address, and the reporting of a coincidence which has resonance only after the event: the simultaneity of the “shot heard ’round the world” with the testing of an atomic bomb in the Soviet Union, connected by the

fact that J. Edgar Hoover was at this match when he received notice of the testing.

This prologue is concerned with an historical moment, and thus could be classified under the mode of the literary historian. John N. Duvall has described “Pafko at the Wall” as an example of postmodern historiographic metafiction, and Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in “The Unmaking of History,” follows his lead in applying this label to *Underworld*. However, she also argues that the novel

acts to dismantle the genre of historiographic metafiction and its preconceptions, working not to create the past out of its narratives but instead to excavate and deconstruct the traces a reified history has left in the present. In so doing, the novel undermines all narrative processes, both the realist and the metafictional. (151)

The book as a whole, then, projects a figure of its author as social commentator as the novel sets out to trace the effects of this historical moment on the present, with one key strand of the plot following the fate of the home run ball over the ensuing decades. At the same time, it is narrated backwards after the prologue, from 1992 to 1952.

The narrator’s omniscient authority is established on the first page with this aphoristic statement: “Longing on a large scale is what makes history. This is just a kid with a local yearning, but he’s part of an assembling crowd” (3). This sense of history in the making animates the reconstruction of the game as the narrator charts the swelling of the crowd. The key feature of this effect of nostalgic immediacy, of the forces of history at play, is the pervasive presence of the second-person pronoun which performs several different grammatical functions in the service of establishing narrator-narratee relations.

The first function is that of the direct address. In this case, the narrator seeks to invoke a general consciousness in relation to a very specific cultural memory. The opening line is: “He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful” (3). The “he” in question is a black youth, the kid with a local yearning, who has skipped school to try and gain entry to the game, which he does by vaulting the turnstiles and evading security guards before disappearing into the crowd. DeLillo’s “engaging” narrator, then, invites narratees to participate in the unfolding of the game, and thus readers to perceive this game as something enshrined in their own cultural memory which becomes internationally significant in geopolitical terms. The direct address also operates at

the level of description: “He has wiry reddish hair and a college jacket—you know those athletic jackets where the sleeves are one color and leathery looking and the body is a darker color and probably wool and these are the college colors of the team” (45).

Building upon this direct address is the use of “you” as an informal variant of “one.” Directly following a passage focalized through the kid, Cotter, as he laments the state of the game, we have this line, inviting readers to share Cotter’s experience as a sports fan: “You know that thing that happens when you give up before the end and then your team comes back to perform acts of valor and you feel a queasy shame stealing over you like pond slick” (30). Again, at the level of description: “Branca who is twenty-five but makes you think he exemplifies ancient toil” (38). This version of “one” also operates as a form of hypothetical focalization, postulating what readers would perceive were they present at the scene:

He stands at the curbstone with the others. He is the youngest, at fourteen, and you know he’s flatbroke by the edgy leaning look he hangs on his body. (4)

You can see it in his face, chin thrust out, a glower working under his brow. (30)

The persistent recurrence of this strategy serves to deictically orient readers to the scene by enacting a pseudo-metaleptic move toward the autotelic second person in which the narratee is addressed as a protagonist. The deictic center shifts, however, to follow the variable focalization of the narrator. Here are some examples. In reference to Cotter evading security guards, as if the narratee is an onlooker: “Then you lose him in the crowd” (14). In the middle of a section focalized through Russell Hodges, the commentator in the broadcasting box (but separated by paragraph breaks which invite attributive hesitation):

Look at Mays meanwhile strolling to the plate dragging the barrel of his bat on the ground. (16)

Look at Durocher on the dugout steps, manager of the Giants . . . (17)

In the middle of dialogue between Cotter and Bill, a spectator who befriends the kid, as they sit in the stands: “Look at Robinson at the edge of the outfield grass watching the hitter step in and thinking idly, Another

one of Leo's country-boy krauts" (22). After a section focalized through J. Edgar Hoover, sitting in another part of the crowd:

Look at the man in the bleachers who's pacing the aisles, a neighborhood crazy. (28)

Look at the man in the upper deck. He is tearing pages out of his copy of *Life* and dropping them uncrumpled over the rail, letting them fall in a seesaw drift on the bawling fans below. He is moved to do this by . . . (38)

In each of these instances, the focalizing imperative is directed toward readers as if they were sharing the perception of a character, but supplemented by narratorial knowledge.

Fourth, the second-person pronoun functions as a feature of free indirect discourse in the performance of characters' internal dialogue. In relation to Cotter: "he's located near the tail of the rush, running and shouting with the others. You shout because it makes you brave or you want to announce your recklessness" (4). In relation to Russ Hodges, the broadcaster: "Somebody hands you a piece of paper filled with letters and numbers and you have to make a ballgame out of it" (25). In relation to Bill, who chases Cotter in an attempt to wrest away the home run ball as a souvenir: "Bill stops completely but is too smart to look around. Best to limit your purview to straight ahead. Because you don't know who might be looking back at you. And the more enlightened he becomes, the more open grows the space for Cotter's anger" (57).

All four uses of the second-person pronoun bleed into each other, creating the effect of a narrator both addressing an extradiegetic narratee and positioning this narratee as an intradiegetic participant in the action, linked sometimes to a character, sometimes to a hypothetical onlooker, sometimes to the zero focalization of the narrator. These types are combined in this section: "Dodgers go down in the top of the ninth and this is when you sense a helpless scattering, it is tastable in the air, audible in the lone-wolf class from high in the stands. Nothing you've put into this is recoverable and you don't know whether you want to leave at once or stay forever, living under a blanket in the wind" (34). Here the "you" could refer to the specific thoughts of Cotter, but by virtue of employing the second rather than third person, the passage encompasses the collective consciousness of the crowd as well as functioning as a version of "one."

In the following passages the internal focalization operates as the narrator's psychonarration invoking the collective "one":

Thompson's not sure he sees things clearly. . . . He is frankly a little fuddled is Bobby. It's like the first waking moment of the day and you don't know whose house you're in. (40)

He takes a guess, he anticipates, it's the way you feel something will happen and then you watch it uncannily come to pass, occurring almost in measured stages so you can see the wheel-work of your idea fitting into place. (45)

In another section the focalization is with Russell and a colleague, but it doubles as another second-person pseudo-metalepsis: "They leave by way of the Dodger clubhouse and there's Branca all right, the first thing you see, stretched facedown on a flight of six steps, feet touching the floor" (59). In other sections, the focalization doubles as the occasion for narratorial comment: "Russ keeps pausing at the mike to let the sound collect. This is a rumble of a magnitude he has never heard before. You can't call it cheering or rooting. It's a territorial roar, the claim of the ego that separates the crowd from other entities, from political rallies or prison riots—everything outside the walls" (37). In this passage the first two sentences establish the perspective of Russell. The anaphoric reference of the third sentence ("it") may invite us to attribute its account of the "territorial roar" of the crowd to Russ, but the combination of the second-person pronoun with the analysis of the sound lends the last two sentences the authority of narratorial comment employing the informal variant of "one."

Further conflations occur in the following, where the subject of address is both character and narratee:

And Cotter's hand around the rival's arm, twisting in opposite directions, burning the skin—it's called an Indian burn, remember? (48)

He holds the ball chest high and turns it in his fingers, which isn't easy when you're running—he rotates the ball on its axis, spins it slowly over and around, showing the two hundred and sixteen raised red cotton stitches.

Don't tell me you don't love this move. (57)

And here a character momentarily becomes the subject of the address: “Edgar loves this stuff. Edgar, Jedgar. Admit it—you love it. It causes a bristling of his body hair” (50).

The prologue contains one key prolepsis which establishes the narrator’s authority as a recorder of history, based on retrospective knowledge:

There’s a man on 12th Street in Brooklyn who has attached a tape machine to his radio so he can record the voice of Russ Hodges broadcasting the game. The man doesn’t know why he’s doing this. It is just an impulse, a fancy, it is like hearing the game twice, it is like being young and old, and this will turn out to be the only known recording of Russ’ famous account of the final moments of the game. The game and its extensions. . . . The game doesn’t change the way you sleep or wash your face or chew your food. It changes nothing but your life. (32)

To link back to the opening comment about the making of history, DeLillo’s point is made clearly in the final pages of the prologue:

Russ thinks this is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, *that binds them to a memory* with protective power. People are climbing lampposts on Amsterdam Avenue, tooting car horns in Little Italy. Isn’t it possible that *this midcentury moment* enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses—the mapped visions that pierce our dreams? Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way. This is the thing that *will pulse in his brain come old age* and double vision and dizzy spells—the surge sensation, the leap of people already standing, that bolt of noise and joy when the ball went in. This is *the people’s history* and it has flesh and breath that quickens to the force of this old safe game of ours. (59, emphasis added)

Here is the notion of cultural memory, which perhaps the second person facilitates. While the passage contains Russell’s focalized thoughts about the significance of the game as a form of local, communal history, the phrase “midcentury moment” evokes the sense of history established by temporal distance, and the line “the thing that will pulse in his brain come old age” performs the function of a prolepsis as much as a character thought.

The range of grammatical uses of the second person which I have identified continue throughout the novel—“She was fifty-four now, let that number rumble in your head” (372)—along with the use of second-person narration. According to David Pike, DeLillo echoes the trope of the Asmodean devil with his metaphorical explorations of the word underworld, and “by sustaining a rooftop vantage point throughout the novel that clearly echoes his own authorial position typing away on his Olympus” (86). By this Pike means that throughout the novel perspective is often oriented to characters looking down from on high, from Russell Hodges in the broadcaster’s booth to Klara Sax on her rooftop to Nick Shay in a hot air balloon. He goes on to claim that “for all his omniscience, DeLillo’s narrator resolves nothing. . . . The halting devil has enough chthonic power to unroof the secrets of the urban world to us but not enough either to gloss them or to make them cohere” (89).

To coincide with the publication of *Underworld*, DeLillo wrote an article for the *New York Times* titled “The Power of History.” In this article he presents the novel as under threat from the consumptive speed of contemporary culture: “Maybe it is the evanescent spectacle of contemporary life that makes the novel so nervous” (2–3). DeLillo argues that the collapse of time in our contemporary experience is evident in the way that celebrity becomes instantaneous, pervasive, and then evanescent. “The fast-forward nature of the decade is an apt subject for a novelist. But the novel itself, the old, slow water-torture business of invention and doubt and self-correction, may seem to be wearing an expiration date that takes effect tomorrow” (3). He goes on to suggest that fiction can find significance in the evocation of history as a counterpoint to the spectacle of contemporary life: “In a period of empty millennial frenzy, we may begin to see a precious integrity in the documents of an earlier decade or century” (3).

The essay’s argument hinges upon DeLillo’s account of the genesis of *Underworld*, the accidental discovery in the archives of a newspaper with two items on its front page: the Giants’ victory in the playoffs, and the Soviet atomic bomb test. This moment is presented as a discovery of the power of history, thus framing the prologue to *Underworld* as not only a fictional demonstration of this power, but a demonstration of the novelist’s capacity to find connections in the past which are beyond the scope of historical discourse: “Against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self” (4) Here DeLillo replicates the standard claim for the capacity of fiction to imaginatively recuperate

the private, unwritten experiences of history: “Fiction will always examine the small anonymous corners of human experience. But there is also the magnetic force of public events and people behind them” (4). And he romanticizes this capacity in terms of the language of fiction itself:

There is pleasure to be found, the writer’s, the reader’s, in a version of the past that escapes the coils of established history and biography and that finds a language, scented, dripping, detailed, for such routine realities as sex, weather and food, for the ravel of a red thread on a woman’s velvet sleeve. (8)

The essay argues for the capacity of fiction to harness the “power of history” in more effective ways than historical language can, but not in the service of recuperating the past from the archive. Instead, DeLillo mobilizes the claims of the novelist as literary historian to explicitly establish his authority to intervene in contemporary cultural life.

This article performs DeLillo’s own critical interpretation of his novel. In the prologue to *Underworld*, the narrative voice draws its authority from a showy display of omniscience in which the presence is DeLillo’s. The link between narrative and authorial voice encouraged by DeLillo’s omniscient narrator enables his comments in “The Power of History” to provide the narratorial commentary at the level of public discourse, sitting alongside the novel, even as the novel performs in fictional form the point DeLillo wishes to make about the role of the novel. While individual readers may or not have knowledge of this article when reading *Underworld*, an approach to fiction as public discourse makes it clear that DeLillo is asserting his narrative authority through a conjunction of authorial and narrative voice, each one reinforcing his claims as a social commentator.

### Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001)

Franzen’s *Harper’s* essay proposed, in effect, a softened DeLilloism. What is retained from DeLillo is the tentacular ambition, the effort to pin down an entire writhing culture. The DeLilloian idea of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry, has been woefully influential, and will take some time to die.

—James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self* 190

Clearly Mr. Franzen’s novel would have benefited enormously from a strict editing job. There are lengthy digressions about Lambert friends and acquaintances,

which serve no purpose but to provide the author with a wider array of social types to send up; and there are passages where the omniscient narrator's voice gratuitously intrudes to tell us exactly what we are witnessing.

—Michiko Kakutani, "A Family Portrait as Metaphor for the 90's"

Authorial presence in *The Corrections* is not manifested in overt intrusive commentary, despite Kakutani's complaint quoted above, at least not in the form of direct addresses to the reader. However, there are evaluations of character embedded in narratorial summary and passages of internal focalization describing aspects of the character's motivations of which they themselves are unaware or unwilling to admit, and which cumulatively establish a detached assessment of the flaws and interrelations of the Lambert family:

Unfortunately Enid lacked the temperament to manage such a house, and Alfred lacked the neurological wherewithal. (6)

None of this occurred to Denise then or after. She was still feeling responsible ten years later. (367)

She was too proud to admit to herself, let alone to Don Armour, that he wasn't what she wanted. She was too inexperienced to know she simply could have said, "Sorry—big mistake." . . . She suffered for her reluctance. (375)

The omniscient or polymathic knowledge of the narrator, as well as his stylistic presence, is more specifically performed through the recurring metaphor of "corrections" which links the exploration of intergenerational family dynamics with a broader account of the corporate health industry and the global economy. This metaphor begins with the individual, charting how three siblings each view their lives in relation to the influence of their parents. The character Chip Lambert, we are told, had a lengthy, unsatisfying relationship with a woman whom he supported through college and beyond as a defiant response to his father's belief in maintaining rigid distinctions between "Men's Work and Women's Work": "in a spirit of correction, he stuck with Tori for nearly a decade" (33). Chip's brother, Gary, is burdened with acute depression, and the narrator reveals through internal analysis that "his entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life" (181). Later in the book, an analeptic scene shows their father, Alfred, contemplating his unborn child, Denise: "A last

child was a last opportunity to learn from one's mistakes and make corrections, and he resolved to seize this opportunity" (281). By virtue of being isolated in its own paragraph, the following line could be attributed to Alfred or the narrator: "What made correction possible also doomed it" (281). The metaphor recurs with Denise, where, again through internal analysis, the gradual erosion of her lifelong antipathy toward her mother is described in these terms: "Not until she was at the pier and her mother kissed her . . . did the extent of the correction she was undergoing reveal itself" (425). And on the final page, when Enid reflects upon the death of her husband, Alfred, we have this line: "The one thing he never forgot was how to refuse. All of her correction had been for naught" (567).

Central to the plot is a breakthrough in neurobiological therapy extolled by a corporate representative as "Corecktall," for "disorders of the brain" such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and the "social disease" of criminality, unchecked by traditional correctional institutions (208). A spokesperson for Axon Corporation describes prisons as having "zero corrective benefit, and, just to keep this in mind, *still the basic model for corrections in the United States today*" (209, original emphasis). The economic sense of the word, in which free markets return to equilibrium, is also used: "Bearish analysts, mindful of recent gutwrenching corrections in the biotech sector, were cautioning against investing in an untested medical technology that was at least six years from market" (189–90). The denouement of the final chapter opens: "The correction, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble, but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets" (563). This correction to the global market occurs as the volatile family dynamics of the Lamberts settle down in the wake of the death of the patriarch, Alfred.

With this recurring word, across internal analysis, narratorial comment, and interior monologue, the narrator encourages us to see how the desire to correct neurological disorders and aberrant social behavior is facilitated by an intrusion of the market economy on all aspects of life. A central thread of the story is the attempt by Alfred's children to secure money from Axon Corporation for using Alfred's patented discovery to develop Corecktall. In one scene, Gary and Denise attend a promotional dinner at which Axon executives are extolling the benefits of Corecktall to potential investors. "Simply put," a company spokesperson says, "Corecktall offers for the first time the possibility of renewing and *improving* the hard wiring of the human brain" (189, original emphasis). Gary's motivation for attending is explained by the narrator as both entrepreneurial and

as part of his desire to correct his father's mistakes in the conduct of his own life: "He saw an opportunity here to make some money and avenge Axon's screwing of his father and more generally, be *bold* where Alfred has been *timid*" (190, original emphasis). As the benefits of the drug are explained we have this interchange between Gary and Denise:

"We've got to get Dad signed up for testing," Denise whispered.

"What do you mean?" Gary said.

"Well, this is for Parkinson's. It could help him."

Gary sighed like a tire losing air. How could it be that such an incredibly obvious idea had never occurred to him? He felt ashamed of himself and, at the same time, obscurely resentful of Denise. (199)

The metaphorical connection between the market and mental health is then shown to penetrate into modes of thought, especially centered on Gary, a banker who cannot admit that he is depressed. In his constant state of self-assessment he believes in "the overall robustness of his mental economy. He was not the least bit clinically depressed" (140). Later we have this metaphor: "Ordinarily Gary wouldn't have let Aaron get away with this. Ordinarily he would have battled his son all evening if that was what it took to extract an apology from him. But his mental markets—glycemic, endocrine, over-the-synapse—were crashing" (161–62). The metaphor is then embedded in Gary's consciousness: "*What this stagnating economy needs*, thought Federal Reserve Board Chairman Gary R. Lambert, is a massive infusion of *Bombay Sapphire Gin*" (162, original emphasis).

The thematic connection between the personal and social afforded by the word "correction" extends to a connection between narrative and authorial voice in the title of the book itself. The recurring metaphor of Franzen's narrator—our desire to correct a perceived malaise in ourselves and in our culture—clearly underpins the argument of Franzen's famous *Harper's* essay. If we approach fiction as one mode of public discourse available to the writer alongside others (such as the journalistic, the essayistic, etc.), this continuum across the discourses of fiction and nonfiction is more important to an understanding of narrative authority than any generic or "ontological" distinction between narrator and author. The *Harper's* essay, titled "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels," is a perfect example of the perceived crisis of the novelist I outlined in chapter 1, functioning as an agonistic bid for the cultural authority—defined in the essay as "an appeal beyond the academy,

a presence in household conversations” (47)—required to assert the significance of *The Corrections* to public life. The essay anatomizes a crisis in American culture which Franzen attributes to “technological consumerism”: the conditioning of social behavior by the logic of the economy and the pervasiveness of electronic media. One result of this conditioning, Franzen argues, is the decline of readership for serious literature, because electronic media has both usurped the role of fiction as social report and reduced the attention span required to read long novels, demonstrating “the incompatibility of the slow work of reading and the hyperkinesis of modern life” (39).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the gratifications of the self afforded by a consumer economy have diminished the desire for connection with other minds (both characters and the author) which the novel traditionally provided. In the course of this argument, Franzen harkens back to the authority of the nineteenth-century novel sustained by a culture of readership:

A century ago, the novel was the preeminent medium of social instruction. A new book by William Dean Howells was anticipated with the kind of fever that today a new Pearl Jam release inspires. The big, obvious reason that the social novel has become so scarce is that modern technologies do a better job of social instruction. Television, radio, and photographs are vivid, instantaneous media. Print journalism, in the wake of *In Cold Blood*, has become a viable creative alternative to the novel. (41)

The crux of Franzen’s essay is the challenge facing novelists today who are committed to the oppositional criticism of the social realist novel, embodied in his own “despair about the possibility of connecting the personal and the social” (36). Franzen’s decision to frame this essay as a confessional account of his personal depression performs this very connection of the personal and the social in his nonfictional authorial voice: “does the distress I feel derive from some internal sickness of the soul, or is it imposed on me by the sickness of society?” (36). Anchoring his critique of the diminished “social currency” (38) of the novel, its inability to combat the problems of American society, is the story of how he grapples with his own sense of obsolescence and irrelevance (his words) as a novelist in contemporary culture.

In a consumer economy fuelled by the speed of information dissemination, Franzen argues, a novelist’s desire to bring the news to society is doomed because this news will become out of date before the novel is even published. In the course of the essay he criticizes Tom Wolfe’s 1989

manifesto, pointing out Wolfe's "failure to explain why his ideal New Social Novelist should not be writing scripts for Hollywood" (42). He also echoes David Foster Wallace's manifesto in his critique of television—"television has killed the novel of social reportage" (42)—and the lack of genuine relationships between people fostered by "our technological and economic systems" (44) designed to gratify our self-oriented needs. There is a further echo of Wallace's trope of the (white male) fiction writer as an exemplar of the disconnected self, performing this trope in confessional fashion: "But of course the more TV I watched the worse I felt about myself. If you're a novelist and even *you* don't feel like reading, how can you expect anyone else to read your books?" (40).

The narrative arc of this personal essay is Franzen's path out of depression throughout the 1990s, from the end of his second novel—the "culturally engaged" *The Twenty-Seventh City* which failed to engage with the culture—to the writing of his third novel, which would become *The Corrections*. Ultimately, the essay is a story about how he overcame writer's block by abandoning his ambition to write the all-encompassing social novel in favor of a novel of character, by realizing that "bringing 'meaningful news' is no longer so much a defining function of the novel as an accidental by-product" (48). This epiphany enables him to claim: "To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?" (49). And to realize, personally, "that the despair I felt about the novel was less the result of my obsolescence than of my isolation" (50). This enables him to claim that the novel is crucial for establishing a community of writers and readers, like-minded, lonely people who take comfort in the solace of fiction. Finishing his third novel, then, became a path out of loneliness to reconnect with a diminishing community of writers and readers. His conclusion is that once he abandoned the desire to compete with contemporary media and attended to the unique qualities of fiction, its use of language, its construction of character, the connection of the social and the personal would be a natural outcome.

In terms of the interrelation between cultural and narrative authority, the *Harper's* essay enabled Franzen to offer, in advance of *The Corrections*, an authorial "direct address" to the culture which overtly provides the public context for his novel: a sweeping critique of American foreign policy, national debt, the solipsistic victimhood of multiculturalism, environmental degradation, the pursuit of money and self-gratification, the opiate of mass culture, the problems of academe, the economics of the book publishing industry, and so on. In his essay he criticizes "the ideology of the market economy" and its consumer products, listing all the

technological changes he saw taking place as a result: “I saw leaf-blowers replacing rakes” (39). In the opening paragraph of *The Corrections*, we have a description of an eerie pre-storm suburban afternoon which includes a reference to “the nasal contention of a leaf blower” (3), establishing an oblique lexical continuum between the novel and the essay. The *Harper’s* essay successfully established one of the most powerfully centripetal paratexts in contemporary fiction, exploiting the very genre of victimized confessionalism which Franzen critiques in fiction, and locating *The Corrections* in a larger extrafictional narrative of the novelist’s search for cultural authority. In the essay’s confessional nature we see a recognition of the genre required to connect with an audience in the marketplace of celebrity and personality, despite Franzen’s critique of this marketplace: “To speak extranovelistically in an age of personalities seemed to be a betrayal; it implied a lack of faith in fiction’s adequacy as communication and self-expression” (50).

When the *Harper’s* essay was republished in 2002 in a collection of his nonfiction, Franzen claims in the preface that interviewers constantly asked whether he saw *The Corrections* as the fulfillment of his essay’s promise that his third book would be a big social novel. His response, each time, Franzen writes, was that they had misread his intention, for *The Corrections* was written out of a desire to escape from that ambition. He then writes that the essay is in fact highly confused but should be preserved as a document of his feelings at the time, as “a stalled novelist’s escape from the prison of his angry thoughts” (5). In this way, Franzen leaves open for continued speculation the link between the essay and the novel.

Some critics have enthusiastically taken up the narrative of Franzen as the savior of the social novel in the wake of postmodernism. For instance, in a cringe-inducing, self-important review of Franzen’s latest novel, *Freedom*, in the *New York Times*, Sam Tanenhaus claimed that, in the wake of September 11, 2001, *The Corrections* “towered out of the rubble, at once a monument to a world destroyed and a beacon lighting the way for a new kind of novel that might break the suffocating grip of postmodernism” (11). Tanenhaus quotes James Woods’s critique of hysterical realism to categorize the sort of postmodern writing prevalent at the time. Taking up Franzen’s infectious metaphor, Tanenhaus asserts that *The Corrections* “did not so much repudiate all this as surgically ‘correct’ it. Franzen cracked open the opaque shell of postmodernism, tweezed out its tangled circuitry and inserted in its place the warm, beating heart of an authentic humanism” (10).

Academic critics, on the other hand, have been anxious to preserve Franzen's postmodern credentials, established in his earlier novels. In his 2008 book, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, Stephen Burn writes:

Jonathan Franzen occupies a revealing position amongst America's millennial novelists. While critics at century's end began to anatomize the end of postmodernism, . . . the conflict between postmodern innovation and more conventional narrative forms was internalized and played out in Franzen's novels and essays. (ix)

And Fitzpatrick positions Franzen, along with DeLillo, as the exemplar of the postmodern novelist's anxiety of obsolescence.

### Richard Powers, *Generosity* (2009)

Having seen a glimpse of the future, Powers has also become known as one of the twenty-first century's notable writers of big cosmic novels to make frequent use of that most nineteenth century of literary devices, the omniscient narrator.

—Jan Alexander, "Happy People Need Love Too"

I conclude with Richard Powers's *Generosity*. Stephen Burn ("The End") classifies Powers as a post-postmodern novelist for the way he combines the techniques of realist fiction with experimental metafiction and deploys this combination to explore the tension between art and science as modes of explicating human behavior. In *Generosity*, Powers's intrusive omniscient narrator bleeds across both the social commentator in the way he displays comprehensive knowledge of genetic science in a commentary on the preoccupations of late capitalism, and the ironic moralist in his metafictional reflections on the possibilities of writing to establish human relations.

In *Generosity*, the conventional authority of the omniscient narrator is complicated by the events of the story itself, which concern current scientific research into the operation of the mind. If, by literary convention, the highest authority is granted to a narrator who has access to the minds of characters, and the novelist's traditional insight into human nature is predicated on this access, the omniscient narrator of *Generosity* is cognizant of the challenge to his authority presented by scientific knowledge of consciousness. This awareness is highlighted in the following passage of

thought report: “She sits in the rocker for a moment, examining herself. It’s not even an effort, really. Not even a decision. Just large molecules, passing their oldest signals back and forth across the infinite synapse gap” (179). In this scene, the host of a science television show, Tonia Schiff, is deciding whether to stay overnight with the scientist Thomas Kurtzon, with whom she has spent the day as part of her research for a documentary film. The first line is reminiscent of a novel by Ann Radcliffe or Jane Austen in which the heroine sits down to review the virtue of her conduct, or of the cue for an extended interior monologue such as Isabel Archer’s in James’s *Portrait of a Lady*. Instead, it is followed by three sentences eschewing internal analysis in favor of a comment on the workings of the brain, which is as much as to say, why try to represent a character’s thoughts which can be reduced to a neurological process? A paragraph later, there is one line of direct discourse: “*I have no center*. The thought wastes her. Not even a thought: just a fact the exact size of her body. She’s disappeared into playing herself. She has no clue what her bliss is, and trying to follow it would lead worse than nowhere” (179–80).

*Generosity*, like Powers’s earlier novels, is thus an example of what Gary Johnson calls neuronarrative: a subgenre of narrative fiction in which novelists engage with new advances in cognitive studies to explore the problem of human consciousness. Johnson’s two examples in his essay “Consciousness as Content: Neuronarratives and the Redemption of Fiction” are Powers’s *Galatea 2.2* and David Lodge *Thinks*. He also includes Franzen’s *The Corrections*, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, and A. S. Byatt’s *A Whistling Woman*. One could add Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* to this list. The challenge for the fiction writer which these works explore, according to Johnson, is that working with consciousness in the wake of cognitive science involves “an epistemological dimension as well as a mimetic one” (171) for scientific research now offers knowledge of the human mind not available until recent decades. If the technical challenge for novelists has traditionally been how to represent consciousness, thus relating to the level of narrative discourse, developments in science now make it necessary for novelists to consider consciousness a problem at the level of story. In this context, Johnson argues that

the encroachment of neuroscience on the field of literature results in a kind of reevaluation of narrative fiction on the part of novelists who produce it. Even as neurologists, psychologists, medical doctors and others in the scientific community embrace narrative as a legitimate area of

inquiry, Lodge and Powers seem to need to convince themselves of the potential value of narrative fiction. (172)

Johnson talks about how Lodge and Powers seem to use their books as occasions to reevaluate the value of fiction in the light of cognitive studies, although he makes no conclusion about what the novels offer, beyond the continued mutual skepticism of art and science and the significance of human consciousness as an area of fictional “content.” Instead, Johnson dwells on what he considers one “of the most fascinating characteristics of neuronarratives . . . the novelist’s perceived need to inform his or her audience about the current state of neuroscience. To put this in narratological terms, the authors seem compelled to facilitate the readers’ entry into the ‘authorial audience’” (174). I don’t find this “perceived need” as fascinating as Johnson: it is simply a demand of the craft of writing. What is fascinating is how Johnson describes the writer’s craft of dramatic exposition in terms of the social function of the public intellectual, defined by Russell Jacoby as “writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience” (5). According to Johnson: “Lodge’s and Powers’s neuronarratives serve two important epistemological functions: they implicitly validate the notion that science produces a kind of useful and true knowledge and they artfully disseminate that knowledge to the lay public” (180).

The omniscient narrator’s authority in *Generosity*, then, relies upon its function as an authorial proxy for the figure of the novelist as public intellectual: a translator of specialized knowledge through the genre of fiction, and a social commentator on the current cultural state. The specialized knowledge which informs the book is genomics. The plot revolves around the fate of Thassadit Amzar, a young Algerian refugee whose beatific, almost unsettling, optimism belies the trauma of her past. She becomes the object of study for Thomas Kurtzon, an entrepreneurial scientist who believes she may possess what he has identified as the “happiness gene.” Research into genetic dispositions for happiness is ongoing and was reported in newspapers and popular science magazines in the two years preceding Powers’s novel. While much of this scientific knowledge is dispensed through the dialogue and thoughts of Kurtzon, it also informs the commentary of the intrusive narrator. The universal here is couched in the authority of science, for the characters’ motivations are examined not from the perspective of the Thackerayan “observer of human nature” but from that of a scientifically knowledgeable narrator who can explain char-

acters in terms of genetic coding and evolutionary science. Commenting on an awkward scene of budding courtship between the protagonist, Russell Stone, who is Thassa's writing teacher, and Candace Weld, a psychologist, the narrator writes: "They stand there awkwardly, two more victims of natural selection, caught between negativity bias and the eternal belief that the future will be slightly better than the present" (96).

The narrator does not assume a posture of specialized knowledge so much as one of general commentary. "According to many of the two thousand new self-help titles that appear every year . . . nothing short of pharmaceuticals can help sustain contentment as much as a satisfying job" (38). Musing on the level of job satisfaction that Russell might experience, the narrator comments: "What pleasure does he get from his selfless editing? Stone strikes me as the kind of guy who might not know what his pleasures *are*. He's not alone. No one does: the happiness books are adamant on this. We're shaped to think the things we want will make us happy. But shaped to take only the briefest thrill in getting. *Wanting* is what *having* wants to recover" (38). This narratorial comment reveals the thematic crux of the novel, shifting from a supposition about the character to a comment on human nature, complete with the aphoristic final sentence, but its authority is couched less in the universal wisdom of the narrator, than in a report on the science of happiness.

The paradigm of evolutionary genetics underpins narratorial commentary throughout the novel: "From where I sit, the whole human race did something stupid when young—pulled some playful stunt that damaged someone. The secret of survival is forgetting" (19). This model of narrative authority also extends to reflections on the role of the novel itself. "In my country," the narrator points out in an intrusive interlude, "a new work of fiction is published every thirty minutes. . . . I try to calculate how many of those million-and-growing volumes are saddled with a romance—bright or doomed, healthy or diseased. I can't do the math. Surely it must be most of them" (94–95). The narrator goes on to offer a reason for this proliferation:

Sexual selection, the surest and most venerable form of eugenics, has molded us into the fiction-needing readers we are today. Part of me would love to belong to a species free, now and then, to read about something other than its own imprisonment. The rest of me knows that the novel will always be a kind of Stockholm syndrome—love letters to the urge that has abducted us. (94–95)

The hesitation about the novelist's role in explaining human nature seems to underpin the metafictional anxiety which animates the intrusive presence of the narrator. The determinism of evolutionary science which provides the model for "universalizing" commentary about human nature finds its parallel in self-reflexive addresses to the reader about the fatalism of generic plot structures: "So you know this story: *Lord Jim*, or a plot to that effect" (15); "He knows this story. *You* know this story: Thassa will be taken away from him" (87); "Of course they had to arrive here, eventually. What self-respecting author would let them escape alive?" (262). These comments function less to assert the authorial narrator's creative control over the fictional world, or to satirize the artificiality of plot, than to demonstrate his own "imprisonment" by narrative structures. I engage further with the novel's metafictionality in chapter 7.

### From Minimalism to Maximalism

Richard Powers has long been considered one of the most knowledgeable and intelligent contemporary novelists for his capacity to draw upon a range of disciplines to explain how the world works. In a 1998 article, "Ecologies of Knowledge: The Encyclopedic Narratives of Richard Powers and His Contemporaries," Trey Strecker claims that, following the lead of Pynchon, a number of contemporary novelists, including Powers, David Foster Wallace and William Volkman, are producing encyclopedic narratives distinguished by the disparate range of information systems they organize in their novels. "One notable feature of these encyclopedists' books is the diversity of specialized knowledge—from biology, chemistry, economics, entomology, linguistics, music, mythology, painting, physics, psychology, and other fields—that they process" (68). What prevents these novels from being mere compendiums of knowledge, argues Strecker, is the "imposition of narrative. For when narrative enters a static encyclopedic system, a living, evolving textual ecology unfolds" (68).

Obviously the figure which holds this knowledge together, organizing and directing it through narrative, is the author who becomes a kind of public intellectual synthesizing specialized knowledge for readers. The polymathic narrator is a clear proxy for this authorial figure, drawing upon and reinforcing the authority of the novelist. The narrator's authority is less a product of reliable knowledge of the fictional world than of a capacity to mobilize a range of extraliterary discourses to make sense

of this world. “The new encyclopedists,” according to Strecker, “do not capitulate to the overwhelming amount of information in postmodern culture” (69). The narrator of *Generosity* is clearly concerned with the problem of this excess of information, as he points out in an intrusive comment: “The price of information is falling to zero. You can now have almost all of it, anytime, anywhere, for next to nothing. The great majority of data can’t even be given away. But meaning is like land: no one is making any more of it” (110).

All four modes of narrative authority employed by contemporary omniscient narrators, but in particular the last two, indicate a general shift in fiction from minimalism to maximalism. Throughout the 1980s minimalism of the kind exemplified in the tradition from Hemingway to Carver was considered dominant in American fiction and slated home to the problem of writing workshops. John W. Aldridge’s *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-line Fiction* (1992) is a good example of this type of criticism. As James Wood’s critique suggests, minimalism is not so much a problem now as its opposite. In a 2004 article titled “The War for the Soul of Literature,” Laura Miller argues that what Wood denounces as “hysterical realism,” and what Dale Peck calls “recherche postmodernism,” can be understood in terms of this shift. For Miller, maximalism, in the form of the big ambitious social novel, has become the new focus of complaint about the direction of contemporary fiction, replacing Carveresque minimalism which had prevailed for the previous two decades as a symptom of literary decline.

The return of omniscience in contemporary fiction has been facilitated by the emergence of encyclopedic fictional narratives as an assertion of novelistic authority in the postmodern knowledge economy. Maximalist fiction need not necessarily be omniscient in narration, but the scope and narrative freedom of omniscience certainly lends itself to an expansive exploration of social relations, and the garrulousness of narrative voice which maximalism encourages is a means of competing with the dynamism of other discourses in the marketplace of opinion and entertainment.

What James Wood lamented in his “Hysterical Realism” essay as the hardening genre of the “big ambitious novel” is now being located in history by scholars as the contemporary manifestation of the impulse traced in Franco Moretti’s *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*. For instance, in a 2009 essay, “‘The Death of the Novel’ and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the ‘Big Ambitious Novel,’” Mark Greif writes: “One knows that Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, William Gaddis’s *J R*, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, and William T.

Vollmann's *Europe Central* help draw a circle around a particular form of the novel, if not quite a genre" (11). As his title suggests, Greif argues that the "'big ambitious novel' as it emerged in the postwar period first appeared in response to, then came to depend upon, the maintenance of a conceit of the 'death of the novel'" (12). First gaining traction with Lionel Trilling and other literary critics in the 1950s—who saw the novel's decline resulting from genre exhaustion, changed social conditions, and the speed of contemporary life—this conceit was perpetuated by writers as a literary challenge, articulated in essays from Philip Roth's "Writing American Fiction" (1961) to the essays by Wallace and Franzen which I have discussed here. "Vitality," Greif suggests, "becomes its own pursuit in an age when 'the death of the novel' is a presumption that never can be laid to rest" (27). Significantly, he points out that these meganovels

rejected the first-person narration of Ellison and Bellow for a kaleidoscopic 'third-person close,' in which all knowing is accomplished through countless limited and idiosyncratic characters who together prove a kind of encyclopedic or superhuman range that must belong to the author but is never acknowledged as an authorial possession. (28)

Here we see that what is vital to these novels is the projection of a figure of the author as polymath, as omniscient in the hyperbolic rather than divine sense of the word. The narrative voices of these novels, then, in combination with their authorial statements, seek to carve out a space for the cultural importance of the novel and the status of the author in the public sphere.

In his 2012 essay, "The Maximalist Novel," Stefano Ercolino sets out to define the contemporary maximalist novel as a genre and place it in relation to postmodernism. Ercolino argues that this genre emerged in the United States in the last quarter of the twentieth century with Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* before emigrating to Europe in the new millennium with novels such as Roberto Bolaño's *2666*. His examples include the usual suspects of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Smith's *White Teeth*, DeLillo's *Underworld*, and Franzen's *The Corrections*, and he names novels by William T. Vollmann and Richard Powers. According to Ercolino, "there are ten elements that define and structure" the maximalist novel "as a genre of the contemporary novel: length, encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, inter-semioticity, ethical commitment, and hybrid realism" (242). For Ercolino, certain of these elements, such as

encyclopedic mode and diegetic exuberance, are centrifugal in their function while others, such as narratorial omniscience and paranoia, operate as a centripetal countermeasure.

Ercolino understands omniscience purely in terms of focalization, as a “narrative regime” which operates on both the micro-structural level of the fragment and the macro-structural level of the narrative as a whole. By this he means that despite the range of shifts in focalization and substantial sections of internal focalization, the sum of the parts in each novel constitutes a freedom of perspective best understood as omniscience. He claims that omniscience

is the consequence of the particularly pressing demand to lend order to the novelistic representation; as a result, there is a fundamental need to construct a narratorial gaze capable of perceiving from above, and thus of dominating the entire narrative flow. This does not mean, of course, that in every maximalist novel the narrator must necessarily be omniscient; however omniscience is a narrative mood that adapts itself more efficiently than others to the control of the narrative material. (249)

In keeping with my argument in this book, focalization is best understood as a rhetorical strategy of the narrator, as the product of the “generating instance” of narrative voice. Hence, to talk of a “narratorial gaze” we must link this gaze to a narrator. Ercolino also sees omniscience as crucially linked to paranoia, which “remains the engine of maximalist literary imagination” (250). The idea that everything is linked is

the indestructible conviction of the paranoid, a conviction that finds its formal correspondence in the interconnection (direct or indirect) of all the stories, all the characters, and all the events with which maximalist novels are filled. . . . Such an interconnection could have no more effective support than an omniscient narratorial regime in which the hyper-vigilant gaze of the narrator controls the narrative material as a whole. (250)

Here Ercolino seems to be suggesting that the narrative voice supports and facilitates the paranoid imagination, indicating that the controlling presence of Providence in classic omniscience has become the paranoia of contemporary omniscience.

We could characterize contemporary omniscience as a verbose narrative voice nostalgically invoking the friend and guide of classic omni-

science, or desperately filling the silence left by the postmodern absence of character. But we could more productively approach this narrative voice as a kind of heuristic technique, where form is generated by the architectonic function of the sentence as a line of flight. The idiosyncrasy of Wolfe's prose stems from his claim in *The New Journalism*, that journalists who deploy the techniques of fiction in the service of nonfiction writing are free from the constraints of aesthetic convention governing point of view and other narrative elements. "For the gluttonous Goths," Wolfe wrote, "there is still only the outlaw's rule regarding technique: take, use, improvise" (48).

Narrative form here is not determined by any sense of formal unity, by the categories of narrative theory, but by the writer's authority as a reporter of contemporary culture. For the social commentator, the tentacular reach of omniscience is underpinned by a creative freedom at the syntactic level. As Don DeLillo explained in an interview about the writing of *Underworld*:

The prologue is written with a sort of super-omniscience. There are sentences that may begin in one part of the ballpark and end in another. I wanted to open up the sentence. They become sort of travel-happy; they travel from one person's mind to another. I did it largely because it was pleasurable. It was baseball itself that provided a kind of freedom that perhaps I hadn't quite experienced before. It was the game. (DePetrio 136)