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The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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CHAPTER 7

Paralepsis and Omniscient Character Narration

But what the hero cannot say, the author cannot tell.

—Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Life of Samuel Richardson” xxv

How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle laden omniscience?

—Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 170

No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria.

—Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* 12

IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn draws attention to the paradox of realist fiction: that its realism is heightened by the fantasy of complete access to a person’s inner life: “narrative fiction attains its greatest ‘air of reality’ in the representation of a lone figure thinking thoughts she will never communicate to anyone” (7). Hence the conventional authority of omniscience is founded upon what Cohn calls “the unnatural presentation of the inner life found in third-person fiction” (*Distinction* 16). In this chapter, I discuss a different paradox: when the unnatural knowledge of omniscience is mobilized by the narrative voice of first-person character narrators.

There is a long history of character narrators saying more than the conventions of realism dictate they should know, in novels from *Tristram Shandy* to *Moby Dick* to *The Great Gatsby*, sometimes on isolated occasions throughout the narrative, sometimes persistently, with lesser and greater degrees of explanation for this excess of knowledge. My focus here is on novels over the past few decades which collectively have developed “first-person omniscience” as virtually another category of narrative voice. Some well-known examples include best-selling and prizewinning novels such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992), Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* (1994), Carol Shield’s *The Stone Diaries* (1995), Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and *Middlesex* (2002), Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* (2002), and Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). It is no coincidence, I think, that these works have appeared at the same time that new modes of heterodiegetic omniscience have been developed, together firmly establishing omniscient narration as a key feature of experimentation in contemporary fiction.

When first-person narrators adopt the privilege of omniscience typically associated with authorial narration, and narrate with authority the thoughts of other characters or events at which they were not present, our default response seems to be: how do they know? I want to suggest that the ways in which narrative theory has engaged with this question demonstrate the extent to which it is in thrall to an “epistemological fallacy,” where questions regarding practices of storytelling are framed as a problematic of knowledge. The debates which result from this approach point to a narratological preoccupation with attribution: to whom do we assign vision, voice, consciousness, intentionality, etc., resulting in a multiplication of possible agents: author, implied author, narrator, focalizer, character, and reader. In this case, the “problem” has been: to which agent do we assign responsibility for impossible knowledge?

Paralepsis and Focalization

The most common approach to the “problem” of first-person omniscience has been through an extension of Genette’s concept of paralepsis. In his chapter on mood in *Narrative Discourse*, Genette claims that “a change in focalization, especially if it is isolated within a coherent context, can also be analyzed as a momentary infraction of the code which governs that

context without thereby calling into question the existence of the code” (195). Genette gives the name alterations to these “isolated infractions” (195), and christens as *paralepsis* any alteration of focalization which involves “giving more [information] than is authorized in principle in the code of focalization governing the whole” (195). This “excess of information” is not an “epistemological” problem in third-person narration, where it is assumed the narrator knows more than the focal character, but it is framed as such in first-person narration.

Some apparent *paralepses* in first-person narration can be understood as speculations or reconstructions of events based on subsequent knowledge. “The real difficulty arises,” Genette says, “when the narrative reports to us, on the spot and with no perceptible detour, the thoughts of another character in the course of a scene where the hero himself is not present” (207). In particular, for Genette, when Proust’s narrator provides us with “access to the last thoughts of Bergotte on his deathbed” (207–8), this is “one *paralepsis* to end all *paralepses*; it is irreducible by any hypothesis to the narrator’s information, and one we must indeed attribute to the ‘omniscient’ novelist” (208). Some critics argue that instances of Marcel’s impossible knowledge highlight the fictionality of his autobiographical writing, the tension between his novelistic desires and his memoiristic project. For Morton P. Levitt there is no “omniscient inconsistency” in the novel if we separate narrator from character and attend to the fact that the novel we are reading is the work Marcel devotes himself to writing: “The presumed autobiography turns inevitably—for Marcel is above all an artist, and he has an agenda of his own—into a fiction” (82). It is possible, then, that in this *paraleptic* moment Marcel could be *assuming* the omniscience of the novelist in the act of narration. Genette does not countenance this hypothesis because Marcel does not admit speculation, unlike other instances where modal locutions become indices of a focal restriction. This is consistent with Genette’s project to apply grammatical categories to narrative theory, in which he claims the function of narrative is to tell a story by reporting facts and therefore “its one mood, or at least its characteristic mood, strictly speaking can only be the indicative” (161).

In *Narrative Discourse Revisited* Genette reiterates that focalization is to be understood as “a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience.” He goes on to write: “In pure fiction that term is, literally, absurd (the author has nothing to ‘know,’ since he invents everything), and we would be better off replacing it with completeness of information—which, when supplied to a reader, makes him ‘omniscient’” (74). For Genette, then, the *author* selects what infor-

mation about the story to convey in the narrative, with the various modes of focalization offering choices of restriction or regulation of this information. The function of the narrator in Genette's model is really only to be the instrument of this focalization, what he calls "a sort of information conveying pipe," to report the story which the author has invented (74). This allows Genette to claim, in *Narrative Discourse*, that Balzac's narrator is never Balzac, "even if here and there he expresses Balzac's opinion, for this author-narrator is someone who 'knows'" the events being narrated "whereas all Balzac himself does is imagine them" (214). A key methodological claim which results from this separation of author and narrator is that "the narrating situation of a fictional account is *never* reduced to its situation of writing" (214). This is fair enough, but when Genette attributes a *paralepsis* to the novelist's omniscience, I think he is effectively reducing the instance of narrating to the instance of writing, and this is because his theory cedes responsibility for the regulation of narrative information to the author rather than the narrator.

Genette's solution to Marcel's moments of impossible knowledge is to explain them as elements of what he calls Proust's transgressive poly-modality. However, I think it is worth looking again at his theory of focalization. In his revision of earlier theories of point of view, Genette argued that what was traditionally understood as omniscient narration can be termed "*nonfocalized* narrative, or narrative with *zero* focalization" (189). Following Todorov, he provides this definition: "where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly *says* more than any of the characters knows" (189). I want to dwell for a moment on this relationship between knowing and speaking.

In the introduction to *Narrative Discourse*, Genette is clear in stating that "[s]tory and narrating thus exist for me only by means of the intermediary of the narrative" (29). This is a statement of method. Its premise is that we reconstruct the temporal order of events, receive information about the story, and identify traces of the narrating instance solely from the narrative discourse itself. If we approach a narrative with this method, rather than the presuppositions of convention, Genette's formulation of omniscience suggests to me that we know a narrator possesses more knowledge than the characters *only* because the narrator *says* more than they know. Hence my claim that the authority of omniscience is constituted by a narratorial performance which invokes the conventional assumption of competence.

It could therefore also be the case that a narrator does not necessarily possess more diegetic knowledge than the characters, but, in *saying* more,

possesses a narrative authority predicated on the assumption of superior knowledge. In other words, omniscience is the performative effect of a text's narrative voice, rather than a product of its focalization. The idea that knowledge about the story world is called into being by the act of narration should make sense when we consider Genette's definition of *narrating* as "the generating instance of narrative discourse" (213). But in separating voice from focalization, Genette methodologically prioritizes knowing over saying. This is the basis of the epistemological fallacy in narrative theory.

Genette's extra-textual recourse to the omniscient novelist to explain paraleptic instances is more coherent, I think, in James Phelan's rhetorical narratology, which takes a more explicitly pragmatic approach to paralepsis. For Phelan, these "deviations from the dominant narrative technique" (*Living* 83) are cases of the implied author providing necessary information to the authorial audience while still trying to retain the mimetic effect of the overall narrative. Phelan calls this the disclosure function, describing it as an authorial strategy which trumps the narrator function. Again, there is no room to attribute the paralepsis to the *narrator's* invention for the sake of the story. We can see here that the theory of paralepsis functions as an interpretive vacuum, in which critics feel compelled to furnish an explanation for a character narrator's impossible or illicit knowledge.

Unnatural Narratology

As examples of first-person omniscience have increased in volume and prominence over the past three decades, they have demanded attention from narrative theorists, and have continued to be understood in the epistemological terms determined by the theory of paralepsis. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette describes the "correlations between mood and voice" in terms of a contract where "the heterodiegetic narrator is not accountable for his information," but a homodiegetic narrator "is obliged to justify" any illicit knowledge (77). For Genette, any breach of this trust is a paralepsis, and, "as a consequence of its 'vocal' selection," homodiegetic narrative "submits *a priori* to a modal restriction" which he calls "prefocalization" (78).

When he goes on to add homodiegetic narration with zero focalization to his typology of possible combinations of voice and focalization, offering *Moby Dick* as an example, Genette has completed the transition of paralepsis from a focal alteration which could apply to heterodiegetic

narration with external or internal focalization, to a synonym for first-person omniscience. Paralepsis is no longer an isolated infraction of a governing code, but a governing code itself which is *by definition* an infraction. The foundations laid by Genette's structuralist narratology have since been reworked by cognitive narratology concerned with readers' naturalizing practices, enabling paralepsis to become a key object of study for the emergent research field of unnatural narratology.¹

In their 2010 manifesto, "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models," Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson argue that paralepsis should be understood as the product of an unnatural mind. In keeping with their critique of the "mimetic bias" of narrative theory, which they claim rests upon "the idea that narratives are modeled on the actual world" (114), they emphasize that many forms or techniques which may have become "conventionalized over time" are nonetheless inherently unnatural, in the sense that they do not occur in real-world acts of communication. The capacity of fictional minds to know the thoughts of characters is a chief example. "The differences between the rather diverse forms of unnatural minds," they argue, "may be sketched out as a continuum ranging from well-known and thus conventionalized cases" such as omniscient narrators, "to the most bizarre and opaque cases found in experimental fiction" (120). Toward this end of the continuum are "the unnatural minds of 'omniscient' (or telepathic) first-person narrators" (120).

So here is the claim that we cannot rely on the idea of human consciousness to explain narratorial models. "In some first-person narratives," it is pointed out, "the narrator knows significantly more than he could if he or she were a real person" (124). This is a theory of paralepsis which highlights how the code of prefocalization which first-person omniscient narrators defy is founded on real-world possibilities, making the obligation for homodiegetic narrators to justify their knowledge a product of the mimetic bias. The difference in approach between classical narratology and unnatural narratology then lies in how this "deviation" is explained, how the interpretive vacuum is filled. In challenging the mimetic bias, unnatural narratology also seeks to resist the impulse of much cognitive narratology to explain strange narratives by adapting them to real-world scripts, such as the Theory of Mind, arguing instead that "one can simply accept the fact that many narratives go well beyond imaginable real-world situations" (129).²

I'm not sure, however, whether the category of the unnatural mind really challenges the mimetic bias, or that it leads to more insightful inter-

pretations. The problem with unnatural narratology for me is that in wanting to preserve the “unnatural” qualities of first-person omniscience from the conventionalization undergone by third-person omniscience it is obliged to keep the mimetic bias always present as a default model to be challenged. If the theory of a paraleptic infraction is based on a mimetic bias, why continue to label it paralepsis? All that it is accomplished is a displacement of the infraction from a textual convention to a cognitive framework. Furthermore, the desire to resist conventionalization leads to an oversimplification of what counts as real-world cognitive parameters. If the *authors* of unnatural narratives are able to imagine impossible storyworlds, antinomic temporalities, mind reading and unnatural narrative voices, presumably these imaginative acts are real-world cognitive activities. To put it bluntly, writing fiction is a natural act of communication, and this is the model first-person narrators invoke when performing omniscience in the act of narration.

Paralepsis and Naturalization

To demonstrate some of the interpretive problems and typological limitations generated by the “unnatural” approach to first-person omniscience, I turn to Ruediger Heinze’s 2008 essay “Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction.” Heinze presents the existence of first-person omniscience as a research problem to be addressed by narrative theory: “How, then, can one conceptualize first-person narrators in fictional narratives whose quantitative and qualitative knowledge about events, other characters, etc., clearly exceeds what one could expect of a human consciousness and would thus make them prone to being labeled ‘omniscient?’” (280).

His first move is to claim that these narrators can’t be “naturalized” or “narrativized” as unreliable, because, despite their unusual knowledge, there are no indicators of insincerity or inconsistency in the narrative report. He also dismisses the possibility of satisfactorily explaining these narratives as narratorless or voiced by nonhuman narrators because of the clear presence of human consciousness in the act of telling. And he dismisses recourse to possible worlds theory on the same grounds: “With the slight but significant exception of unusual knowledge, the narrators belong to a ‘natural’ world very much like the actual one” (285).

Heinze’s approach is to follow Culler’s lead and reject the concept of “omniscience,” instead using “the term ‘paralepsis’ whenever refer-

ring to the phenomenon of a first-person narrator knowing and/or sensing something to which he/she should not have access by all that we as readers know about human cognition and perception” (282). One can see by this definition that Heinze is not using the term “paralepsis” in the classical structuralist sense that Genette employed it, where the infraction is defined in relation to the dominant mood of the text. Instead, rather than an “alteration” of focalization, paralepsis is defined as the infraction of real-world frames of reference which readers bring to a text. “As a purely text-immanent phenomenon,” Heinze argues, “paralepsis cannot be adequately explained. . . . Without knowledge of some basic cognitive and phenomenological aspects of the actual world (for example our inability to mind-read),” statements requiring unusual knowledge would not “qualitatively differ” from mere report of action (283).

The result is to limit his account of first-person omniscience to what he calls a violation of mimetic epistemology. With this method in place, Heinze presents five types of “first-person paraleptic narrators” before “discarding” or “disqualifying” three of them because their impossible knowledge can be naturalized. The case of *illusory* paralepsis can be explained by the delayed disclosure of a plausible reconstruction from available evidence; *humorous* paralepsis can be seen as parody or unreliable narration; and *mnemonic* paralepsis can be seen as an extension of accepted narrative conventions. This last category refers to the “impossibly comprehensive and infallible memory” of some narrators, but is dismissed because readers are habituated to the fact that “all first-person narrators remember pages and pages of dialogue verbatim” (286).

So after discarding the majority of examples of first-person omniscience for being “natural” paralepses and thus not paraleptic enough, we are left with two “real” cases of paralepsis which, Heinze says, “can be called ‘non-natural’ because their paralepsis cannot be rationalized within a natural world. They are true *violations of mimetic epistemology*. The explanation is either beyond the known physical laws or simply not given” (286). These two paralepses are the global and the local. *Global* paralepsis “is situated within a non-natural impossible frame” such as the narrator of Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* narrating the story of her murder from heaven (286). *Local* paralepsis is “situated within a natural world but, nevertheless, is assumed by a first-person narrator in a style that suggests epistemological sincerity” (286). The example here is Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm*, in which a character, Paul, assumes the role of authorial third-person narrator to look back upon his adolescence and tell the story of the *annus horribilis* of his family.

The problem I have here is that if, as Heinze indicates, his typology is determined by the degree to which each *paralepsis* can be naturalized, and local *paralepsis* “is perhaps more difficult to naturalize because it is situated in a basically natural and realistic world with the physical laws of the real world intact” (286), then positing *The Ice Storm* as his exemplar makes his case difficult to sustain. *The Ice Storm* opens with the line: “So let me dish you this story about a family I knew when I was growing up. There’s a part for me in this story, like there always is for a gossip, but more on that later” (3). This opening leads us to believe the narrator is a homodiegetic witness, but the novel quickly moves into an authorial voice employing variable internal focalization to shift perspectives between the father, mother, daughter, and son, while also containing many nonfocalized “authorial” comments about the 1970s. The last paragraph of the novel, however, reminds us not only that it is homodiegetic narration, but that the narrator is in fact one of the main characters, the son of the family:

Or, that’s how I remember it, anyway. Me. Paul. The gab. That’s what I remember. And that this story really ends right at that spot. I have to leave Benjamin there with that news . . . and I have to leave myself—Paul—on the cusp of my adulthood, at the end of that *annus mirabilis* where comic books were indistinguishable from the truth, at the beginning of my confessions. I have to leave him and his family there because after all this time, after twenty years, it’s time I left. (279)

Heinze runs through the ways in which this revelation might be naturalized, dismissing the illusory, the humorous, and the mnemonic because the narrator does not reveal a natural source for his knowledge or highlight his subjectiveness or speculation, and claims that the authoritative heterodiegetic report can only be the result of unnatural knowledge. He seems to contradict his rejection of naturalization, though, when he asserts that as a result of the revelation “the reliability of everything that has been told has to be reevaluated” (291). In fact, *The Ice Storm* really does belong to Heinze’s most “naturalizable” and easily dismissed category: that of illusory *paralepsis*. Indeed, it would best be described as an example of what Heinze relegates to a footnoted subcase of this type: the cloaked *paralepsis*, in which “a first person narrator is cloaked for some time in an authorial (heterodiegetic) narrative situation” (294). The reason I say this is because Heinze fails to quote what for me is the key line of the novel, which comes after the narrator describes the uncanny experi-

ence of Paul having the exact same dream that his father had years earlier: “This congruency—between Paul and his dad—is sort of like the congruency between me, the narrator of this story, the imaginer of all these consciousnesses of the past, and God” (206).

This line draws attention to the imagination rather than unnatural telepathy of the narrator, and obviously refers to the convention of omniscience with its reference to God. So why does Heinze privilege *The Ice Storm* as an example of the highest degree of unnaturalizability, as a true violation of mimetic epistemology, for which the “paraleptic insights” of the narrator “cannot be explained or rationalized” (289)? It seems to be because he can’t accept that the narrator has *imagined* the “consciousnesses of the past” rather than reported them.

If we need to posit and then discard three types of paraleptic narrators then *paralepsis* is surely not the best term to understand the phenomenon of first-person omniscience. *Paralepsis*, from structuralist to unnatural narratology, seems to be defined as a case where a first-person narrator does not *justify* his or her possession of knowledge. The absence of modal language is interpreted as an epistemological dilemma, when really this refusal would, in many cases, more productively be approached as a rhetorical strategy of the narrator, along with the decision to maintain a homodiegetic presence from the beginning or to resort to delayed disclosure. So rather than charting different types of *paralepses* according to degrees of naturalization, we might think about different rhetorical mobilizations of the conventional performative *authority* of omniscience.

It could be argued that in claiming homodiegetic omniscience is the product of the character narrator’s imagination rather than impossible knowledge I am practicing another form of naturalization. This is true, and my response would be that this is the most accurate form of naturalization for these texts. However, I would also argue that we have recourse to naturalization as a reading practice only if we first consider a narrative to be unnatural. This first move, of encountering something strange which needs to be explained, is not necessarily a “natural” response of readers, it is the product of the mimetic bias itself. In Genette’s formulation, *paralepsis* relates to momentary or isolated infractions of the governing code of focalization. If a narrative establishes homodiegetic omniscience as the governing code, one cannot point to instances of impossible knowledge as an infraction of this code, unless one invokes the mimetic bias as an external code or cognitive frame. Rather than focusing on the unnatural qualities of first-person omniscience by terming it *paralepsis*, I suggest an approach which highlights the fictional invention of the narrator.

Paralepsis and Hypothetical Focalization

This brings me to David Herman's work on hypothetical focalization (HF). In his project to bring the theory of possible worlds semantics into dialogue with narratology, Herman suggests a way of building upon the classical structuralist typology of focalization. "My claim is that by examining narratives told from a more or less obviously hypothetical point of view, we can start to rethink narrative mood generally, focalization specifically, in the context of the theory of possible worlds" ("Hypothetical Focalization" 233). He proceeds to outline Genette's categories of zero, internal and external focalization before asking:

But what about narratives whose development provokes, in a more or less direct or explicit way, speculation about some nonexistent focalizer? At issue are narratives focalized such that we gain as it were illicit access to the materials of the story—materials not in fact focalized, or not focalizable even in principle, in the world(s) of the narrative. (236)

This discussion of "illicit access" sounds very much like a reference to paralepsis, and indeed in a footnote to this passage Herman writes: "Thus, we might want to construe HF as a special case of what Genette terms 'paralepsis,'" arguing that his purpose "is to analyze in detail the specifically paraleptic effects of HF—effects which may suggest less the infraction of a code, than grounds for rethinking the principles on which the code itself is based" (249).

Herman's goal is to reconfigure our understanding of focalization from a distinction between internal and external perspectives on a story (in Bal's understanding of these terms), to a scale of epistemic modalities in which varying degrees of doubt or certainty about the storyworld are encoded in the narrative discourse by grammatical moods. And here he suggests that we can take Genette's application of grammar to narrative not in a loose metaphorical sense, but literally by attending to modal locutions. This approach to what he calls the intensional properties of narrative, Herman argues, will facilitate greater attention to the study of narrative meaning because it posits focalization as a means of establishing propositional attitudes toward the reference world.

This is the context in which he discusses the category of HF, the appeal to a nonexistent or virtual focalizer or focalizing act, marked by modal locutions which offer a counterfactual perspective on what might have been observed or thought. Herman places HF at one end of a scale of

“epistemic deixis,” marking maximal doubt about the reference world, and zero focalization at the other end, indicating maximal congruence between the expressed and the reference world of the narrative. For Herman, then, “‘omniscience’ entails an epistemic stance in which a focalizer has absolute faith in the veracity, the actualness or actualizability, of the states of affairs detailed in the narrative” (246).

The question here is, what happens when this omniscience is attached to a character narrator? We have the discursive appearance of certainty, but the narrator’s role as a character calls this epistemic stance into doubt, not through the presence of modal locutions, but by the very act of adopting an “external” perspective in the act of narration. So if first-person omniscience is defined as a *paralepsis*, and if Herman calls HF “a special case” of *paralepsis*, what is the relation between first-person omniscience and HF?

First-person omniscience, I suggest, offers an epistemic stance in which a “focalizer,” which I understand as a perspectival position rather than an agent, may express no doubt about the reference world, but the narrator, in saying more than he or she knows or could know, cannot unproblematically claim the epistemic authority associated with this focal position. As a result, first-person omniscience becomes a performance of knowledge based on the hypothesis of a virtual focalizer: this is what *would* have been perceived by an omniscient narrator if such a perspective were possible. The extent to which readers doubt the epistemic stance of this virtualized zero focalization is dictated by the rhetoric of the narrating agents, their willingness to “justify” this stance, to make light of it, or their decision to conceal it. So the difference between what Heinze calls the “illusory” *paraleptic* narrator of Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, who reminds us that “of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can’t be entirely sure about any of this” (9) and Moody’s local *paraleptic* narrator who utters third-person authorial pronouncements, is one of rhetorical strategies rather than degrees of knowledge.

As Herman’s examples show, isolated passages of grammatically encoded HF operate across a range of narrative categories, from first- to third-person voices, and from internal to zero focalization. While he carefully delineates the different functions of direct and indirect HF in their strong and weak versions, the case of homodiegetic omniscience highlights the importance of demonstrating how these types of HF interact with different modes of focalization and different narrative voices.

For instance, it is obvious that omniscient narrators may deploy HF to demonstrate hyperbolically their own epistemic authority, conjuring a

virtual focalizer to speculate about what they already know, as is the case in Herman's example from *Possession*: "An observer might have speculated for some time as to whether they were travelling together or separately" (273). The narrator, of course, knows that these two characters are secret lovers travelling together. In this sense, hypotheticality could be understood as a paralipsis, Genette's term for a narrator saying less than they know. At the same time, the narrator's rhetorical use of this "hypothetical observer" (274) orients contemporary readers to a subject position aware of nineteenth century models of propriety. *The Ice Storm*, on the other hand, has several instances of modal locution which paradoxically serve to solidify its narrative authority by counterfactualizing the already imaginary act of focalization. Here is Benjamin Hood, Paul's father, turning up at a "key" party in the 1970s and realizing that the ascot tie he is wearing is no longer fashionable: "Had Hood been in a mind to comfort himself, he might have approved of his ample shirt collar, spread wide on the wings of his lapels. But how had he managed to get out the door wearing the ascot? How had he let himself?" (107). The modal locution in the first sentence marks the thought as virtual. The conjunction suggests the following questions could easily be an extension of the narrator's HF, even as it takes the form of free indirect thought. In fact, the whole passage of internal focalization is counterfactualized by the revelation that the narrator is this character's son, adopting the privilege of omniscience in the act of narration and describing himself as "the imaginer of all these consciousnesses of the past" (206).

Omniscience across Person

All this is by way of arguing that the relation between voice and focalization is crucial to the effects of HF, and that, like other modes of focalization, HF is a rhetorical strategy of storytelling akin to the strategies of justification employed by first-person omniscient narrators. So my claim is that first-person omniscience is an extension of HF beyond isolated modal locutions to the governing code of a narrative, in which a character, in the act of narration, draws upon the "privilege" of authorial omniscience to posit what could be known or perceived from the epistemic stance of zero focalization. The hypotheticality is not necessarily a propositional attitude of doubt, however, first because in its grammatically encoded manifestations HF can operate as a rhetorical strategy for highlighting epistemic authority (such as in the case of *Possession*), and

secondly because the epistemic logic of first-person omniscience is often one of invention. So when the narrator of *Middlesex* undermines his epistemic authority by pointing to the limitations of his knowledge of the past, he is nonetheless asserting his narrative authority to tell the story of his life with conviction, established with this early invocation: “Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome!” (4).

In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* Richard Walsh argues that positing the idea of a narrator who knows cancels out the fictionality of fictional narratives. “The function of the narrator,” Walsh points out, “is to allow the narrative to be read as something known rather than something imagined, something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction” (73). Walsh is not dismissing the idea that someone is telling a story, or arguing that fiction is not a communicative act. His rejection of the narrator is a rejection of the concept of level and its implication of a narrative act outside the frame of representation. In claiming that “the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author” (78), Walsh argues that “omniscience is not a faculty possessed by a certain class of narrators, but, precisely, a quality of authorial imagination” (73).

The fictional counterpart to Walsh’s argument, I suggest, is Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*. This novel employs delayed disclosure to reveal that the apparent third-person omniscient narrator is in fact a character, Briony, herself a novelist, who has written the book we have just read, and admits to having invented the ending of the story she has narrated. Here is Briony’s justification for her choice of narrative voice:

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (371)

The metafictional game being played here involves the “omniscient” author, McEwan, displacing his novelistic privilege of invention onto a character-narrator. Briony, in fact, can more accurately be described as the author of the first three parts of the novel, employing an omniscient narrator to report this fictionalized narrative of her life, creating an ontological distinction between these parts and her revelations in the final section, “London 1999.” In this case, the narrating Briony is enacting the

experiencing Briony's desire for the unnatural or impossible knowledge of omniscience. This desire has two competing aspects: to access the thoughts of Cecilia and Robbie which would have afforded her experiencing self the requisite empathy for understanding their motivations; and to assert creative control over the lives of her characters, offering the lovers a happy ending in fiction denied them in life by Briony's misreading of their motivations.

It should be made clear that I am not rejecting the argument that isolated cases of impossible knowledge in many novels throughout history can be understood as paraleptic infractions where the author's desire for exposition "trumps" the dominant focalizing code of first-person narration. I am arguing that the desire of characters to perform omniscience in the act of telling constitutes a global frame in much contemporary fiction, in which narrators invoke the genre of the novel rather than the memoir or the autobiography, which character narration originally mimicked precisely for the purposes of verisimilar authority. First-person omniscience, then, highlights the fact that telling one's story is as much an act of imaginative reconstruction as it is a narrative report by someone who knows. In turn, it highlights what self-reflexive novelists have said for centuries: the capacity to invent fictional truths is part of the author's discursive authority.

What, then, are the ways in which the relation between first-person omniscience and traditional authorial narration have been explained? In considering the "functional design" of first-person omniscience, Heinze concludes that "paralepsis in first-person narrators can then be read as a satiric comment not only on the alleged panopticism of authorial narratives but also on those critiques of these fictions that read them as panoptic" (292). Heinze locates these narrators historically as "the legitimate heirs of the postmodern language games," with the unnatural knowledge of narrators parodically highlighting the fantasy of omniscience in realist fiction: "If epistemic unity—or its pretense—is a form of assuming discursive control, then these narratives assume an impossible control, emphasizing that it has always been illusory anyway" (292). Morton P. Levitt makes a similar claim on behalf of modernism in *The Rhetoric of Modernist Fiction*, arguing that what he calls the "seeming omniscience" at play in the work of Carol Shields and José Saramago demonstrates the triumph of point of view and the subjectivism it entails over the certainties of the form inherited from the Victorian novel.

Can we see omniscient character narration, therefore, as a governing code or frame of hypotheticality which operates as a critique of the epistemological surety of traditional omniscience? Only, it seems to me,

if we perpetuate the epistemological fallacy of focalization as a mode of knowing rather than a strategy of telling. While it is certainly true that first-person omniscience produces a metatextual stance on the concept of omniscience itself, I would suggest that it is not a critique of omniscience, but another deployment of omniscience in the wake of postmodern metafiction. I have already argued that metafiction reflexively re-introduced omniscience by highlighting the author's creative power in agonistic rather than triumphalist fashion. I would suggest that first-person omniscience can be characterized as a post-postmodern move beyond metafiction because it draws attention, particularly in examples of delayed disclosure, to the artifice of the fiction, but locates the authorial figure within the diegesis, providing a characterological motivation for the reflexive experimentation with conventions of omniscience. In this way it contributes to the development of a relativized omniscience across person in contemporary fiction.

Here I return to Richard Powers, whose post-postmodern sensibility is characterized as a combination of realism and metafictional experimentation. As reviews of *Generosity* attest, the novel courts uncertainty about the diegetic status of the narrator. The novel opens with the narrator voyeuristically observing the protagonist, Russell Stone, on a train, and attempting to read the notes he is taking, while simultaneously drawing attention to the spatio-temporal distance of the narrating instance from the story:

A man rides backwards in a packed subway car. . . . He's just thirty-two, I know, although he seems much older. I can't see him well at first. But that's my fault, not his. I'm years away, in another country, and the El car is so full tonight that everyone's near invisible. (3)

At times the narrator assumes the role of an immanent presence in the diegesis, spying on his own creation—"His pen freezes in midair; he looks up. I glance away, caught spying" (5). At other times he indicates that he is recreating the "real" world in fiction: "I watch him twist, the way he did so often in real life" (96).

These intrusions display an anxiety about the extent of the narrator's knowledge of the protagonist, similar to Martin Amis's narrator in *The Information*: "The train sways, he pitches in his seat, and I don't know anything. I stop deciding and return to looking" (4). The narrator's conventional access to consciousness seems insufficient, as he resorts to obser-

vation and the documentary traces of Russell's existence (his notes, the books he reads):

I search for Russell Stone all over. I read the almanac for that year. I read his class textbook, of course. I read back issues of his magazine. I even loot those hall-of-mirrors avant-garde novels whose characters try to escape their authors, the kind he once loved, the kind he thought he'd write one day, before he gave up fiction. (37–38)

The equivocation between creative control—"I have her flip up her window slide and look out the plastic portal" (80)—and lack of insight—"I wish I could make out Stone's students better. I can see how they disturb him. But I just can't see them in any detail. They're hiding in the sullen, shiny performance of youth" (7)—underpins the metafictional commentary on the armature of fiction, from the arbitrariness of plot to the handling of time: "*Time passes*, as the novelist says. The single most useful trick of fiction for our repair and refreshment: the defeat of time. . . . I needed 125 pages to get from Labor Day to Christmas vacation. In six more words, here's spring" (156). There is enough evidence to suggest that this self-reflexive omniscient narrator is less of an authorial figure exposing the artifice of realist fiction and its representational claims than Russell himself writing about his life in a form he has lost faith in: "Just beyond the South Bend, Stone has an epiphany. He knows why he could never in his life or anytime thereafter write fiction: he's crushed under the unbearable burden of a plot" (273). That the narrator is a character separated from his experiencing self by temporal distance (subsequent narration) and by narrative voice (heterodiegetic) can be assumed from a line such as this: "Purveyors and contractors, drug dealers, number crunchers, busboys, grant writers. Just brushing against them in memory makes me panic" (4).

The conclusion suggests that Russell has self-consciously adopted the role of omniscient authorial narrator as he turns his life into a work of fiction to make sense of the death of his student, Thassa. In the final pages, Thassa meets up with the journalist, Tonia Schiff, and it is unclear at first whether this is an actual event in the storyworld, or a fictional encounter in which Thassa remains alive only in the novelist's imagination. In this scene, Thassa wants to return the writing handbook which Russell set for his students to read, *Make Your Writing Come Alive*. The following line suggests an equivalence in identity between narrator and character:

“It’s not mine,” she says. “Give it to Russell. He will need this.”

I will need much more. Endless, what I’ll need. But I’ll take what I’m given, and go from there. (295)

The novel, then, draws parallels between a heterodiegetic authorial narrator metafictionally commenting on a character he has created but cannot fully know, and a character narrator acknowledging the process of fictionalization involved in reconstructing his life as a narrative: “And I’m here again, across from the daughter of happiness as I never will be again, in anything but story. . . . She’s still alive, my invented friend, just as I conceived her, still uncrushed by the collective need for happier endings” (295). In a sense this severs the existential link between narrating and experiencing self which provides the epistemological grounds for a character narrator’s focal restriction. To the extent that the novel itself takes the relation between fiction and nonfiction as an object of exploration, *Generosity* shows how Powers has offered omniscient character narration as an extension of his practice of combining metafiction and realism, locating the metafictional elements in the character’s self-authorship.

First-Person Omniscience and Narrative Authority

Many first-person narrators go far beyond transcribing that which they have experienced themselves by letting the narrative arise anew from their imagination.

—Franz K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* 215

My argument is not simply that “unnatural” narratives can be naturalized, or to provide different interpretations of the texts under consideration. In suggesting hypotheticality as the way to understand first-person omniscience, particularly as it highlights invention rather than speculation and doubt, I want to think more about the relation of first-person to third-person omniscience in contemporary fiction. I have argued throughout this book that omniscient narration is best understood not as a quality of authorial or narratorial knowledge, but as a specific rhetorical performance of narrative authority. As a result of this approach, I have suggested that focalization, the narratological category under which omniscience is typically discussed, must be seen as a rhetorical strategy of narrative voice. Instead of conceptualizing an all-knowing authorial narrator who is already in full possession of all there is to know about the story-

world and who can then deploy different modes of regulating information about this storyworld when representing it to readers, I am suggesting that we think of omniscient narrators as storytellers who generate and perform this knowledge in the act of narration. First-person omniscience “dramatizes” this concept of omniscience. If the impossible knowledge of homodiegetic narrators draws attention to the “unnaturalness” of omniscience assumed by authorial narrators, what it highlights is our willingness to understand the convention of omniscience in terms of narratorial knowledge rather than authorial invention. What is at stake in this form is a tension between two modes of narrative authority which have informed the history of the novel: the verisimilar authority of the eyewitness derived from the nonfictional form of the memoir or autobiography or confession; and the authority of “fictional truth” claimed by the novelist.

My argument about imagination as the central paradigm for homodiegetic omniscience is anticipated by Scholes and Kellogg, who point to an uneasy relationship between empirical and fictional impulses in the history of the novel as a problem of authority associated with the question of point of view. The empirical authority of eyewitness narrators, they argue, is balanced by the fact that they cannot witness everything and can know only one mind: their own. “But the novelist’s determination to have the benefits of eyewitness narration without accepting its limitations has been indefatigable” (259). In tracing this determination of novelists, Scholes and Kellogg point to *Tristram Shandy* whose eyewitness status covers events before his birth, and to the narrator of *Madam Bovary* who begins as an eyewitness before fading into an omniscient presence (259). They also draw attention to Dickens’s “famous resort to a combination of disembodied omniscience and direct reporting in *Bleak House*” (260). In particular, they discuss the work of Proust who “has given us some of the most flagrant cases in all literature of the novelist’s insistence on having things both ways” (260). The paralepses in Proust which have become the touchstone of the epistemological fallacy in narrative theory are discussed here in terms of

Proust’s entire esthetic, which continually mentions the limitations of the empirical and asserts the extraordinary power of those insubstantial essences, memory and imagination. He simply rejects the notion that “real” people can be apprehended without the assistance of these esthetic essences. Thus, conversely, as long as the eye-witness is imaginative enough he need not be hindered, like poor Lucius in the stable, by any merely physical bonds. *Since we are all makers, he suggests, creating*

our lives as we go, there is no incompatibility between the narrator as witness and the narrator as creator. Proust's esthetic enables the narrative artist to regain some of the ground he had lost when he abandoned his position as inspired bard for the more empirically oriented positions of eye-witness and *histor*. (260–61, original emphasis)

Unencumbered by the epistemological fallacy, Scholes and Kellogg are able to acknowledge Proust's focal transgressions but discuss them as a function of Marcel's narratorial imagination (as opposed to telepathy). They go on to discuss the peripheral eyewitness narrator in the work of Conrad, claiming that: "Since the imagination plays the central role, the factual or empirical aspect of the protagonist's life becomes subordinated to the narrator's understanding of it. Not what really happened but the meaning of what the narrator believes to have happened becomes the central preoccupation in this kind of narrative" (261). Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Warren, they claim, "have all worked variations on this basic tactic" (261). The novels which I mentioned at the start of this chapter extend this tradition of emphasizing the role of imagination in narrative report. As examples of ways in which authors construct narrators who deploy omniscience in order to solve the limitations of first-person narration, they are also examples of ways in which first-person narration has extended the possibilities of omniscience in contemporary fiction.

Hypothetical Focalization and the Narrating Instance

I do not wish to reject all claims for impossible knowledge, but the paradox of characters narrating more than they know can be construed as a rhetorical function of voice rather than an epistemological problem of focalization if we pay attention to the distinction between the narrating and experiencing selves of a character. In works of contemporary omniscient character narration, narrators constantly draw attention to the narrating instance, providing a range of justifications for their "impossible" knowledge. These justifications necessarily imply a narratee as the narrators contend self-reflexively with the "mimetic bias," asserting their authority to narrate the story. On the majority of occasions, I suggest, they do so by invoking the importance of the imagination to the narrative act. So, instead of displaying impossible knowledge attributable to an unnatural mind or the (implied) author, these character narrators deploy HF to assume the narrative authority of omniscience. Their narratives are

not the product of unnatural narrative acts, but of narratorial invention, drawing authority from the figure of the novelist who creates rather than the memoirist who reports. They self-consciously replicate, in the narrating instance, the determination of novelists to have it both ways, drawing attention in most cases to the fact that they are written narratives.

Classifying omniscient character narration according to a model of paralectic violations of mimetic epistemology with varying degrees of naturalizability creates a kind of artificial distinction between examples of this form. Instead, we can pay attention to the self-reflexive references to the narrating instance in justificatory statements to establish the rhetorical means by which narrators perform the conventional authority of omniscience as an imaginative heuristic, a search for knowledge. A typology of different modes of omniscient character narration would then focus on strategic deployments of the conventions of omniscience: autobiographical reconstruction of the narrator's past in an attempt to make sense of their lives, narrated in autodiegetic mode (*Midnight's Children*, *Middlesex*, *The Lovely Bones*) or in heterodiegetic mode (*The Ice Storm*, *Atonement*, *Generosity*), typically employing delayed disclosure; or biographical reconstruction of the lives of other characters, known and unknown to a peripheral narrator, narrated by a singular (*Oscar and Lucinda*, *Jazz*) or plural (*Ways of Dying*, *The Virgin Suicides*) homodiegetic narrator.

References to the imagination are common in many of these examples. The first-person plural or "we" narrator of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* speaks for a group of neighborhood boys who are unable to understand the female "point of view" represented by the mysterious Lisbon girls. Their capacity to narrate scenes and thoughts to which they were not privy is not explicitly explained, but readily alluded to early in the novel: "He had a high voice, and when Joe Larson told us how Mr. Lisbon had cried when Lux was later rushed to the hospital during her own suicide scare, we could easily imagine the sound of his girlish weeping" (8). The desire which animates this imagination is evident in their experience of seeing Cecilia Lisbon moments before she commits suicide: "She kept her face to the floor, moving in her personal oblivion, her sunflower eyes fixed on the predicament of her life we would never understand" (29). This is what the boys do witness, at a party they were invited to. They then hear Cecilia walk up the stairs and fling herself out of a window to her death. They will never understand Cecilia or her sisters and this whole narrative, written years after the event in the narrators' adulthood, is an attempt to flesh out what they know in the act of narrating,

of imagining, of performing omniscience. “Like us,” the narrators say of news reporters, “they became custodians of the girls’ lives, and had they completed the job to our satisfaction, we might never have been forced to wander endlessly down the paths of hypothesis and memory” (224).

In Tony Morrison’s *Jazz*, the narrator opens with the line “Sth, I know this woman” (3), and proceeds to relay the private life and inner thoughts of the woman, whom she does not actually seem acquainted with, and many other characters, even those in the past. Caroline Rody describes *Jazz* as having “a form of narration we might call the first-person omniscient anonymous” which makes “the identity and the status of the knower a central puzzle of the story” (622). Rody claims that the combination of personal subjective narrator and omniscient knowledge make this an “impossible” and “logically infeasible” voice (622). However, the narrator makes clear the grounds of her knowledge: “Risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind. But worth the trouble if you’re like me—curious, inventive, and well informed. . . . So he didn’t know. Neither do I, although it’s not hard to imagine what it must have been like” (137). The narrator in fact goes on to make this invention the grounds for a confession to the reader: “How could I have imagined him so poorly? . . . I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am” (160); “I believed I saw everything important they did, and based on what I saw I could imagine what I didn’t” (221). The concluding section reveals the desire animating the narrator’s performance of omniscience: selfishness—“confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered” (220); and envy—“I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret” (229).

I will examine in more detail the narrative voice of Salman Rushdie’s 1981 novel, the Booker of Bookers, *Midnight’s Children*, for this is the earliest of contemporary omniscient character narrators, referred to by Nicholas Royle as evidence for the necessity of recasting omniscience as telepathy, and because it certainly does have “unnatural” elements. In the magic realist world of this novel, the first-person narrator, Saleem Sinai, asks readers to believe that he somehow became a radio receiver when he was nine, able to hear the thoughts of other characters: “Telepathy, then: the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space within my head” (168). In an account of how he dealt with this transformation, Saleem gives us a list of different types of focalization: “By sunrise I had discovered that the voices could be controlled—I was a radio receiver, and I could turn the volume up or

down; I could select individual voices; I could even, by an effort of will, switch of my newly-discovered inner ear” (164).

And yet, despite this account of the unnatural mind of his younger experiencing self, the act of narration is a “natural” frame, in which the self-consciously unreliable narrator persistently refers to the process of writing in his attempts to reconstruct his past, to fill in the gaps in his knowledge: “Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps of knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail” (14). This “trick” is the function of memory, “my new, all-knowing memory, which encompasses most of the lives of father mother grandfather grandmother and everybody else” (97). Here we have a magic realist justification for the narrator’s mnemonic overkill. If this all-knowing memory is the product of his telepathic access to the memories of his family, however, it does not guarantee the infallible knowledge of omniscience. Indeed telepathy is far less important as both a theme and a mode of knowledge than memory:

“I told you the truth,” I say yet again, “Memory’s truth because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own.” (242)

Rushdie’s narrator is aware of the role the imagination plays in the function of memory, thus recognizing that distortions and factual errors are inevitable in his narration: “I reply across the unreliable years to S. P. Butt, who got his throat slit in the Partition riots and lost interest in time: ‘What’s real and what’s true aren’t necessarily the same’” (87). This awareness is built into the act of narration itself: “as my decay accelerates (my writing speed is having trouble keeping up), the risk of unreliability grows” (310).³

Furthermore, the act of narration is not informed by telepathic access to other character’s thoughts. In the following passage Saleem discusses the differences between his (older) narrating self and his (younger) experiencing self:

Then as now, someone was awake in the dark, hearing disembodied tongues. Then as now, the one deafened ear. And fear, thriving in the

heat . . . it was not the voices (then or now) which were frightening. He, young-Saleem then, was afraid of an idea—the idea that his parents’ outrage might lead to a withdrawal of their love; that even if they began to believe him, they would see his gift as a kind of shameful deformity . . . while I, now, Padma-less, send these words into the darkness and I am afraid of being disbelieved. He and I, I and he . . . *I no longer have his gift; he never had mine.* (190, original ellipses, emphasis added)

This suggests that Saleem’s narrating self no longer possesses his youthful gift of telepathy and must rely upon his memory. In this sense, then, the narrator is paradoxically paraliptic, saying less than he knew. The “disembodied tongues” that he hears in this passage are present only in his confusion of past and present self: “Different and similar, we are joined by heat. A shimmering heat-haze, then and now, blurs his then-time into mine . . . my confusion, travelling across the heat waves, is also his” (191). Although Saleem discusses how as a child he would enter a person’s mind, he typically refrains from relaying the contents of that mind. To cope with his telepathic gift, he tells us, he had to assume some sense of control:

Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were *mine*, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow making them happen . . . which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift. “I can find out any damn thing!” I triumphed, “There isn’t a thing I cannot know!” (199)

This admission, of course, raises the specter of doubt regarding the young Saleem’s “gift” within a global narrative framework of unreliability. The story being narrated is an imaginative reconstruction rather than a reliable paraleptic account, and subject to the dictates of the narrative act itself: “And now I, Saleem Sinai, intend briefly to endow myself-then with the benefits of hindsight; destroying the unities and conventions of fine writing, I make him cognizant of what was to come, purely so that he can be permitted to think the following thoughts” (270). This narrator is liberated from the mimetic bias not by virtue of his unnatural mind, but by his self-reflexive awareness of narrative as an act of invention.

Writing about *Midnight’s Children* in his 1982 essay, “Imaginary

Homelands,” in the context of his status as an Indian writer, Rushdie claims:

Writers are no longer sages, dispensing the wisdom of the centuries. And those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us. We can't lay claim to Olympus, and are thus released to describe our worlds in the way in which all of us, whether writers or not, perceive it from day to day. (12–13)

Midnight's Children can thus be seen as the refracted voice of Rushdie's cultural authority in the relativized omniscient voice of Saleem Sinai. That Rushdie chose, several years later, to write *The Satanic Verses* with an omniscient “satanic” narrator, suggests another experimental attempt to lay claim to Olympus.

Authorship and Homodiegetic Omniscience

I have pointed out how Genette attributes Marcel's paralectic statements to the transgressive polymodality of the “omniscient author,” and how Phelan attributes similar statements in other works to the implied author operating along a different track of communication from the narrator. More recently, Henrik Nielsen has drawn upon the premises of unnatural narratology to assign paralectic statements to an impersonal first-person voice separate from the character narrator (“The Impersonal Voice”) or to a kind of authorial intrusion in a character's narrative, both of which expose the logical unity of the narrating instance as an anthropomorphic projection. The latter argument is made in “Natural Authors, Unnatural Narration,” in which Nielsen suggests the need to reconsider the importance of authorship in narrative theory. Nielsen refers to Richard Walsh's argument that to employ the concept of narration as report, and thus posit the figure of a narrator who knows rather than invents, cancels out the fictionality of a work. He draws upon this insight to investigate works which problematize distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, and he does so to suggest that we need to pay more attention to how authors communicate information to readers through local manifestations of unnatural narration.

Any attempt to acknowledge the importance of craft-based decisions by authors is productive. However, such a move seems again to rely upon

the epistemological fallacy and its logic of deferred attribution. This is because Nielsen wants to describe a narrative, or a moment of narration, as unnatural if its narrator could not know what is being reported. “Since narrators as ‘agents’ do not invent, they cannot help to explain passages that are—inside fiction itself—obviously invented and not reported” (298). Hence Nielsen’s recourse to the author to explain this invention. Yet surely the point of Walsh’s insight is that we don’t need to rely upon a model of narration as report, of a narrator who knows. If the author directly narrates a fictional invention, then why can’t a character narrator also invent a narrative report? Not, by virtue of the same logic of naturalization, an unreliable report, but simply a fictional narrative. That is, in many cases it may be profitable to read a character narrator’s story as a novel about their lives with all the conventions of novelistic storytelling available to them, rather than a memoir or autobiography, with the attendant focal restrictions accompanying the narrating instance of these forms. Only if we understand memoir or autobiography as the global generic frame of first-person narration will we deem instances of “impossible” knowledge as unnatural.

The problem of unnatural narratology is the assumption it shares with cognitive approaches to theories of naturalization: that only a “naturally” occurring form of oral conversational storytelling in the real world can be considered natural, and that this is the default mode of communication by which fictional narratives are understood. According to Nielsen:

While the narrative in texts of this nature can *globally* be considered a form of communication from author to reader, this global narrative may include local noncommunication rather than a report from an unwitting narrator. It may, for example, include narration that is unnatural, in the simple sense that it transcends the norms of everyday conversation and communication, and in the sense that it is without sender or receiver, without narrator or narratee. (297)

So unnatural narration is seen here as non-communication if it cannot be assimilated to the knowledge of the narrator. Nielsen provides a line from James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* which he says is unnatural because it cannot be communicated by a narrator: “I fade in and out. The TV is narcotic. In and Out. In. Out. In. Out.” For Nielsen, “there is no one to tell, and no one with a conscious mind able to do the telling” (297). Hence the line must be a global communication from the author, a fictional invention which “violates the limits of narratorial communication”

rather than a local report from the narrator (298). But if, as Nielsen points out, “written narrative lends itself more easily to non-communication” (297), and the character narrator is authoring his own life, why can he not have *written* this? For Nielsen it is because rather than two tracks of communication, in which the author communicates through the narrator, we have two voices:

My proposal has the advantage of acknowledging the ability of authors to employ such features of their choosing, as well as their ability to transcend normal communication and the rules governing conversation or storytelling from narrator to narratee. This ability to go beyond communicational models is paradoxically, yet completely logically, possessed by no narrator understood within the framework of the very same communicational model. (299)

My argument in this chapter has been that such claims deny the capacity of authorial invention to character narrators when this capacity would seem to be a central rhetorical element of the narrative. Nielsen, at least, directs the epistemological preoccupations of unnatural narratology to questions of authorship, concluding that “narration cannot always be understood according to the rules of communicational discourse. Furthermore, this fact ties narration more closely to its flesh-and-blood author” (299). In my final chapter I will address the question of global communication between author and reader in terms of fiction as a mode of public discourse.