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## The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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## CONCLUSION

MY AIM in this book has been to reconsider the prevailing view that omniscient narration is no longer aesthetically viable in literary fiction or prominent in the contribution of novelistic discourse to cultural debate. I have argued that contemporary omniscience should not be characterized as a nostalgic revival or parodic critique of an archaic form, but as a legacy in mainstream fiction of postmodern experiments with narrative voice. This has led me to investigate what distinguishes “post-postmodern” modes of omniscient narration from classic examples of the form in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, and what this might reveal about the cultural status of the novel in contemporary public discourse. In doing so, I have located the emergence of new modes of omniscient narration in the context of millennial anxieties about the decline of book culture and argued that omniscient narration is best understood as a rhetorical performance of narrative authority that simultaneously invokes and projects an historically specific figure of authorship.

To investigate this figure of authorship, I have analyzed the narrative voice of a work of fiction in relation to its author’s nonfictional commentary in the public sphere. These statements, as I have shown, typically lament the loss of cultural authority supposedly invested in the omniscient

voice of nineteenth-century fictional narrators while recognizing the need to relativize this voice in contemporary fiction. I have further argued that the narrative voices of contemporary omniscience self-reflexively demonstrate an agonistic awareness of the diminished “universality” of authorial narration, drawing authority not from the novelist as observer of human nature and guide to ethical conduct, but from the writer as public intellectual both competing with and deploying other nonliterary discourses of “knowledge”: journalistic, historical, scientific, critical, and so on.

Another aim of this book has been to employ this investigation of contemporary omniscience to engage with ongoing theoretical debates about the formal category of omniscient narration itself and develop a model of narrative voice more sensitive to the historical contingency and cultural contexts of fictional form. In formalist terms, omniscient narrators are invested by convention with the highest authority to tell a story because they possess reliable knowledge about the storyworld, particularly through their “privileged” access to the consciousness of characters. I have pointed out the need to reconceive narrative authority in more dynamic terms, as performance (the actual use of knowledge) rather than as competence (the possession of knowledge). I have thus approached focalization as a rhetorical strategy which narrators employ to perform their authority, a performance which generates “omniscient” knowledge in the act of narration in order to assert the significance of a story.

To avoid reducing omniscience to a synonym for third-person narration, I have argued that the term ought to apply to narrators who not only report the thoughts of characters, but who narrate what characters do not know (zero focalization), typically aspects of consciousness which characters themselves are unaware of (psychonarration), or information which none could be privy to (prolepses, unwitnessed events). Furthermore, this performance of knowledge ought to contribute to an intrusive narratorial presence established by devices such as direct addresses, commentary, self-reflexive statements, and stylistic expressivity. This intrusiveness can also be a form of zero focalization, in the sense that to offer commentary is to provide insight beyond the awareness of characters, and that references to the act of narration itself are obviously at a higher diegetic level than characters. At the same time, instances of zero focalization are intrusive to the extent that they draw attention to the narrator’s capacity to tell rather than show.

I have also used this study of contemporary omniscience to argue for greater narratological attention to authorship, suggesting that authorial voice can be approached as a formal textual feature of narrative commu-

nication if we approach narrative fiction as a mode of public discourse. This contextualist approach has been designed to show that narrative theory offers more than just a “toolkit” for textual analysis, that attention to narrative form can be the basis for engaging with critical debates about the cultural status of contemporary fiction. Finally, I hope that this book contributes to broader studies of the novel today, particularly in relation to the legacy of metafiction, the historical novel, and the stylistic and encyclopedic features of maximalism, by demonstrating that new modes of omniscient narration have emerged as a vital feature of fiction after postmodernism.

