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The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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NOTES

Introduction

1. See Dawson (“Historicising”) for a critique of this “pros and cons” approach to the teaching of writing and how it perpetuates a prejudice against omniscient narration. See McGurl for an account of the relationship between American fiction and creative writing programs.

2. The only references I have found to contemporary omniscience in fact come from writers and teachers of writing. See Kress, Anderson, and Boulter. All three suggest omniscience has made a “comeback,” listing novels by Isla Dewar, John Irving, and Mary Wesley (Kress), Rick Moody’s *Purple America* (Anderson), and the novels of A. S. Byatt (Boulter). Byatt, Pullman, Boswell, Russo, and Dunning also offer defenses of omniscience as a narrative technique.

3. This intellectual enterprise draws its main inspiration from the scholarship of Friedrich Kittler in works such as *Grammaphone, Film, Typewriter*. Daniel Punday more explicitly relates this enterprise to narratological concerns, such as the story/discourse distinction.

4. Some of the books of nonfiction by these writers include Zadie Smith’s *Changing My Mind*, which includes her review essay, “Two Paths for the Novel”; David Foster Wallace’s *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, which includes his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”; Jonathan Franzen’s *How to Be Alone*, which includes the *Harper’s* essay; Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step across This Line*, which includes his “In Defense of the Novel, Yet Again”; Martin Amis’s *The War against Cliché* and *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom*. David Lodge is also a literary critic, but some of his important works since he retired from the academy include *The Practice of Writing, Consciousness and the Novel*, and *The Year of Henry James*.

5. Ross Chambers offers a psychoanalytically informed account of the dynamics of the narrative act as a form of seduction. For Chambers, narrative authority is based on

the possession of information, but it is authorized by the interest of the narratee who seeks this information, and narrators must yield their authority in exchange for this interest.

Chapter 1

1. Also see Ermarth, who argues that if we understand omniscient privilege as the product of the collective consciousness of the characters, we can dismiss the problem of how to account for impossible knowledge.

2. Amis has encouraged this autobiographical correlation in an interview about *The Information*:

There's an "I" in the first sentence. The narrator is me but he disappears halfway through the book. I wondered about that: I think that I wanted to tell the reader where I was coming from. It is a book about mid-life, and for me the mid-crisis came in the form of blanket ignorance, I felt. I just didn't know anything about the world. . . . I felt that I had to open up to the reader about that and say "How can I be an omniscient narrator when I don't know anything." Which is what it felt like. (Laurence and McGee)

3. See "From Imagination to Creativity" in my book *Creative Writing in the New Humanities* for an account of the historical development of theories of creativity.

4. Dorothy Hale brilliantly anatomizes the formalist circumscription of James's ideas in Lubbock's book.

5. Our modern understanding of omniscience is mapped out in Clayton Hamilton's 1908 book *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, which provides the first account of "limited omniscience" that I have found. This book provides a comprehensive overview of point of view long before it was made prominent by Percy Lubbock. In his chapter "The Point of View in Narrative," Hamilton writes that aspects of narrating a story "are all dependent directly on the answer to the question, who shall tell the story?" (117).

6. William Nelles ("Getting") aptly suggests we rename zero as "free" focalization precisely to demonstrate that all other types are contained.

7. Jaffe similarly argues that "omniscience is not so much evidence for the possession of knowledge as an emphatic display of knowledge, a display, precisely, of what is not being taken for granted." From an overtly post-structuralist interest in how transgressions define the limits they exceed, particularly how Dickens's Asmodean figure negotiates the boundaries between the public and the private, Jaffe suggests that "a narrative mode that has traditionally signified an unquestioned assertion of authority may be understood instead to interrogate the grounds of its authority." She thus locates omniscience in the tension at play between the authorial presence which earlier critics bemoaned and the absence of a unitary voice which contemporary theorists argue for.

Chapter 5

1. Nicholas Dames, in *The Physiology of the Novel*, sets out to prove that the long Victorian novel was in fact designed to train readers to adapt their consciousnesses to the new rhythms of industrial life.

Chapter 6

1. Dorrit Cohn (*Transparent*) more accurately places stylistic contagion under the category of psychonarration, demonstrating how it facilitates a move from psychonarration to narrated monologue.

2. Cognitive narratology offers the next iteration of social formalism. In *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine draws upon scientific research into the Theory of Mind to explain the reading process as a stimulation and test of our mind-reading capacities which have evolved to aid social interaction. Zunshine does not specifically discuss FID, for this feature can be collapsed into our larger evolved cognitive ability to attribute (source monitoring) and keep track of states of mind (metarepresentation) when reading fiction.

3. Compare this character's simultaneous fascination and repulsion to the omniscient narrator's internal analysis of Isabel Archer in the opening to chapter 53 of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*:

She had plenty to think about; but it was neither reflexion nor conscious purpose that filled her mind. Disconnected visions passed through it, and sudden dull gleams of memory, of expectation. The past and the future came and went at their will, but she saw them only in fitful images, which rose and fell by a logic of their own. It was extraordinary the things she remembered. (581)

The narrator's wonder at the workings of the mind becomes in contemporary fiction a character's wonder at their own mental processes.

Chapter 7

1. See Alber and Heinze, Hansen et al., and Alber, Nielsen, et al. .

2. Fludernik ("Naturalizing") draws on the latest craze of blending theory to supplement her natural narratology, arguing that it can help explain how new storytelling frames arise. In this view, first-person omniscience, a form which she traces to *Midnight's Children*, emerges when the source domain of omniscient narration is blended with the target domain of first-person narration, although it is possible to see the form as a double-scope blend. The explanatory power of blending theory strikes me as underwhelming in this instance. Also see Alber 89–91.

3. In "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie draws an autobiographical link between himself and Saleem Sinai, revealing that the motivation for writing the novel was his desire as an expatriate to somehow recover the history of Bombay for himself: "what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory. . . . I tried to make it imaginatively true, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect. . . . This is why I made my narrator, Saleem, suspect in his narration; his mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance, and his vision is fragmentary" (10).

Chapter 8

1. Herman has recently affirmed the importance of intentionality to the study of narrative. In "Narrative Theory and the Intentional Stance," he explains the intentional

stance as an evolved human predisposition to attribute intentionality to persons, objects, and artifacts, a heuristic strategy along the lines of folk psychology which we all employ to solve problems.

2. Brian Richardson offers an insightful account of the possible relations between historical authors, implied authors, and narrators, emphasizing that each category is valid if it performs a useful function in the analysis of texts.

3. Marilyn Edelstein points out that Genette's *Paratexts* makes no reference to Lanser's earlier pioneering work on the significance of extrafictional elements to narrative theory and that critics have tended to refer more to Genette's work than to Lanser's. According to Edelstein, what Lanser calls "extrafictional elements" Genette would call the "peritext," since they are part of the book, and what she would call "extratextual elements," framing discourses such as authorial interviews, Genette calls the "epitext."