Another of the more significant omissions in contemporary narrative theory is the absence of sustained accounts of multiple modes of narration. Thus, while many typologies contain a space for both Bloom’s subvocal speech and Molly’s internal monologue, there is usually no place in such schemas for *Ulysses* as a whole, as if the conjunction of different narrators and modes of narration was not itself of primary theoretical importance.¹ This gap is all the more unfortunate when one considers a work like *The Sound and the Fury*, in which the first person “memory monologues,” as Dorrit Cohn calls them (*Transparent* 247–55), are starkly juxtaposed to the resolutely third person segment that concludes the novel. Still more compelling for readers and potentially problematic for theory are texts in which the same character’s thoughts and actions are narrated in different persons, or when entirely disparate narrators converge. As such texts continue to proliferate, and the varieties of multiperson narration expand, it becomes all the more urgent to identify, analyze, and theorize this impressive group of texts. One of the consequences of this analysis is a reaffirmation of the significance of the distinction between first and third person narration (and homo- and heterodi-egetic moods); if the previous two chapters show how these forms are often made to fuse, this chapter will underscore the importance of establishing and maintaining this distinction for twentieth-century novelists.
In what follows I will examine a number of different texts that employ multipersoned narration. Three major kinds of multiperson texts may be identified at the outset: works that move back and forth between different narrative positions, those whose narration remains fundamentally ambiguous, inclining toward but never comfortably situated within either category, and those strange texts that employ unnatural narrational stances that are impossible in nonfictional discourse. In addition, we might note another general opposition: “centripetal” texts that begin by producing a number of seemingly disparate voices and stances only to reduce them to a single narrating position at the end, and “centrifugal” texts that continue to proliferate an irreducible galaxy of different, heterogenous or antithetical, perspectives. Since many of the critics of the works I will be discussing frequently invoke ideological reasons to explain the author’s chosen narrative practice, I will also briefly discuss claims concerning the politics of narrative person as I have done in the previous two chapters.

Alternating narration between different grammatical persons is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. As Stanzel has pointed out, Thackeray’s narrator employs both “I” and “he” to describe his life in Henry Esmond. A historical survey of these practices will include other titles Stanzel discusses in this context: Conrad’s Under Western Eyes, Robert Penn Warren’s All the King’s Men, Bellow’s Herzog, and several novels by Max Frisch (104–10). To this group of course we may add the many texts that, following Conrad, juxtapose a “we” narration to a first person singular or a third person form. In Bleak House, an omniscient third person narrative is accompanied by the first person account of one of the characters. Discussing Dickens’ novel, Stanzel explains that the “two narrative situations represent two different perspectives, namely, the panoramic one of the authorial narrator who is critical of the times, and the naive but sympathetic viewpoint of the first-person narrator, Esther Summerson, circumscribed by her domestic horizons” (71). Even in this description, it might be noted, we get a sense of the ideological valences present in such a gendered division of knowledge and narration. As Susan Sniader Lanser explains, by “replicating the ideology of separate spheres,” Bleak House sets “the omniscient and implicitly male voice of the authorial narrator next to
the personal voice of the female character Esther Summerson without acknowledging this duality” (*Fictions* 239–40).

Contemporary fiction is replete with a polyphony of competing narrative voices; even where the narrator’s speaking situation seems fixed, alternative voices often threaten to destabilize that situation. A representative example of this kind of play with person can be found in Alberto Moravia’s 1971 novel *Io e lui* (literally, *I and He* or *Ego and Id*), which dramatizes the battle between a man’s reason and desire by having each presented in its appropriate person.¹ Texts like this effectively embody the intersubjective constitution of “the” self and the instability of the classical ego, and one can follow out the drama of identity as the libidinal “he” keeps attempting to include the resisting narrative “I” within a shared identity (“Enough of that plural. We are not ‘we,’ we are ‘I’ and ‘you’” [8]). One can also find a more realistic though more ambiguous separation and conflation of person and voice in “Unguided Tour,” the last story in Susan Sontag’s collection, *I, etcetera* (1978), in which an apparent dialogue between an “I” and a “you,” transcribed without quotation marks, is collapsed into other voices and texts.

Clarice Lispector’s *Agua Viva* (1978) seems to be a missive from a woman to her lover, with “I” and “you” firmly locked in their conventional places. As the narrative continues, the “I” disintegrates: “I divide myself thousands of times, into as many times as the seconds that pass, fragmentary as I am” (4). While the speaking self is continuously dispersed and multiplied, the addressee expands to include the various readers of the text: “I write you completely whole and I feel a pleasure in being and my pleasure in you is abstract, like the instant” (4). These two pronouns and their elusive referents are soon further reconstructed, as the narrator announces that “if I say ‘I,’ it’s because I don’t say ‘you,’ or ‘we,’ or ‘a person.’ I’m limited to the humble act of self-personalization through reducing myself, but I am the ‘you-are’” (6). Here, an act of apparent humility—not presuming to speak for someone else—is simultaneously disclosed to be a bold claim to do just that. And this occurs through the curious act of “self-personalization through reducing myself,” a practice that superficially can seem either tautological or self-contradictory unless we recognize it as a persuasive statement of the intersubjective constitution of a fluid and multiform subjectivity.

Lispector’s drama of person, self, and other continues as the narrator explains that she is “still not ready to speak of ‘him’ or ‘her’” (28);
the introduction of the third person pronoun proper in the form of the story of João will not be presented until much later in the text (48). In the meantime, the narrator is transfixed by the pursuit of the “it,” as in “I need to feel the it of the animals again” (38), that is, a kind of primordial sensibility beneath or beyond mere individuality: “it seems I’m achieving a higher plane of humanity. Or of inhumanity—the it” (43). At this point, other pronouns fuse: “You have become an I” (43). The work ends with a pseudo-classical resolution. The narrator, who began by asking “Who am I?” claims to have found herself, and in the process realizes the disjunctive corollary that, after all, “you are you” (79). But it is no longer clear exactly what these terms refer to after their conventional meanings have been so thoroughly effaced. The narrative practice of Lispector and others tends to elude conventional theoretical models because it implodes or transcends the stable, determinate identities presupposed by those theories.

The contemporary use of multiperson narration is marked by Nabokov’s abrupt shift from “I” to “we” narration in the final chapter of *Speak, Memory*, originally published in 1951 as *Conclusive Evidence*. In narrative fiction, the systematic alternation of first and third person narration seems to begin with Elizabeth Jane Howard. Her 1959 novel, *The Sea Change*, consists of a series of alternating accounts of four individuals involved in the same web of events. The male playwright is the only one treated in the third person; his male attendant and his sickly wife employ first person memory monologues, and the naive young woman from the countryside is presented exclusively through her diary and letters home. Together, the figures present a compelling, dynamic picture of consciousnesses that either strive for an objective, public sensibility or withdraw into a safer, bounded subjectivity.

Recently, a number of novels have appeared that alternately use the first and the third person pronouns to designate the same character. A survey of some of these can establish what exactly is at stake in the deployment of multiple personal reference, both aesthetically and ideologically. The first chapter of Fay Weldon’s *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989) is narrated in the first person and is followed by three third person chapters; then the work returns to the first person for a chapter which is followed again by three more third person chapters. This pattern, with a few basic variations, continues throughout the novel. Since the first person account is that of a woman struggling to achieve a sense of self—and escape the depredations of the brutal patriarchal world that threatens first to marginalize and then to kill
her, we may be forgiven if we first approach this work as another reinscription, pace Dickens, of the public (male)/private (female) hierarchy. In fact, however, a dual epistemology is presented in the text, one deterministic, materialistic, patriarchal, and murderous; the other more spiritual, communal, female, and alert to the play of chance. The ultimate triumph of Joanna May and her achievement of self, community, and survival—the victory, that is, of the “I” over the “he”—constitutes a rewriting and reversal of the very hierarchy inscribed by Dickens. Intriguingly, many of the novel’s thematic oppositions are first expressed in terms of the second person:

‘Love’ I could understand, but what did he mean by this ‘you’? Small children (so I’m told) start out by confusing ‘me’ with ‘you.’ Addressed so frequently as ‘you,’ their clever little minds work out that this must be their name. ‘You cold,’ they say, shivering, as the wind blows through the window. ‘Not you,’ comes the response, ‘me.’ ‘Me cold,’ says the child, obligingly. Presently the little thing progresses to the gracious ‘I am cold.’ But is the ‘me,’ the ‘I,’ really the same as the initial ‘you’ with which we all begin; the sudden bright consciousness of the self as something defined by others? Perhaps we did better in our initial belief, that the shivering cold is jointly experienced, something shared. I wonder. (6)

Other contemporary works articulate comparable notions. The narrator of Margaret Drabble’s The Waterfall begins her story in the third person, but after fifty pages switches to the first person in the hopes of producing a more satisfactory narrative; in subsequent chapters, she alternates between the two perspectives. In Michel Tournier’s Friday (1967), as Arlette Bouloumié has pointed out, a past tense, third person account alternates with a first person logbook, reflecting the thematic conflict between the man Crusoe was and the person he is becoming, as one form contaminates the other and results in “a triumph of the logbook and a victory for interiority” (Bouloumié, 454). Many examples of texts that shift between first and third person perspectives can be adduced, including Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook (1962) and Marge Piercy’s He, She and It (1991). Marguerite Duras’s switching between the first and third person pronouns in L’Amant (1984) suggests a more self-reflexive and unsettling narrative topography. As Sharon Willis explains, “given the text’s strategy of veiling and unveiling, where ‘I’ veils herself as ‘she,’ but where ‘she’ just as frequently masquerades as ‘I,’ we cannot maintain a rigid and
secure separation of self and other, interior and exterior. Nor can we as readers determine a fixed vantage point, and the reassuring distance that would entail” (6).

In Roland Barthes’s book, *Roland Barthes* (1975), we also find an oscillation between “I” and “he” segments, but one that also includes leading comments concerning the use of pronouns and the nature of writing one’s life. (“All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel—or rather by several characters,” 119); “The intrusion, into the discourse of the essay, of a third person who nonetheless refers to no fictive creature, marks the necessity of remodeling the genres: let the essay show itself to be *almost* a novel: a novel without proper names” (120). By writing autobiographical fragments with techniques borrowed from contemporary fiction, Barthes not only problematizes the notion of genre, but also produces a Borgesian frame that keeps turning on itself. Andrew Brown observes that “[s]omebody in *Barthes par lui-même* is saying *il*, framing Barthes: that somebody is a fictional character . . . but the *il* is not a *créature fictive*: Barthes has thus ensured that in such passages he has written a fiction whose (unnamed and unreal) soliloquist does nothing but discuss the (real) *il*” (124).

Christa Wolf, whose *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1970) deftly mingled first and third person accounts, alternates between second and third person passages in *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), as the “I” is avoided and displaced by a “you” (“du”). As the narrator explains: “Allmählich, über Monate hin, stellte sich das Dilemma heraus: sprachlos bleiben oder in der dritten Person leben, das scheint zur Wahl zu stehen. Das eine unmöglich, unheimlich das andere” (9). (“Gradually, as months went by, the dilemma crystalized: to remain speechless, or else to live in the third person. The first is impossible, the second strange.” [3]) At this point, the “unheimlich” second person narration commences. Throughout the novel, the second person is presented as more authentic, more responsible, and perhaps less subjective than the first person, though less arduous than the third. Assia Djebar’s *A Sister to Scheherazade* shifts between first and second person perspectives; Carlos Fuentes’s *Cambio de piel* (1967) and his recent *Inez* (2000) alternate between second and third person narration.

Anterior to nearly all of the examples I have adduced is Philippe Sollers’s novel *Drame* (1965), which moves between a third person narrative of a writer and segments from that writer’s first person fiction. Barthes has praised this text effusively: not only does it abolish the seemingly inevitable temporal distance between the experiencing self and the writing “I” who chronicles those events long after they
occurred; it also refuses the distinction between first and third person positions: “Sollers alternates these two modes by a formal plan (the he and the I follow each other like the black and white squares on the chessboard) whose very rhetoric proclaims a purposely arbitrary quality” (in Sollers 91). The significance of this practice is worth some additional discussion.

Stanzel has written compellingly on the differences between first and third person narration and provided examples of authors who rewrote works from different narrative perspectives: Gottfried Keller’s Der Grüne Heinrich (1912) was transposed from the third to the first person “with some hesitation and despite many misgivings” (83–84), while Kafka changed the first chapters of Der Schloss from the first to the third person. After discussing Henry James’ quandary concerning how to present Strether’s consciousness in The Ambassadors, Stanzel concludes, “many other authors besides James have racked their brains regarding the choice between the first- and third-person form, or else they have declared themselves emphatically for or against the former” (84). By depicting the same personage in both first and third person forms, Sollers underscores the artifice inherent in all fictional narration. Instead of choosing between one perspective or the other, or employing devices like inserted diaries or letters to provide a first person text within a third person narrative that does not violate any mimetic conventions, or even by having a first person narrator finally claim the third person materials, Sollers refuses to choose and thereby shows how fragile and perhaps arbitrary is the “foundational” distinction which differentiates, in Stanzel’s words, “the identity and non-identity of the realms of existence of the fictional characters” (84). It is this conflation, which cannot normally be done in nonfictional or natural narratives, that is so unusual and so potentially disorienting, as is evident in the work of later authors who use multiple pronouns to refer to the same characters, such as Duras, Barthes, and, as we will see, Fuentes, McGahern, and Farah.

Together, these texts reveal distinctive characteristics of multiperson narrative: they present fresh possibilities for formal literary innovation and they create new methods to reinscribe thematic material at the level of narration, as the text’s central concerns are embodied in a correlative formal technique. They can help a writer reproduce more accurately the jagged fissures within a single subjectivity; they can also provide alternative tools to define more sharply or collapse more effectively conventional distinctions between different characters, competing narrative worlds, or tale and frame. Thus, they can
cunningly embody contemporary issues in philosophy, cultural studies, and gender theory relating to the reconfiguration of self, mind, and person. Perhaps most importantly, they allow the free play of multiple voices and can be seen as a practice that generates a greater degree of dialogism than more conventional techniques typically allow. This is no doubt why so many writers from previously marginalized or silenced groups have vigorously taken up multiperson narration. Gayle Greene notes it was astonishing that so many of the powerful feminist novels published in 1969 “implement the same device at the same time, using divided pronouns to express the sense of dividedness and contradiction. . . . Atwood and Drabble split their narratives into ‘I’ and ‘she’; so too does [Patricia] Laurence, but she splits the narrative up into a veritable polyphony (or cacophony) of voices” (54–55). I strongly suspect that this occurred primarily to give a more full and original expression to previously unnarratable thoughts and perspectives, even though we may suggest that there is nothing inherently female or feminist about writing in the first person, as will be discussed at greater length toward the end of this chapter.

Many of the distinctive features of multiperson novels figure even more prominently in the small group of unusually resonant fictions that juxtapose first, second, and third person narration. Juan Goytisolo’s *Paisajes después de la batalla* (1982) ingeniously manipulates reader identification and response through a deviously compelling play with narrative person. The shifting use of the narrative “you” is used to establish an identity between the reader and the dispossessed peoples living in and around Paris, as well as with a xenophobic racist and child molester. More systematic interrogations of the three major narrational pronouns appear in Carlos Fuentes’ *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), John McGahern’s *The Dark* (1969), and Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps* (1986). Fuentes’ novel explores the transformation of its complex protagonist from idealistic revolutionary to oppressive oligarch and, by extension, chronicles the concomitant degeneration of the Mexican revolution. The book is presented in a series of triadic alternations, as a first person present tense section is followed by a third person past tense segment which in turn is succeeded by a second person passage written (sometimes rather affectedly) in the future tense. All three modes of narration center on the protagonist; the third
person passages however occasionally stray and present thoughts and events unknown to him—most poignantly, the last thoughts of his son before his own untimely death in Spain. The first person sections, following modernist, post-Joycean conventions, adhere quite closely to the successive thoughts of Cruz in his final hours. The second person segments are rather more dynamic: they fragment and coalesce, range over different time periods, and include quasi- or nonnarrative material. The final two segments fuse the different narrating voices as the protagonist expires: “Yo no sé . . . no sé . . . si él soy yo . . . si tú fue el . . . si yo soy los tres . . . Tú . . . te traigo dentro de mí y vas a morir conmigo” (1974: 1407) (“I don’t know . . . don’t know . . . I am he or if . . . you were he . . . or if I am the three . . . You . . . I carry you inside me and you will die with me . . . [1964: 305]); this passage is directly followed by the final second person text which likewise ends in a fusion of perspectives that is equated with death: “‘Artemio Cruz . . . Nombre . . . ‘inútil’ . . . ‘corazón’ . . . ‘masaje’ . . . ‘inútil’ . . . ya no sabrás . . . te traje adentro y moriré contigo . . . los tres . . . moriremos . . . Tú . . . mueres . . . has muerto . . . moriré” (1974: 1408). (“Artemio Cruz . . . Name . . . Hopeless . . . heart massage . . . hopeless . . . You will not know now. I carry you inside and with you I die. The three, we . . . will die. You . . . die, have died . . . I will die” [1964: 306]). There is a final collapsing, or perhaps more precisely, evacuating, of the three narrating positions and the three tenses. A closure is attained, both for the protagonist and for the text’s drama of experimental techniques; significantly, it is one that refuses to reduce any one voice to either of the others.

McGahern’s The Dark begins with four chapters of third person narration, moves on to a chapter in the first person, and then presents several chapters in the second person, all of which depict the same individual. The ending of the book largely follows the opposite trajectory, as some pages in the first person are followed by four chapters in the third, though in the final pages the “you” reasserts itself. Though it is difficult to identify a clear thematic pattern that governs these pronominal shifts, it appears that “you” narration predominates when the protagonist is establishing his own subjectivity against the voices, names, and desires that others seek to impose on him: “If you stood and stopped the crazy fighting within yourself you’d be able to see what the noise inside the gates was” (176). In the third person segments his social identity is relatively stable, while in the first person passages he tends to be fixated on his temporarily stable self.

In Farah’s Maps, as Rhonda Cobham points out, the shifting uncertainties of nation, sexuality, and history are mirrored in the text’s “use
of three personal pronouns to narrate Askar’s story. Askar identifies these at the end of the novel as the voices of judge, witness, and audience (246), although, typically, the lines between these three perspectives are not always reliably indicated by the pronoun used” (49). Each narrative voice both obscures and reveals different information, and does so in an idiosyncratic tone. The first person narrative is rather diffident and at times almost willfully ignorant of the surrounding circumstances; the second person narration is on the other hand vague, oneiric, and suspiciously vatic. The third person narration, though not without its own archetypal ambiance, is more objective, limiting, and distant. It is precisely these differences that foreground the paramount significance of the category of person for narrative theory and analysis.

Genette, as we have noted, affirms: “The novelist’s choice, unlike the narrator’s, is not between two grammatical forms, but between two narrative postures (whose grammatical forms are simply an automatic consequence): to have the story told by one of its ‘characters,’ or to have it told by a narrator outside of the story” (244). But this is exactly what Fuentes, McGahern, and Farah refuse to do, and much of the power of these works results precisely from a rejection of the dichotomous position within which Genette would attempt to circumscribe these texts. Instead of choosing between two narrative positions, these authors elect to employ three. Another ambiguity attends the novels’ three-person narrative form. Unlike Bleak House, in which Esther Summerson’s first person account can be neatly placed within a larger, extra- and heterodiegetic whole, the three narrations of Artemio Cruz refuse to fall into any epistemological hierarchy. We cannot determine whether Cruz is telling his story using three different pronouns, or an extra- and heterodiegetic narrator is employing all three forms, or whether two or three distinct narrators are at work. The same is the case (though somewhat less spectacularly) for the other triple-voiced narrations. It is precisely this irreducible ambiguity that gives the novel its peculiar tension and urges theorists to extend our analytical categories.

This conclusion is perhaps even more evident when one considers Maurice Roche’s Compact (1966), probably the ne plus ultra of multi-person narrative. Its multiple, symmetrical, and curiously parallel story lines are narrated in a nearly exhaustive range of possible pronouns that foreground the insistence and complexity of the category of narrative person. The reader is presented with you (tu), one (on), I, he, we, and even a passive voice narration devoid of pronominal reference.
The power of the alternating narrations is often most evident in transitions from one form to another:

I could tell myself a million times that turning it was within everyone’s reach, that it would be a deed well done, my heart just wasn’t in it.

“— . . . humble doctor is perfect hypnotist; if necessary, he uses nitrous oxide . . . benign operation . . .” IT WAS A MATTER OF SPARING HER PAIN.

You’ll feel nothing. Everything will happen without your knowing it. You could just as well not be there, but far away, outside of everything. (58)

The meticulous, contrapuntal braiding of distinct voices (and the independent stories they narrate) in this text clearly indicates person to be an indispensable category of narrative analysis. The fact that, as many critics have observed, some of the different narrative voices seem to merge together testifies to the need for particular suppleness within such an analytical perspective.  

Looking back over the range of examples set forth above, we may discern two major tendencies: a centrifugal one, which produces ever more possibilities of narration, and juxtaposes storytelling from first person, third person, and still other perspectives, as additional viewpoints and positionalities are included in the act of narration. These may be presented by the inclusion of more voices and more kinds of voice, or they may take the form of more perspectives that narrate the world of a single figure, as we see quite prominently in Fuentes’ Artemio Cruz. The other tendency is a centripetal one, in which genuinely or apparently distinct voices are either contained within a single mind or collapsed into another voice. The first of these is represented by the alternating “he” and “you” sections of Beckett’s Company that turn out to be merely different registers of the same voice; the second by the multiplicity of different acts of narration impossibly run together in The Unnamable. These examples in turn suggest a final
possibility—the suggestion of multiple voices that nevertheless cannot be identified with precision but which remain ambiguous, shuttling between one mind and many, as demonstrated so compellingly by Nathalie Sarraute’s texts. In every case we see a move away from the simple, unproblematic categories of first and third person narration. The collective richness of these works and their challenging effects on readers demonstrate convincingly the importance of person as a category of narrative theory and analysis even as they show that the concept of person must be substantially expanded to include second person, multiperson, and “impossible” narration.

In the history of narrative theory we can find an intriguing precedent for the position I am advocating. In 1927, E. M. Forster attacked the univocal categories propounded by Percy Lubbock and praised instead Bleak House and Gide’s Les Faux monnayeurs, works in which omniscient narration, limited omniscience, and first person forms alternate. Forster concluded:

A novelist can shift his viewpoint if it comes off, and it came off with Dickens and Tolstoy. Indeed this power to expand and contract perception (of which the shifting viewpoint is a symptom), this right to intermittent knowledge:—I find it one of the great advantages of the novel-form, and it has a parallel in our perception of life. We are stupider at some times than others; we can enter into people’s minds occasionally but not always. (81)

It is unfortunate that this thesis of Forster’s has been critically overlooked for so long by Lubbock’s varied followers and successors in narratology.

The second point Forster makes in this passage—the relation between the strategies of narration and lived social experience—has drawn a great deal more attention, particularly in the numerous quests to not merely identify general ideological tendencies but equate one form of narration with a specific political agenda. For almost a century theorists have debated the ideological valence of the choice of person in narration. Glancing back over some of these controversies, one is struck by the vehemence of the argumentation, the abrupt shifts in position over what is “revolutionary” and what “reactionary” from decade to decade, and the general ephemerality of moments of consensus. We may begin by noting Georg Lukacs’ influential strictures against modernist subjectivism that provided the most powerful theoretical justification for decades of socialist realism. In the 1940s, the
Sartre-Mauriac dispute recast the debate as Sartre denounced third person omniscient narration as inherently inauthentic. Roland Barthes is perhaps the most persuasive of recent ideological apologists for first person narration. In Writing Degree Zero, he observed that third person narration “attracts the most conformist and the least dissatisfied” (35); two decades later, as noted in my introductory chapter, Barthes would go on to state that “‘he’ is wicked: the nastiest word in the language: pronoun of the non-person, it annuls and mortifies its referent; . . . Saying ‘he’ about someone, I always envision a kind of murder by language . . .” (169). Though more sophisticated and paradoxical than his earlier simple denunciation of third person narration, Barthes’ aversion to the third person is clear, and echoes comparable statements by Robbe-Grillet and others. Recently, some new historicists have denounced third person narration as an analogue of the panopticon and related methods of surveillance and control.

While we may sympathize with the general position behind these remarks—that third person omniscient narration tends to reify and “naturalize” existing social relations—the fact remains that, among writers who alternate from book to book between first and third person narratives (Dickens, Thackeray, Conrad, Calvino, Wittig), we don’t usually find the first person narratives more emancipatory than the others; sometimes, indeed, we don’t immediately remember whether a given text is narrated in one person or the other. Furthermore, many works of certain avowed fascists and fascist sympathizers (Hamsun, Céline, Cela) employ a particularly intense kind of first person narration. These examples would seem to definitively refute any claims for the liberatory nature of first person narration. In the last chapter we saw how radically opposed positions have similarly employed “we” narration; elsewhere I have outlined the radically different ideological valences that have been associated with second person narration (“Linearity” 689–90). It is clear that no form has any inherent essence or tendency—or at least none that a competent practitioner cannot readily circumvent. Ideological stances are frequently associated with practices of narration, but to affirm that there is a simple progressive or conservative “essence” to any particular technique is certainly erroneous.

Feminist attempts to move beyond sexist cultural binaries have not produced a consistent position concerning narration. Joanne S. Frye, in a chapter on “the subversive I,” articulates what was then a common position. She writes that for female writers, to “speak directly in a personal voice is to deny the exclusive right of male author-ity implicit
in a public voice and to escape the expression of dominant ideologies upon which an omniscient narrator depends” (51). She goes on to explain:

If a female pronoun recurs throughout a text it repeatedly reminds us of cultural expectations for what it means to be female; it reminds us, inevitably, of the [patriarchy’s] femininity text. The “I,” by contrast, reminds us only of a subjective narrating presence, a nameless agent; it asks us to remember only its subjective agency. The “she” can easily lull us into conventional expectations; the “I” keeps us conscious of possibility and change. (65)

This value-laden binary opposition, at once suggestive and familiar, necessarily invites scrutiny of the terms it rests upon. First of all it tends to replicate rather than contest what Susan S. Lanser, in her discussion of Bleak House cited earlier, identified as “the ideology of separate spheres” (Fictions 240), a division many feminists might well be reluctant to see codified so decisively. In addition, many might question the subversive or liberating value posited in the first person pronoun. Virginia Woolf, it will be remembered, quickly became bored by a representative male writer’s insistent use of the first person: “After reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a dark, straight bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’ One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter ‘T’. One began to be tired of ‘I’” (103). Far from erasing or eluding gender markers, the “I” of the male writer is utterly self-absorbed and altogether too self-sufficient. Adelaide Morris shows how women writers gradually moved away from a suspicion of the many negative implications of this pronoun documented by Woolf and others earlier in the twentieth century before embracing it—often in a highly qualified manner—in the sixties (11–17). Trinh T. Minh-ha offers a different perspective, suggesting that the pronoun “I,” far from being monolithic, is in fact multivalent: it includes not only “I (the all-knowing subject)” but “I/i (the plural, non-unitary subject)” and “i (the personal race- and gender-specific subject)” (9–11). Once again, we may look to the work of Elizabeth Jane Howard to help us verify or dismiss some of these claims. In her recent novel, Falling (1999), she reveals how the now conventionally gendered dyad of “I” and “he” can be effortlessly inverted. This text alternates between the first person writing of a
predatory male and the third person account that is focalized solely through the unsuspecting female protagonist.  

The feminist quest for a discursive site beyond the first person is perhaps most emphatically articulated by Monique Wittig in the author’s note that prefaces Le corps lesbien (1975). She states that the “je,” when written by a woman, is always alienating since that “I” must write in a language that denies and negates female experience. Every such usage is always already reinscribed within a larger masculine matrix (10). All of the limitations Frye attributes to the use of “she” are present for Wittig in the writing of “je.” Consequently, Wittig says she is physically incapable of writing “je”; instead, her novel is narrated by a “j/e,” an ideologically marked pronoun that desires “to do violence by writing to the language which I [j/e] can enter only by force” (10). Similarly, Frye’s position seems to be controverted by Maxine Hong Kingston’s observation: “There is a Chinese word for the female I—which is ‘slave.’” Kingston affirms that such a usage attempts to break “the women with their own tongues” (47).

In her essay “The Three Genres,” Luce Irigaray makes an important observation in her analysis of male and female pronominal usage, the first part of which might serve as a gloss on Woolf’s remarks: “With men, the I is asserted in different ways; it is significantly more important than the you and the world. With women, the I often makes way for the you, the world, for the objectivity of words and things” (146). Women’s discourse, even in the first person, often remains other-directed, seeking interaction and validation. Men, on the other hand, “live within the closed universe of the first-person pronoun; their messages are often self-affirmations which leave little space for co-creation with an other sex,” writes Margaret Whitford, summarizing Irigaray’s position (Irigaray, 78). This postulate can help explain why a number of feminist writers have moved beyond the “I” to the more fluid, interactive, and destabilizing technique of “we” narration, as noted in the last chapter, and second person narration as found in works like those of Mary McCarthy, Edna O’Brien, Lorrie Moore, and Jamaica Kincaid, as well as other texts like Pam Houston’s “How to Talk to a Hunter” and Sunetra Gupta’s The Glassblower’s Breath. It is also suggests specific ideological reasons for other feminists’ deployments of still other pronouns—most strikingly, on and elles in Wittig’s L’Opoponax (1964) and Les Guerilleres (1969)—and for the alternation and/or conflation of the first, second, and third person pronouns in previously mentioned works by Lispector, Sontag, Wolf, Weldon, and Duras. One may, in conclusion, applaud the efforts of feminist
writers (and, by extension, those of colonized subjects and sexual and ethnic minorities) to contest undeniable social prejudices inherent in existing linguistic practice, even as one acknowledges that no mode of narration has any inherent ideological valence.\footnote{9}

There is one final, distinctively postmodern category of multiple narration to identify, and that is the category of “impossible narration”: metaleptic texts that contain discourse that cannot possibly be spoken or written by their purported narrators and may involve the kind of ontological framebreaking typical of postmodern works. A paradigmatic example of this kind of text is Christine Brooke-Rose’s \textit{Thru} (1975), which is succinctly described by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in the following terms: “The novel repeatedly reverses the hierarchy [of narrative levels], transforming a narrated object into a narrating agent and vice versa. The very distinction between outside and inside, container and contained, narrating subject and narrated object, higher and lower level collapses, resulting in a paradox which the text itself puts in a nutshell: ‘Whoever you invented invented you too.’” (94).

This practice, which can only occur in works of fiction, may extend as far back as Diderot’s \textit{Jacques le fataliste} and is not uncommon in recent French fiction, notably Beckett’s \textit{The Unnamable} and the later novels of Robbe-Grillet. \textit{The Unnamable}, as we will see, simultaneously enacts several of the different extreme possibilities of narration. The narrative voice often refers to other characters and voices which it then discloses to be fictions invented by itself, as apparently independent persons are collapsed into a single narrative voice. On the other hand, the same narrator goes on to claim to have invented the frustrated narrators of other novels written by Beckett; the narrator of \textit{The Unnamable} here seems to be impersonating its author. This narrative strategy does not merely problematize conventional theoretical distinctions, but undermines the very terms upon which such distinctions rest.

Once again, we see how traditional narrative theory, implicitly based on the more stable nonfictional types of biography (third person) and autobiography (first person), have a difficult time comprehending forms that, like second person and impossible narration, do not or cannot occur in nonfictional discourse. Up to now, narrative theory has tended to deny, ignore, or dismiss as inconsequential curiosities the
very kinds of narration that are distinctively fictional. The fundamental question is, once again, Which model of narrative is more effective for theorizing the practice of fiction: one grounded in linguistics and imitations of nonfictional narratives, or one that begins with the heterogeneity, polymorphism, and flagrant fictionality typical of the novel from Petronius and Lucian to Beckett and Wittig?

If, as I have argued, the latter is the case, it is necessary to remap strategies of narration in a more expansive and dialectical manner. Recalling Stanzel’s “narrative circle,” which uses a subtly gradated illustration of narrative person, we can now envisage an alternative model that is more comprehensive and flexible. I would like to argue for a four-part division of such a circle as shown in figure 1. The quadrant on the left would cover first person narration; its opposite, on the right, would include third person forms. At the bottom, connecting the two, free indirect discourse can be situated; at the top, the long neglected category of second person narration can take its rightful

Figure 1. Strategies of Narration.
place. Second person novels that incline toward other forms of presentation may be situated accordingly: Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* would be near the first person boundary, while Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* should reside near the space of the third person.

We may further subdivide this circle to include a number of recent innovative deployments of person. Nonmimetic “we” narratives stretch synthetically from the first to the third person. “One” narration (*on, man*), which can approximate much of the same conceptual space as “you” forms, rests uncomfortably between second and third person forms, adjacent to the “hypothetical” second person mode, in which a narratee/protagonist is given instructions that form a narrative. Moving on to the third person, we observe how this category can be extended to include works that refer largely to a collective “they” (Perec’s *Les Choses*, 1965), an “it,” and “na,” the gender-neutral pronoun invented by June Arnold for her novel, *The cook and the carpenter* (1973). It is in the bottom quadrant that we may most plausibly situate the sustained use of the passive voice that denies person and minimizes agency, as deployed in Kathy Acker’s story “Humility,” also present in Conrad’s *Narcissus* and Roche’s *Compact*. This agentless form will edge up against the boundary of free indirect discourse; in the same quadrant we may add the “monologized thought” employed by Woolf in *The Waves* to the standard category of free indirect discourse.

To conclude our mapping of narrational possibilities, it will be helpful to draw another circle around the first circle to represent the flow of multiperson narratives that travel across or beyond the ordinary divisions and juxtapose divergent points of view. Lastly, I would like to propose that a large black dot occupy the center of the figure, to stand for impossible and impossibly conflated acts of narration. Only with such a Borgesian schema can one embrace the kinds of functions produced by authors like, well, Borges.