In this chapter I will explore three of the most significant and extreme narrating agents which exist at the very boundaries of narration: 1) the figure of the interlocutor, or disembodied questioning voice, as it appears in *Ulysses* and in recent fiction, 2) denarration, in which a narrator negates or erases aspects of the world created by the narration, and 3) what I call the “permeable narrator,” a speaker who says “I” but whose narration transgresses the natural limits of the contents and perceptions of a single consciousness. I will then go on to identify a number of distinctively postmodern types of unreliable narrator.

I. The Interlocutor

The interlocutor is a disembodied voice that poses questions which the narrative goes on to answer. It should be differentiated from superficially similar textual phenomena in order to specify what this figure (or function) is not. It is, after all, rather common to encounter a voice within the diegesis of a fictional text that poses questions. Most of the time, it is relatively easy to identify the speaker and to describe the speech situation it enacts; it usually takes one of three forms. Take the lines, “You were a student weren’t you? Of what in the other devil’s name? Paysayenn. P.C.N., you know: *physiques, chimiques, et naturelles.*
Aha.” (U 3.175–77). In this bit of free indirect discourse from the Proteus episode of Ulysses, Stephen Dedalus is talking to himself, carrying on in his own mind a remembered or imagined dialogue with another.

For a second example, we may go to the narrator of Dickens’ Bleak House, who asks the following partially rhetorical question to his narratee at the beginning of the sixteenth chapter: “What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw . . . ?” We readily recognize this as a common feature of eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction, as the narrator articulates likely or suitable questions that either the narrative or authorial audience might have. Indeed, Sterne frequently parodied such colloquies. Up to this point, there is no problem at all in identifying and situating the various questioners or questioning voices in these texts. Issues of person, narration, and audience are clear; there is no need to look beyond Stanzel, Genette, Chatman, or Prince.

But even fairly standard examples can easily become deviant. Near the beginning of Notes from the Underground, for example, we meet with the following lines: “Advantage! What is advantage? Can you possibly give an exact definition of advantage? . . . What do you think? Are there cases where it is so? You are laughing?” (279). Dostoevsky’s narrator is envisioning responses with such precision that they may point to an origin in the narrator’s obsessions rather than any mimesis of others’ probable speech. In The Good Soldier, Ford Madox Ford’s narrator Dowell playfully personifies his narratee (who here may be indiscernible from Ford’s authorial audience): “Is all this a digression or isn’t it digression? Again I don’t know. You, the listener, sit opposite me. But you are so silent. You don’t tell me anything” (19). Here, the narratee is playfully chided for the silence that this particular narrative contract enjoins him to maintain. We will see, however, that the category confusion implicit in Dowell’s remarks nicely presages some of the conflations and ambiguous relations between teller and hearer that would soon appear in the history of narrative.

A number of recent works of fiction employ an unidentified, unmarked narrative voice that asks questions that the narrative proper then responds to; for much or all of the text it is not clear what the status of these voices are; whether they emanate from a single source or whether they are irreducibly dual. The ease with which a new questioning voice can materialize is evident in Diderot’s short text entitled, “This is not a Story” (ca. 1772). The work begins with the narrator
noting that, since in an oral storytelling situation there is invariably a listener who interrupts the tale to ask questions, he has introduced an inquisitive character “whose role is more or less that of the reader” (45). This character narratee would seem to have made good use of his new body, since a few pages into the text he admits to having had an affair with the woman the narrator is infatuated with. Thus, a textual function can readily become a character proper; the opposite movement is also possible, as we will see in the case of Beckett’s projected pseudo-characters.

The source of most modern experiments is the “Ithaca” episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and it is with this text that we may most appropriately begin our analysis. The chapter consists of some 2300 lines of questions and answers. Joyce identifies the episode’s technique as “catechism, impersonal,” a designation that makes specifying the exact nature of this elusive text still more daunting. At one level, it suggests earlier critiques of compulsory catechistic instruction made by Blake and Byron; at another level, it is itself a very strange kind of anti-catechism, couched in exaggerated scientistic language and containing much more narrative and description than standard doctrine or useful knowledge.

Furthermore, the catechism itself is a somewhat unusual discursive practice; as Robert Hampson points out, it “has the form of a dialogue, [though] it is monologic: the questions and answers constitute a repertoire which the respondent is required to learn. The respondent does not respond personally to the question but rather internalises the answer which the questioner has already supplied” (230). The catechism is thus a text with a single implied author and single voice or perspective to be performed by more than one individual. Joyce of course immediately strays from this orthodox arrangement, and goes on to test the limits of the question and answer format. In doing so, however, he retains and intensifies the catechism’s inversion of the function of dialogue and problematizes further the status of the speaking subject. We may legitimately wonder just who the speaker is (or who the speakers are) of the following exchange that begins the episode:

What parallel courses did Bloom and Stephen follow returning?
Starting united both at normal walking pace from Beresford place they followed in the order named Lower and Middle Gardiner streets and Mountjoy Square, west: then, at reduced pace, each bearing left, Gardiner’s place by an inadvertence as far as the farther corner of
Temple street: then, at reduced pace with interruptions of halt, bearing right, Temple street, north, as far as Hardwicke place. . . . (U 17.1–7)

This passage, which is fairly representative of most in the rest of the chapter, is rife with ambiguities concerning its nature, status, and speech situation. Is this a catechism proper or a series of genuine questions and answers? Are we to understand this text as written or spoken? Is there one speaker or two? That is, is the questioner an independent character, a stylistic feature that serves as a pretext for the dissemination of the material that follows the question, or could it be a personification of the narratee? David Hayman has rather famously (at least in Joycean circles) posited the figure of what he calls “the arranger” to designate the sensibility responsible for the many different voices and effects beyond those of Ulysses’s primary narrator, who “practically disappears” after “Sirens” (91). Is this, then, the arranger?

One might also ask other questions, such as what is the possible speech situation of such pointlessly precise information in the episode? Or perhaps the entire chapter is best read as a kind of allegory of mis- or noncommunication. In the passages that follow the one I have cited, we do not get anything resembling definitive answers to these questions; instead, the multiple ambiguities increase. Fritz Senn argues that the question and answer format is itself merely a kind of stylistic pretext: “‘Ithaca’ aspires toward successive enumeration, silent as in writing, in spite of the presence of a questioning and answering voice. Such voices are disembodied conveniences, with no ostensible attribution. The dual form is a communicative stratagem” (38).²

The typologically resistant nature of Joyce’s text can be brought into relief by comparing it with Pinget’s novel, The Inquisitory, which superficially seems quite similar in the use of this technique. Here too an interrogative is asked in a single line of type, “Yes or no answer,” without any quotation markers or punctuation, and it is responded to in equally unmarked lines. The response, however, rapidly provides substantial information about the man being questioned. We quickly learn that he is a servant in a large house, that he had lived and worked there for several years, that he is speaking directly to the interlocutor, and so forth. None of this information is available to the reader of Ulysses.

A key feature of these figures, both in “Ithaca” and in many subsequent texts that employ an interlocutor, is the protean nature of both questioner and respondent. In Ulysses, the primary function of the interlocutor seems to alternate between producing repetitions of
prearranged answers and providing queries that seek out new information, as in the following: “Did either openly allude to their racial difference? / Neither” (17.525–26), or when the interlocutor requests amplification of an earlier statement (“Such as?” 17.587; “What?” 17.618; “Then?” 17.2240). At other points a genuine though brief dialogue appears to be in the process of emerging, as the respondent provides the information desired by the interlocutor when a more strict answer would prove misleading (“Was this affirmation apprehended by Bloom?/ Not verbally. Substantively” (17.1017–18). These transformations conclude with the interlocutor’s call for clarification, “Womb? Weary?” (17.2319) and the respondent’s stumbling attempts to answer the text’s final three questions, With? When? and Where?4 The second of these take him beyond the edge of identity, logic, and meaning: “Going to dark bed there was a square round Sinbad the Sailor roc’s auk’s egg in the night of the bed of all the auks of the rocs of Darkinbad the Brightdayler” (17.2328–30). The last question, “Where?” leads the respondent beyond speech (and, for that matter, the conventions of typography) as the response is indicated merely by a large dot: •.

Such transformations in the nature and status of the interlocutor in subsequent fiction are common, indeed fairly standard. Pinget’s respondent, referred to above, also undergoes a substantial metamorphosis, and the text itself turns into a parable of the act of writing fiction: “I’m not here any more we could invent other people no matter who yes make them say anything we liked it would be just like what happened to the real ones all of them in our heads they’re dead, your questions give me the impression we’re forcing them to speak but mistakes are not important they’d talk just the same whether it’s true or false” (247–48). At the end of Beckett’s Molloy, a series of questions of a theological nature are set forth in the style of a catechism, though no answers emerge. In many of his later works, the main epistemological drama of the text is often the determination of the identity of the speaker and hearer of an endless stream of questions or demands. This is especially true of The Unnamable, as we will see in the third section of this chapter. One quotation will suffice us here: “But who is he, if my guess is right, who is waiting for that, from me? And who these others whose designs are so different? And into whose hands I play when I ask myself such questions? But do I, do I? In the jar did I ask myself questions?” (331). Beckett here employs a cascade of questions but entirely obscures their discursive status by making it unclear how serious they are, which person is being spoken of, and even whether
they have an addressee other than the speaker himself. He later self-
consciously refers to the catechistic method in the text but, significant-
ly, renders its status paradoxical: "They have no pedagogic purpose
in view, that's definite. There is no question of imparting to him any
instruction whatsoever, for the moment. This catechist's tongue, hon-
eyed and perfidious, is the only one they know" (356). The identity of
the "they" is irreducibly ambiguous.

More extreme are the unmotivated questions that irrupt into the
body of the text in Robbe-Grillet's novels La Maison de rendez-vous
and Project for a Revolution in New York. Some of these include hos-
tile objections to the narrative as a whole: "Don't you have a tendency
to insist too much, as I have already indicated, on the erotic aspects
of the scenes you report?" (Project 159). Bruce Morrisette describes
a set of these in Project in the following terms: "At this point in the
text occurs a new type of interrogatory sequence, in which the narra-
tor replies to objections made by someone who seems to combine the
(analogous?) qualities of chief of an organization and literary critic.
The narrator defends the eroticism of his descriptions, his exaggera-
tions, the unidiomatic distortions of some New York place names, and
even the use of the term 'cut' to punctuate his text (despite the fact
that 'cut' will so appear only later)" (Novels 277). These introjections
are rather extreme cases of the kinds of disruptions the interlocutor
frequently or even typically occasions. As such, they strike me as being
situated at varying distances between the roles of the narrator and the
narratee, though difficult to reduce to either.

Joyce Carol Oates uses an interlocutor that slides between the
hetero- and homodiegetic levels in her story, "What Is the Connection
Between Men and Women?" (1970). A more extreme deployment of
the interlocutor appears in Jeanette Winterson's short text, "The Poet-
ics of Sex." Here, six rude rhetorical questions presented in a large
font appear. They are answered indirectly and obliquely by a creative
respondent who produces a highly metaphorical love narrative as a
partial (or pretended) response. The interlocutor does not appear able
to understand or even hear these answers, and the respondent does not
seem to expect them to be heard. It is a parody of a dialogue, a total
transformation of the question and answer scenario. Instead of eliciting
information, the questions serve to generate the narrative. In this, it
is typical of the way the postmodern interlocutor and respondent defy
conventional norms, particularly (but not exclusively) the primordial
one between narrator and (dramatized) narratee.

Winterson's story, however, differs from most of the other deploy-
ments in that the two voices are entirely self-consistent. A glance back at “Ithaca” readily discloses how radically different each voice grows. The respondent is particularly multiform as his speech includes, as we have seen, pointlessly pedestrian information, obsessively scientific descriptions, some dubious lyricism—“The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit” (1039)—and a repetitive eroticism that merges with the scientific discourse and finally produces a curious lyricism: “He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each melonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow furrow, with obscure prolonged provocative mellonsmellonous osculation” (2241–43).

Does a single subject or voice produce this heterogenous discourse? Karen Lawrence notes that although she uses “the term ‘narrator’ for ease of reference,” she prefers “the concept of consciousness or mind of the text, since Joyce does everything possible in ‘Ithaca’ to destroy our sense of a narrating, human voice” (183–84). This strikes me as an eminently sound critical move; we have posthumanist narration without a single, self-consistent, identifiable narrator. Concerning *Ulysses* as a whole, Timothy Martin has observed that “the end of the novel is so different from the beginning that it might almost have been written by a different writer” (207); this refusal to remain confined within the boundaries of a single human voice also informs the discourse of several of the later chapters of the work, including “Ithaca.” Just as two or more individuals may collaborate and form a single implied author, here a single historical author is constructing radically incommensurate voices that may not be reduced to a single postulated human psyche.

I wish to suggest that the interlocutor, as depicted above, is an unstable and inherently protean figure (or kind of discourse) that regularly oscillates from one function or status to another as it evokes familiar categories like narrator and narratee in order to blur their edges or transgress them altogether. As such it would seem to be a new category that deserves inclusion in a poetics that attempts to circumscribe the narrative experiments of *Ulysses* and postmodern fiction. In this, it resembles the phenomenon of second person narration, which often resembles yet eludes the adjacent forms of first and third person narration.

I will go on to suggest that even if one proposes, as many might first be inclined to do, that in most of the cases adduced so far we really only need a single, albeit highly flexible narrator, and that the notion of a personified narratee is, following the trajectory of certain texts of Beckett, merely the illusory projection of a single voice in a
vain attempt to successfully create or ventriloquize another, still we will have to look hard at the curious nature of the single prolific narrator (or should we say supernarrator?) we have now evoked. In virtually all of these cases (some of them quite dramatically), the narrative discourse thus predicated of the single narrational source far exceeds the standard range or limits of any single human sensibility. Such a move would “solve” the question of the interlocutor only to replace it with the conundrum of a shapeless, contradictory, indeed monstrous supernarrator. In fact, any possible collocation of any heterogenous discourses could always be projected as the work of a single narrator bent on producing irreducible heterogeneity. This does not strike me as a satisfactory solution. Put another way, the author may create a narrator that is psychologically and historically consistent, or she may produce discourse that cannot be plausibly located within a single human speaker; it does not seem useful or accurate to refer to each discourse simply as the work of a narrator, since the latter case violates all the parameters that govern the former. That is, the concept of a narrator implies a certain minimal discursive consistency that many late modern and postmodern authors reject; we should have a place for shifting, depersonalized, multivoiced texts that transcend or traduce the sensibility of a single narrator, a composite figure we may refer to as the “incommensurate narrator.”

Here we are running up once more against the implicit mimetic presuppositions of conventional notions of the narrator. As we noted at the beginning of this book, Wolfgang Kayser stated this quite explicitly: once we lose sight of the notion that the narrator is someone who tells a story, the novel is dead (Entstehung, 34). For many postmodern authors, however, the death of the traditional narrator is the essential precondition for the creation of new forms with other, disparate, decentered voices. We should not insist on a humanistic frame to encompass overt narration, even if it was produced by a single human being. Structuralist narratology has performed a great service by revealing that characters can be conceived both as human-like entities and as textual functions. The same insight should be readily applied to narrators: on the one hand, they may well resemble actual people who tell stories; on the other hand, there may be no “they” there—with postmodern fiction, we often have mere discourse that unconvincingly occupies the space of a standard narrator. It is this rejection of the personified narrator that the figure of the interlocutor finally reveals.
II. Denarration

We may now move on to an intriguing and paradoxical strategy of narration that I will call “denarration.” I am referring to a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given. The simplest example of this might be something like, “Yesterday it was raining. Yesterday it was not raining.” The effect of this unusual strategy is variable: it can play a relatively minor role in the overall text, or it can fundamentally alter the nature and reception of the story. The effect it produces is nearly always arresting, and to many readers it can be quite disconcerting. In what follows, I will present several instances of this practice, analyze its functions within a text, and go on to speculate on its import for narrative theory.

For a sustained and relentless deployment of denarration, we may look to Samuel Beckett, a master of the art of verbal negation. Early on in *Molloy*, the narrator states that, while he was sitting on a rock, he saw characters A and C walking slowly towards each other. This transpired on a road remarkably bare, “I mean without hedges or ditches”; the narrator is sure this took place in the country, since “cows were chewing in enormous fields” (8). He admits that he is perhaps “inventing a little, perhaps embellishing”; nevertheless, we are assured that “on the whole that’s the way it was” (8). The addition of this qualification serves to enhance one’s sense of the narrator’s reliability. This simple narration of an ordinary event is, however, quickly called into question by another statement a little further into the text: “And I am perhaps confusing several different occasions, and different times, deep down. . . . And perhaps it was A at one day at one place, then C another at another, then a third the rock and I, and so on for the other components, the cows, the sky, the sea, the mountains” (17). Now, the causal and temporal relations are rendered dubious; all that remains are the elements themselves, devoid of their relation to one another. They can, it would seem, be recombined in any number of different constellations. Of course, if the causal and temporal relations are so easily negated, the solidity of the other figures becomes considerably less firm. Is it certain that there was, in fact, a cow, and not instead a sheep, a bird, or a boy? The subsequent, more extended acts of denarration in *Molloy*, culminating in Moran’s denial of the opening lines of his narrative, are implicit in this first textual undoing, as will be clear when I return to discuss this example at greater length below.
I term these negations “denarrated” descriptions and events, modeling my usage on Gerald Prince’s concept of the “disnarrated,” his term for possible events that, though referred to, remain unactualized in a text. Thus, in Vanity Fair, we find the following fateful nonevent: “If Rawdon Crawley had been then and there present, instead of being at the club nervously drinking claret, the pair might have gone down on their knees before the old spinster, avowed all, and have been forgiven in a twinkling. But that good chance was denied to the young couple” (146). Denarration, by contrast, would have affirmed Rawdon’s presence in the company of Miss Crawley, and then denied this event.

We may identify a number of instances of this stratagem and go on to outline a kind of continuum of narrative negation; this will in turn enable us to specify the different functions it can have in the narrative world and the interpretation of that world. Near the end of Nabokov’s Lolita Humbert writes, “Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it” (282). In To the Lighthouse, the irritable Charles Tansley is asked whether or not he is a good sailor. We are then informed that “Mr Tansley raised a hammer: swung it high in the air; but realizing that he could not smite that butterfly with such an instrument as this, said only that he had never been sick in his life” (91), as Woolf transforms a seemingly literal statement into a harmlessly metaphorical one. A comparable though rather more extended specimen can be found in Arnold Bennett’s The Old Wives’ Tale, where the narrator records the following speech: “‘Yes,’ said she. ‘You can talk about your sister, and you can call him [by his first name], and you can mince up your words. But have you got a tea-service like this? . . . Did not my dress cost more than you spend on your clothes in a year? Has a man ever looked at you? . . .’” (71). This passage is immediately followed by the disclaimer, “She did not say this aloud.” There is nothing particularly revolutionary about these statements, but they do trespass slightly beyond the basic conventions of realism and point reflexively to the ways in which authors may modify, qualify, or negate material that had been presented as “given.” Nevertheless, these will normally be processed by most readers as temporary, minor gaps that are resolved in the text almost as quickly as they are noticed.

For a more sustained and realistically motivated example, we may turn to Margaret Drabble’s The Waterfall (1969). Well into the work we are informed by the narrator: “I told a really shocking lie at the beginning of this narrative, when I said that I told James I wasn’t writing any more. . . . I lied, too, about the circumstances of Malcolm’s
departure. In fact I have already told two lies about this event, and who can tell if I will now risk a true account?” (130). This deceptively polymorphous novel starts off, as has been noted, narrated in the third person but, after 50 pages, the narrator switches to the first person in the name of a more accurate telling. A comparable situation occurs at the end of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) as the elaborate, emotionally satisfying resolution to the novel is revealed in the final paragraphs to have been a sustained fabrication, one that is more in line with poetic justice than the facts of the case. Most readers will probably grant these narrators the benefit of the doubt, and may even find a token of authenticity in the corrected representation of the narrator’s erroneous path; the storyworld will remain stable as the transformation is limited to the narrator’s act of storytelling. The contradictions can be explained epistemologically, as a function of the character of the two narrators, rather than as a postmodern overturning of the fictional world. At the same time, one is aware that with a few additional or more extreme interventions, the narrative world may start to fissure; instead of observing a fluctuating narrator alter descriptions of a stable world, we will see the world being created and re-created anew.

A playful, rather Shandyean admission occurs at the end of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980), as the narrator, Saleem Sinai, confesses: “I lied about Shiva’s death. My first out and out lie—although my presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and thirty-five-day midnight was perhaps excessively romantic, and certainly contradicted by the available meteorological data” (529). The first statement is a standard kind of denarration. The second sentence implies that Saleem’s narration oscillates between mimetic and nonmimetic modes and contains a different kind of denarration. The endless night of the Emergency was not the literal darkness presented in the narrative but is instead merely a metaphorical figure to emblemize the excesses of that dark period. The literal, unrealistic meaning is negated by a statement affirming the figurative presentation of a historical event. The boundaries between these poles are kept fluid, and narrative negation may be either a remaking of the narrative world or an invitation to read events metaphorically rather than literally. At this point we are still near the middle of the continuum though leaning decidedly toward the ontological slippages that, as Brian McHale has pointed out, characterize postmodernism; it is also here that the more extreme, destabilizing types of denarration begin to be found.

It will now be useful to return and further examine the dynamics of narrative negation in *Molloy*. After a vivid description of the moon
that suggests temporal anomalies in the scene, Molloy goes on to write, “I say that now, but after all what do I know now about then, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, fouly named” (41). This claim is quite ironic, since if Molloy were genuinely unsure of what he remembered, he would have written his account in a more tenuous manner the first time. On the other hand, the comment does draw attention to the gaps, distortions, and fabrications inherent in any verbal reconstruction of the past. Other asides cast further doubt on the accuracy of the story being told: “She had a somewhat hairy face, or am I imagining it, in the interests of the narrative” (75). It is amusing to speculate on the kind of narrative such a description would enhance, even if we know in advance that it would doubtless be a rather Beckettian one. As the novel continues, more events are described, and more are called into question. Some qualifications refer to specific event descriptions: “But perhaps I am merging two times in one, and two women” (101), repeating the opening disavowal of the circumstances surrounding A and C. Other disclaimers more generally subvert the entire narrative: “and when I say I said, etc., all I mean is that I knew confusedly things were so, without knowing exactly what they were about” (118). In the end, all we can be sure of is that “what really happened was quite different” from anything we are told (119). This is true of the Moran narrative as well; despite its seemingly obsessive precision, it concludes with another act of denarration: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The train is beating on the windows. It was not raining. It was not midnight” (241).

Numerous other acts of denarration followed the publication of Molloy (1951). Some of the most explicit and radical have been discussed by Brian McHale in his analysis of what he terms “self-erasure” in postmodern fiction (99–106). If one includes comparable cases of third person narratives that contain several contradictory events that are unresolved into any ontological hierarchy, the group becomes still larger. One can readily point to Robbe-Grillet’s Jealousy, Robert Pinget’s Passacaille, Raymond Federman’s Double or Nothing, and Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter.” Other examples can be found with closer resonances to Beckett’s texts, such as Robbe-Grillet’s In the Labyrinth (1959), the beginning of which, as Richard Begam has pointed out (217n43), reads as a set of variations on the final sentence of Molloy: “I am alone here, under cover. Outside it is raining, outside you walk through the rain with your head down, shielding your eyes with one hand while you stare ahead nevertheless, a few yards ahead, at a
few yards of wet asphalt; outside it is cold, the wind blows between the bare black branches. . . . Outside the sun is shining, there is no tree, no bush to cast a shadow, and you walk under the sun shielding your eyes with one hand while you stare ahead, . . . at a few yards of dusty asphalt” (141). At this point, I suspect we may be approaching the limits of the denarrated; no further or more thoroughgoing negation suggests itself as likely to be achieved.7

As noted above, these acts of denarration vary considerably in their overall effect on the stability of the represented world as well as on the reader’s processing of the text. In the work of Bennett, Nabokov, and even Drabble, the denarration remains distinctly local, indeterminacies are temporary, and the stability of the represented world is not seriously challenged. In these cases, the narrators are simply modifying their stories, not reinventing the world they inhabit. This is partially true of Saleem Sinai’s narration, which unfolds within a much less determinate ontology where fact and allegory, history and fiction, and the literal and the metaphorical regularly slide into one another; there is considerably less stable, determinate narrative there to be controverted. In Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, however, the denarration is global and undermines the world it purports to depict; very little (if anything) is left over after the assaults of textual negation the narrative performs upon itself.

§

One salient facet of these denarrated episodes is that they draw attention to what could be called, after J. L. Austin, the performative nature of the articulation of a fictional world. That is, if an omniscient narrator states that “Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her, Lena thinks, ‘I have come from Alabama: a fur piece’” (3), this means, as we all know, that the transcription of the character’s thoughts is necessarily correct; and this is, as Käte Hamburger and Dorrit Cohn have pointed out, one of the distinctive features of narrative fiction. It is also the case that everything else postulated by the narrator is equally true of the fictional world being depicted. In Light in August, in this part of the South, there is a road, there is a hill, Lena is sitting beside the road, and a wagon is coming toward her, she is heading toward a county named Yoknapatawpha. Unlike any non-fictional account of an arrival in some part of the South, once these words are written in a narrative fiction, they constitute some of the
unalterable facts of its world. There is no way of falsifying these depic-
tions by drawing on material outside the text, such as maps, atlases, or
guidebooks. The only way they can be controverted is if the narrator
disavows the statements at some later point in the work.

Intriguingly, this is also largely true of much first person fictional
narration as well. If Marcel informs us of a certain event that took
place in Combray, it is no good to say, as one might to an author of
nonfiction, that when *Swann’s Way* was published there was no such
place as Combray, or that records of the period show no such person
as Charles Swann, or that the dreams recounted sound as if they were
invented, or that the events described form too perfect a symmetry to
be entirely credible. We do expect a certain amount of what might be
called “plausible fallibility” on the part of any narrator concerning the
precise dates of private events, or any other act or event that depends
on memory or involves judgment; in such cases, ordinary fallibility is
a sign of verisimilitude. But in all larger, public areas, the first person
narrator’s word is definitive. To return to the example from Faulkner,
the status of Yoknapatawpha does not change depending on whether it
appears in a heterodiegetic or homodiegetic narration. In fictional first
person narratives, the depiction of the fictional world is a constitutive
act—whatever is said to exist thereby does exist. These basic facts of
the textual world are simply given—but, once again, only as long as
the narrator does not contradict them.

Naturally, such contradiction can happen, most obviously in the
deranged or possibly insane narrators in many of the works of Nabo-
kov; this practice can then call into question the reality of all the
recounted events, and the reader learns this to be the case by observing
salient indications within the text, usually involving contradictions in
the recounting of key events or anomalies within basic interpretations.
Thus, in *Pale Fire*, Zembla may possibly exist, or it may merely be a
projection of the mad Professor Kinbote—unlike Combray, Hardy’s
Wessex, or Bennett’s Five Towns, which are as real as the characters
who reside there.

The denarrated in Beckett occurs in both his first and third person
texts—not that he seems concerned to uphold that (or any other)
boundary. *Worstward Ho* presents a further, additional deploy-
ment of the denarrated, in which a world is slowly and painstakingly
constructed as a number of fictional possibilities are stated and then
immediately denied or revised to produce the most poetically bleak
effect. “Say a body. Where none. No mind where none. That at least. A
No. No out. No back. Only in” (7). A page later we get the following revision: “Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain. No mind and pain? . . . Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain” (8–9). Denarration here happens phrase by phrase, and what is left unchanged does then take on a curious stability, though it is a distinctly provisional one.\(^9\)

Eventually the shapes of the backs of a man and a boy appear; they are in the distance, poorly seen in the dim light, walking together but never receding (13). They briefly fade in and out of existence, returning unchanged (14–15). Then the man is depicted as kneeling: “From now kneeling. Could rise but to its knees. Sudden gone sudden back turned head sunk dark shade on unseen knees. Still” (16). This work is based on negation, and adding to the materials of the work is generally opposed: “Add others. Add? Never. Till if needs must” (25). As the work continues the outline of an old woman’s head is grudgingly incorporated, as if to provide an observer. In the distance the two figures move apart; finally, they nearly disappear from the text: “Say child gone. As good as gone. From the void. From the stare. . . . Say old man gone. Old woman gone. As good as gone” (43). The denarration of the word of the text is concluded in its final paragraph: “Enough. Sudden enough. No move and sudden all far. All least. Three pins. . . . Whence no farther” (47). They are reduced to short, thin lines, in the “dim-most dim. Vasts apart” (47). Denarration here takes on the features of entropy, and all creation, all difference, slide into the void.

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It is the first person form of the denarrated that is generally most prevalent and, I believe, more compelling. I suspect this is because it invites more possible interpretive positions concerning the subjectivity of the narrator, as the reader wonders whether the narrator is incompetent, disoriented, devious, or insane. And, when an especially contradictory line appears, it comically throws all of these conceptual frames into disarray, as the entire mimetic framework of the narration is abruptly called into question. At the very least, we may want to conceive of a new kind of fallible narration (postmodernism certainly has a way of expanding our sense of fallibility); the kind of figure we have seen employed by Beckett, Drabble, McEwan, and Rushdie might well be termed the “duplicitous” narrator, one, that is, who deliberately provides information that is later falsified by subsequent statements in the
narration. This figure could thus be distinguished from two standard types of unintentional unreliable narrator that Dorrit Cohn has recently identified: the factually misinformed narrator and the “discordant” narrator who is ideologically biased or confused.¹⁰

Denarrated events pose yet another intriguing problem for narrative theory, specifically, how is one to separate story from discourse in a text like *Molloy*? If, as Rimmon-Kenan states, “‘Story’ designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text [discourse], and reconstructed in their chronological order” (3), how are we to reconstruct any story when the discourse, as it unfolds, works to deny, negate, and erase the events recounted earlier? Instead of opposing a list of events from the reconstructed story to the sequence in which they are recounted in the discourse, there will not be much recoverable story at all, but rather a general, undifferentiated conglomerate of past events which may or may not have occurred, within an inchoate temporality that cannot be analytically reconstructed into any sustained order. All that is left for the narratologist to work with is the discourse, since all we know is the sequence in which the dubious events are presented or negated. At this point, a fundamental distinction at the foundation of modern narrative theory breaks down. Here, the usual separation between story and discourse collapses, and we are left with discourse without a retrievable story. The work’s discourse is determinate; its story is inherently indeterminable.¹¹

One point I wish to reemphasize here is the performative aspect of world making in narrative fiction, as well as the ontological destabilization always possible in fiction—a move that many postmodernists find irresistible. The play between narrative creation and destruction is typical of recent fiction as well as some earlier texts with anti-mimetic elements (e.g., *The Beggar’s Opera*, *Jacques le fataliste*). We may also observe the ontological fragility of the status of much fictional discourse—at any point, the narrator can contradict what has been written, and thereby transform the entire relation between events as well as the way they are interpreted. Likewise, any third person text can become a first person text by a narrator’s sudden self-revelation in the course of the fiction, as happens in Calvino’s *The Nonexistent Knight* and several of the works discussed elsewhere in this book. Finally, denarration is also part of a larger kind of serious gamesmanship between the affirmation and denial of identities—individual, ontological, epistemological, or referential—and one that continuously reafirms both the transformative and the disruptive power of the language of narrative.
III. The Permeable Narrator

Narration in the fiction of Samuel Beckett tends to revolve around two antithetical poles, both of which work to negate the basic epistemological drama of multiple narrators and focalizers with differing perceptions that animates most of the work of major modernists like James, Joyce, Broch, Faulkner, and Woolf. The first pole is solipsistic, as seemingly disparate narrative voices turn out in the end to be mere projections of a single isolated consciousness. Company (1980) is exemplary in this regard: it begins with the statement, “A voice comes to one in the dark” (7); much of rest of the text is an investigation of the nature, status, and identity of that voice. In the end, it turns out that “huddled thus you find yourself imagining you are not alone while knowing full well that nothing has occurred to make this possible” (61); the voice is not that of another, there is no one else. Such a failed attempt to generate “company” also appears in Malone Dies, “Cascando,” “Not I,” and other texts, narrative and dramatic, which follow the trajectory described early in The Unnamable: “I am of course alone. . . . I shall have company. In the beginning. A few puppets. Then I'll scatter them, to the winds, if I can” (292).

The other, opposite tactic is the uncanny and inexplicable intrusion of the voice of another within the narrator’s consciousness. I call such a figure a “permeable narrator.” Unlike the solipsistic gambit, which is readily situated within existing theories of narration, this other movement threatens to violate the principle of an autonomous, individual consciousness that is presupposed by all current theories of the narrator. To get a full sense of the force of this transgression, we may trace the emergence and development of the intrusive alien voice as it is played out in Beckett’s trilogy. In the first section of Molloy, Molloy occasionally hears voices; near the end of his stay with Lousse, he is afraid “of wearing out that small voice saying, Get out of here Molloy, take your crutches and get out of here and which,” he adds, “I had taken so long to understand, for I had been hearing it for a long time” (59). Near the end of this section, Molloy notes that the voice had deserted him (87), but then he goes on to negate the reality of that voice: “every time I say, I said this, or I said that, or speak of a voice saying, far away inside me, Molloy, and then a fine phrase more or less clear and simple . . . I am merely complying with the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace” (88). It would seem we are dealing with possibly nothing more substantial than a conventional depiction of the “voice” of the ego or even a conscience,
and such depictions are themselves revealed to be entirely unreliable. We are given a bit of a twist then a couple of pages later when Molloy notes, “I heard a voice telling me not to fret, that help was coming. Literally” (91). It is not precisely clear what such a statement might mean, literally or otherwise, in such a dubious and self-negating discourse.

The voices that plague Moran in his narration in the second part of the novel are much less easily circumscribed. He begins by referring to a voice, which he is “only just beginning to know” (132), in the conventional terms of conscience with an occasional hint of an authorial muse, but very quickly describes it in quite different terms: “Yes, it is rather an ambiguous voice and not always easy to follow, in its reasonings and decrees. But I follow it none the less, more or less” (132). A few pages later we are informed of a most curious situation. Moran refers to “a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. . . . Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them” (137). This assertion overthrows the ontology of the work. Moran claims to have in his head voices of other characters created by Beckett—and in the case of Mercier, one inhabiting a text that had not yet been published. This ontological violation further problematizes the idea of voice: what can the source of such a voice be? Moran accepts it without comment, but later wonders about its nature and origin: “it was not so much Moran as another, in the secret of Moran’s sensations exclusively, who said, No change, Moran, no change. This may seem impossible” (147). And, in all probability, it is. We are now far beyond the internalized speech of another, as found for example in the unsteady mind of the narrator of Dostoevsky’s “Notes from the Underground.” I argue that Moran is hearing an external voice, one that uncannily resembles or mimics the voice of his literary creator, impelling him onward. His mind is impregnated by the voice of another outside him. His final comment on the subject emphasizes the alterity of that discourse: “I have spoken of a voice telling me things. I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little. . . . But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understood it, all wrong perhaps. That is not what matters. It told me to write the report” (175–76). Moran’s consciousness is now taken over and permeated by a voice that is not his own.

In the next volume of the trilogy, _Malone Dies_, we encounter a rather more realistic narrative situation, though it is one that reproduces many of the oddities of consciousness and narration present
in more radical forms in the other volumes. Malone’s mind is a bit strange; as he confesses, “the loss of consciousness for me was never any great loss” (183). He has the habit of turning external sounds into internal noises, and goes so far as to postulate that the various noises of the world have gradually “merged into a single noise, so that all I heard was one vast continuous buzzing” (207). There also comes a point where Malone transgresses the standard narrative situation in the most egregious manner. As Andrew Kennedy explains: “Malone-as-narrator is the controlling voice at all levels of narration, but his own ‘authorial authority’ is undermined at times. One of the most striking examples of such a radical device is Malone suddenly stepping out of the role of self-narrating narrator and seeing himself, in effect, as the creator of other characters in other Beckett fictions: ‘Then it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloy, Morans, and Malones’” (138).

Molloy’s inner voice is readily reducible to his own subjectivity, while Moran’s *daimon* is pretty clearly the speech of another. Malone’s narration is entirely self-contained except for those uncanny references to other works by Beckett. The final volume of the trilogy, *The Unnamable*, takes this oscillation as the governing principle of its own extensive speculations on voice and narration. Indeed, the text starts off as a kind of mystery concerning the nature and identity of the narrator. The narrator himself does not know what kind of space he occupies or how he got there; his earlier existence is opaque and he does not know whom he is speaking to; it is not even clear what kind of entity he is, or whether he is a single entity at all: “I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me” (291). He spots a figure that appears to be Malone, though he quickly notes that it could be Molloy (292–93). His ontological status would thus seem to be that of an unfinished persona trapped in a limbo of characters, or else he is like an author, looking down on his creations, except of course they are not his but Beckett’s creations. He goes on to assert the contradictory claims that “Basel and his gang” (including the other characters?) are “all lies . . . all invented, basely, by me alone” (304) as well as admitting:

It issues from me, it fills me, it clamors against my walls, it is not mine, I can’t stop it, I can’t prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It’s not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, its round that I must revolve, of that I speak, with this voice that is not mine, since there is no one but me, or if there are others, to whom it might belong, they have never come near me, I won’t delay to make this clear. (307)
At one moment the narrator takes credit for all the other voices in the narrative; at the next he complains he is at their mercy. He claims both to be outside his narrative and imprisoned within it. This dilemma is not easily resolved, as the two opposed positions collapse in on one another. Basil is rechristened Mahood, and the narrator states that “his voice continued to testify for me, as though woven into mine, preventing me from saying who I was, what I was” (309). New variables enter this bizarre drama of identity and nonidentity, as basic narrative relations of distance, priority, hierarchy, existence, self, and other are raised and then utterly obscured. Every conceptual opposition, every statement of difference, is immediately collapsed or negated. The notion of the self is entirely undermined, and Descartes’ *cogito*, as David Hesla (1971) points out, is controverted by the Unnamable (114).

As the narrator states, “It’s entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate. They’ve blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it’s them I hear. Who them?” (325). In its starkest form, the basic question remains: is the voice internal or external? If external, what is its possible source: “Who them?” If internal, is it a projection or delusion, or is it the voice of another character speaking through him due to his internalization of the other’s speech? Then again, is it somehow both internal and external at the same time, say a preternatural voice sounding within him, *daimon* like, or is it the voice of an author creating and directing the thoughts of the narrator? Or is one speaker simply making all the voices up? All of these hypotheses are plausible, yet each is contradicted at many points by some aspect of the other possible answers.

As the narrative continues, the paradox of its speaking grows more intense and its resolution seems more intractable: the narrator wonders whether what is required is “praise of my master. . . . Or the admission that I am Mahood after all and these stories of a being whose identity he usurps, whose voice he prevents from being heard, all lies from beginning to end. And what if Mahood were my master?” (311). This contradictory welter of possibilities does not suggest any unproblematic way out of the conundrum, as what seem to be other characters and narrators go on to merge with the Unnamable. After all, it was Mahood “who told me stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me, heaped stories on my head. . . . It is his voice which has often, always, mingled with mine, and sometimes drowned it completely” (309). Every pos-
sible relation between Mahood and the narrator are assayed; none is able to be confirmed or refuted.

The self-referential interrogation pauses as the narrator assays more descriptions, offers some partial memories, and tries out a few abortive stories. The book emerges as one of the most defiantly anti-narrative works ever composed, in which all the basic elements of storytelling are negated. There is no determinable temporal or spatial setting, no characters to speak of, no events worth narrating, and no clear audience or motive for the narration. The main engine of the text is the compulsive voice that will not stop, and the primary drama of the text is the determination of the identity of the narrator and its voices. We are teased by the question of whether the speaking “I” creates or belongs to the world of the fiction. Numerous passages suggest that both are in fact the case, one of the more insistently paradoxical of which may be cited:

No one left, no one to talk to, no one to talk to you, so that you have to say, It’s I who am doing this to me, I who am talking to me about me. Then the breath fails, the end begins, you go silent, it’s the end, short-lived, you begin again, you had forgotten, there’s someone there, someone talking to you, about him, then a second, then a third . . . then they depart, one by one, and the voice goes on, it’s not theirs, they were never there, there was never anyone but you, talking to you about you, the breath fails, it’s nearly the end, the breath stops, it’s the end, short-lived, I hear someone calling me, it begins again. (394)

As the narrative winds down, there are no more breaks between sentences, the voice becomes less aggressive, the other figures melt away, and closure beckons. At this point the Unnamable makes rather more admissions than usual that all the others are his creation: “there was never anyone, anyone but me, anything but me, talking of me to me, impossible to stop” (395), and “I’ve always been here, here there was never anyone but me, never, always, me, no one, old slush to be churned everlastingly” (403). Passages like these have helped lead a number of critics to conclude that this work too, like many of Beckett’s other texts, is ultimately a vain attempt by an isolated consciousness to engender some solace, company, or identity. This position is most succinctly put forth by Linda Ben-Zvi (1986): “‘I’ talking to ’you’ about ‘me,’ the tripartite form of the self doing battle against the unnamed ‘they,’: that is the final image of The Unnamable and in many ways the
ironic image that lurks behind all Beckett’s fiction. A self that is split, talking aloud, trying to coalesce and to continue against the ‘they’ that thwart it” (100).16

But Beckett does not attain resolution so easily. The narratological analysis I have undertaken here suggests exactly the opposite conclusion. Every identity is dissolved and every hierarchy subverted; each claim that the voices are all invented is repeatedly followed by counter-claims of the insistence of an external voice. “It’s not I, that’s all I know, it’s not mine” (414). The speech of the primary narrator merges with that of the temporarily internal narrators; it is not always clear who invented whom: “And another question, what am I doing in Mahood’s story, and in Worm’s, or rather what are they doing in mine” (377). We have another set of references to other works of Beckett, rather more ambiguous, if possible, than the earlier ones in the trilogy: “All these Murphys, Malloys, and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and me alone” (303). The Unnamable here seems to be impersonating an overly simple version of Beckett himself, as he muses on the inability of his earlier creations to express that which can only be delivered by the unusual, disembodied narrator of this text. How can this unreal narrator know of Beckett’s other books? It is only by a metaleptic framebreaking that allows him to be outside the textual world he otherwise often seems to inhabit. We may grant that the Unnamable can invent all the other figures and even the voices, but he can’t have invented Beckett’s other creations as well. This kind of threshold crossing reveals the impossibly protean nature of the “dis-framed” narrator and shows that there remains a fundamental alterity that cannot plausibly be reduced to any single consciousness. In the words of Richard Begam, “Beckett succeeds in collapsing the narrator/narrated into an undifferentiated third term, the mediating slash that formerly stood as the sign of demarcation but now disperses itself into an interstitial zone” (156).17

In the final pages of the text the question of interiority is explicitly invoked: “it’s an image, those are words, it’s a body, it’s not I, it wouldn’t be I, I’m not outside, I’m inside, I’m in something, I’m shut up, the silence is outside, outside, inside, there is nothing but here, and the silence outside, nothing but this voice and the silence all round” (410). Here too we see not the reduction of the external to the internal but their repeated collapsing into one another as indeterminacy and fragmentation reign. “I’m there somewhere, it won’t be I, no matter, I’ll say it’s I” (410). There is no resolution to the question of the iden-
tity of the narrator; he remains to the last a contradictory conflation of self and other, essence and absence. In the words of Angela Moorjani, the labyrinthine “prison of textual duplication, of doubling and redoubling fictions, of lying images and voices... is being sabotaged by the textual play. The narrator attacks the ‘hell of stories’ by subverting narrative discourse from within” (60).

As might be expected, this text plays regularly with the nature and function of the narrating pronoun and utilizes a considerable number of divergent perspectives. The narration opens with a self-conscious first person voice, “I, say I” (291), moves quickly on to self-narration in the second person, “You think you are simply resting” (291), and then concludes that the third person “it” form is most appropriate: “It, say it, not knowing why, . . . ,” explaining, “I seem to speak, it is not I” (291). The text goes on to oscillate between more standard first and third person narrators, though the normal status of each is invariably undermined: “They say they, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking” (370). Over halfway into the text, another narrating possibility is briefly assayed: “let’s drive on to the end of the joke, we must be nearly there, and see what they have to offer him, in the way of bugaboos. Who we? Don’t all speak at once” (360). This begins as a rhetorical “we,” but the attention called to it makes one wonder as to its actual status. Such curiosity is immediately dashed by the speaker: “no sense in bickering about the pronouns and other parts of blather. The subject doesn’t matter, there is none” (360). This last statement may well be literally true.

Later, after a long passage that once again conflates and deconstructs discreet narrative and narrating agents, the voice attempts to get to the root of the confusions: “you don’t know why, you don’t know whose, you don’t know against whom, someone says you, it’s the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, it’s a kind of person too, it isn’t that either, I’m not that either, let us leave all that” (404). The oddity of a first person speaker claiming “there is no name for me” is dwarfed by the even stranger denials throughout the text that the speaker is not an “I,” from the opening paragraph’s “I seem to speak, it is not I” (291) to the protestation on the final page: “it’s not I, that’s all I
know” (414). In between we find numerous, additional declarations of the inaccuracy of the “I”: “I shall not say I again, ever again, it’s too farcical. I shall put in its place, whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it” (355). Even in denying the “I” an “I” is invoked, but the “I” is largely evacuated of any identity or essence. It is, in the end, merely a decentered text saying “I.” Or in the words of the Unnamable, “who is I, who cannot be I, of whom I can’t speak, of whom I must speak” (404). Beckett is here explicitly and repeatedly assaulting the conventions of all traditional narration that demand a story be told in either the first or the third person, as well as the entire critical and theoretical corpus that, since Percy Lubbock, has acted as if these are the only possibilities in fiction. Instead, The Unnamable provides one of the most extreme, fascinating, and outrageous demonstrations of the possibilities of narration in—and only possible in—a work of fiction.

The permeable narrator has had a significant career during the course of the twentieth century. It begins with the wandering thoughts of one character that inexplicably wind up in the minds of another in Ulysses as mentioned in the introduction, and the many bleedings of one consciousness into the thought of another in Borges (“The Circular Ruins”) and Beckett (“here long silence, there will be no more I, he’ll never say I any more . . . he won’t think any more, he’ll go on, I’ll be inside” [Fizzle 4]). The Unnamable remains a kind of fountainhead of the most extreme kinds of permeable narrators, as figures on the same ontological level are fused and then separated back out. It also presents a related “dis-framed narration” where larger narrative levels are collapsed together metaleptically. Permeable narration would go on to become a favorite technique of the authors of the nouveau roman in their more extreme experiments, such as Robbe-Grillet’s La Maison de rendez-vous and Project pour une révolution à New York, Robert Pinget’s Le Fiston and Passacaille, and Claude Simon’s Les Corps conducteurs. It also figures prominently in postmodern novels such as Raymond Federman’s Double or Nothing (1971), Christine Brooke-Rose’s Thru (1975), Juan Goytisolo’s Paisajes despues de la batalla (1982), and Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses (1988). This practice is perhaps the most thoroughgoing negation of the humanistic concept of a narrator who is like a person, since it violates what is probably the most important aspect of personhood, which at least since Descartes has been conceived of as a mind. When that mind is contaminated by debris of another, the very possibility of a unitary self is exploded. All of these works deserve to be better known and would repay a sus-
tained narrative analysis, not along traditional lines but the kind made possible by the concept of the permeable narrator.

IV. Postmodern Unreliability

We need to directly address the question of narratorial reliability in contemporary fiction. Despite impressive recent studies on unreliability, culminating in James Phelan’s astute analysis of six types of unreliability (Living 49–65), additional work is needed to encompass the more extreme kinds of unreliability postmodernism delights in producing. Summarizing and extending the findings of this study, we may identify and bring together the varieties of posthumanist narrators and voices that have superseded the traditional figure of the narrator as a person who is telling a story and who is subject to the normal abilities and limitations of a human being or humanlike narrating agent.

1) The Fraudulent Narrator. Unreliability has proliferated under postmodernism, and we need some new concepts to add to current notions of unreliable and untrustworthy narrators. One avowedly anti-mimetic construct that is needed may be designated the “fraudulent narrator”: for a paradigmatic case we may cite the obvious anachronisms of the narrator of Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage (he refers, for example, to Piltdown Man eighty years before the hoax was concocted). Another instance would be the eleven-year-old narrator of John Hawkes’ Virginie: Her Two Loves. In a typical passage, she writes: “Did I dream the darkness that wears soft the stone, like sheep in the narrow passages of a labyrinth? (The darkness that changes in density and moves, magnifies the smallest sound, and lives so curiously alive yet unsatisfyingly between the sleeper and all the activity he awaits in the sun.)”(34). There is no pretense of any mimetic illusion here; no one will believe for a moment that an eleven-year-old, no matter how precocious or poetic, could have penned such words. Hawkes is flouting the realistic convention that a character narrator should seem to write the way such a figure could be expected to in the real world, and thereby perhaps critiquing such ineffective illusionism which invariably produces, in the hands of Henry James, a governess that writes unbelievably like Henry James.

Fraudulence comes in many forms, and we will want to specify its more interesting varieties. We begin with the relatively unobtrusive (and rarely remarked on) type found in Molloy. Its narrator is so befuddled that when asked by a policeman to produce his papers, he
merely pulls out the bits of newspaper he uses to wipe himself with. And yet this same narrator is capable of referring to the doctrines of the minor philosopher Géulincx and observing lyrically, “all I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead” (31). Another kind of fraudulence is what Ann Jefferson has called the *intra* and *semblable* in the work of Sarraute: “the narration of Portrait d’un inconnu repeatedly transgresses the realist limitations of the narrator’s position in order to give an account of the inner lives of the other characters. Indeed, most of the novel’s major scenes are based on such transgressions” (120–21).

An opposite kind of fraudulence is found in the case of a clearly unbelievable narrative that a narrator somehow is able to credit for a time. In Borges’ “The Immortal” (1949), the narrator of the preposterous first person inner story (who claims to have spoken to Homer and drunk from a fountain of youth) discovers that he is not merely unreliable, but impossible: “The story I have told seems unreal because the experiences of two different men are intermingled in it” (193); that is, the narrator, in recounting his life story, has conflated it with another’s. The framing material at the end of the text resolves this anomaly: the tale does not, in fact, entwine the lives of disparate individuals within the spurious identity of a single “I.” Instead it is revealed that the narrator is simply a deluded fabricator, writing a fiction in the first person that he originally believes to be an autobiography, and then equally erroneously supposes is the story of an “I” and a “he.” As we will see in the next chapter, fraudulent narrators also figure prominently in contemporary drama.

Other important anti-mimetic narrators include 2) Contradictory Narrators. In Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie*, Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter,” and J. M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*, multiple, contradictory versions of what are presumably the same events are set forth, with no mechanism offered (such as different narrators with different memories and agendas) to explain away the often outrageous contradictions. Using naturalistic assumptions to comprehend these texts leads directly to interpretive chaos; one must abandon the idea of a self-consistent narrator relating an account of a preexisting set of events to begin to read these unusual pieces. This too represents a kind of unreliability unimagined in current narratology.

3) Permeable Narrators, as we have just seen, are distinct figures who merge and blend into one another without any signal or expla-
nation, and are thus a large-scale extension of vagrant thoughts of one character that somehow find their way into the consciousness of another as noted above. The impossibly straying thoughts may be relatively isolated, as in the case of *Ulysses*, or occupy large chunks of the entire narrative, as we find in Claude Simon’s *Les Corps conducteurs*, Juan Goytisolo’s *Paisajes después de la batalla*, Robert Pinget’s *Le Fiston*, and of course *The Unnamable*.

4) Incommensurate Narrators, as discussed above, are those who cannot be the single source of the heterogenous voices of texts they seem to narrate. As Monika Fludernik states, “neither a story and/or common situation nor a group of consistent characters nor even a consistent narratorial voice can be projected from ‘stories’ like Donald Barthelme’s ‘You Are as Brave as Vincent van Gogh’” (“Natural” 287–88). The heterogeneity of the materials thus must exceed our ability to postulate a single, realistic consciousness responsible for all of them. Earlier in this chapter and elsewhere in this book, I suggest that this approach is particularly useful in designating the protean figure(s) behind the most contradictory acts of narration in *Ulysses*.

Finally, we may identify 5) Dis-framed Narrators, who move from one level of a text to another in ways that are impossible outside of fiction. Thus, Moran, the narrator of the second part of *Molloy*, claims to have invented characters that appear in other novels by Beckett. The most tersely expressed articulation of this condition is the statement uttered by (and about) one of Christine Brooke-Rose’s narrators: “Whoever you invented invented you too” (*Thru 53*).