On- and offstage narrators have occupied prominent positions in the drama for most of the twentieth century. Among the many such figures, one may point to the protagonist of O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920), the Voice in Cocteau’s *La Machine infernale* (1934), and the Stage Manager in Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938). Since narration in drama is not known as well as it might be, I will start by describing a common instance, that of Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). It is a partially enacted homodiegetic narrative in which the narrator is also a participant in the events he recounts and enacts. At the beginning, an actor comes on stage, identifies himself as “the narrator of the play, and also a character in it,” sets the scene (“I turn back time”), and describes the other characters and the concerns of the play. He indicates that what is to follow is a memory play and observes that, consequently, it is not realistic. Here the diegetic portion ceases and the mimetic part begins, as what was uttered by a single, governing voice becomes enacted by several speaking characters. Later in the play, the protagonist resumes his functions as narrator to introduce the third and sixth scenes, and to comment on the action in the fifth scene. At the end of the performance, he narrates the gist of his subsequent travels and brings the story up to the time of its telling. The stage directions also encourage variation in this figure’s performance to enhance its effect: “The narrator is an undisguised con-
vention of the play. He takes whatever license with [mimetic] dramatic convention is convenient to his purposes” (22).

Another major presence and subsequent source for many later strategies of narration is the drama of Bertold Brecht. In his essay “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?” (1935–36), Brecht outlined the distinctive features of the epic theater he created, stressing the use of narration: “The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing” (71). Not only did Brecht employ narrators in many of his plays; he also displayed written texts before each scene that frequently had a narrative function. In The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1944), a bard is actually brought on stage to narrate a story. In doing so, he generates a fictional world in a manner similar to that of an omniscient narrator. Brecht’s storyteller narrates diegetically, in the third person, until, pointing to the stage, he directs actors to mimetically enact the narrative he is recounting. This oscillation between the two representational modes then continues throughout the play. In contrast to a standard memory play like Williams’, this type of work is a heterodiegetic narrative in which the narrator resides in an ontologically distinct level from that occupied by the characters. Other generative narrators include the Stage Manager of Wilder’s Our Town (1938) and, more radically, the storytelling characters of Milan Kundera’s Jacques and His Master (1981).

Postmodern inversions of the conventional onstage narrator can be quite striking. In David Henry Hwang’s M Butterfly (1989), we find instances of permeable narration as the thoughts and memories of the narrator, Gallimard, are contaminated by another. The character Song even insists that certain past scenes be set forth despite the fact that he himself is merely a memory in the consciousness of another. Confronted by this strange demand, Gallimard protests, “You have to do what I say! I’m conjuring you up in my mind” (78). Tom Stoppard’s Travesties (1975) dramatizes the memories of an old man, Henry Carr, who is growing senile and whose recollections are at times wildly inaccurate. At other points, his memory is impossibly, indeed “fraudulently,” accurate, as when he recalls James Joyce composing works that he has never read, or “remembers” Russian dialogue spoken by Lenin. This extreme unreliability and the “fraudulent” narration are further blended with highly stylized representations, as when the character Joyce regularly speaks in limericks. The framework of the memory play is thus in Stoppard’s hands largely a pretext for its parodic violation.

Fraudulent narration is also a major factor in Paula Vogel’s The Baltimore Waltz (1992), a drama in which the main characters narrate
and enact a trip to Europe. It is, however, a very strange trip: the secondary characters resemble figures out of European *films noirs* and other popular media rather than actual people one might encounter in contemporary France, Holland, or Austria. A waiter speaks in a thick “Peter Sellers French” accent and another figure called The Third Man also narrates and acts out melodramatic scenes. We finally learn that the trip was never taken, and that its episodes are imagined events inspired by old movies and set in a fictional Europe. Together, the three plays just mentioned present one person’s memories contaminated by another, an incorrectly remembered past, and fabricated accounts of travel that never occurred.

As might be expected, one of the most compelling dramatists to employ narration on stage is Samuel Beckett, especially in his later work, where dramatic narrators and monologists create the world around them as they name it (e.g., *A Piece of Monologue* [1979]). Most apposite for the purposes of this study is Beckett’s 1963 radio play, “Cascando.” A narrator called “Opener” begins the play, calling on secondary figures “Voice” and “Music” respectively to recount a tale of the hapless movements of a figure called Woburn and to produce appropriate melodies in counterpoint to the embedded narrative. Opener proceeds in total mastery of the two subordinate figures until part way through the piece, at which point both begin to weaken and fade. Like many of the narrators of Beckett’s fiction, Opener insistently affirms the independence of the other figures, vigorously denying that they are merely internal creations of his own: “They say, He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it’s in his head” (*Plays* 140). As the play continues, Opener’s control weakens further; he even becomes afraid to open. Nevertheless, he perseveres, and with increasing difficulty is able to get the other progressions back in motion. Finally, all sound ceases, as the halting movements of Woburn, the desperate narration of Voice, the failing music, and the vain attempts of Opener to go on all come to a halt. By the end, it seems clear that the other figures were indeed all in the head of the fatigued Opener.

Another device that has proven most apt for dramatic experiments in narration is the offstage voice. Unique to performance is the disembodied narrative voice that sets the stage, comments on events, and propels the action. The first examples I will set forth are heterodiegetic ones, though homodiegetic cases can also exist; in this area, theatrical options resemble those of the voice-over in cinema. The Voice in Cocteau’s *The Infernal Machine* (1934) is a representative example: omniscient, ironic, and interventionary, it informs us at the
beginning of the second act that it will wind back the clock and represent other events unfolding at the same time as those that have just been displayed. In *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* (1977), Simone Benmussa starts with an offstage representation of the voice of George Moore, the author of the story the play is adapted from. Actors then appear and dramatize the story he has begun to tell; throughout the production, he will also provide various narrative asides. Hélène Cixous, in *Portrait of Dora* (1976), further extends the subjectification of the narrative voice, as an entity referred to as “The Voice of the Play” draws attention to slippages of identity in the drama and the impossibility of determining what actually happened, as opposed to what was desired, projected, transferred, or misremembered.

A still more radical transformation appears in Marguerite Duras’ *India Song* (1972). This work contains four offstage voices which usually comment on or inquire about the events being enacted on stage. At other times, however, their comments permeate, take the place of, or echo the characters’ dialogue; sometimes, they even seem to engender the next sequence of actions. It is a shifting, unstable relation that re-creates and relativizes the offstage voice in new ways. As Elin Diamond has observed, “though the stage enactment seems to emerge from the memory of the voices, the voices are incapable of assuming a stable narrating position; rather they react fearfully, helplessly, anxiously, erotically, both to what they witness and what they partially remember” (102).

This narrative fascination is so complete that the voices’ interactions constitute a second, offstage drama that is both parallel to and dependent on the play enacted on the stage, as the voices speak for the actual audience and at other times seem to usurp the prerogatives of the author. They dislodge the fixity of critical categories grounded in mimetic assumptions, as memory and invention, narration and description, seeing and speaking glide into one another. Sarah Kozloff, in her study of the subject, has suggested that voice-over narration in film humanizes and tames an otherwise “odd, impersonal narrative agency” (128). I argue that in the plays just described the opposite is the case, as offstage voices work to decenter identity and defamiliarize conventional practices of dramatic representation.

Tom Stoppard has also shown how thoroughly voice-over in a video medium can be destabilized. His 1984 television play, *Squaring the Circle*, is a kind of postmodern documentary about the events surrounding the Solidarity union in Poland during 1980 and 1981. It pushes the generative narrator to new extremes by applying the
technique to historical events that were largely unknowable at the time of its filming. It has a narrator, whose role at first seems to be merely that of the conventional pseudo-objective voice-over. Soon, however, the voice contradicts the enacted events. After introducing Brezhnev and Gierrek talking together on a beach at a resort on the Black Sea, the narrator goes on to state that “This isn’t them, of course.” In close-up we then see the (suddenly) bodied narrator who, looking directly into the camera, continues speaking, “and this isn’t the Black Sea. Everything is true except the words and the pictures. If there was a beach, Brezhnev and Gierrek probably didn’t talk on it” (21–22). The deceptively omniscient documentary voice is here demystified and revealed to be a single, situated speaker with his own positionality and limited knowledge. The drama also includes a character identified as the Witness, who explains many of the issues to the narrator and at times corrects him and criticizes his presentation of images (pp. 54, 66–67, 78, 82). The potentially authoritative voice that most documentaries strive to achieve is thus individualized, democratized, and shown to be fallible. What is ultimately contested here is nothing less than any claim to the epistemic privileges of heterodiegetic discourse (such as omniscience), at least in genres like the documentary that purport to be nonfictional.

Contemporary dramatists transgress mimetic conventions of narration in still other ways, as our last examples will disclose. Pinter’s *Family Voices* (1981) consists of three voices—those of a mother, father, and son—that seem to be reading aloud letters they have sent each other; as the play progresses, it becomes apparent that the mother’s letters have never been read; the son’s never sent (and probably never written); while the third set are voiced by the father, who is dead and is literally speaking from beyond the grave. The work, though first broadcast as a radio play, is regularly presented in “platform performance” in which the physical proximity of the actors speaking the texts intensifies the unbridgeable ontological chasms between the characters even as it underscores the rhetorical failure of these “letters” as forms of human communication.³

Beckett’s later short play, “Not I” (1972), as its title suggests, also interrogates self and identity in addition to any traditional, fixed narrative stance. The work consists primarily of a torrent of words that are uttered by a single illuminated mouth, an arrangement that draws considerable attention to the nature and function of this strange, nearly disembodied voice. The drama is what I have called in Chapter One a “pseudo–third person” narration, as the mouth sets out a
sad account of the miserable existence of someone identified merely as “she.” But this attribution is illusory; the jumbled narrative refers not to another, but rather the speaker herself. Mouth’s truncated and repetitive life story is, however, so wretched that the speaker refuses to acknowledge any connection to it, despite reiterated promptings by another voice that only she can hear. This strange communication adds to the epistemological drama of the work, as the audience, like Mouth, struggles to identify and keep distinct the various subjectivities that are invoked, as the following selection should suggest:

back in the field . . . morning sun . . . April . . . sink face down in the grass . . . nothing but the larks . . . so on . . . grabbing at the straw . . . straining to hear . . . the odd word . . . make some sense of it . . . whole body like gone . . . just the mouth . . . like maddened . . . and can’t stop . . . no stopping it . . . something she—. . . something she had to—. . . what? . . who? . . no! . . she! . . (Plays, 221)

We find, that is, a mélange of description and narration, invention and memorial reconstruction, and self-correction and the contradiction of another (internal? internalized?) voice.

To add to this rich confusion of subjectivities, there is also the physical presence of another, silent figure, dressed in black, on stage as well. Even after we solve what might be called the modernist riddle of the work, i.e., that the “other” described in the third person is actually a displaced version of the self that speaks, the postmodern enigma remains: just who or what is Mouth, and to whom (or what) is she speaking? Numerous possibilities suggest themselves, many of which are reminiscent of the questions posed by the Unnamable: she may be an image of a madwoman, a figure in hell, an allegory of the dispossessed, or a parody of authorial creation; she may be addressing the imagined voice of another, another version of herself, or the metadramatic image of a stage prompter. But more than anything else, the very physicality of this staging of a contaminated consciousness—the disembodied mouth and the unexplained auditor—ensures that no critical gesture will be able to unify these defiantly inorganic fragments.

Paula Vogel’s *Hot ‘n’ Throbbing* (1993) is one of the most innovative and powerful developments of several of the strands of narration and subjectivity that have been traced above. There are two primary figures in the play, a woman who is trying to scrape together a living by writing erotic film scripts for a feminist film company, and her former husband, a physically abusive man who, drunk, breaks down her
door as she is working at her computer. There are also two “permeating” narrative voices: one, designated the “Voice-Over,” is female, a kind of muse, the woman’s inner voice and source of the narrative material that the woman types; it is also, at other moments, a voice of temptation, of her feminist conscience, and of the language of horror films. The other, called “Voice,” is a protean male discourse that uses a number of styles and accents, speaks in male clichés, proffers diagnoses in the language of early sexology, and reads out phallocratic passages from figures like D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert. Its different voices form a collective social discourse of male domination and control.

As if this were not experimental enough, Vogel pushes the medium still further: both voices are literally embodied on the stage: the playing space is dual, at once an ordinary living room and at other times a fantasy erotic dance hall, and the voices in the former space are physically present—that is, portrayed by actors—in the latter. Here, Voice-Over is also a sex worker, located in a glass booth where she dances during the play. The Voice is also corporeally present as the owner/bouncer of an erotic dance hall, acting “like a live DJ, spinning the score of the piece” (232) and often breathing heavily into his microphone. At times, he also sounds like the abusive husband. No wonder the protagonist asks in an aside after a passage of fallacious, turn-of-the-century sexology is uttered by the Voice, “Where is that coming from?” (249).

As will be readily imagined, the drama is as much about the struggle between two competing narratives as it is about the individuals who happen to speak them. This discursive clash occurs in seemingly minor areas as well as in those of mortal significance. As the woman, Charlene, sits at her computer and tries to come up with synonyms for “throbbing,” Voice-Over proffers “pulsating” and “heaving,” while Voice in turn suggests the more violent “beating” and “battering” (243–44). The play also documents the circulation of public discourses about gender and sexuality, as speeches and ideas overheard or adapted by the woman are incorporated into her text, and will presumably go on to animate other individuals who will view her film once it is finished. Here, a creative, nonviolent recursivity is offered as an alternative to the more deeply ingrained narrative and behaviors of the culture at large.

At the end of the play, individual acts of discursive resistance are overwhelmed by male agencies of institutional control. Voice, now taking the role of a film producer, demands that the script be inverted so that the woman in it is bound and helpless. On the other set, the
abusive man gains physical control of the situation, and proceeds to batter and finally kill his former wife. In this final scene, the two characters lip-sync the almost predictable words of contemporary domestic violence that are provided by Voice and Voice-Over, as the man acts out the savage social script he knows so well.

Narration has long been a basic feature of the twentieth century stage, and many basic concepts of narrative theory can be enhanced by reference to approximate equivalents in performance. Questions such as those concerning the status and gender of otherwise unmarked narrators are clarified (or intensified) when the voice that speaks the lines is male or female. Issues of focalization can be nicely complicated when we are presented with a full staging of the protagonist’s consciousness—or told, as we are in India Song, that the voices now “see” the action on the stage. A number of Bakhtinian concepts take on greater immediacy by reference to their theatrical incarnations, such as polyphony or interior polemical speech, when the disparate or conflicting voices within a single consciousness are spoken by different actors. Even the narratee becomes more complex when he or she is present on the stage, or gestured to in the audience. One hopes for more studies of narration in the corpus of authors who, like Beckett or Duras, experiment with voice in both fiction and drama.

The pieces I have discussed above, in addition to providing extensions and reinventions of the figure of the narrator, also share in modern literature’s continued transgressions of conventional boundaries as well as its general dissolution of the notion of a unified individual consciousness. They dramatize distinctively postmodern types of extreme narration by employing what I have termed fraudulent and permeable narrators and, in the case of Vogel’s Voice, an incommensurate narrator. They also display a contemporary take on the intersubjectivity and even intertextuality of the self—the way individuals are constructed by the discourses that surround them—and foregrounds the play with voice and narration, which regularly fragments and recombines the subjectivities it cannot resist interrogating. Like contemporary fiction, modern drama has for some time transcended the simple, humanist narrator figure and has gone on to create “unnatural” narrators who exceed and subvert the limits of an individual consciousness.