My discussion of the narrative imagination in relation to its media in the previous chapter insisted on the primacy of a semiotic rather than transmissive sense of the term “medium.” That, from my point of view, is a theoretical imperative; but I also want to do justice to the persistence with which the experience of narrative creativity is itself conceived as, precisely, transmission—as the mediation rather than the generation of narrative—and by the creators themselves. This conceit, I suggest, is invaluable as a way of moving beyond a communication model in which narrative is transmitted from author to reader, towards one in which the authorial relation to narrative is homologous to the reader’s. I have argued that fictional narrative needs to be understood as a rhetorical means in respect of its fictionality, not just its representational strategies, and this implies a view of the novelist’s communicative act in which that rhetoric is accountable beyond the frame of representation. But I would reject the conclusion that the rhetoric of fictionality must therefore be wholly accounted to authorial intention, not least because any such model of novelistic communication is necessarily abstracted from the particularity of the narrative, which would therefore be underdetermined. In order to elaborate an alternative view of narrative creativity, I propose to draw upon this idea of creativity as mediation, as expressed in the comments of novelists themselves upon their experience of the narrative imagination—bearing in mind that these comments also contribute in their own right to the communicative context of their fiction.

Let me begin with the note at the end of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, which reads, “I thank everybody in this book for coming—A. W., author and medium” (1983: 245). It’s a perfect, succinct expression of the
attitude I mean, and it appeals to me for three reasons, each of which intimates a key element of the explorations that follow. Firstly, it is an instance, if an extreme one, of a familiar and often-observed experience of novelistic creativity, the novelist’s peculiar loss of creative control over her own narrative. It belongs within the best-established tradition of such observations, those which figure this lack of control as a deference to the autonomy of the characters, but I want to suggest that this has its place within a more general understanding of the phenomenon. Such an understanding will need to recognize both the creative experience involved and the possible motives behind the various figurations of it in authorial testimony.

Secondly, Walker’s idea of herself as both “author” and “medium” strikes me as a highly suggestive way of formulating a general model for this seeming abdication of creative control, and in this respect it serves to introduce the central preoccupation of my inquiry. She is using “medium” in the spiritualist sense (the novel is dedicated “To the Spirit”); but the broader sense of “a means of communication” is inherent in that usage and heightens the paradox of its conjunction with “author.” Between “author” as “origin” and “medium” as “means,” where is the novelist? How to negotiate between communicative agency and this sense of creative mediation in fiction? The author, having been under a conceptual cloud for much of the century (in Russian Formalist, new critical, structuralist, and post-structuralist terms, among others), has latterly regained a certain standing as a focus of theoretical interest. 1 My concern is to understand the communicative act of fiction as authorially situated and particular, in terms which resist both the idealized intentionality of the “implied author,” and the tendency to contain such communicative acts within the fictional frame, as with the institution of the “narrator” as a universal agent of fictional narrative (for the reasons set out in chapter four). The idea of fictional narrative as a communicative instrument of prior authorial intentions is inadequate to the fecundity of the interpretative possibilities it generates; but if the novelist is figured as medium, narrative creativity becomes itself already an interpretative activity. The narrative text is no longer the medium through which a prior authorial intent is transmitted: the author is not a figure behind the text, but one on the same side of it as the reader. The novelist as medium is a kind of privileged first reader—privileged with a selectivity and control over the narrative which is analogous to the privilege, in another sphere of narrative creativity, of a lucid dreamer; engaged in a teasing out, an elaboration and development, according to laws or imperatives already in place, but only to be fully unearthed in the process of writing.
The third sense in which Walker’s note appeals to me has to do with its hint of an unexpected connection between creativity and its worldly context. Her “thank you” is a curious version of the formal acknowledgment by which writers conventionally recognize the debts incurred in producing a book. In this respect, it establishes what will turn out to be a recurrent association between the mysteries of narrative creativity and the practical realities of the profession of novelist (this is one reason why I have preferred “novelist as medium” to the more general and abstract “author as medium”). This association, in the comments of novelists themselves, between the spiritual and the material—between the ineffable creative process and the pragmatic business of turning out a marketable product—undergoes some significant transformations and is doubtless susceptible to analysis in relation to changing historical and cultural contexts. In general, though, it serves to negotiate the tensions between material interest and disinterestedness, and so also between the subjective, ideological occasion of communication and the claim to impersonal truths.

Inspiration and Discursive Imperatives

The most fundamental motive underlying novelists’ accounts of the “medium” experience is the appeal to an external authority as the guarantor of the narrative; an attempt to shore up authorship against the dubiousness of fiction. Such appeals are typically of two kinds: one invokes this authority in discursive terms, the other in representational terms. Although Walker’s version of the novelist’s (partial) surrender of creative control is centred on her characters, and therefore grounded on the authority of representation, its spiritualism also re-establishes a link with the most venerable prenovelistic manifestation of this experience, in which the author defers to a higher discursive authority. This is the idea of inspiration—the divine inspiration of medieval Christianity, or else that of the classical muse. To an extent, this tradition persisted into the age of the novel, although perhaps less as an expression of authorial humility than as a mock-epic veil for egotism—as with Fielding’s invocation of Genius, Humanity, Learning, and Experience to direct his pen in *Tom Jones* (1966: XVI, 5; 608–9). But even where the trope of inspiration does serve to diminish the credit accruing to the author’s conscious artistry, there are other benefits to be gained by using it. One of these is very evident in Charlotte Brontë’s observations upon the disconcerting qualities of her sister’s imagination, as manifested in *Wuthering Heights*. She scarcely thinks it “right or advisable to create
beings like Heathcliff,” but she insists that “the writer who possesses the
creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something
that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself. . . . Be the work grim or
glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption.
As for you—the nominal artist—your share in it has been to work passively
under dictates you neither delivered nor could question—that would not
be uttered at your prayer, nor suppressed nor changed at your caprice.” 2
Here the abdication of creative control is also a release from moral account-
ability, so the author’s own rectitude is no longer compromised by the
darker qualities of her narrative. Of course, there are limits to the scope of
such disclaimers. However compelled authors may claim to have been in
writing a certain narrative a certain way, the compunction to have written
at all (or, having written, to have published) could arise only from an
authorial decision to grant authority to the inspiration. In acting as Emily’s
apologist, Charlotte obscures the public communicative dimension of the
novelist’s own act, and in doing so she tends to pathologize her sister, or
the artist in general.

The idea of inspiration is straightforward where the novelist appeals
to a higher authority (the muse, the divinity), but where the inspiration is
demonized, the legitimation of its authority involves a more subtle rheto-
ric. The authority of demonized or Dionysian inspiration lies in the subter-
兰anean discourses of the primitive, the instinctual, and the unconscious,
discourses to which the novelist, as a bourgeois, rational, conscious sub-
ject, can only appeal by adopting a double strategy: to embrace, in the act
of narration, the imperatives of such another discourse, and to maintain
nevertheless a sense of its otherness. The novelist as medium, then, both
appropriates and submits to the inspirational authority; both inscribes and
is inscribed upon.

The authority of the unconscious has been considerably enhanced
since Emily Brontë’s day, and only partly in relation to the decline of the
kind of moral anxiety about fiction evinced by her sister. As a way of
talking about the source of a narrative, invocation of the unconscious
has two potential advantages for the novelist. The first is that its asso-
ciation with the primitive and instinctual stakes a claim for some degree
of collective relevance, for a generality of significance that escapes the
idiosyncrasies of the novelist as a conscious subject. Its legitimacy is that
of a common frame of reference to which novelist and reader alike should
be able to connect, in spite of the inevitable differences between their
individual sensibilities, values, and points of view. The second advantage
is to an extent antithetical, in that the unconscious may also serve as an
evasion of the conventional, or of the shared assumptions and norms of
the novelist’s culture. Here the unconscious authorizes a defamiliarization
of received modes of understanding and legitimizes a vision which in
some way subverts conventional wisdom and penetrates beyond superfi-
cial and habitual, acculturated ways of seeing. Or again, it defies the self-
censorship to which the common run of the novelist’s and reader’s thoughts
are subject, in the name of a more fundamental truth. This more radical
project, the evasion of the novelist’s habituated and self-censoring modes
of thought, has justified extensions of the role of the unconscious into
every aspect of the creative process. But of course, even here, conscious
authorial choice irreducibly frames the whole enterprise, and to that extent
it cannot be interpreted as the discourse of another (the unconscious) with
its own communicative agenda: if it had no conscious, authorial sanction
at all, it would never see the light of day. The real interest, for both novelist
and reader, is the potential for discovery offered by such creative practices.
Only on such a basis can their legitimation in negative terms—as ways of
eluding the constraints of conventional modes of narrative understand-
ing—be reconciled with the fact that the results are necessarily evaluated
in relation to precisely those norms.

Once it is recognized that this negative principle has a validity of its
own, according to which the avoidance of creative control is simply a
mechanism for innovation, the specific creative authority of the unconscious
is redundant. The creative process may be just as legitimately subjected
to mechanisms based on chance, or on any kind of artificial constraint.
Raymond Roussel, for example, despite his subsequent adoption by the
Surrealists, didn’t need the authority of the unconscious to justify his use,
in Locus Solus and elsewhere, of elaborate homophonic puns as devices
for text generation: it was enough that they were an effective stimulus to
the production of narrative.¹ The same could be said of the lipogrammatic
narrative devices used by Georges Perec in La Disparition, or Walter Abish
in Alphabetical Africa, or the use of textually disruptive mechanisms such
as the “cut-up method” by William Burroughs. These devices have the
potential to subvert conventional language and thinking, and they under-
mine ordinary assumptions about the communication contract between
author and reader by frustrating any interpretation that seeks to refer
the narrative directly to authorial intent. But above all, they provide for
creative surprise and discovery—for the novelist, as for the reader. Despite
the creative writing maxim that a mechanically imposed narrative plan
will stifle creativity, here avowedly mechanical means are used to achieve
the opposite effect.
This is as far removed from the notion of the novelist as originator of the narrative as it is possible to get: here the narrative only emerges as a by-product of obedience to external constraints on the novelist’s discursive agency. But the differences between such practices and the more traditional models of authorial inspiration with which I began are superficial—Burroughs, indeed, made straight-faced claims that his cut-up methods could be a channel of communication from the “pre-written” future (1989: 28). Whatever the source or engine of the narrative, and whatever scope its influence is allowed to have in determining the final form of the text, the novelist’s role in all cases is that of a mediator between that source and the reader, one whose claim is not to have originated meaning, but to have gained access to it, discovered it, or identified it and sanctioned its authority.

Representational Imperatives

Up to this point, I have been dealing with models of abrogated narrative creativity in which the novelist’s deference is to discursive imperatives. The most common novelistic sense of creativity as a kind of mediation, however, is not discursive but representational: it is the widely attested experience of having a narrative hijacked by its characters. I propose to take the general currency of this experience for granted, and consider its manifestations in the comments of a few novelists whose idiosyncrasies can perhaps shed more light on the general case. I do not mean to claim universality for such an experience of creativity; nor do I want to privilege it over authorial accounts that, on the contrary, emphasize and celebrate an extraordinary degree of control over narrative representation. The notion of autonomous characters is of course figurative (as will be underlined by my discussion of character in the next chapter); my interest is in the light shed by such a notion upon the general conditions of narrative creativity.

One point at which the notion of autonomous character actually coincides with that of demonic inspiration is in Scott’s prefaces to the Waverley novels, which speak of a demon who “seats himself on the feather of my pen when I begin to write, and leads it astray from the purpose,” and in the next breath, “When I light on such a character as Bailie Jarvie, or Dalgetty, my imagination brightens, and my conception becomes clearer at every step which I take in his company, although it leads me many a weary mile away from the regular road, and forces me to leap hedge and
ditch to get back into the route again” (1978: 49). This dual figuration of the experience clearly articulates an ambivalence. It is a “sore point” that under the demon’s influence, his planned “regular mansion turns out a Gothic anomaly” (indeed Scott’s Gothic affiliations, as with Brontë, make the idiom of demonic inspiration a natural choice). By contrast, his delight in following the lead of his characters is quite apparent, and indeed if the impulse is resisted, “my thoughts become prosy, flat and dull; I write painfully to myself and under a consciousness of flagging which makes me flag still more” (49). Authorial control and narrative creativity, then, are represented as antagonistic values. The emphasis falls on the dismaying loss of control when inspiration is figured discursively, but on the independent vitality of the narrative when it is figured in representational terms. This emphasis seems to imply an affirmation of mimesis over plot—Scott opposes “materials” and “story” (49)—the narrative artifice of plot being overthrown by fidelity to the representation of character. But the opposition here is not simply between static, descriptive mimesis and dynamic narrative action: when a character takes over the narrative, it is in narrative terms that he or she does so. The character dictates the course of the narrative insofar as the novelist’s conception of that character implies or excludes certain narrative possibilities. The reciprocity of character and action being what it is, it might be further said that this process is itself the unraveling of an authorial understanding of that character (or of something embodied in that character) which is already narrative in form. Narration and representation are symbiotic; Scott’s account of the autonomy of his characters is just as disingenuous as the appeal to his demon, and both need to be understood in relation to his deeper rhetorical purposes.

There is good reason for caution in interpreting such comments from the “Introductory Epistle to The Fortunes of Nigel.” Scott, at this point in his career, is still sheltering behind the anonymity of “the Author of Waverley,” and this is one of his most elaborate prefatory games. It purports to be Captain Clutterbuck’s account of his dialogue with the “eidolon” of his creator, and so both plays upon and consolidates the elusiveness of Scott’s own authority. This evasion, however, and especially its inversion of the narratorial hierarchy of author and character, is very much to the point, as are its immediate rhetorical dividends for Scott’s presentation of his novel to the public. The obliqueness of the preface allows him considerable license for pre-emptive self-criticism and, more assertively, the ironization or rebuttal of possible objections. The remarks on inspiration occur in the context of Clutterbuck’s intimation that the frequency of the Author’s
publications implies hasty composition, a charge which has both literary and mercenary implications. In response to the literary charge, Scott’s dichotomized model of the novelist as medium allows him to concede to the accusation, but then counter it in the same terms. When Clutterbuck returns to the issue as a matter of “the lucre of gain,” it occasions a similar double response: the Author first boldly affirms the view that “a successful author is a productive labourer,” and that the convention of literary disin- terestedness is cant; and in doing so he makes a strong case for regarding the test of marketability as itself the only valid ground for a novelist’s authority (53). But then he hastens to dissociate himself from the motive of gain: “For myself, I am not displeased to find the game a winning one; yet while I pleased the public, I should probably continue it merely for the pleasure of playing; for I have felt as strongly as most folks that love of composition which is perhaps the strongest of all instincts, driving the author to the pen, the painter to the pallet, often without either the chance of fame or the prospect of reward” (54–55). Scott’s unease about the profession of novelist leads him to invoke the language of compul- sion as testament to a gentleman’s literary integrity, his amateurism. This recurrence to the theme of his earlier remarks implies that the contrasting “sore point” about the demon’s disruption of his narrative plan does not express an aesthetic attitude so much as the interests of the novelist as a commercial manufacturer. Such an antithetical way of disposing the mat- ter is in significant contrast to another voluminous producer of novels, Anthony Trollope, to whom I will shortly turn; but first there is one more aspect of Scott’s case worth noting.

The fundamental issue being so artfully negotiated in the introductory epistle is Scott’s claim upon his readership—his authority. This is the common thread running through the formal playfulness of his self-presenta- tion, the question of his creative control and the integrity of his business relations with the consumers of his novels. It is also the key to another preoccupation of the prefaces, which surfaces parodically here and again in the similarly devious “Prefatory Letter to Peveril of the Peak”: the historical novelist’s relation to history. History, although seeming to offer up the authority of actual events to the novelist’s narrative mediation, is itself already narrative in form. Here again, the conventional opposition between mimetic fidelity and the novelistic artifice of plot is misleading. Indeed, Scott’s invocations of history are often used against the censure of mimetic criteria, as a means of vindicating narrative episodes he himself avows to be artificial. The focus of the dialogue with Jonas Dryasdust, however, is the converse problem of Scott’s liberties with history, and the
grounds upon which they can be authorized. He begins by appealing to the general disclaimer implied by fictionality as such, which makes any objection to unhistorical assertions “a discharge of artillery against a wreath of morning mist” (66). But he is clearly unwilling to relinquish the authority of history altogether: he claims at least to be awakening the historical curiosity of his readers, or even supplying in the more careless some compensation for the lack of it (67). Once again, he is trying to have it both ways, but this attempt to wrest the authority of history from Dryasdust’s antiquarian pedantry is more interesting than a simple polarization of the historian’s responsibilities and the novelist’s creative freedom. Scott seems to be playing off the Aristotelian view of fiction as more philosophical than history (that is, appealing to the higher authority of universals rather than to historical particulars) against something that Lukács would recognize as a sense of typicality (that is, the ability of a narrative of fictional particulars to articulate in individual terms the general movement of history). Scott offers his historical fiction as a simultaneous adherence to these converse principles. Or, to resist his prefatory rhetoric a little, he invites the reader to discriminate as appropriate between the authorities upon which his narrative is grounded.

In Trollope’s case, too, the question of the novelist’s relation to his readers is as pertinent as the question of productivity mentioned earlier. As with Scott, both issues are directly involved in the way the narrative’s own imperatives are conceived. Trollope’s notoriously businesslike attitude to his art, as expressed in the Autobiography, pushes Scott’s notion of the novelist as productive labourer to an extreme that many commentators, including Henry James, see as indicative of “a certain infusion of the common” (1911: 99). What is striking for my purposes here, however, is that this authorial industry does not, for Trollope, involve the brutal subordination of his materials, but coexists with an unusually strong sense of obligation to the integrity and autonomy of his characters. In contrast to Scott, Trollope stands for a synthesis of the novelist’s job of work and the sense of creative mediation, and he is equally emphatic on both sides. Trollope’s sense of involvement with the lives of his characters went well beyond the common formulae of nineteenth-century novelists. He not only held rigorous views about the novelist’s accountability for his characters—“on the last day of each month recorded, every person in his novel should be a month older than on the first” (1950: 233)—but also continued his imaginative acquaintance with them beyond the bounds of the novels themselves, even (as with Mrs. Proudie, after he had killed her off) beyond the bounds of their creative utility. The terms of these imaginative
relationships are very much those of the novelist’s deference to the author-
ity of autonomous characters: “He must argue with them, quarrel with
them, forgive them, and even submit to them” (233). But this deference,
far from conflicting with Trollope’s two hundred and fifty words every
quarter of an hour, is the condition of their possibility. It is precisely by
conceiving of himself as the scribe for the lives of characters who exist
independently, in a realm of imagination, that Trollope rendered the func-
tion of the novelist so unproblematically businesslike. That efficiency need
not be understood as his ultimate motive, however, especially as he was
himself well aware that his overproduction exceeded all commercial sense
(Wall 1988: 7). His rapidity of composition was rather a way of facilitat-
ing the imaginative mediation of his characters, which was finally its own
satisfaction, even to the point of compulsion.

Trollope’s lack of artistic pretension, more than the excess of his pro-
ductivity, was the quality to which James objected in him: he lacked a
proper sense of the high calling of the novelist’s art. Oddly, though, James’s
censure in this respect falls most heavily, not upon the literalism to which
Trollope’s sense of character seems to reduce the novelist’s creative enter-
prise, but upon the most flagrantly artificial aspect of his writing: “He
took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was
telling was only, after all, a make-believe. He habitually referred to the
work in hand (in the course of that work) as a novel, and to himself as a
novelist, and was fond of letting the reader know that this novelist could
direct the course of events according to his pleasure” (1911: 116). On the
face of it, there are good grounds for surprise that Trollope, of all novelists,
should behave in this way: his insistence on the relation between novelist
and character seems to be comprehensively undermined. It is so only from
the perspective of James’s own meditations upon the novelist’s obligations
to the logic of narrative, however, and it fits with Trollope’s sense of things
once its implications for the relation between novelist and reader are teased
out. Trollope’s imaginative involvement with his characters risks casting
the novelist as a private fantasist, and he appears to have been aware
that the legitimacy of presenting such narratives to the public depended
on a counterbalancing detachment. His authorial intrusions establish a
critical distance, for both author and reader, from the narrative’s own
imaginative momentum: they shift the emphasis from involvement to
evaluation, and restore the sense of creative choice. The novelist’s role as
arbiter, in the mediation of no matter how compelling a narrative logic,
is reaffirmed. In the process Trollope draws attention to the discursive
nature of fiction, and so makes the reader’s interpretative naturalization of
that discourse—its evaluation in terms of familiar nonfictional discourses—more than usually self-conscious. This sense of the accountability of his narratives to the ordinary truths of his readers’ world was thoroughgoing, and one of Trollope’s greatest strengths: it serves to keep the particulars of his narrative in constant touch with a general framework of understanding which he shared with his readership. One of his better known intrusions, in chapter fifteen of *Barchester Towers*, is symptomatic: he disabuses his readers of any doubt over the prospect of Eleanor marrying either Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope, insisting that whatever interest his narrative has to offer is not dependent on the thrill of suspense. Suspense is a staple of narrative rhetoric, but it conflicts with Trollope’s ideal of novelistic propriety, because it holds the reader hostage to the narrative, betraying the community of author and reader: “Our doctrine is, that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other. Let the personages of the drama undergo ever so complete a comedy of errors among themselves, but let the spectator never mistake the Syracusan for the Ephesian; otherwise he is one of the dupes, and the part of a dupe is never dignified” (1980: 144). This image of author and reader proceeding side by side is, after all, entirely in keeping with the way in which Trollope situates himself in relation to his material. His own sense of his characters is very much that of a reader, and although as the mediator of the narrative he is privileged to select and channel its development, his authority rests only on the judiciousness with which he does so, according to criteria which are shared by author and reader alike.

Elizabeth Bowen’s reflections on character in “Notes on Writing a Novel” have an indirect relation to Trollope which is too felicitous to pass over. The phrase “creation of character,” she says, “is misleading. Characters pre-exist. They are found. They reveal themselves slowly to the novelist’s perception—as might fellow-travellers seated opposite one in a very dimly-lit railway carriage” (1950: 251). This, as it happens, is exactly the scenario in the piece which precedes this essay in her *Collected Impressions*—a radio play in which the modern protagonist, having fallen asleep in a railway carriage, discovers Trollope himself seated opposite. The conversation turns to the novelist’s methods of character creation:

TROLLOPE: . . . I put myself into the habit of steady and rapid writing, set myself to turn out a set number of pages daily—and, moreover, turned ’em out, every day. That being so, my people just—came along.

WILLIAM: You suggest, you know, that a novelist is a sort of medium. Sits down, takes up his pen, goes into a sort of trance—

The nonspiritualist interpretation of the novelist as medium, on the other hand, is clearly articulated in Bowen’s own discussion: “The novelist’s perceptions of his characters take place in the course of the actual writing of the novel. To an extent, the novelist is in the same position as his reader. But his perceptions should be always just in advance” (251). The novelist’s creative act, for Bowen, is emphatically a process of discernment rather than the transmission of a preconceived meaning. Her sense of the fundamental necessity to which the novelist must submit is not primarily defined in terms of character, though, but plot—an emphasis on the particularity of the narrative itself which aligns her, as we shall see, with James: “Plot might seem to be a matter of choice. It is not. The particular plot is something the novelist is driven to. It is what is left after the whittling-away of alternatives” (249). As a corollary of this, she regards objectivity as an essential of the novelist’s art. “Pre-assumptions [she instances “social, political, sexual, national, aesthetic, and so on”] are bad. . . . Great novelists write without pre-assumptions” (258). She does not mean the novelist has no viewpoint, no conviction, but “the conviction must come from certainty of the validity of the truth the novel is to present” (258). The grounds of this truth prove elusive, however. Having elaborated upon the moral power of narrative’s revelation of “truth in action,” she asks herself, “Truth by what ruling, in relation to what? Truth by the ruling of, and in relation to, the inherent poetic truth that the novel states” (258). The pressure to transcend the novelist’s subjectivity is exerted by an elevated sense of the truth of art: Bowen’s rather baldly tautological statement of the matter reflects the extent to which authorial impersonality, the ruling idea of that view of the novel, conflates the novelist’s sense of narrative mediation with a claim that the logic of such mediation is an index of objective and universal truths.6

It’s unclear whether the ideal of authorial impersonality is a product of the novelist’s experience of creation as mediation, or a motive behind the claim to that experience. Once the rhetoric of objective truth is taken out of the equation, it remains possible to understand the doctrine of impersonality in relation to the fictional narrative itself, rather than the communicative situation within which that narrative operates: in other words, to understand impersonality as a fiction of the fiction, a representation of the novelist’s relation to the narrative rather than to the reader. This double aspect would seem to be a way of reading the duality expressed in
Flaubert’s well-known formulation of the creed of artistic impersonality: “The artist in his work must be like God in his creation—invisible and all-powerful: he must be everywhere felt, but never seen” (1980: 230). Joyce’s (or Stephen Dedalus’s) contribution to this analogy takes impersonality a step further by wholly disregarding the communicative relation: “The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (1992: 233). This model of the artist’s self-effacement in pursuit of an aesthetic absolute turns upon a familiar transfer of agency, which “fills every person [of the drama] with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life” (233). Abstracted from the work’s representational world as the God of creation, the consummately impersonal artist grants the narrative a similar internal autonomy to that conceded by the hapless novelist whose characters simply take over; but here the dispensation is made without admitting any loss of personal artistic credit—rather the reverse. The appeal of this as a reconciliation between the novelist’s obeisance to the imperatives of art, and the proprietorial claim implied by the marketing of a narrative product, is obvious enough: the narrative is legitimated by its self-determination (theologically speaking, its free will), but it is still undeniably the novelist’s to sell.

My representative of the novelist as consummate artist is Henry James, whose name has arisen more than once already in this discussion. Unsurprisingly, the novelist’s relation to the marketplace doesn’t loom as large in James’s writings as it does in Trollope or Scott, but he does nevertheless make the same link, in an ironic aside, between the sense of creative mediation and the material considerations of the profession: “one cherishes, after the fact, any proved case of the independent life of the imagination; above all if by that faculty one has been appointed mainly to live” (1962: 152). But the significance of the opposition between Trollope (the novelist as tradesman) and James (the novelist as artist) is that it is James who feels the need to shore up the authority of fiction. His objection to Trollope’s authorial self-consciousness was not that it was often artless in execution, but that it was “suicidal” in principle. His assumption was that any allusion to the fictionality of the narrative left its authority ungrounded and arbitrary: “It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regard himself as an historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as an historian that he has the smallest locus standi. As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempt a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real” (1911: 116–17). For James, then, the novelist’s creativity must of necessity be subordinated
to a prior narrative logic, and he repeatedly conceives of this inevitability (“the necessary, the precious ‘tightness’ of the place”) in terms of “the authenticity of concrete existence,” so that once he has the “hint” of his subject, “the point is not in the least what to make of it, but only, very delightfully and very damnably, where to put one’s hand on it” (1962: 311–12). James’s accounts of the creative process, with their recurrent metaphors of germs, seeds, and crucibles, consistently figure the novelistic imagination as essentially the site for a process with (biological, chemical) laws of its own: “These are the fascinations of the fabulist’s art, these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful determinations, on the part of the idea entertained, to grow as tall as possible, to push into the light and the air and thickly flower there” (42). But this is far from undermining the exalted calling of the novelist, which resides precisely in the scrupulous discernment with which these necessities are unveiled: “he alone has the secret of the particular case, he alone can measure the truth of the direction to be taken by his developed data. There can be for him, evidently, only one logic for these things; there can be for him only one truth and one direction—the quarter in which his subject most completely expresses itself” (123). The novelist’s concern is with “the careful ascertainment of how it shall do so, and the art of guiding it with consequent authority” (123): this “consequent” authority, which James calls “the treasure of treasures, or at least the joy of joys” (123), is that of a guide, a facilitator—a medium.

Rhetorical Imperatives

As soon as the emphasis falls more on the novelistic art than novelistic obligations, though, the rigour of James’s adherence to the objective logic of the actual seems to diminish. There is already more than a hint of subjectivity in the repetitions of “he alone . . . for him . . .” above; and his account of the actual origins of The Spoils of Poynton emphatically contrasts the artist’s “sense for the subject” with “the fatal futility of Fact”—the “classic ineptitude” to which “with the full measure of the artistic irony one could once more, and for the thousandth time, but take off one’s hat” (122). James here raises a critical question which escapes the habitual frame of his sense of the novelist’s obligations: “If life, presenting us the germ, and left merely to herself in such a business, gives the case away, almost always, before we can stop her, what are the signs for our guidance, what the primary laws for a saving selection, how do we know
when and where to intervene, where do we place the beginnings of the wrong or the right deviation?” (120). To what authority does the novelist defer if not, after all, that of life? James excuses himself from pursuing the question, pausing only to suggest “that general conditions fail or mislead, and that even the fondest of artists need ask no wider range than the logic of the particular case” (121). It seems to me, though, that the rudiments of an answer are already there in that comment, and they connect with observations James makes elsewhere. The particularity of narrative is finally irreducible to the embodiment of general laws, of a logic anterior to itself, even as it proceeds by invoking them. Its authority finally is as story itself, which, in the preface to *The Ambassadors*, he describes as “obviously, overwhelmingly, the prime and precious thing (as other than this I have never been able to see it)”—but also as “just the spoiled child of art” (314–15). The ambivalence is a considered acknowledgment of the extent to which his own efforts to hold his fiction accountable to general criteria are overwhelmed by the way in which the story “simply makes for itself,” however well it creates the illusion that its authority is well grounded: “It rejoices, none the less, at its best, to seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it’s about—liable as it yet is at moments to be caught by us with its tongue in its cheek and absolutely no warrant but its splendid impudence” (315). It seems that “story” answers to no reason but its own, and James further recognizes that this willfulness on the part of narrative extends even beyond those occasions when the novelist actually experiences the symptomatic loss of creative choice: this spoilt child probably has its own way “even when we most flatter ourselves that we negotiate with it by treaty” (315).

This line of thought stands as a corrective to the inference possible from my discussion so far, that the imperatives determining novelists’ narrative choices are essentially criteria of realistic representation, which would be to say that beneath all the mystification, the mundane reason novelists find themselves constrained to develop their narratives in certain ways is that they come up against their obligations to the mimetic correspondence between their fiction and reality. James’s reflections indicate that this is not the case, at least in any straightforward way: the rule of narrative derives from imperatives grounded in meaning rather than existence. The point can be confirmed by examining the similar experience of fictional creativity reported by an author whose aesthetic assumptions are not of a realist persuasion.

Donald Barthelme’s thoughts on narrative creativity begin with the outline for an implausible story involving an azalea bush, a gold pocket
watch, a handsome thief named Zeno, a chastity belt, and two disaffected Sarah Lawrence students. His sense of the writer’s experience, in the face of his scenario and in search of what happens next, is one of “not-knowing,” and this is essential to his notion of creativity: “Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (1985: 510). But Barthelme’s essay, playful and inventive as it is, turns out to be preoccupied with the imperatives to which the author, even in the absence of a realist aesthetic, is bound to defer. “Inside the pocket watch there is engraved a legend. Can I make it out? I think so: Drink me, it says. No no, can’t use it, that’s Lewis Carroll’s. But could Zeno be a watch swallow rather than a thief? No again, Zeno’d choke on it, and so would the reader. There are rules. . . . The not-knowing is not simple, because it’s hedged about with prohibitions, roads that may not be taken. The more serious the artist, the more problems he takes into account and the more considerations limit his possible initiatives” (510). Such considerations, he suggests, ensure that his kind of “postmodernist” fiction, despite critical assertions to the contrary, can never be other than about life; it cannot avoid its implication in the contexts both of other discourse (including Lewis Carroll’s) and of its own communicative situation, its accountability to the reader. Exactly which considerations a novelist takes into account are less important than the fact that some will be, whether they are grounded in realism or not. Here, as within a realist aesthetic, the problem of narrative creativity coincides with the novelist’s sense of professional imperatives. He must own his discursive authority (he must not be a plagiarist), yet must also derive it from independent sources to which the reader can hold him accountable. In this context it becomes clear that these imperatives are not simply representational—much less realist—but, more inclusively, rhetorical: the novelist’s authority is finally a negotiated condition of communication.

The prerequisite of any communication is a shared frame of reference, and it is this (rather than any mimetic principle) that assures the inescapability of the novelist’s social, cultural, and historical contexts. The writer of fiction engages with the world, Barthelme suggests, much as a musician (playing the “jazz banjulele”) improvises around a tune: “If I perform even reasonably well, no one will accuse me of not providing a true, verifiable, note-for-note reproduction of ‘Melancholy Baby’—it will be recognized that this was not what I was after” (521). But the tune does nonetheless define the parameters of a creative effort which is necessarily obligated to it as the assumed context of the performance: “Rather I
will play something that is parallel, in some sense, to ‘Melancholy Baby,’ based on the chords of ‘Melancholy Baby,’ made out of ‘Melancholy Baby,’ having to do with ‘Melancholy Baby’—commentary, exegesis, elaboration, contradiction. The interest of my construction, if any, is to be located in the space between the new entity I have constructed and the ‘real’ ‘Melancholy Baby,’ which remains in the mind as the horizon which bounds my efforts” (521). The fact that Barthelme’s choice of analogy is a performance further underlines the congruity of creation and interpretation, as acts or processes. Fictional narrative is a communicative gesture, the rhetorical force of which attaches to the process rather than to the substance of a representational product: acts of fiction are not accounts of imagined worlds, but imaginings. The sense of imagined world is residual: indeed, even in cases that most strongly suggest an authorial sense of reporting upon an imagined world (Wessex, Yoknapatawpha County, Middle Earth), this sense must itself arise from the cumulative effect of numerous prior imaginings.

The imperatives to which novelists defer, then, are not simply those of verisimilitude, neither in a universal sense nor even in senses which recognize the historical, cultural, and ideological contingency of truthful representations. The authority to which fictional narratives appeal may be cast in such terms, and it is certainly a function of truth. But the truth with which they are concerned is not grounded in correspondence. Fundamentally, it is less a matter of any kind of representational accuracy than an appeal to a specifically narrative rightness. This sense of narrative rightness has to do with the concord between the story in hand and other, prior narratives, not ultimately in the sense of a relation to sources, to a tradition, or even to any given set of narrative conventions, but rather to a way of meaning or of understanding—a rhetoric, but one with cultural roots so deep that it effectively usurps the authority of logic. Fictional narrative, to just the extent that it functions fictionally, is not the vehicle for another kind of knowledge; on the other hand, novels are not merely the communication of the story itself, as if its value were intrinsic. What is communicated in fiction is a form of understanding which negotiates dialectically between the general and the particular, and which is irreducibly narrative in kind. Its authority is legitimate only to the extent that it succeeds in assimilating to the extant repertoire of narrative understanding, or narrative competence, defined by its cultural context. The law of narrative is case law.

The novelist’s obedience to principles of narrative rightness informs the whole creative enterprise, not just those occasions when the narrative
seems to dictate to its author. Authorial control of the course of the narrative indicates the extent to which the narrative understanding already implicit in the novelist’s conception proves adequate to its realization, whereas the loss of that control, that foreknowledge, indicates the extent to which the creative process is a revision of the narrative understanding of its premises—or simply the discovery of other, more compelling narrative meanings. In other words, the novelist’s creative work is never simply original, and in fact it is only a process of discovery when it is least experienced as the author’s own; which, of course, is why an experience that might be expected to cause novelists nothing but frustration is so highly valued by them.

There are aspects of the sense of narrative rightness which tend to encourage a transhistorical view of narrative understanding. It must be, after all, as fundamental to consciousness as our related senses of causality and temporality. But the idea of the novelist as medium helps to qualify that view and historicize the act of fiction, by locating the novelist between the demands of the narrative and those of its readers. Novelists do not merely experience their creative deference to the narrative’s own discursive or representational imperatives; they repeatedly invoke the authority of that experience, as a way of negotiating their own relation to a particular cultural context, readership, or market. The sources of creative authority are so often discussed in conjunction with the professional relation of novelist to readership because mediation looks both ways and is in itself already a kind of salesmanship. That interestedness, with all its rhetorical and ideological concomitants, is what implicates the communicative act of fiction in an irreducible sense of its historical situation and occasion.