

Unnatural Voices

Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction

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pre face

Narrative theory, despite its emphasis on narration and narrators, has not yet systematically examined the impressive range of unusual postmodern and other avant garde strategies of narration. At the same time, though postmodernism is certainly the most important and successful literary movement of the last half century, it is one that has often proven resistant to traditional narrative theory. This book is intended to rectify these unfortunate absences. It explores in depth one of the most significant aspects of late modernist, avant garde, and postmodern narrative—the creation, fragmentation, and reconstitution of narrative voices—and offers a theoretical account of these unusual and innovative strategies. This is an empirical study that describes and theorizes the actual practices of significant authors, instead of building on *a priori* linguistic or rhetorical categories; such an inductive approach is essential because many extreme forms of narration seem to have been invented precisely to transgress fundamental linguistic and rhetorical categories. By drawing on a wide range of examples and utilizing the work of postmodern narrative theorists, I hope to give these practices the thorough analysis they deserve. I will also take care to identify substantial if unexpected antecedents in earlier texts by authors ranging from Gogol to Conrad as well as apposite modern and contemporary works not usually considered from this perspective. In addition, I include some discussion of

the work of Samuel Beckett in each chapter, thus providing a single (if knotty) thread that runs throughout the book.

The *first* chapter, “Transgressing Self and Voice,” begins with a brief inventory of a number of innovative contemporary uses of narrators and narration, including narration by animals, small children, corpses, machines, and a Minotaur, which move ever further away from conventional human speakers. We will look briefly at the career of Robbe-Grillet, and follow out the varied construction and deconstruction of the narrators of his fictions. The chapter goes on to provide a theoretical overview of recent deployments of narration and describes a new kind of textual drama that hinges on the disclosure of the unexpected identity of the narrator at the end of the work. The chapter outlines the existing range of first, second, and third person forms, including such unusual types as “it,” “they,” and passive voice narration. I then contrast these practices with current theories of narrative poetics which are unable to fully comprehend the distinctive difference of such work. While concentrating on postmodern works, I also pay attention to earlier and adjacent forms, noting salient continuities and ruptures.

The *second* chapter studies second person narration in depth, identifying three major forms of second person fiction, reflecting on its functions and nature, and commenting on the reasons for its utilization by authors from a number of minority or disenfranchised communities. The *third* chapter traces the development of fiction narrated in the first person plural from its unexpected origins in Conrad’s *Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* to its more familiar present incarnations and its less known postcolonial avatars. This chapter elucidates the play of unreliability, the knowledge of other minds, and the constitution of a collective subject in these texts. I also discuss “we” narration as a vehicle for representations of intersubjective feminist, agrarian, revolutionary, and postcolonial consciousnesses. The *fourth* chapter surveys recent developments in multiperson narration, that is, texts that employ both first and third or, in some cases, first, second, and third person narration. It also discusses indeterminate speakers and logically impossible acts of narration. It assesses claims and debates that stretch from Lukács to feminism and new historicism concerning the ideological valence of specific kinds of narration. Having completed three chapters of analysis of the most prominent alternative forms of narration, I then go on to offer a flexible model that can situate all of these odd but increasingly common voices.

These analyses in turn are followed by explorations of new areas

of experimental narration that have not been studied from the vantage point of a comprehensive approach to the theory of narration. I begin (in Chapter *Five*) with an examination of three curious narrating figures that exist at the limits of the utterable: The first is what I call the “interlocutor,” or the voice that asks questions that the rest of the narrative then answers. This feature, found in the catechistic chapter (“Ithaca”) in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, is fairly common in postmodern fiction, and occupies an unusual and unstable position between narrator and narratee. The second is the phenomenon of “denarration,” voices that erase the texts that they have been creating, such as found in the sentences, “Yesterday it was raining. Yesterday it was not raining.” The last, which I call the “permeable narrator,” slips (or is collapsed) into other minds and discourses and speaks what should be impossible for it to know; this is a favorite strategy of Beckett, especially in the trilogy, and is common in subsequent French fiction and elsewhere. I conclude this chapter with a brief analysis of distinctively postmodern types of unreliability. Chapter *Six* surveys unusual narrators and antimimetic kinds of narration in contemporary drama, focusing on the more outrageous practices of Stoppard, Duras, David Henry Hwang, Paula Vogel, and (naturally) Beckett. I focus on plays in which the nature and identity of the narrator constitutes part of the drama of the work, where offstage voices construct events, and the contents of one mind contaminates another.

The *seventh* chapter reassesses the question of the implied author and argues for the continued viability of this concept by assembling a range of texts that have two or more historical authors and either one or more implied authors. I also examine works by a single author that seem to emerge from antithetical aesthetic stances and speculate on the implications of such texts for a theory of the implied author. I discuss the limits and utility of the concept, and point to places where the author’s voice seems to override that of the narrator. Booth’s concept of the “career implied author” is reassessed and found relevant for the analysis of the larger oeuvre of writers throughout the history of fiction. I go on to take up the understudied topic of multiple implied readers in a work and compare it to the case of multiple implied authors of a single text. I conclude with a new model of the narrator–implied author–historical author continuum.

In the final chapter, I summarize the main argument of the book and go on to discuss further the modernist origins and historical antecedents of the anti-realist practices of so many contemporary works. Finally, I end with a description of a general “anti-poetics” of narrative

for these and other anti-representational works to be conceived as a supplement and foil to the traditional poetics based on mimetic and “natural” narratives. I advocate the move away from rigid typologies and Chinese box-type models of embedded speakers and toward an alternate figuration that stresses the permeability, instability, and playful mutability of the voices of nonmimetic fictions. It is hoped that this book will fill a large gap in narrative theory, contribute to scholarship on Samuel Beckett and on modern and postmodern fiction, and help provide enhanced coverage, precision, and conceptual modeling for the theory and analysis of narrators and narration.

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