The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction

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The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction

I want to begin this essay by pointing out what I think has become a salient feature, or at least significant trend, in contemporary British and American literary fiction: namely, a prominent reappearance of the ostensibly outmoded omniscient narrator. In the last two decades, and particularly since the turn of the millennium, a number of important and popular novelists have produced books which exhibit all the formal elements we typically associate with literary omniscience: an all-knowing, heterodiegetic narrator who addresses the reader directly, offers intrusive commentary on the events being narrated, provides access to the consciousness of a range of characters, and generally asserts a palpable presence within the fictional world.

The novelists I’m thinking of include Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, Zadie Smith, David Lodge, Adam Thirlwell, Michel Faber, and Nicola Barker in the UK; and Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Tom Wolfe, Rick Moody, and John Updike in the US. In this paper I want to consider why so many contemporary writers have turned to omniscient narration, given the aesthetic prejudice against this narrative voice which has prevailed for at least a century. For instance, in 2004 Eugene Goodheart pointed out that: “In the age of perspectivism, in which all claims to authority are suspect, the omniscient narrator is an archaism to be patronized when he is found in the works of the past and to be scorned when he appears in contemporary work” (1).

How are we to evaluate novels which employ an ostensibly redundant nineteenth century form in the twenty-first century? Are they conservative and nostalgic
by virtue of their form, or are they experimental and contemporary in their use of this form? This paradox is captured with ironic pithiness in the last paragraph of David Lodge’s 2002 novel, Thinks: “In the first year of the new millennium Helen published a novel which one reviewer described as ‘so old-fashioned in form as to be almost experimental’. It was written in the third person, past tense, with an omniscient and sometimes intrusive narrator” (340).

We are accustomed to an historical trajectory of the novel which holds that modernist and postmodernist fiction throughout the twentieth century can be characterised, in part, as a rejection of the moral and epistemological certainties of omniscient narration. I want to suggest that the contemporary revival of omniscience in fact represents a further development and refinement of some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction. I want to further argue that the reworking of omniscience in contemporary fiction can be understood as one way in which authors have responded to a perceived decline in the cultural authority of the novel over the last two decades.

Attending to the features of contemporary omniscience will also help us to productively reconsider the formal category of omniscient narration itself. According to Gérard Genette, in Narrative Discourse, the paradox of poetics is that “there are no objects except particular ones and no science except of the general” (23). Existing theoretical accounts of omniscient narration derive largely from the study of classic nineteenth century novels. While narrative theory acknowledges historical shifts in fashion, it operates with a synchronic understanding of omniscient narration as a static element of narrative, produced by the structural relationship between focalization and voice. A study of contemporary fiction will enable us to approach the category of omniscient narration as a mutable and historically contingent practice of novelistic craft sensitive to historical and cultural contexts.

THE DEBATE ABOUT OMNISCIENCE

It is a fascinating historical coincidence, I think, that a theoretical debate about omniscience has emerged in the first decade of the new millennium, at roughly the same time that a revival of omniscient narration has reached a critical mass in contemporary fiction. A dramatization of this debate would see Nicholas Royle and Jonathan Culler lined up for a concerted new millennium attack on literary omniscience, and Barbara K. Olson and Meir Sternberg carrying out a staunch rearguard defence.¹ And yet, so far, besides terminological wranglings and abstract theorizing, the debate has not led beyond re-examinations of nineteenth century fiction, such as William Nelles’s 2006 article “Omniscience for Atheists: Jane Austen’s Infallible Narrator.” I think more recent novels have yet to be canvassed because surveys of contemporary fiction continue to cast omniscience as an outmoded narrative voice which writers have rejected in favour of more radical experiments with form. This, for instance, is Brian Richardson’s argument in his 2006 book, Unnatural Voices. In an exhaustive survey of twentieth century fiction, Richardson claims that there “is a general move away from what was thought to be
omniscient’ third person narration to limited third person narration to ever more unreliable first person narrators to new explorations of ‘you,’ ‘we,’ and mixed forms” (13).2

According to Nelles, Jonathan Culler, “will-he-nil-he, appears to be a lightning-rod in the current debate over omniscience” (128). In his 2004 article “Omniscience,” Culler asserts that omniscience “is not a useful concept for the study of narration, that it conflates and confuses several different factors that should be separated if they are to be well understood—that it obfuscates the various phenomena that provoke us to posit the idea” (184). For Culler, there are four textual ‘phenomena’ which produce effects generally understood as omniscience: the performative authority of reliable narrative declarations about the fictional world; the reporting of character’s private thoughts; overt self-reflexive statements which draw attention to the invented nature of the fictional world; and the synoptic overview of events as a means of producing a kind of universal wisdom.

Culler carefully sifts through each phenomenon, explaining how the term omniscience is inadequate to describe its effects, and concludes by suggesting the need for an alternative vocabulary. It is hard to argue with his dissection of these phenomena, but ultimately Culler’s essay seems to prove nothing except what most narratologists accept: that omniscience is an imperfect analogy. Narrative theory has of course long employed a range of alternative or near-alternative terms, from “extradiegetic heterodiegetic narration with non or zero focalization” (Genette) to “authorial narration” (Stanzel) to “narrator-focaliser” (Rimmon-Kenan), to “psychonarration” (Cohn). The term omniscient narrator still persists in the wider scholarly community, however, and its continued traction is presumably the occasion for Culler’s essay. Unlike Meir Sternberg, who takes umbrage to Culler’s anti-theism, I do not wish to defend the conceptual value of omniscience as a narrative model and debate the theological and epistemological implications which this entails. I am happy, however, to continue using the term with its attendant narratological imprecisions, for it is embedded in our critical lexicon and none of the existing alternatives quite manages to encompass the narrative freedom (in terms of panoramic scope and narratorial judgement) which the trope of a ‘god-like’ narrator suggests.

One alternative to omniscience which Culler favourably invokes, in order to bypass the traditional analogy with God, and more accurately explain at least one of his phenomena, is ‘telepathy’. This term is proposed by Nicholas Royle in his 2003 book, The Uncanny. Royle argues, in fact, that omniscience, focalization and point of view are all critical fallacies, part of an institutionalized metadiscourse of narrative theory which does not attend to the complexities of actual literary works. Royle wants to do more than abolish an unproductive critical term, though; he wants to reconceptualise our approach to literary history, and our understanding of modern narrative fiction. For Royle, the disappearance of God, or should we say, the authority of God, in the eighteenth century, can be read in the hyperbolic appropriation of the term ‘omniscience’ to denote human knowledge. He further argues that in the late nineteenth century, at the moment when omniscience becomes a common term in literary criticism, the concept of telepathy emerges in the discourse of psychology.

The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction 145
“Telepathy,” Royle argues, “is both thematically and structurally at work in modern fictional narratives, and calls for a quite different kind of critical storytelling than that promoted by the religious, panoptical delusion of omniscience” (261). From brief readings of Dickens and George Eliot, Royle moves to an examination of Salman Rushdie’s 1981 book, *Midnight’s Children*, where, in the character and narrative voice of Saleem Sinai, “the telepathic here accedes to a new level of explicitness,” demonstrating that the structure of fictional narration is fundamentally telepathic rather than omniscient (269).

But what, then, I find myself asking, are we to make of Rushdie’s 1988 book, *The Satanic Verses*, where surely omniscience accedes to a new level of explicitness? Where the narrator self-consciously addresses us as god, or the devil, the creator of a magic realist world? Where the protagonist is visited by this God, who happens to look like Rushdie himself? *The Satanic Verses*, for me, is in fact a convenient historical marker of the moment where, critical fallacy or not, omniscient narration, uncannily, like the return of the repressed, returns in serious literary fiction, but in a different form. In saying this, I mean that *The Satanic Verses* requires critics of the novel to engage with the way Rushdie plays with the conventions of omniscient narration (“I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and –potence, I’m making no claims at present” [10]). The same holds true for the number of prominent novels, published in the two decades since *The Satanic Verses*, which employ omniscient narration.

Before undertaking a brief account of contemporary omniscient narration, I will return to Culler’s essay as a starting point to elaborate my approach. In asking whether the term omniscience is useful for understanding the effects of particular phenomena of narrative fiction, Culler’s essay raises the question of whether any narrative can usefully be classified as omniscient, and thus whether the formal category proposed by critics actually exists in literary practice. In response, I would suggest that the idea of omniscience does not conflate and confuse different factors for which the term is used as a dumping ground. Rather, certain works of narrative fiction produce the overall effect we have labelled omniscience by combining all four phenomena Culler identifies (and others, such as temporal range). So, once they have been separated for the purposes of analysis, the relation between these phenomena needs to be understood.

It is certainly true that, at different times in the history of literary criticism, each of these phenomena has received emphasis as the defining feature of omniscient narration, which is why omniscience has been such a theoretically unstable term. Yet the overriding effect which the various formal elements of omniscient narration both enable, and are underpinned by, is that of a specific rhetorical performance of narrative authority. By this I mean the heterodiegetic narrator’s authority to pass judgement on the fictional world, and the authoritative resonance of these judgements in the extradietic or public world of the reader. Essential to this authority is a coherent narrative persona who serves as a proxy for the author. Contemporary narrative theory has generally been reluctant to engage with this effect because it is at odds with recurring assertions that third person narratives need not possess a narrator.
Culler’s first two phenomena—authoritative reportage of the story world and of characters’ thoughts—also hold true for internally focalized heterodiegetic narratives (and the first for external focalization). Culler himself points out the difficulties of considering these narratives in terms of ‘limited’ omniscience or of narratorial reticence: it effectively confers omniscience on all extradiegetic heterodiegetic narratives. The last two phenomena, however—narrators who self-consciously claim authorship of the work, and narrators who dispense universal wisdom—which are more specific to a typical understanding of omniscient narration (i.e. telling rather than showing), draw upon the epistemological surety of the first two for the authority of their claims. In classical narrative theory, these first two phenomena can be understood in terms of focalization (the regulation or restriction of narrative information), while the latter two can be understood in terms of narrative voice (the relation between the narrator and the story).

In his foundational work, *Narrative Discourse*, Genette points out that “the division between variable focalization and non focalization is sometimes very difficult to establish . . . and yet on this point no one could confuse Fielding’s manner with Stendhal’s or Flaubert’s” (192). This point should indicate that the difference between the work of these novelists is not one of focalization so much as voice, and it is furthermore not a difference which can be accommodated by the idea of person, since they are all heterodiegetic. Genette’s work establishes the crucial theoretical distinction between who sees and who speaks, but never provides an account of the relation between focalization and voice. As a result the relation between these two elements in the construction of omniscient narrative authority has long been vexed. Genette’s brief account of the five functions of a narrator (narrative, directing, communicative, testimonial, ideological) provides some basis for understanding this relationship, and the last seems particularly pertinent to omniscient narration: “the narrator’s interventions, direct or indirect, with regard to the story can also take the more didactic form of an authorized commentary on the action” (256). Genette declines, however, to establish a typology of these functions which would relate back to his other categories of voice and mood. Narrative theory since Genette has sought to clarify the relationship between focalization and voice, and two possible approaches for omniscient narration would be to posit, along with Bal and Rimmon-Kenan, an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator who is also a focaliser, or, along with Chatman, a narratorial slant on filtered events.

Sternberg argues that, according to Genette’s own understanding of focalization as a means of regulating narrative information, heterodiegetic narrators cannot possess restricted knowledge; they merely display a restricted performance of knowledge. “Thus the focalizings called ‘internal,’ whether ‘fixed’ (*The Ambassadors*), ‘variable’ (*Madame Bovary*), or ‘multiple’ (*Rashomon*), and ‘external’ (Hammett’s *The Glass Key*): all typically exhibit an all-knowing (mind reading, omnitemporality, omnipresence) that keeps the given ‘focalized’ information short of what its power makes accessible and might reveal at will to the last ‘nonfocalized’ detail” (“Omniscience” 757). For Sternberg, the author is by definition omniscient and the narrator is the author’s superknowing delegate: “the narrator is constructed in God’s image to perform the required discourse job with authority, epistemic at least” (763). This nar-
rator’s divulgence of omniscient knowledge ranges from omnicomunication to free suppression, depending on the artistic strategy required. In one sense, accepting Sternberg’s claim that all heterodiegetic narrators are omniscient would neutralise epistemological considerations and allow us to focus on the more important rhetorical function of narratorial performance. I’m inclined, though, to use the term omniscient narration as a label only for certain types of fiction, rather than as a general category of narrative: those works which actualize a panoramic intrusive narrator, which perform omniscience, rather than those narratives which report without comment, or in which commentary does not reveal a sense of the narrator’s personality.

In opening his discussion of the fourth phenomenon of omniscience, Culler suggests that “the examples where the best case could be made for the notion are those nineteenth-century novels from George Eliot to Anthony Trollope with extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators who present themselves as histors: spokespersons of authority who judiciously sift and present information, know the innermost secrets of characters, reveal what they would keep hidden, and offer sage reflections on the foibles of humankind” (31). Culler finds that omniscience also fails to adequately describe these novels, and the wisdom their narrators seek to impart. Whether or not the narrators of these novels are sufficiently godlike to warrant the description omniscient is not my concern. They obviously display a constellation of formal qualities which produce an effect that must be named, and named as distinct from other modes of heterodiegetic narration.

My understanding of omniscient narration, then, is that the term is a trope, a figure of speech denoting a particular type of narratorial performance, and not, or not only, a quality of narratorial knowledge. We need not take the notion of an “all-knowing” narrator literally. Genette’s reformulation of omniscient narration defines it as a mode of focalization where the “narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly says more than any of the characters know” (189 emphasis original). We could enter into an epistemological debate about how and how much a narrator knows, but I don’t think this would be of much use for textual analysis. We would do just as well to accept, along with Uri Margolin, that “a basic literary convention endows the claims of an impersonal omniscient narrating voice with truth by fiat, while all claims from other sources are fallible” (77). That is, on a scale from unreliable homodiegetic narration (how can we know whether the narrator of American Psycho is really a serial killer, and whether this narrator himself even knows?) to analytic heterodiegetic narration (is it really worth pondering how much Jane Austen’s narrators actually know?) the latter, by convention, has the highest ‘epistemological’ authority.

The debate over what sort of narrator could possess omniscient knowledge also strikes me as unnecessary. The Anglo-American study of novelistic method may have used the term omniscience, but it never posited a divine or superhuman narrator: it simply accepted the convention of the ‘omniscient author’ telling the story directly. In The Method of Henry James, Joseph Warren Beach writes: “Mr. James is seldom or never, in his later work, the ‘omniscient author.’ He has a great scorn for this slovenly way of telling a story” (56). Narratology has productively complicated this conflation of author and narrator, but it has also created problems with account-
ing for narratorial knowledge. In his 2007 book, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, Richard Walsh challenges several central concepts of narrative theory by presenting “a number of attempts to vindicate rather old-fashioned ideas in new terms” (1). One of Walsh’s challenges is to the concept of the narrator, arguing that all fictional narratives are narrated either by a character or by the author. As a result: “‘Omniscience’, I would suggest, is not a faculty possessed by certain class of narrators but, precisely, a quality of authorial imagination” (73).

I would qualify Walsh’s argument only by suggesting that authors can imagine a personalised ‘second self’ to narrate their story, effectively establishing themselves as extradiegetic characters. This effect of authorial ‘characterisation’ is achieved by the ideological perspective of narratorial commentary. Overt commentary is the chief means of projecting a narratorial self and demonstrating the omniscient narrator’s superior knowledge to the characters in terms of his or her moral sagacity, intellectual breadth and psychological and social insight. The term omniscient narration, then, is best used to describe a certain type of narrative in which a heterodiegetic narrator, by virtue of being an authorial proxy, functions as an extradiegetic character, setting up a communicative rapport with the reader in order to rhetorically highlight the value of the narrative to a broader extraliterary public sphere.

**OMNISCIENCE AND AUTHORITY IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION**

What I’m interested in here, is how contemporary omniscience differs from classic omniscience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not so much in terms of formal narrative features, but in terms of the specific claims for cultural authority which enable this narrative voice to function. Such an investigation takes us into the terrain of contextual narratology, for it necessitates the diachronic analysis of omniscient narration as a formal category, and a synchronic analysis of a narrative’s discursive relationship to contemporaneous extraliterary discourses. Central to my argument is the proposition that there are different genre-specific and historically contingent modes of narrative authority which underpin the performance of omniscience. With this in mind, we can see that the ‘universal’ moral authority of the classic omniscient narrator is indeed no longer available to contemporary writers, but that this has instead been replaced by a range of non-essentialized and more specific relativised modes of narrative authority. That is, the authority of contemporary omniscient narrators is based less on traditional novelistic convention accepted by a unified reading public, than on other extraliterary claims to knowledge or expertise in postmodern culture. For my purposes, then, a model such as Sternberg’s, with its focus on the range between omniscient narrators who are omnicommunicative or freely suppressive, is not as important as the historically specific figure of cultural authority which omniscient narrators invoke to assert the importance of their fictional narratives, and fiction in general, to public discourse.

J. Hillis Miller describes the 19th century omniscient narrator as the voice of a “general consciousness,” and Scholes and Kellogg suggest this narrator combines...
the figures of bard, histor and maker. As I have pointed out, critical and popular opinion has divested authors of this narrative option. Contemporary omniscient narrators can no longer claim the luxury of being spokespersons of authority, asserting accepted truths on behalf of a general consciousness. The contemporary omniscient narrator can best be described as a form of public intellectual: a thinker and writer who is able to speak to a general audience on a range of public issues from a base of specific disciplinary expertise. The emergence of contemporary omniscience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in fact, is roughly coterminous with the rise of interest in the figure of the public intellectual, from Russell Jacoby’s 1987 *The Last Intellectuals* to Amitai Etzioni and Alyssa Bowditch’s 2006 *Public Intellectuals: An Endangered Species*.

The formal contingency of omniscient narration results from the fact that its narrative authority relies upon historically shifting literary-cultural conditions which determine the status and function of the novel in the public sphere. These determining conditions over the last decade or so include: the commercial orientation of multinational publishing houses; increased sales for literary non-fiction such as memoirs and popular history; the competing claims of cinema, television and new media; and the proliferation of demotic opinion in public debate via blogs, opinion polls, and reality TV. The emergence of contemporary omniscience, I would venture, is one response by writers to the decline of literary authority engendered by these conditions. We thus need a narratological approach sensitive to the anxieties about social relevance peculiar to the formal narrative voices employed by contemporary omniscience—voices which seek to assert the cultural authority of novelists as public intellectuals in the new millennium.

One of the difficulties associated with literary omniscience is the slippage between author and narrator encouraged by the analogy with God. Rather than maintain a strict narratological distinction between author (or creator) and narrator (or knower), I think it is important to understand how the combination of these two concepts produces narrative authority. In *The Narrative Act*, a comprehensive study of the complex textual relations through which narrative authority is generated by the production and reception of a work of fiction, Susan Lanser argues for the importance of the ‘extrafictional’ voice of a text. According to Lanser, this voice, which readers equate with the historical author, is manifested in the material publication of the fictional work, from the author’s name and the book’s title to “additional extrafictional information in the form of a preface or foreword, a dedication, an afterword, epigraphs, biographical information about the author or indications of his/her previous publications, chapter titles or other textual divisions, etc.” (124). To extend Lanser’s claim, it can be seen that these extrafictional elements establish a discursive relationship with the extraliterary publications of the historical author. The narrative authority of contemporary omniscience, as it circulates in public discourse, needs to be approached as an interrelation between the narrative voice of a work of fiction and this extrafictional voice.

Most of the authors I have mentioned have produced manifestos, essays, interviews or critical works in which their thoughts on the cultural function of contemporary literature are clear, and which seek to establish the conditions by which their
work may be received. It is possible, then, to establish a discursive continuum from narratorial commentary in a work of fiction to critical pronouncements in a work of nonfiction which establish mutually reinforcing claims for an author’s cultural capital. This approach is particularly apposite for understanding the function of contemporary omniscience because critics of the novels I have identified typically condemn their narratorial commentary as inartistic authorial intrusion. For instance, in his 2004 article, “Character in Contemporary Fiction,” Brian Phillips claims that the characters in Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*, often “speak and think like Franzen, whose management of indirect discourse is compromised by his enthusiasm for narratorial incursion, and who places too much faith in the comedic and analytical properties of his crude interruptions” (640). The common prejudice against intrusive commentary which Phillips displays leads him to argue that “Franzen adjourns to analysis and the ease of his own vocabulary” because he is unable to bring a character to life (ibid.).

If we eschew this prejudice, however, we can see the narrative voice of *The Corrections* precisely as Franzen’s invocation of his extrafictional voice. Such an approach leads us, inevitably, to consider Franzen’s famous 1996 *Harper’s* essay, which many critics and reviewers felt obliged to refer to in their discussion of his novel, and which was republished in the wake of the novel’s success as “Why Bother?” in his 2002 collection, *How to be Alone*. This essay, of course, outlines Franzen’s lament for the novel’s loss of authority since the nineteenth century and its increasing obsolescence in contemporary society as a result of “the banal ascendancy of television, the electronic fragmentation of public discourse” (58). *The Corrections*, then, is an overt example of a novelist’s deployment of omniscient narration as part of a broader project to reassert the authority of the novel in contemporary culture.

The continuum between narrative and extrafictional voice moves in both directions, for, in operating as public intellectuals, novelists seek to establish their cultural authority through a range of genres, while still promoting the central significance of fiction as their source of ‘knowledge’. So, for instance, when in the wake of the London bombings in 2005, the *Times* publishes an opinion article by Salman Rushdie entitled “Muslims Unite! A New Reformation Will Bring Your Faith into the Modern Era,” surely his ‘authority’ as a public intellectual rests upon the fact that he is the author of *The Satanic Verses*?7

I want now to briefly sketch the ways in which postmodern experimentation has influenced contemporary omniscience. Invoking the term postmodern is inevitably fraught with problems of definition, and its deployment in relation to fiction can only ever be provisional. Some prominent definitions of postmodern fiction include: metafictional subversions of the relation between fiction and history (Hutcheon); fiction in which the generic dominant is a narrative foregrounding of ontological questions—as opposed to the epistemological dominant of modernism (McHale); and, in a critique of formalist approaches, the global expansion of English language fiction in the wake of colonialism (Berube). If we accept postmodernism, at the very least, as a periodizing term, I will define postmodern fiction, for the purposes of this essay, as an aesthetic move beyond the ‘exhaustion’ of modernist experimentation without returning to traditional realism, and a cultural response to a perceived crisis of
authority for the novel as a mode of public discourse, dramatised in the phrase “the death of the novel.” David Lodge’s important 1969 essay, “The Novelist at the Crossroads” is a good starting point here, for it identifies three genres which emerged from the anxiety of writers faced with this situation. These genres are: fabulism, or what became known as magic realism; the non-fiction novel, now sometimes called faction, or grouped under the broader term of creative nonfiction; and the problematic novel, now known as metafiction. What I would like to suggest is that Lodge’s three genres are examples of postmodern experimentation with form which opened up the possibility for re-introducing omniscient narration in literary fiction.

John Fowles’s 1969 metafictional classic, The French Lieutenant’s Woman, is a good example here. In his “Notes on an Unfinished Novel,” published in the same year, Fowles wrote: “We suspect people who pretend to be omniscient; and that is why so many twentieth-century novelists feel driven into first person narration . . . But in this new book, I shall try to resurrect this technique” (153). Of course, the narrator of The French Lieutenant’s Woman, as we are told in a direct address to the reader, has the problem of dealing with omniscience in “the age of Barthes and Robbe-Grillet” (85). In other words, an omniscient narrator in the twentieth century cannot be the same as an omniscient narrator in previous centuries.

I propose, then, four permeable and overlapping modes of narrative authority which contemporary omniscience relies upon, and whose postmodern lineage can be traced back to Lodge’s genres. The first mode I will call the ironic moralist. This category grapples self-reflexively with the legacy of the ‘universalising’ moral authority of classic omniscience, and it does so in the shadow of metafiction. Some examples here are David Foster Wallace’s story “Octet,” Martin Amis’s The Information, and Adam Thirlwell’s Politics. The self-reflexivity in this mode, in which the narrator’s intrusive authority is constantly paraded, is less concerned with exposing the artifice of fiction, than with the problem of how to assert the universal in relation to the particular.

For instance, Thirlwell’s novel opens with a sex scene in which the protagonist, Moshe, is excruciatingly self-conscious about his performance. From the second line of the novel, the narrator’s presence is forcefully asserted: “I think you are going to like Moshe. His girlfriend’s name was Nana. I think you will like her too” (3). During this opening scene, Moshe’s concern about what he thinks “must be the most nervous scene in the history of sex” (10) is interrupted by two pages of narrative commentary which begins: “I am going to expand a little on Moshe’s problem. It is a universal problem. It is the universal insecurity that one is not universal” (11). After offering an opinion that the genre of the novel can provide solace precisely for readers with this sort of anxiety, the narrator expresses an anxiety regarding his own capacity to provide this solace: “This book is meant to be reassuring. This book is universal. It is a comparative study. The last thing I want is for this to be just me” (12). In these comments we find both a brazen display of diegetic authority and an agonistic lament for extradiegetic authority. The self-reflexivity facilitates an appeal to the subjective personality of the individual writer, relativising the ‘universal’ authority of the narrator’s omniscience. Such a strategy can also be seen in The Information where the link between narrator and author is made clear:
“And I made the signs—the M, the A—with my strange and twisted fingers, thinking: how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don’t know anything?” (63).

The second mode, which I will call the literary historian, relies upon the authority of the historical record and the possibilities of imaginatively recovering private or occluded moments in history opened up by postmodern theory and explored in ‘factional’ works such as Thomas Keneally’s Schindler’s Ark. Unlike historiographic metafiction—a form which Linda Hutcheon claims the term postmodern fiction should be reserved for (40)—this mode displays a faith in the literary imagination to supplement the historical record, rather than undermine the narrative ‘truth’ of history. Some examples would be Gail Jones’ short story collections, such as The House of Breathing and Fetish Lives, Michel Faber’s The Crimson Petal and the White, Edward P. Jones’s The Known World, and David Lodge’s Author, Author.

Here, the traditional metaphor of the novelist as historian, established by the prototypical omniscient narrator of Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones, becomes literalized in the figure of the contemporary narrator as academic historian. The most interesting aspect of contemporary historical fiction is the way it employs the proleptic voice of history to exploit the narrating instance and establish a temporal gap between modern narrator and historical story; meaning that the narrator’s omniscient authority is simultaneously heightened and problematized by their distance from the events of the story. For instance, the opening paragraph of Gail Jones’s story, “On the Piteous Death of Mary Wollstonecraft,” begins with a lyrical present-tense account of the protagonist’s consciousness: “She arises momentarily from the deepsea of unconsciousness, trawls up her drowned mind through fluid dimensions” (105). The next paragraph begins: “She is about to die, this Mary Wollstonecraft. Born in the year 1759, she will die at thirty-eight of post-partum complications” (105). In a conference paper which identifies The Crimson Petal and the White as a ‘classic’ of the contemporary Neo-Victorian novel, Georges Letissier describes the narrative voice in these terms: “the double temporal perspective, with the twenty-first century looking back on the nineteenth century, with the benefit of hindsight, as it were, leads to what could be called hyperomniscience” (6–7).8

The third mode of narrative authority in contemporary omniscience, I will call the pyrotechnic storyteller. For me this would include Zadie Smith’s White Teeth, Rick Moody’s The Diviners, Nicola Barker’s Darkmans, and much of the work of David Foster Wallace. The pyrotechnic narrator is typically humorous or satirical, and relies less on moral introspection or historical research than on a flourishing and expansive narrative voice, a garrulous conversational tone, to assert control over the events being narrated. Omniscient authority is a product of the narrative level which determines a narrator’s relationship to the characters, and of the manner in which this relationship is articulated to readers. The pyrotechnic storyteller does not flaunt his or her ontological superiority in the way that Thackeray’s or Trollope’s narrators do, or in the way narrators of postmodern metafiction do, but nonetheless operates much like an extradiegetic character, eschewing the impersonality of analytic omniscience to the extent that the narrative voice often overshadows the characters being described or analysed.
One example is the narrator of Barker’s *Darkmans* introducing one of the characters: “Mrs Dina Broad had a wonderful facility for getting total strangers to do exactly as she wanted” (104). This introductory statement is straightforward enough, but over the next page of character summary the narrator’s presence is keenly asserted in the hyperactive prose with its regular parenthetical qualifications and extended metaphors. “If Dina’s life was a carousel (which it was anything but), then there was only enough room on the rotating podium (midst the high-painted roses, the mirror-tiles, the lovely organ) for a single pony; and Dina’s was it” (104). The metaphor of the single-pony carousel is exhausted before it segues into one of the character’s life as a theatrical show: “The Dina Broad show (like Celine Dion in Las Vegas) was a show that never ended (it just went on and on and on); but this low-budget extravaganza (in perfect Technicolor) by no means ran itself” (104). “Nuh-uh,” the narrator says, before pursuing the metaphor for another two paragraphs.

The pyrotechnic narrator is the mediating voice for much of the fiction which the prominent British critic, James Wood, denounces as “hysterical realism.” For Wood, much contemporary fiction is beset with an “excess of storytelling” (*Irresponsible* 171), neglecting the development of characters with genuine humanity. He describes hysterical realism in this way: “The big contemporary novel is a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, and these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs” (*Irresponsible* 167). Wood argues that this mode of fiction has absorbed the textual qualities of magic realism into the realist novel. The manic flourishes of verisimilar improbability do not tip into the surreal, but simply exhaust the conventions of realism.

Wood coined the term hysterical realism in a review of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. This novel opens with a scene in which the protagonist, Archie Jones, is attempting to commit suicide by gassing himself in his car. After the scene is established we have this passage: “Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth’s diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live” (4). This passage seems deliberately designed to prevent us from reading Archie’s escape from suicide as some sort of profound statement about the fragility of human existence. Its satirical references to various popular theories of universal cause and effect seem to terminate in the suggestion that the somebody who “makes shit happen” is either a divine entity about which the narrator can only speculate (she knows what happened, but not why), or simply the narrator herself, the story-telling author’s proxy, who playfully acknowledges her analogous relation to God. Smith’s narrator, in fact, regularly satirises the desire of characters to assign events to providence: “The principles of Christianity and Sod’s Law (also known as Murphy’s Law) are the same: *Everything happens to me, for me*” (44). The narrative voice of *White Teeth* indicates that Smith herself can only imagine a world of random uncertainty, relativising the authority of her commentary.
The fourth mode of contemporary omniscience contains both the immersion journalist and the social commentator. The narrator as immersion journalist is a fictional counterpart of the narrators of documentary novels, such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and stems directly from the New Journalism. Here I am thinking specifically of Tom Wolfe’s latest novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons*. Central to Wolfe’s construction of narrative authority, and to his operation as a public intellectual, is the extrafictional voice of this novel emerging out of its prefatory material and linking it to his 1973 account of the New Journalism, his 1989 manifesto for the social realist novel, and his 2001 essay collection, *Hooking Up*. The appeal to observational fieldwork established by this voice provides a kind of ethnographic distance from the characters as the source of omniscient knowledge, both grounding and relativizing the narrator’s authority.

Throughout *I am Charlotte Simmons*, the detailed scenic construction is supplemented by explanatory commentary. For instance, after an exchange of dialogue between two college basketball players we have this line: “Without even realising what it was, Jojo spoke in this year’s prevailing college creole: Fuck Patois” (35). This observation is followed by examples of the multiple grammatical uses the word fuck can be put to. Another observation which seems to deliberately flaunt the generational distance of the narrator from his characters occurs when Charlotte meets her first friend at Dupont. After introducing themselves to each other as Bettina and Charlotte, this line follows: “They were members of the first generation to go through life with no last names” (145). The mock anthropological distance of the narrator which provides the overarching approach of the novel is highlighted to the point of caricature in this comment during a scene where Charlotte hears shrieking in the campus hallway: “They were the cries of the female of the species feigning physical fright at the antics, probably physical, of the male” (145).

In his 1989 manifesto, “Stalking the Billion-footed Beast,” Wolfe explains his turn from nonfiction to fiction: “I wanted to fulfill a prediction I had made in the introduction to *The New Journalism* in 1973: namely, that the future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him” (50). The historical importance of this faith in fictional realism is that, for Wolfe, postmodern fiction, as a result of its penchant for formal experimentation, has retreated from any obligation to deal with contemporary culture. The desire to diagnose and report a social problem through the techniques of omniscience links Wolfe’s immersion journalist with the social commentator, under which I would include John Updike’s *Terrorist*, Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*, and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*. The narrative authority here operates by deploying the capacious knowledge of the narrator to analyse postmodern culture. “Time and again,” James Wood complained in a 2001 article about the big social novel, “novelists are praised for their wealth of obscure and far-flung social knowledge.” If omniscient authority must be granted by the reading public, rather than unselfconsciously assumed by the narrator, ‘all-knowing’, in this case, has come to mean less a divine or telepathic knowledge of the human interior, than a polymathic knowledge of how the world works. In other words, con-
temporary narrators ‘know’ more than any other character not simply because of their omniscient privilege, but because of their intellectual scope. In a 2003 article, Judith Shulevitz refers to the work of DeLillo and Franzen, amongst others, when she claims, somewhat ruefully that: “Novelists, in short, have become our public intellectuals—our polymaths, our geographers, our scholars of the material world. And yet, oddly, you will find very few intellectuals in the modern novel” (B31).

In Franzen’s novel, this omniscient knowledge is performed through the recurring metaphor of ‘corrections’ which links intergenerational family dynamics with the corporate health industry and the global economy. This metaphor begins with the individual, charting the depression of one of the characters, Gary Lambert, and revealing through internal analysis that “his entire life was set up as a correction of his father’s life” (181). Central to the plot is a breakthrough in neurobiological therapy spruiked by a corporate representative as “Correcktall,” for “disorders of the brain” such as Parkinson’s and Alzheimers, and the “social disease” of criminality, unchecked by traditional correctional institutions (208). The denouement of the final chapter opens: “The correction, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble, but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets” (563). This correction to the global market occurs as the volatile family dynamics of the Lamberts settle down in the wake of the death of the patriarch, Alfred.

All of these modes of narrative authority, but in particular the last two, indicate a general shift in fiction from minimalism to maximalism. In a 2004 article entitled “The War for the Soul of Literature,” Laura Miller argues that what Wood denounces as “hysterical realism,” and what Dale Peck calls “recherche postmodernism,” can be understood in terms of this shift. For Miller, maximalism, in the form of the big ambitious social novel, has become the new focus of complaint about the direction of contemporary fiction, replacing Carveresque minimalism which had prevailed for the previous two decades as a symptom of literary decline. “Most people who follow contemporary fiction,” Miller writes, “can confidently name some books that fall into this category and can tell you what they’re like: They’re big, they’re full of information, ideas and stylistic riffs; they have eventful plots that transpire on what’s often called a ‘broad social canvas’; they experiment with form and voice; they’re overtly (or maybe just overly) smart. Or at least that’s what they’re supposed to be like” (1). Miller lists DeLillo and Pynchon as the “paterfamilias” of maximalism, its disciples including Rick Moody, Jonathan Franzen, Colson Whitehead, Jeffrey Eugenides, David Eggers, Richard Powers, Jonathan Lethem, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace. Maximalist fiction need not necessarily be omniscient in narration, but the scope and narrative freedom of omniscience certainly lends itself to an expansive exploration of social relations, and the garrulousness of narrative voice which maximalism encourages is a means of competing with the dynamism of other discourses in the marketplace of opinion and entertainment.

We could characterise contemporary omniscience as a verbose narrative voice nostalgically invoking the friend and guide of classic omniscience, or desperately filling the silence left by the postmodern absence of character. But we could more productively approach this narrative voice as a kind of heuristic technique, where
form is generated by the architectonic function of the sentence as a line of flight. The idiosyncrasy of Wolfe’s prose stems from his claim in *The New Journalism* that journalists who deploy the techniques of fiction in the service of nonfiction writing are free from the constraints of aesthetic convention governing point of view and other narrative elements. “For the gluttonous Goths,” Wolfe wrote, “there is still only the outlaw’s rule regarding technique: take, use, improvise” (48).

Narrative form here is not determined by any sense of formal unity, by the categories of narrative theory, but by the writer’s authority as a reporter of contemporary culture. For the social commentator, the tentacular reach of omniscience is underpinned by a creative freedom at the syntactic level. I’d like to finish here with a quote from Don DeLillo about the writing of *Underworld*: “The prologue is written with a sort of super-omniscience. There are sentences that may begin in one part of the ballpark and end in another. I wanted to open up the sentence. They become sort of travel-happy; they travel from one person’s mind to another. I did it largely because it was pleasurable. It was baseball itself that provided a kind of freedom that perhaps I hadn’t quite experienced before. It was the game” (DePietro 136).

ENDNOTES

1. Royle refers to Culler’s earlier work when he claims, in his 2003 book, *The Uncanny*, that omniscience should be reconsidered as telepathy. Culler cites Royle approvingly in his 2004 article, “Omniscience,” published in *Narrative* (and notes that reading Royle’s then unpublished chapter on telepathy prompted his article). In the Dialogue section of a 2006 issue of *Narrative*, Olson, author of *Authorial Divinity in the Twentieth Century*, responds to Culler’s article, defending the critical merit of the analogy between author and God, and eliciting a response from Culler. And in 2007 Sternberg, author of *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, re-asserts his status as the pre-eminent scholar of narrative omniscience in an extended refutation of Culler and Royle in *Poetics Today*.

2. In the same year Brian Finney argued that what unites British novelists of the last two decades is a belief that “an omniscient narrator is an anachronism” (12). Also in 2006, Morton P. Levitt claimed, in *The Rhetoric of Modernist Fiction*, that the modernist novel can be defined as a rejection of omniscient narration, and that the occasional recurrence of this narrative voice in mainstream fiction can only be the product of a conservative ‘New Victorian’ impulse: “to criticize Trollope for being omniscient is ludicrous; to criticize Murdoch or Drabble for being omniscient is necessary” (7). An aesthetic prejudice against omniscient narration, based on a claim for its historical redundancy, continues to be perpetrated by Creative Writing programs. In a 2007 writing handbook, Robert Graham claims that: “From the earliest literature all the way through to the end of the nineteenth century, the author speaking, the author acting as an omniscient narrator, was standard practice” (47). He asserts that omniscient narration has fallen from favour since Chekov, before providing this advice to aspiring writers: “If you’re going to use an omniscient narrator in the twenty-first century, chances are you will not want to wear your omniscience on your sleeve; nobody likes a show-off . . . Alternatively, you need to use a tone so arch, so dripping in irony, that the reader is bound to realise you know fully well the omniscient narrator went out of fashion in 1899” (56).

3. In the first chapter Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha float safely to the ground after falling from a plane which has been blown up by terrorists. Towards the end of this chapter we find this passage:

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and –potence, I’m making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.
Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type—angelic, satanic—was Farishta’s song?

Who am I?

Let’s put it this way: who has the best tunes? (10)

God’s visitation to Gibreel later in the novel is described in these terms: “He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff, and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected” (318).

The link between God, the narrator and the author is made clear when the narrator admits late in the novel that he visited Gibreel, despite a non-interventionist policy: “I’m saying nothing. Don’t ask me to clear things up one way or the other; the time of revelations is long gone. The rules of Creation are pretty clear: you set things up, you make them thus and so, and then you let them roll. Where’s the pleasure if you’re always intervening to give hints, change the rules, fix the fights?” (408).

4. When Henry James referred to George Eliot’s “heights of analytic omniscience” (85), he was thinking in terms of Culler’s fourth phenomenon; and certainly ‘analysis’ and ‘omniscience’ were almost interchangeable in the latter part of the nineteenth century. When omniscience was defined as a particular point of view—the panoramic—in the Anglo-American study of novelistic method exemplified by Percy Lubbock, its chief characteristic was intrusiveness and narratorial ‘telling’ rather than dramatized ‘showing’: “In the old novels,” Leon Edel wrote, “the omniscient author was nearly always present and nearly always addressing an audience” (138). By 1955, Norman Friedman was able to define omniscience in terms of gradations of third person narration, from editorial to neutral to selective, leading inevitably to a restriction of the term to Culler’s second phenomenon—“access to character consciousness”—which Wallace Martin, in 1986, described as “omniscience in the usual sense” (146).

5. This narrative authority is the basis of Culler’s atheistic disdain for authors ‘playing God’; it is at the heart of Sartre’s famous attack on Mauriac; and it is figured as the source of repressive panopticism by theorists such as Mark Seltzer and D. A. Miller who link narrative omniscience with Michel Foucault’s concept of modern disciplinary surveillance.

6. Arguments for a causal link between perceptions of literary decline and the cultural projects of postmodern and post-postmodern novelists have been made, respectively, by Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Robert McLaughlin.

7. In 2005, Rushdie was ranked as number ten on Prospect Magazine’s list of 100 global public intellectuals.

8. Letissier argues that The Crimson Petal and the White “illustrates the classical format of the neo-Victorian novel, which has now discarded the postmodernist, deconstructionist stance of earlier post-Victorian fictions, such as The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Possession, or Poor Things, to quote but a few, to embrace the more traditional form of the three-decker, or ‘large, loose, baggy monster’ of its Victorian forerunners” (1).

WORKS CITED


The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction


