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Introduction

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This book begins with a basic observation: stories frequently depict the act and processes of storytelling. In some ways, this observation is not especially surprising. Novels like *Tristram Shandy* openly exploit this tendency, often to comic effect. Seemingly stepping out of the narrative proper, Tristram tells of the problems he is having progressing in his autobiography, since he has only managed to cover a single day of his life in three volumes. Moments like this one give a kind of wink to their audience, as if to say this is just a story and we are all in on the joke.

However, I take these moments more seriously, as more than a glitch or comic eccentricity in the narrative. In my view, they occur far too often to be accidental – in narratives ranging from Cervantes to *Last Action Hero* – and too prominently to be incidental – in frames, authorial intrusions, digressions, embedded stories, and so forth. In fact, I believe that these moments are not only common but explicitly foregrounded in a number of well-known texts across the tradition of the English novel, several of which I discuss here, including *Tristram Shandy*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim*. Adapting Hillis Miller's definition of a ''linguistic moment,'' I would call them *narrative moments* – that is, moments in which the act of narrative itself is depicted and thus thematized or called into question.[1] These moments demonstrate a distinctively reflexive turn, in that narrative refers to itself, to its own medium, mode, and process, rather than simply to other (nonlinguistic) ''events,'' the kind of events

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1 See ''The Critic as Host,'' in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 250. See also ''Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II,'' reprinted in *Theory Now and Then* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 119; and his book so titled, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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that we normally assume constitute a narrative. Further, beyond indicating solely a linguistic or epistemological problematic, narrative moments broach an ideological lesson, valorizing and in a sense advertising the mode and extant form of narrative – for the most part, the modern novel.

To start, I propose a theoretical description and preliminary taxonomy of these moments of narrative self-figuring. For instance, chapter 3 delineates the various features of framing. Frames are not merely a simple relaying structure but a complicated layering of significance that relies on various codes, among them the figuring of a distinctive situation for narrative (what I will call a *narrative scene*, in which narrative comfortably and it seems inevitably takes place), the introduction of a catalyst that spurs or elicits the telling of a narrative (a *narrative goad*, coding narrative not only as natural but inevitable, casting its telling as a necessary response to this incitement), the description of narrative in hyperbolically attractive terms (*narrative adverts*), and the attribution of an almost preternatural desire for narrative amongst its audience (the *narrative affect* of a *narrative circle*, further coding the narrative as natural and indeed as necessary as hunger or sex, bonding a social group). This kind of poetic description of frames has been largely elided in most theories of narrative as well as in practical criticism, since frames are generally consigned to peripheral status, to being ''extra-''diegetical or ''meta-''diegetical, by definition outside the primary diegesis or plot. As I note in the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, frames are usually thought to be disposable structures, a kind of packaging that you throw away, like a cracker-jack box, to get to what is inside.

As William Nelles points out in a recent essay, embedding in general has rarely been discussed and its analysis is largely undeveloped in narrative theory.[2] This study proposes at least provisional suggestions toward such a discussion, or, more grandly, toward an introductory poetics of what I term narrative reflexivity.[3] In other words, the line of argument of this book most

2 See Nelles' excellent article, ''Stories within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative,'' *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 25.1 (1992), 79–96.
3 I should add that this critique has gotten underway, although in a manner different from mine, with the publication of Gerald Prince's *Narrative as Theme: Studies in French Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) and Bernard Duyfhuizen's *Narratives of Transmission* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992). See also Robert Stam's *Reflexivity in Film and*

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immediately occurs within the space of narrative theory and
offers revisions to the general distinctions made there, although
it also is very much a critique of that field. Further, the impetus
for this book is to draw out some of the implications – or really,
ensuing complications – of the narrative reflex toward self-repre-
sentation. For the implications echo through a number of issues
haunting narrative theory, suggesting revisions of: the general
bias toward defining narratives according to plot or a plot-struc-
ture; narratology and its foundational schema of narrative on a
stepladder or ''levels'' model; definitions of literariness; the con-
cept of fictionality; ''realistic'' representation or mimesis as a
determining model for narrative; the prevalent ideology of liter-
ary culture and the attendant projection of literary desire and
consumption; and, in general, what I see as the current impasse
of theory.

To do this, my purpose here is not to produce yet another set of
readings of yet another set of standard novels from yet another
theoretical perspective unfurling yet another layer of meaning, as
has been our wont in this profession, but to suggest the theoretical
purview and polemical force of these various reflexive narratives,
their complication of meaning and (straight, linear) reading, and
their ideological suasion. In short, this is a book about theory,
without apology, or rather about the theoretical complications
and dissonances inherent in describing and interpreting narra-
tive. To place it in the context of the theoretical movements of the
past thirty years, this study is very much a critique of approaches
to narrative that are essentially still structural, but it also recog-
nizes the efficacy and usefulness of the structural description of
narrative. My intention is not to take potshots at or deride the
structural doyens of narrative, for I fully acknowledge the useful-
ness, both abstractly and more practically, in pedagogy as well as
in criticism, of the delineations of narrative set out in a seminal
text like Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*. Genette's theoreti-
cal terms and distinctions help straighten out and make compre-
hensible narratives like Proust's *Recherche* or *Tristram Shandy*, as I
hope chapter 1 makes clear. But Genette's system is also built on a
theoretical blindspot, in its unreflective assumption of a primary
diegetic level. It is that unproblematic positing of an identifiable if

Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard (New York: New York University
Press, 1985).

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not definitive narrative ground, a narrative base or degree zero, that I critique.

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A common if not prevalent critical tendency is to see self-reflexive narrative moments – ''authorial'' commentary, frames, or embedded stories – as marginal or aberrant, extraneous to the import of the presumed ''real'' story. At best they are appetizers, comic interludes, or helpful hints to the main plot, at worst distractions, quirks, or flaws. The usual terms by which they are named – intrusions, digressions, and so on – bespeak their marginal status. In terms of narrative theory, they are devalued as lying outside the narrative proper, by definition ancillary to what the narrative purports to be about. The implication of this bias not only bears on the structural description of narrative but the interpretation of narrative: placed outside the boundary of the cornerstone of narrative meaning, the ordinal category of plot, they are relegated to insignificance, except insofar as they ''transmit'' that plot.[4]

In broad terms, the intuitive or natural assumption is to see plot as the content of narrative, like the message in the proverbial bottle or, as Conrad's Marlow puts it, the core of the nut. By and large, narrative theory has retained and elaborated Aristotle's privileging of plot as the most important feature of narrative, plot being defined as the imitation and construction of the ''events'' or ''incidents.''[5] Those incidents are usually assumed to be ''real,'' nonlinguistic or nondiscursive action, in the sense of action in an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie: the running, the fisticuffs, the romantic encounters, but not the narrating. Narrative theorists, from the Russian formalists down to recent figures like Genette,

4 Cf. Duyfhuizen's model in *Narratives of Transmission*.
5 The relevant passage in Aristotle's *Poetics* is section six (1449b21–1450b21): ''The greatest of these is the construction of the incidents [i.e., the plot], for tragedy is imitation, not of men, but of action or life . . . the incidents and the plot are the end of tragedy, the end being the greatest of all parts . . . Plot, therefore, is the principle and, as it were, the soul of tragedy'' (trans. Kenneth Telford [Lanham: University Press of America, 1985], p. 13). Aristotle puts aside the question of the imitation of language (recall that diction is subordinate to plot, character, and thought in Aristotle's categorization of drama); in ''Narrative Diction in Wordsworth's Poetics of Speech'' (*Comparative Literature* 34 [1982], 305–29), Don Bialostosky shows how Genette follows an Aristotelian bias in his subscription to an event- or plot-based *mimesis*, at the expense of the Platonic sense of *mimesis*, which places priority on the imitation of language.

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Seymour Chatman, Mieke Bal, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and others, have retained this basic assumption of plot as the central category in narrative analysis. Shklovsky's famous distinction between the story (*fabula*) and plot (*sjužet*), whereby the story entails the normal, straightforward temporal-causal sequence of events, and the plot denotes the sequence of events as they occur in the narrative, in literary rather than real time, stacks the deck toward plot. For Shklovsky, plot – the disordering of the normal storyline – is a key locus of defamiliarization and thus of literariness.[6] Genette's categories of *histoire*, *récit*, and *narration* essentially take up the plot–story distinction. In fact, despite making those three qualifications, Genette proceeds to bracket *narration* and talk almost exclusively about the disparity between *histoire* and *récit* in Proust's *Recherche*, as I discuss in the next chapter.

I propose to displace this assumption and to read these self-reflexive narrative moments counter-intuitively, as the provisional content of narrative. The bias toward seeing them as intrusion or distraction is based on the model of colloquial communication: when someone is telling you what you have to do to turn on your new computer, you do not want a lot of digressions, say, about where the computer came from, the person's mother, or that person's self-conscious ruminations on telling you s/he is telling you about computers. With (literary) narrative, though, things are different. What is of interest might be precisely the story about the person's first time using a computer and how s/he is going to tell you that story. In other words, one might say that these reflexive moments – of the narrative of narrative – are a significant *literary* trait, one feature that marks a narrative as literary.[7] Literary narratives frequently foreground and exploit excessively this reflexive turn, highlighting the modal form of narrative itself, and this very excess becomes a mark of literariness, an excess that is not tolerated in normative forms of colloquial communication.

6 See Victor Shklovsky, ''Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary,'' in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 25–57. See also the essays collected in Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).
7 Nelles, ''Stories within Stories,'' 79. See also Gérard Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), esp. chapter three, ''Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative,'' pp. 54–84.

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This is not to specify a hard-and-fast distinction between literary and non-literary discourse, finally providing what Nelles calls the Grail of Poetics by answering what makes an utterance literary. Nor is it merely to elaborate or extend Jakobson's definition of the poetic function, drawn in his classic structuralist statement, ''Linguistics and Poetics,'' as that which focuses on the message itself, rather than on what the addresser is trying to relay (the intention, or, for Jakobson, the emotive function) or any other part of the communication structure.[8] Instead, it is to underscore the confusion, in the root sense of that word, of those various facets of communication and the interaction of the communicative situation. Reflexive narrative moments blur Jakobson's distinctions among referential, emotive, poetic, conative, phatic, and metalingual functions, among what the message transmits (the addresser's intention – again, the emotive function) and the code of the message (the mode of that expression – the poetic function), the announcement of the message (the phatic function), the meta-narrative or metalingual function, and its referential value. For instance, frames perform a phatic as well as a poetic function, and a(n) (auto)referential as well as intentional function. Narrative moments put all of these functions into play: the intention is precisely an announcement of the mode of narrative, so the message is circularly and paradoxically self-referential and simultaneously metalingual. In other words, the question of literariness turns not on the proffered center of the poetic function, but on the disruption or deconstruction of the categories of the standard, static model of communication.[9] The *literary*, then, is not a focus on the message itself, but a denial of the separable category of ''message'' – or, for the purposes of this study, plot.

8 Recall Jakobson's famous scheme:

<div align="center">

Context (Referential function)

Addresser (Emotive)   Message (Poetic)   Addressee (Conative)

....

Contact (Phatic)

Code (Metalingual)

</div>
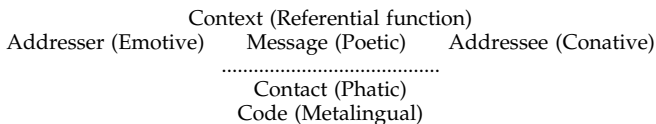
See Roman Jakobson, ''Linguistics and Poetics,'' in *The Structuralists: From Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, ed. Richard and Fernande DeGeorge (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), esp. pp. 89–97.

9 In some ways, my provisional definition of the literary has more in common with de Man's definition of *text* than with structural schemes of narrative (*Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979], p. 270).

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The literary, in its blurring or confusion of normally constituted phases of communication, is thus in some ways similar to *non-sense*, which has relevance to its status as fiction.[10] This is not to reinvoke surreptitiously the axis of nonsense/sense, literary/non-literary, or fiction/nonfiction; rather, my point, counter to that of structural schemes like Jakobson's, is that the literary or the fictional is not an absolute category, but a question of degree and relation, defined provisionally in terms of (the deconstruction of) the usually stable categories of colloquial communication. In other words, it is not an intrinsic or transhistorical property of texts – one can imagine a time when a text like *Finnegans Wake* falls to nonsense, or, for that matter, with the advent of hypertext, when its various puns are more obvious and therefore it becomes more accessible, or when Dickens' novels are taken to be historical records, as they were in the context of Soviet realism – but a register of the continually displaced character of those properties, an ad hoc posterior judgment rather than a prior fact.

This points to the anti-realist character of narrative: stories or narratives do not represent the world, or, more exactly, the world does not provide a ground or literal point of reference. Rather, narratives represent storyworld, the universe or economy of their own functioning and figuring, and they are validated and grounded within that economy.[11] This is not to say that stories are divorced from ''reality'' or history, but to stress that fiction is self-referential, self-validating and legitimating. Stories are true because they tell you they are true: they tell you they are stories and fictional, thereby speaking the truth, broaching the liar's paradox. To give an example, again from *Tristram Shandy*, when Tristram says that he is narrating, when he points to the puppet strings he is holding, it seems as if he takes the

10 There is a large body of work that deals with the question of the status of fictional discourse, from Frege on. One might start with John Searle's ''The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,'' *New Literary History* 5 (1974), 319–32; and Richard Rorty, ''Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?,'' *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 110–38. Chapter two of Genette's *Fiction and Diction* discusses Searle at length.

11 See Roland Barthes, ''The Reality Effect,'' *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 141–8; and ''The Real, The Operable,'' *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 80. As Barthes succinctly puts it in the latter text, ''what we call 'real' (in the theory of the realistic text) is never more than a code of representation (of signification).''

same communicative position as the actual reader, ''outside'' the fiction. The comic wink is provided by this gesture of identification: let's look at the puppets dancing. But there is a strange contradiction here: while the fictional construct called ''Tristram'' embeds the putative plot, that construct has no superior ontological status to the fiction ''he'' exposes. While it is true to point out the fictionality of the previous level, the prior level is not any more ontologically valid or referentially assured than the embedded level. (Thus I would resist the term ''metafiction,'' as defined by Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh, since it implies a superior level from which to judge or expose the fiction.[12]) The situation is akin, in terms of science fiction, to a cyborg pointing out the cybernetic character of another cyborg. That cyborg is not any more human, and, as science fiction films like *Alien* teach us, one should not trust cyborgs.

The analogy of narrative to a cyborg is not entirely gratuitous. A premise of this study is to see narrative as a technology, as a technical operation inscribing its replication. Very literally, a primary ''action'' that narrative performs is the circulation (telling, receiving, desiring) of narrative, whereas the ''actions'' of the characters are cybernetic at best, bearing traces of human activities (miming them), but driven by narrative machinations. While this might seem obvious, there is a way in which criticism frames its discussions of novels as if their characters act, think, and live in the ways that actually existing human beings do. In my observation, much criticism talks about characters affectionately, as if they were people (think of commentary on Micawber or Leopold Bloom). Reflexivity, contrary to this prosopopoetic habit, points to the technological economy of narrative (Micawber spurs the plot of *David Copperfield*), that projects its own reproduction – rhetorically hailing us to ''imitate'' it, rather than the other way around.

In this regard, narrative is a profoundly *ideological* form, because it works to reproduce the model of narrative production and by extension that of literary subjectivity, proffering the model of literary desire, to be engaged in or absorbed by literature and thus to reproduce it and its conditions of existence. Novels specifi-

12 See Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984).

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cally tend to promulgate the *ideology of literature*,[13] of literary life, consumption, and production, through their self-reflexive valor-ization of storytelling and more generally of the *profession* of literature (say, in Parson Adams' love of literature, as well as in more systematic treatments, such as *New Grub Street* and contemporary academic novels), and also of reading (as in *Madame Bovary* or *Don Quixote*). As a sidebar, the foregrounding of reading and reading scenes in some ways forms a counterpart to this investigation of narrating, likewise coding the implacable power of, if not addiction to, literature within literature.

To return to the question of fictionality, in novels like *Tristram Shandy* the intuitive tendency is to accord the seemingly superior level of a narrator's discourse a greater degree of referential authority, when it logically has none. In other words, fiction depends on a referential house of cards, built upon the various levels of the narrative. In large part, the project of narratology has been to separate and demarcate the levels of narrative, thereby recovering a fundamental level of plot or diegesis that anchors or centers the narrative. Other levels – say, Tristram's narration of his narrating – are consigned to an *ex*-centric status (again, by definition *extra*-diegetic). I argue, in chapter 1, that Tristram is not like an MC, commenting on the game show of the plot, but that ''his'' plot-level is imbricated in the overall configuration of the text. The explicit figuring of a narrator like Tristram points to the complex of narratorial relations that striate the narrative and complicate the postulation of anything like a univocal plot. The argument of this study is to collapse the hierarchy of narrative levels, or at least to disallow its literal or referential value in grounding the narrative. In other words, the predominant trope motivating or defining narrative is not mimesis or referentiality, but narrativity or reflexivity. More exactly, mimesis is not based on referentiality but on the autological economy of narrative (self-) figuring, on what Roland Barthes calls the signifying codes of narrative or Christine van Boheemen calls the rhetoricity of narrative.[14] This is not an utterly surprising claim in the aftermath of the epoch of

13 See Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, ''On Literature as an Ideological Form,'' in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 79–99.
14 See Barthes, *S/Z*, and Christine van Boheemen, ''The Semiotics of Plot: Toward a Typology of Fictions,'' *Poetics Today* 3.4 (1982), 87–96.

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poststructuralism, but it is one that I think worth stressing and, again, has been largely elided in the way that we usually see and write about narrative.

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A strong qualification is in order here. When I first observed the prevalence of reflexive narratives, I put my thesis in extreme terms: narratives are *really* about narrative. I am still taken with the definitive confidence of that claim, but I have come to realize that it is wrong-headed in two ways. First, I do not want to claim a kind of exclusivity, typical in academic argument, that narratives are only about narrative and their own self-figuring. There's an anecdote about a fan approaching James Joyce to ask, Can I touch the hand that wrote *Ulysses*? As the story goes, Joyce responded, No, it's done a lot of other things too. Narratives are about a lot of other things besides the technology of storytelling, and they differ markedly in how they highlight and foreground those features and aspects. I do not presume to exhaust the significance of a text by resort to one theme, to one mode of reading and attention to one salient stratum. Second, I want to resist the mode of critical phrasing that asserts that I have uncovered a cardinal interpretive secret that of course everyone else has missed, the mode of critical argument that projects a dramatic discovery (or recovery), of a key to what narratives (and literature, life, etc.) are really about.[15] Would that one quite knew.

Two relevant terms I try to stress and use here are *feature* and *salience.* These terms, I think, lend a desirable and conceptually necessary degree of flexibility to my project. In a sense, they answer why I am not a structuralist and why this is at best a modified poetics. In the wake of poststructuralism, it seems impossible to return to a faith in concepts like structure or in the purely poetic categorization of texts. Further, ''structure'' seems to reify texts into definable and exactly determinable units. It is underwritten by a kind of cognitive faith: one would only have to uncover the framework (axial oppositions, diegetic levels, Greimassian antitheses, and so on), and one would have it, the

15 See Richard Levin's observations on these tendencies in *New Readings vs. Old Plays: Recent Trends in the Reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

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