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0521430399 - Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition

Jeffrey Williams

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Theory and the Novel

Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition

Narrative features such as frames, digressions, or authorial intrusions have traditionally been viewed as distractions from or anomalies in the narrative proper. In *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition*, Jeffrey Williams exposes these elements as more than simple disruptions, analyzing them as registers of narrative reflexivity, that is, moments that represent and advertise the functioning of narrative itself. Williams argues that these moments rhetorically proffer models of literary desire, consumption, and taste. He examines a range of novels from the English canon – *Tristram Shandy*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Lord Jim*, and *Heart of Darkness* – and poses a series of theoretical questions bearing on reflexivity, imitation, fictionality, and ideology to offer a striking and original contribution to readings of the English novel, as well as to current discussions of theory and the profession of literature.

Jeffrey Williams teaches the novel and theory at University of Missouri-Columbia. He is editor of *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy*, and has published work in numerous journals, including *MLN*, *Narrative*, *Studies in the Novel*, *College English*, *VLS*, and elsewhere. He also is editor of the *minnesota review*, and co-editor of the forthcoming *Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*.

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Preface

When I was in grad school, in the mid- and late 1980s, I hung out with a self-proclaimed Theory Crew. That is, we were taken with theory, signing up for all the theory courses we could and avoiding traditional staples like the “History of the English Language,” buying as many volumes of the Minnesota Theory and History of Literature series as we could afford after paying the rent, writing papers replete with ideologemes, lexic codes, phallogocentricity, aporias, *différance*, and the like, probably much to the chagrin of the senior professors in our respective departments, and quoting Derrida, Cixous, de Man, Althusser, Jameson, and the rest when we got together every Thursday night, after seminar, at our favorite local dive Tara’s, with large green shamrocks on the walls and dollar burgers. In a very real sense, theory – whether in seminar or at Tara’s – was what professionalized us.

When we started writing our dissertations, none of us wanted to do the usual thing – say, to write on a relatively unattended literary text by a safe author – but we all wanted to take on big texts and big theoretical topics, so we projected our own nascent series, in the manner of the party game adding “– in bed,” prefixed with “Big” and forbidding subtitles: *The Big Allegory*, *Big/De/construct/ion*, *GENDER* (with the masculinist “Big” under erasure), and, for me, *Big Narrative*. After having read in deconstruction, my particular twist was reflexivity, how narrative reflexively represents and “thematizes” its linguistic and modal form, and I was struck by the fact that a great many canonical novels – not just anomalous ones, as a kind of sideshow to the Great Tradition, but center stage – foregrounded the act and modal form of narrative itself. Not contemporary “metafiction,” but *Tom Jones*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Lord Jim*, and so on, in commonplace constructions, such as authorial intrusion, narrative frames, and embedded tales. So, big novels, a big theoretical theme.

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Gradually, the working title of my project – which with wholesale and face-saving transfusions morphed into this book – came to be *Narratives of Narrative*. While I still fancy the elegance of that formulation – the implied reflexivity of the genitive, and the neat doubling of “narrative” – I have since been persuaded that a more apt title, one which would make sense for library-buyers, bookstore-shoppers, and catalog-browsers, ever concerns for publishers, would be the current *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition*. As recompense, this does manage to announce my concern with contemporary theory first, and it succinctly specifies its field as the novel and more generally as literary studies. (The reservation against “Narratives of Narrative” was that it might refer to history, or anthropology, or to autobiography, and so forth, and thus confuse a prospective audience, not to mention bookstore-shelvers.) In typical academic fashion, I have capitulated to the need for an explanatory subtitle, since “Theory and the Novel” alone casts a rather wide net. While this study investigates what I take as the predominant line of theories of the novel – formalist or structural narrative theory, most manifest in narratology – and its somewhat vexed relation to poststructural theory – from which structural narratology has largely insulated itself – I do not catalog and critique the vast array of theory bearing on the novel. That would be an enormous, multi-volumed project, I would think. As a matter of focus, I attend to the problematic of reflexivity – of the narrative of narrative – which I believe opens fairly explicitly questions of theory and the novel, and take as examples a selection of well-known novels in the British tradition that demonstrate different facets of reflexivity, novels that I assume are generally familiar to those of us trained in English departments and who have taken standard survey courses (*Tristram Shandy*, *Joseph Andrews*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim*).

Beyond the question of accuracy in labeling, I have come to qualify this project further: at first I saw the problematic of narrative self-reference as solely a linguistic one, that broached a fundamental epistemological dilemma. I have since revised my thinking, more insistently to ask the consequence of this tendency in narrative, to ask the ideological effect of this seemingly natural and playful tendency toward self-reference, its effect not only as paradox but as self-advertisement. In other words, rather than

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examining it purely as a poetic phenomenon, to examine it rhetorically, beyond the sense of tropes and figures, in its material effect on purveyors and consumers of literature. Again, in a manner of speaking, as advertising. What action does narrative perform not only in terms of its modal operation, but on *us*, as readers? Not just psychologically or in terms of the immediate act of reading, but pedagogically and socially?

To put it now, I would say that narrative reflexivity is the technological armature of an ideological impulse, to reproduce the model of the desire for and irresistible power of literary narrative and thereby to teach the lesson of the naturalness of its consumption. While narratives have been with us for a long time, this effect is historically specific and takes a particular charge in the age of the novel, or more exactly of the mass production and distribution of novels – even with the advent of television, a productive apparatus that is still going strong, as witness the replicating rows of “literature,” “fiction,” mysteries, science fiction, westerns, romances, and so on, lining the shelves of your local chain bookstore. In other words, maybe Plato and my mother were right, that fiction is not entirely an innocent entertainment. While reflexivity might form part of the aesthetic play of fiction-making, in some sense autonomous from its sociohistorical determinants, the pervasive topoi of the narrative of narrative in otherwise “realistic” novels function ideologically to naturalize and promote the activity of consuming novels.

I am not sure how adequately I have drawn out this question of the ideology of narrative, in palimpsest over my earlier reflections on narrative and theory. The strange thing about *post-partum* prefaces is that they really introduce the book you have come to want to write, more so than the one you have already written.

To offer a few more words of explanation, one question readers of early versions of this book asked was how, amidst its constructing a rhetoric of narrative, it changes readings of the novels I talk about, like *Tristram Shandy* or *The Turn of the Screw*. After all, the presumed job of criticism, in R. P. Blackmur’s phrase, is to provide readings of literary texts. Other than making various observations on these novels’ salient features, my intention has not been to produce a set of new readings of old texts, to paraphrase Richard Levin’s formulation of the Shakespeare critical industry. Rather,

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my intention has been to investigate the theoretical moorings (its lexicon, foci, and presumptions) of narrative criticism and to propose some alternatives to the normative ways we talk about narrative. There is a familiar way in which theory is taken as a template to produce critical readings that lays a theory pattern over the wholecloth of specific literary works, thus yielding a kind of pre-programmed chapter or article on a particular work – the marxist reading of *Wuthering Heights*, the feminist reading of *The Turn of the Screw*, the reader-response reading of *Joseph Andrews*. Without due respect, you put the theoretical quarter in the reading machine, choose a theory, and get the reading out.

To invert this, one might read texts instead as registers through which to read theory and the set of assumptions and expectations that prescribe and govern critical practice, and by extension to examine the critical institution. The colloquial notion of literature defines it as our exquisite disciplinary object, to which criticism takes a service role – to guard and polish the exhibits in the museum. I have no interest in fulfilling that role. I do not mean by this to express the resentment of the critic, performing an overthrow of the monarchical object of our field. Rather, I would say that the horizon of expectation of literature *is* criticism, a point that Stanley Fish has trenchantly argued for a number of years, or, to put this another way, literature is always located in the network of the institution of literature, an institution that usually goes without saying but in a very real sense prescribes and produces the thing called literature. In other words, I would skirt the classic question undergirding literary studies, What is literature?, or its corollary, What is narrative?, that seeks an essential and discernible attribute that demarcates the discursive phenomena we call literature.

The usual feature that defines narrative, from Aristotle on, is plot. As Aristotle has it, plot is the skeletal mimetic ground for a proper narrative; better to have a line drawing of a form than colorful splotches or characters without plot. Rather than supplanting the core of plot with the updated techno-sophisticated attribution of reflexivity as the core operation of narrative, though, I would shift the question to the socio-institutional scene of literature. Instead of asking what is literature, I would ask, what constitutes the field that ascribes and valorizes the object of literature? What draws us to be purveyors of literature, and partici-

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pants in that field? What function does criticism have in this institutional economy? How is the institution of literature reproduced? There is an obvious way in which the production of readings and “scholarship” serves – reflexively – to reproduce the institutional configuration of professional literary studies, as measures of accreditation and prestige, incorporating us into the “conversation,” the internal economy of the field. Our critical narratives – what one might summarize under the rubric of theory – record our formation as professional subjects.

The critical postulation of the question, “What is literature?” tacitly iconizes our object of study in order to legitimate the discipline and profession of literature. That is, it assumes the *a priori* and stable existence of the object of literature, grounding and justifying our activity as professors of literature. Amidst the smoke and din of the culture wars, there has been a renewed call to rechristen that object and to reconfirm our faith in the love of literature; while tinged with nostalgia, I see this move not simply as reactionary but as an effort to reconfirm the disciplinary field and thereby to reassure our professional prospect, particularly as that prospect has been jeopardized in the wake of downsizing of university faculty and calls for academic accountability.

To return to the question of ideology, I would argue that in general the narrative reflex toward self-advertisement promotes the consumption of literature and literary narrative. Further, this ideology of desire for literature works socially to inculcate the *taste* for literature, the development of that taste a sign of cultural capital serving to produce social distinction. In short, the ideological inscription of the affective power of literature engenders the cultural affect and distinction of the literate person. In its specific institutional location, the ideological work of “literature” and literary narrative takes a slightly different charge. The critical examination of narrative – in readings, as well as in the attribution of the critical category of “narrative” rather than the novel – records the site-specific (which is to say institutional) ideology of professionalism, the reflexive processes and codes through which we are made into literary professionals and academic specialists. As I mentioned earlier, theory in a very real sense professionalizes us, naturalizing our somewhat unusual activities. As a corollary to the general ideology of literature that makes us literate individuals and cultured subjects, our critical practices make us institu-

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tional subjects. The power of ideology is such that it makes other forms of existence unimaginable, our own inevitable, natural, and desirable. But just as one can imagine other cultures, other times, and other social arrangements in which our narratives are not quite so enthralling or aesthetically pleasing, one can imagine other institutional arrangements for professing literature. The job of criticism, I would like to think, is precisely to read against the grain of our tacit ideological fix, to articulate what goes without saying in texts, in theory, and in the institutions within which we work, and to imagine a new institution of literature.

This book took far too long to finish, much to my editor's chagrin, and encountered far too many obstacles. The one thing I find salutary about this business of literary studies, though, and that keeps me in it, are the many good and generous people I have had the privilege to know and work with along the way. So, a litany of thanks to: David Gorman, whose comments on various chapters not only set straight some problems but prompted me to keep going; Jim Paxson, old friend and Stony Brook veteran, whose frequent phone calls and disquisitions on the state of theory always spur me on; Tom Cohen, fellow exile to unhospitable theory territory, whose surprisingly sage advice helped; Hillis Miller, who showed exemplary professional generosity; Bruce Robbins, fellow Long Island Intellectual, who gave avuncular support; Judy Arias, colleague and friend, making Greenville more livable; ditto for Frank Farmer, carrying our theoretical dialogue to the IHOP; and readers of early, ungainly incarnations, including Sandy Petrey, David Sheehan, and Rose Zimbardo. Thanks, too, to MaryJo Mahoney, who was there when it counted, from Long Island to North Carolina. I am also grateful to Richard Schelp for help preparing the original manuscript on a woefully archaic computer, and to the staff at Cambridge University Press, especially to Chris Lyall Grant.

I would also like to thank especially folks who have stood by me over the long haul: Joyce and Michael Bogin, my sister and brother-in-law; my parents, Sidney and Muriel Williams, who helped me through hard times, financially and otherwise, to whom I owe the deep gratitude of an incorrigible son; and Virginia Williams, my daughter, who asked for several years when this would be done until she tired of asking, who had to await too

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many meals while I finished one last thing, and whose intellectual acuity and integrity I can only admire.

Finally, I owe an insurmountable debt of gratitude to Michael Sprinker, who supported this and other projects not only with long single-spaced comments but with countless burgers at various Long Island restaurants, and who taught me, along with theory and the proper use of prepositions, about intellectual generosity, selflessness, and courage. Despite its glaring ineffectuality in the social struggle, I dedicate this book to him.

An early version of chapter one, "Narratives of Narrative," much revised for this book, appeared in *MLN* 105 (1990), published by Johns Hopkins University Press. Chapter 2 incorporates material on the interpolated tales in *Joseph Andrews* published in substantially different form in *Studies of the Novel*, and chapter 3 incorporates material on *The Turn of the Screw* published in substantially different form in *Journal of Narrative Technique*.