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# Ambiguous discourse : feminist narratology and British women writers

edited by Kathy Mezei.

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## introduction

### *Contextualizing Feminist Narratology*

kathy mezei

*Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing.*

—Austen, *Persuasion*

**A**nne Elliot's retort to Captain Harville as they debated the differences between men's and women's "nature" pinpoints the essence of feminist narratology—the *context* of how stories are told, by whom, and for whom.

This collection is the first to gather together essays that combine feminist and narratological readings of women's texts. In their selection of British women writers from Jane Austen to Jeanette Winterson, the contributors focus on writers who are conspicuously self-conscious and iconoclastic in their deployment of narrative techniques. While seeking to decode subversive, evasive, or perplexing narrative strategies in Austen or Woolf or Mina Loy, the contributors recognized the value of a feminist narratology in interpreting these strategies, in proving, as Anne Elliot might say, *some thing*. In 1986 Susan Lanser described the contingent relation between feminism and narratology, which she named "feminist narratology": "My . . . task [is] to ask whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods . . . of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women's texts" (342). Taking up the "task" in turn, these essays explore and expose "gender's effect on the level of discourse" (Warhol, *Gendered Interventions*, 6). At the same time, the diversity of the contributors' responses reflects both the edgy alliance of feminism and narratology and the evolving, contested histories of feminist literary theory and narratology.

The reader will quickly notice the pervasive theme of ambiguity winding its way through this collection, despite different theoretical positions and texts that range from eighteenth-century domestic realism to postmodern metafiction. Within the texts she had set out to analyze and interpret, each contributor confronted forms of ambiguity. The sites of these ambiguous discourses were located, depending on the individual contributor, within the narrator, the focalizer, the reader, author-ity, subjectivity, historicity, linearity, or specific structures and features of narrative and discourse and their complex interrelations. Feminist narratology, this hybrid of an *ology* (the science of narratives) and an *ism* (the action of being a feminist), then offered the contributors a multilayered stack of tools with which to probe these forms of indirection in convergence with an ideological framework that could account for their singular power and effect. The focus of this volume is to show, through close textual reading, how feminist narratology locates and deconstructs sites of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and transgression in aspects of narrative and in the sexuality and gender of author, narrator, character, and reader.

The his/story of narratology, like any story, rather depends on who the narrator is. If the narrator is Mieke Bal, "narratology" is defined simply as "the theory of narrative texts" (*Narratology*, 3); if he is Gerald Prince, then more fully as a study of "the nature, form, and functioning of narrative . . . [which] tries to characterize narrative competence . . . [and which] examines what all and only narratives have in common . . . as well as what enables them to be different from one another" (*Dictionary*, 65).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Peter Brooks's phrase describing the Russian formalists' "constructivist" view of literature as one that "so often cuts through thematic material to show the constructed armature that supports it" (14) best visualizes the original intent of narratology to found a science of narrative through a comprehensive study of structures underpinning all narrative. Readers of this collection of essays will undoubtedly be familiar with the emergence of a poetics of narrative through the disparate conduits of structural anthropology, linguistics, Saussurian semiotics, and Russian formalism. Out of these preliminary sources, narratology branched into a grammar of narrative (Todorov, Barthes, Greimas), a discourse of narrative (Genette), and the heteroglossia of novelistic discourse (Bakhtin).

With each narrator-critic plotting trajectories of narratology from different positions, we inevitably end up reading subjective and culturally bound summaries of its history. For example, Ingeborg Hoesterey's 1992

retrospective account places narratology within an evolutionary teleological framework:<sup>2</sup>

The seminal work of the text-oriented aesthetics of New Criticism marks what might be called the first, "archaic" phase of narratological scholarship. The structuralist-formalist paradigm . . . paved the way for "classical" narratology. . . . During the past decades, certain literary critics have moved away from narratology's almost exclusive focus on the question of what individual texts mean . . . to a heightened awareness of how texts . . . mean, and for whom . . . narratology has provided paradigms and instruments of analysis, even as it has itself undergone critical scrutiny and development. (3)<sup>3</sup>

Wallace Martin, on the other hand, organizes his *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1987) from the point of view of narratives themselves as "modes of explanation" (7); he proceeds through a historical account of theories of the novel via abstract, structural models of narrative analysis to models based on conventions and communication.

As Hoesterey pointed out above, quite predictably, narratology has interrogated its own narrative and story, self-reflexively undergoing "critical scrutiny and development." And so, in "Whatever Happened to Narratology?" (1990), Christine Brooke-Rose quips: "*It got swallowed into story* seems the obvious answer; it slid off the slippery methods of a million structures and became the story of its own functioning" (286). But, as Brooke-Rose reminds us, we continue to pose ancient, elemental questions about stories and their analysis, "not just of representations (stories) in general, but also of the very discourses (stories) that purport to analyse stories, stories of people, stories of people reading stories of people, stories of people reading stories of the world" (283).

In the first of three *Poetics Today* issues featuring papers from the influential 1979 Tel Aviv Symposium 2 on Narrative Theory and Poetics of Fiction, Benjamin Hrushovski had queried: "But what is Narratology? Is it a logical division of Poetics? Does it constitute a clearly-defined discipline with a specific object of study? Or is it a methodology?" (6). Reflecting that "narratology" . . . is neither one discipline nor one methodology nor a division of Poetics but rather a meeting point, an intersection, of a whole range of problems . . . especially found in works of prose" (208), Hrushovski acknowledged the ever-widening compass of the practice of narratology.

When *Poetics Today* editors Brian McHale and Ruth Ronen decided to revisit narratology in 1989, they canvassed the original Symposium 2 partici-

pants and other scholars in the field, asking them to consider whether "narratology [has] developed since 1979, or has it stagnated? What new directions of research have emerged, if any? . . . Is narratology a dead-end, or is it still a lively and fruitful direction for research?" (iii–iv). This palpable anxiety about the viability of narratology was vitiated by the considerable response they received.<sup>4</sup> Narratology's continuing vitality, as well as its protean adaptability, is evident in the number of publications in the field; the emergence of a new journal, *Narrative*, in January 1993, edited by James Phelan, Ohio State University; the ongoing *Journal of Narrative Technique*; and the successful annual International Conferences on Narrative Literature, recently held at the University of Nice-Sophia-Antipolis (1991), Vanderbilt University (1992), Simon Fraser University (1994), and the University of Utah (1995). Glancing through tables of contents and conference programs, one notes how narrative analysis embraces not only traditional narratology—the science of narrative (Todorov)—but also a plurality of concepts such as "narrative theory," "narrative poetics" (James Phelan), "narratological criticism" (Gerald Prince),<sup>5</sup> and the inclusive "study of narrative literatures" that calls upon psychoanalysis, deconstruction, postmodernism, or Bakhtin's theories of novelistic discourse. The once "scientific" enterprise has attained a dynamic, if sometimes contested, elasticity. In *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* (1994), Patrick O'Neill comments on how narratology's "once dominant position in international narrative theory has been . . . challenged . . . by . . . post-narratological theories" (157).

In his reply to McHale and Ronen, "What Can We Learn from Contextualist Narratology," Seymour Chatman signaled a significant shift in narratological studies, one that forms the central assumption behind this collection. He wrote that as of late, "scholars have proposed an approach to narrative which diverges sharply from structuralist narratology" (309). Labeling this new direction "contextualist," Chatman explained that the "Contextualists' chief objection to narratology is that it fails to take into account the actual setting in which literature is situated" (309): in contrast, the contextualist approach is characterized by diversity.

Throughout the two *Poetics Today* special issues on narratology (1990) and in more recent publications by narratologists, the necessity of expanding the parameters of narratology is repeatedly asserted.<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, one of the contexts currently receiving close attention is gender, particularly as expressed through feminist perspectives. Indeed, bringing feminist theory and perspectives into narratology has reoriented narratology. Other gender

issues, including sexuality and queer theory, and poststructuralism, postcolonialism, deconstruction, cultural studies, and identity politics, all impinge on the discussion of how narratology functions by querying subject positions, cultural formation, the laws of genre, and the universality and stability of narrative forms. For example, resistance to the laws governing the genre of autobiography have led "to the proliferation of hybrid autobiographical practices that challenge the laws of genre identified with western notions of traditional autobiography, hybrid practices Caren Kaplan describes as 'out-law' genres" (Smith, 406). Not only has narratology been adapted to historical writing and to historiography (Hayden White), but history, biography, autobiography, and traditionally devalued discourses like gossip, conversation, and silence have expanded our understanding of narrative and representation, pushing the boundaries of narrative analysis. Gossip, as Patricia Meyer Spacks reminds us, "impels plots" (7), and the tentacles of gossip extend narratologically into biography and autobiography as well as impelling the plots of novels such as *Emma*, *Persuasion*, and *Hotel du Lac*. Or, when, for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. analyzes the rhetorical strategies of black American women writers whose narrative practice invokes the "problematic identity of the speaking subject" (144), there is a radical shift in the comparative values of narrative features: that is, speech and dialect are privileged over writing and "standard" English.

Although narratology obviously has its roots in structuralism, as the essays in this book indicate, poststructuralism—sometimes filtered through feminist theory—has problematized certain features of narratology such as the transparency of language, representation in narrative, and encoding of the self (in narratological terms: author, narrator, focalizer, character, reader) as unified, knowable, and inscribable. As Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson write in *De/Colonizing the Subject*, the "axes of the subject's identifications and experiences are multiple, because locations in gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality complicate one another" (14).

Mieke Bal's response to the debate between ancients and moderns, between formalism and contextualization, summarizes the tension between the two: "Today's options seem to be either regression to earlier positions (Genette 1983), primary focus on application, or rejection of narratology. All three are problematic. . . . More important issues, mainly historical and ideological ones, have taken priority. In my own case feminist concerns have taken the lead but not, I wish to argue, at the cost of more formal narratological issues. Rather, the concern for a reliable model for narrative analysis has more and more been put to the service of other concerns

considered more vital for cultural studies" ("Point of Narratology," 728–29). Other feminist critics began to call on narratological models in their own critical readings. When Robyn Warhol published her study of direct address to readers, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (1989), using a model of feminist narratology, she too insisted that "nothing prohibits us from asking, among other questions about the role of social factors in shaping narrative strategies, what part the writer's gender plays in the kinds of interventions he or she uses in narrative" (5). Bal's emphasis on the importance of feminist concerns to narratology and Warhol's insistence on the practical application of what she sees as the productive interaction between gender and narrative invite us to trace the recent but contentious history of feminist narratology, for whereas feminism has adapted itself to a variety of theoretical positions from psychoanalysis to film theory, narratology has, until more recently, questioned or resisted the advances of feminism.<sup>7</sup>

The term "feminist narratology" begs the question of whether the modifier "feminist" refers to feminist literary theory—with its origins in the work of Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray—or to feminism(s)—a movement, an ideology, a political position. Judging by the practice of the critics in this collection, the feminisms that negotiate with narratology resist codification. They range from an assimilation of male critics such as Bakhtin and Genette to French feminist theory, materialist feminism, feminist film theory as it interrogates the gaze, poststructuralism, and queer theory. For just as narratology shifts, evolves, and resists easy definition and houses many narratives, so too are there many feminism(s) and feminist literary theories.

Feminist theory has learned to resist the homogeneity that marked the urgency of its beginnings and to accommodate and indeed celebrate difference in its practice. As Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocínio Schweickart point out in their introduction to *Gender and Reading*, "Gender is a significant determinant of the interaction between text and reader . . . [and] gender-related differences are multifaceted and overdetermined" (xxviii).

It is possible that feminist narratology has some kinship with what Elaine Showalter described as "gynocriticism"—"the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women" (184)—but what emerges from the following essays is a complex mix of interrogations about gender and its narratorial representation. For argument's sake, let's adopt Warhol's concise definition of feminist narratology as "the study of narrative structures and strategies in

the context of cultural constructions of gender." In this way, we acknowledge contextualization yet retain narratology's formalism—a fluid formalism, however, that reflects the eclectic approach of the essays that follow.

Ingeborg Hoesterey, in the introduction to *Neverending Stories*, perceives narratology evolving through the incorporation of feminist studies: "The field of feminist studies has celebrated a syncretic mode for some time, borrowing from French poststructuralist writing . . . and adding semiotics and Bakhtinian concepts through the work of Julia Kristeva. This syncretism has facilitated the rise of a feminist narratology, by definition the conflation of an orientation toward form with a political agenda—an approach that has destabilized the formalism/antiformalism opposition" (10–11). Nevertheless, the road to a feminist narratology has been a rocky one, for as Susan Lanser concedes, "the two concepts I have been describing—the feminist and the narratological—have entailed separate inquiries of antithetical tendency: the one general, mimetic, and political, the other specific, semiotic, and technical" (*Fictions of Authority*, 4).

Where do we then locate those moments along the critical path where feminist critics recognized and articulated the necessity of conversing with narratology or vice versa? Certainly, women writers have been cognizant of the need to match their subject matter and subjectivity to an appropriate narrative technique, as Ann Ardis reminds us in her discussion of the new women novelists: "Issues of female identity fueled tremendous experimentation with narrative form in the 1890s" (169). From Austen's retorting through Anne Elliot that the pen has been in the hands of men to Woolf's musing that "the first thing" a woman writer would find "setting pen to paper, was that there was no common sentence ready for her use" (76), the constraints on "telling their story" have simultaneously hampered and inspired women writers. Thus, they have developed ingenious strategies to tell their story, such as Austen's invoking irony and indirection or Woolf's decentering the authorial narrator. We have been made aware how women writers sought to rewrite conventional or master plots, to write, in the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, beyond the ending.<sup>8</sup>

One of the first essays to incorporate feminist narratology was Mária Minich Brewer's 1984 "A Loosening of Tongues: From Narrative Economy to Women Writing" (to which Lanser refers in "Toward a Feminist Narratology"). Brewer addressed the relation between narrativity and women's writing, asserting that "certain critical discourses have discerned the taut web of relationships that exist between narrativity on the one hand, and power, desire, and knowledge on the other. Women's writing and



its theories are essential elements in both the crisis and the generalization of narrative" (1141). Concerned about the limits placed on textual analyses, Brewer anticipated the condemnation by Chatman, Bal, and Lanser of formalist narratology's refusal of contextualization: "When narratology does attempt to account for the contextual, it does so in terms of narrative conventions and codes. Yet their capacity to account for social, historical or contextual differences always remains limited by the original formalist closure within which such codes and conventions are defined" (1143). She analyzed women's positionality in and through narrative, focusing on the fiction theories of Hélène Cixous, Annie Leclerc, Madeleine Gagnon, and Luce Irigaray, who exposed the "ideological narrativizing of women" (1146).

But it was Lanser who in 1986 first named and outlined a form of inquiry that feminist critics had been gesturing toward, calling for a feminist narratology that would examine the role of gender in the construction of narrative theory.<sup>9</sup> I still remember my elation when I first read Lanser's article.

Lanser was strongly rebuked, however, by Nilli Diengott (1988), who insisted that narrative categories like focalization are abstract concepts "totally indifferent to gender" and that Lanser was falling over the precipice into dangerous territory—the category of interpretation (45); Diengott claimed that Lanser's analysis was based on a confusion of theoretical poetics with other fields within the study of literature such as interpretation, historical poetics, or criticism. To Diengott, narratology is a science and "focuses only on systematic questions about the system" (48).<sup>10</sup> In her subsequent rebuttal of Diengott, "Shifting the Paradigm: Feminism and Narratology," Lanser replied that Diengott was trapped by the paradigm of a particular theory, reiterating the necessity for narratology to be "'interested in' any element of discourse that contributes appreciably and regularly to the structure of narrative texts" (56). In response to this debate, Prince commented that because "one of the goals of narratology is to explain the *functioning* of narrative, narratologists must not only characterize the general pragmatic/contextual principles affecting this functioning but also devise ways of testing the possible influence of factors like gender on narrative production and processing" ("Narratology, Narratological Criticism, and Gender," 7).<sup>11</sup>

By 1989, feminist narratology had entered another important stage, which saw the transformation of theory and theoretical positioning into praxis. Detailed narratological analyses of women's writing had been slow

to surface, for although crucial, groundbreaking thematic studies of women's narratives such as Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) had been published, few considered the ideological implications of structure. As Warhol remarked in *Gendered Interventions*, although feminist critics expressing interest in narrative strategies (Nancy K. Miller, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Marianne Hirsch) have looked at how "gender colors the production of *story* in narrative" (ix), "no feminist critic has taken a detailed look into gender's effect on the level of discourse in fiction" (6).

That same year, the editorial collective of *Tessera*, a journal specializing in feminist literary theory in English-Canadian and Québécois women's writing, published the special issue "Vers une narratologie féministe/Toward Feminist Narratology." Introducing this issue, a combination of theoretical and creative work, Susan Knutson argued that "feminist narratology can identify gender-determined forms in traditional narrative and analyze feminist revision of narrative grammar" ("For Feminist Narratology," 10). In accordance with the contextualist approach to narratology, she suggested that "ultimately, feminist narratology may help correct the ethnocentrism of narratology itself by clarifying that a certain dominant sense of story is culturally determined" (10).

In her 1990 essay "Bakhtin and Feminism: The Chronotopic Female Imagination," Marianne Cave summarized the Lanser-Diengott debate, agreeing with Lanser that, since context and meaning are important in narrative, feminist issues form a necessary element of narratology. She then turned to the practical application of narrative theory from a feminist perspective. Acknowledging the popularity of Bakhtin's paradigms of heteroglossia and polyphonia in the merging of feminist criticism and narratology, she engaged a Bakhtinian chronotope to read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Adapting the contextualist rationale, Cave remarked, "Within current feminist criticism, then, there is a new movement to read narratives dialogically, to illuminate the embedded narrative structure which resists any simple thematic signification which threatens to limit the text to one class and race and ignores ideological tension" (118).

In her 1991 book, *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Sally Robinson tackled feminist narratology from a different perspective. Under the subsection "Toward a Contestatory Practice of Narrative" of her introduction, Robinson explained that "most feminist accounts of the narrative production of gender have stressed the masculinist orientation of narrative and narrative theory" (17). She herself

examined novels by Doris Lessing, Angela Carter, and Gayl Jones, novels that model a contestatory practice of reading. In a lengthy footnote, she contextualized her particular narrative approach within a feminist narratology: "There have been some attempts to devise a feminist narrative theory and feminist theories of reading, although none have taken quite the tack I take here. . . . Perhaps because, like Warhol, Lanser is invested in a structuralist account of narrative, she does not ask the questions about narrative's construction of gender that I am asking here. . . . I am concerned with how gender is produced *through* narrative processes, not prior to them" (198 n. 23; emphasis in original). Robinson thus extends the affective relation between narrative and gender to the construction of gender in the text and in the reader, a topic that is addressed and further developed by a number of the contributors to this volume.

In intersecting with poststructuralism, feminist narratology can shed light on the elusive or decentered subject. Because it no longer assumes (in the form of narrators, focalizers, readers, authors) a unitary subject or fixed subject position, a feminist narratological reading of postmodern texts can fold back the layers of this subject and expose ambiguities and indeterminacies in a methodical way (see Lee's and Lanser's essays). For example, in *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (1991), Pamela Caughie recognized the contingent relation between narrative form and feminist ideology, noting "that Woolf's experiments with narrative forms and functions engender certain ideological assumptions and political strategies, and thereby enable a feminist ideology to take shape" (19; emphasis in original).

Elaborating the feminist poetics of narrative set out in "Toward a Feminist Narratology," in her 1992 *Fictions of Authority*, Lanser examined "certain configurations of textual voice" in a number of women writers, including Jane Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Monique Wittig. Lanser distinguished three narrative modes of voice—authorial, personal, and communal (collective)—and considered how these writers react to issues of public voice and authority. Stressing the necessary convergence of narrative form with social identity and ideology, she demonstrated how the female voice is a "site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices" (6).

This "rise of a feminist narratology" is evident in insightful articles on nineteenth-century British women writers by Beth Newman, Robyn Warhol, and Susan Winnett published over the last few years in *PMLA*. The 1994 International Conference on Narrative Literature, "Nativity and Narrativity," presented a panel discussion entitled "Why a Feminist Narratol-

ogy?" Speaking from quite different perspectives, several contributors to this book (Melba Cuddy-Keane, Susan Stanford Friedman, Janet Giltrow, Kathy Mezei, and Robyn Warhol) debated how feminist narratology has contributed to their critical practice and reading.

As we trace the trajectory of feminist narratology over the last ten years, at first in theory, now in practice, we see the gradual appearance of a distinct though far from hegemonic critical enterprise. Whereas earlier theorizing about narrative was gender blind or androcentric, an emerging feminist narratology begins to critique the androcentrism of earlier stages and paradigms of narratology. Just as feminist psychoanalytic critics have objected to the male bias in theories of psychoanalysis or feminist readers have challenged the "universality" of reading in reader response criticism, we need to interrogate Genette's models, for example, and to determine whether his typologies are as gender-neutral as presumed. In *Gendered Interventions*, Warhol pointed out the gender blindness of narratology, and in "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure" (1990), Susan Winnett challenged the "gender bias of contemporary narratology" by arguing that a narratology—such as practiced by Peter Brooks and Robert Scholes—"based on the oedipal model would have to be profoundly and vulnerably male in its assumptions about what constitutes pleasure" (506). Susan Lanser in *Fictions of Authority* reminded us that "the canon on which narrative theory is grounded has been relentlessly if not intentionally man-made" (6). In "The Authorial Mind and the Question of Gender," Ina Schabert surveyed how critics have responded to the issue of gender in the authorial narrator. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in her contribution to this volume, also queries the claim of universality implicit in Roland Barthes's and Peter Brooks's "masterplots" and their association of narrative design with male sexual trajectory and orgasm, offering an alternative narratology in her reading of "seismic orgasm" in Mina Loy's poetry. In a similar deconstruction, Christine Roulston considers Bakhtin's erasure of gender from his analysis of the sentimental novel through the perspective of Jane Austen's *Emma*.

Feminist narratology helps us understand our response to the narratives we read and to the role that gender plays in our reading. The essays here show just how diverse and complex gender's role in fictional and poetic narratives is as it incorporates gender identity, sex roles, sexual activity, and sexual preference (Delphy, 202).

In her discussion of *Persuasion*, Robyn Warhol considers "the gendered implications of the way Austen puts a novel together," presenting a

“gender-conscious look at Austen’s management of focalization.” Warhol reveals the pervasiveness of the gaze as a narrative device and suggests that the gaze as practiced by Anne Elliot and on Anne Elliot, particularly in relation to the body, implies a “feminine form of language,” an alternative to explicitly verbal discourse. Opposing the trend of many feminist critiques of Austen, Warhol shows us how “a close look at the narrative discourse of *Persuasion* yields an alternate view of Austen’s literary feminism, discernible in her text’s representation of a heroine’s access to knowledge (through the act of looking) and to pleasure (through textual consciousness of the body).”

Whereas Warhol envisions Anne Elliot as exemplifying solidarity with other women, suggesting that Austen’s heroine obtains “access to power through the feminine language of looking,” Christine Roulston argues that Emma’s assertion of her position of class privilege “ties her to male structures of class over and above a potential female solidarity.” Roulston reads Jane Austen’s *Emma* across Bakhtin to engage questions of class and gender, claiming that “Austen assumes and essentializes class difference, whereas Bakhtin silences and erases gender difference as a possible way of analyzing conflictual structures in the novel.” By locating occurrences of dialogism and heteroglossia within the narrative structures and strategies of *Emma*, Roulston links Bakhtin’s theories of novelistic discourse to the practice of narratology. In her analysis of the different discourses in *Emma*, by highlighting gossip in relation to private and public space, female subjectivity and empowerment, Roulston exposes the ambiguity of Austen’s text, for, as she reminds us, “we cannot but question whether Austen is using gender-based discourse as a form of social critique or as means of confirming the *status quo*.” When, as a new ideal heroine, Emma herself valorizes the ability to communicate over innate virtue, we begin to recognize her enduring appeal to us. By reading across Bakhtin to *Emma*, Roulston enacts the way narratology reads across feminism to give us a valuable entry into an opaque text.

Reaching back to Austen and forward to Woolf through the intermediary of Forster’s interrogation of narratorial authority in *Howards End*, Kathy Mezei locates the site of gender and textual ambiguity within a specific discourse—free indirect discourse (FID). Through FID Austen allows her heroine to achieve a certain independence from the status quo and from authority in the form of the narrator. Like Roulston, Mezei notes the ironic parallels between the narrator’s and Emma’s plotting and match-making, but she locates the site of Emma’s struggle for (narratorial) con-

trol within instances of FID where Emma’s discourse vies with that of the narrator. A similar struggle for control between character and narrator, between male power and female desire, and between fixed gender roles assigned to the figure of the narrator is waged within FID in *Howards End* and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Because Virginia Woolf wrote so incisively and passionately about the importance of breaking the sentence and the sequence in recognition of writing “like a woman” (81, 91), and about the patriarchal hold over women’s lives and over the novel form, she rests at the center of this collection, with five contributors focusing on her novels and essays. Denise Delorey discusses the narratological and feminist implications of the “paradox of containment” in *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*, suggesting that Woolf’s “strategic focus on the parenthetical [is] a feminist narrative principle.” Through the parenthetical, Woolf shifts the focus/locus of what is perceived as significant, thereby deflating masculine metanarratives, opening up space for the private and the domestic, and allowing Woolf to displace the (feminine) subject. Once again, the reader is alerted to the narratological representation of paradox and ambiguity, this time by means of a feature of discourse—the parenthetical.

Susan Stanford Friedman’s reading of Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*, presents a “spatialized reading strategy.” Contrary to most critics’ interpretation of the relation between early and final drafts, Friedman proposes that the final draft reveals Woolf’s own ambivalence about marriage, sexuality, and the traditional romantic closure of the novel form more frankly than the more explicit earlier draft. Adapting Kristeva’s model of spatialization in *Desire in Language* and Bakhtin’s double chronotopes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Friedman charts *The Voyage Out*’s narrative axis in order to plumb the different (repressed) stories embedded within the narrative. By diagramming the interweaving of the novel’s vertical axis (literary, historical, and psychic, including the draft *Melymbrosia*) with its horizontal axis (space-time chronotope, represented world, and characters), Friedman seeks to expose the two main and paradoxical narratives of defeat (Rachel’s) and victory (Woolf the writer’s). What Friedman calls a “dissonant narrative” of the bildungsroman (she also cites Brontë’s *Villette* as an example) is another term for what I describe here as ambiguous discourse or the indeterminacy of narrative.

Turning to Woolf’s often enigmatic essays, Melba Cuddy-Keane reveals how Woolf deliberately instills indeterminacy or ambiguity into the discourse of these essays; she analyzes the rhetorical mode of conversation,

which is "particularly well suited to a woman writer who seeks an alternative to the authorial/authoritative dominance of patriarchal discourse." Like Roulston discussing Austen, Cuddy-Keane aligns Woolf with Bakhtin, this time to point out that although Bakhtin has been celebrated for his theory of double-voiced discourse (1929), Woolf had even earlier (1923) "proposed her own version of the dialogic"—conversation. Cuddy-Keane then continues on to show how conversation for Woolf "became the informing trope of her critical prose," how innovative and subversive that trope proved to be, and how unrecognized. As in the previous essays, Cuddy-Keane emphasizes our role as readers both in untangling and in responding to her subject's narrative strategies.

Like Delorey, Patricia Matson is interested in Woolf's conflation of sexuality and textuality and her challenge to the "authority of the humanist subject and the authority of patriarchal value systems." Through detailed textual analyses of moments of discourse, Matson probes the relationship between codes of oppression and the possibilities of transgression and resistance. She decodes the writing of writing as subject and proceeds to show how "writing in and of itself is an act of resistance" and how the "authority of the 'patriarchs and pedagogues' is undercut and challenged at the level of syntax."

Rachel Blau DuPlessis is the only one to discuss a poet—the modernist Mina Loy—providing us with insight into *poetic* narrative strategies. DuPlessis reminds us (via Dorothy Richardson) how intensely the ideological link between narrative and sexual conventions was debated in early modernist writing. In her personal advocacy of the contextualist approach of narratology, she firmly insists on completing narrative poetics with a "sociological poetics." DuPlessis discusses Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" and her long poem "Love Songs to Joannes" in terms of reading "sexual intercourse as a site wherein various agents and cultural processes are exposed," contrasting Loy's narrative trajectory of sexual intercourse—seismic orgasm—with that of D. H. Lawrence's in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. For Loy, "seismic orgasm" is "the only site in which gender binaries are rendered inoperable," the "only point at which the interests of the sexes merge."

In "Ironies of Politeness in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*," Janet Giltrow approaches textuality in an equally radical way. Like Matson, Giltrow emphasizes the importance of penetrating beyond narratological surfaces into the deep structures of syntax and semantics; like Roulston, Warhol, and Mezei, she is intrigued by the narratological (and discursive) and gen-

dered implications of irony (and gossip). By setting out before us specific features of discourse—presupposing and agentless expressions, modalities such as "naturally," "of course," and projection—as materials of politeness, as an encoding of ordered social relations, Giltrow shows us that Brookner, as do Austen and Woolf, mounts a (coded) attack on the institution of marriage as closure and as the "conclusive social relation."

Alison Lee's reading of Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, in which the narrator transforms from a male into a female voice, presents us with a text that concretely and ironically engages gender and narrativity. The hints of gender ambiguity that Mezei had observed in Austen, Forster, and Woolf become the subject of Carter's novel. As Lee indicates, because the narrator's gender shifts and because texts are narrated in time, difficulties beset a reader in pinning down the gender of the narrative voice at specific moments in the novel; focalization is indeterminate; it is as difficult to distinguish between the narrating and the experiencing self as between male and female language and voice. This is indeterminacy and dissonance rendered graphically narratological, though Lee reminds us, "Gender does not determine narrative; it makes narrative identity as complex as gender identity." Focalization, as other contributors have noted in Austen, Woolf, and Loy, "creates a political framework," and the significance of looking—or what Lee, echoing Carter, calls "persistence of vision"—constructs the gendered subjectivity. Lee suggests that it is the "heteroglossia, the multiplicity, the undermining of binaries that make a text like Carter's feminist in both its narrative structure and its story."

Who better to close this discussion of the discourses of ambiguity than Susan Lanser, who, by naming feminist narratology, was the impetus for the book? Lee begins her discussion of gender and narrativity with Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*; here, Lanser explores *Written on the Body* as the embodiment of the complicated relations between sex, gender, sexuality, and narrative. "Queering Narratology" argues for the inclusion of sex, gender, and sexuality in narrative analysis and questions the relegating of these essential elements to the margins of narratology. Marking or unmarking the sex and gender of the heterodiegetic, autodiegetic, or homodiegetic narrator matters and has always mattered—as several other contributors point out. In the context of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, where the narrator's sex is deliberately elided from the text and where his/her sexuality is ambiguous, Lanser looks at how this deliberate silence or absence drives narratives and implicates readers. It is time, she suggests, to introduce gender, sex, and sexuality, along with contextuality and inter-

pretation, into narrative poetics and to begin the process of queering and querying narratology.

As a coda to the preceding examples of feminist narratology, Linda Hutcheon's essay sets out some of the issues surrounding (meta)narrative, postmodernism, and feminisms. In recognition of the variety of narrative systems, she expands the concept of narrative to include metanarrative, pointing to moments of conflation between postmodernism and feminisms as both, for example, offer parodic representations in their critique of metanarrative. Whereas feminisms seek to effect real social change and therefore foreground their political agenda, postmodernism insists on incredulity toward metanarratives, although in response to feminist influences it occasionally incorporates gender into its parodic structures.

Hutcheon's acknowledgment of the paradoxes that arise out of theoretical positions echoes the other contributors' uncovering of contradictions that destabilize readers as they jostle to locate themselves in relation to textual evasions. And so feminism and narratology combine in the praxis of feminist narratology to address these contradictions, evasions, and ambiguities—and to invoke and provoke them.

#### NOTES

1. The term, according to several critics, was coined by Todorov in 1969: "a science that does not yet exist, let us say, 'narratology,' the science of the narrative" (*Grammaire du Décameron*, 10).
2. For different "stories" and summaries, see also Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*; Wallace Martin's *Recent Theories of Narrative*; Terry Eagleton's subsection on narratology in *Literary Theory*; chapter 1 of Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*; Ingeborg Hoesterey's historical introduction to *Never-ending Stories: Toward a Critical Narratology*; or Thomas Pavel's "Narrative Tectonics," in which he moves onto textual, psychoanalytical, deconstructionist, reader-oriented, and like challenges to the originary formalist views. These summaries reflect the narrators' intellectual backgrounds—Israeli poetics, American Freudian, British Marxist, and German phenomenology.
3. See also Philippe Hamon's version of narratology's evolution: "Narratology has evolved (or is evolving) by dissemination. At first centered around essentially linguistic and oral objects (songs, myths, tales), it rapidly found itself confronted with written literary messages, plurisemiotic objects (films, comic strips, theater), nonlinguistic objects (paintings, photographs, architecture), and even nonsemiotic objects (a 'semantics of human acts,' sketched here or there). Among the most interesting repercussions, and sometimes the most unpredictable, of this scattering (which proves the vitality of the body of axioms and postulates that define narratology), let us point out the semiotics of passion elaborated around Greimas (Jacques Fontanille and A. J. Greimas's *Sémiotique des passions* [*Semiotics of the Pas-*

sions]), which renews a long rhetorical tradition going back to Aristotle, and the narrative semiotics of biblical texts (probably inaugurated by a collective study in 1971 *Exégèse et herméneutique*—which includes an article by R. Barthes—and then continued by the 'Groupe d'Entrevignes' and the collection 'Parole de Dieu,' published by Seuil), which also renews a long and prestigious tradition, the exegesis and hermeneutics of sacred texts" (364–65).

4. See the two ensuing issues of *Poetics Today*—"Narratology Revisited I" (Summer 1990) and "Narratology Revisited II" (Winter 1990).
5. Prince feels that it is not the function of narratology to engage in interpretation that would fall under the aegis of "narratological criticism."
6. In her 1989 review of Bal's *Narratology*, Ruth Ronen points out that while "researchers in narratology are relatively in agreement as to the definition of basic concepts and procedures: narrative levels, narrative structures, temporal order, causality, perspective, types of narration . . . the a-contextual view of narrative concepts, the belief in the self-sufficiency of texts and the playing down of referentiality, fictionality and readership" create a "discrepancy between the 'ideology' behind the structuralist paradigm and its methodological appeal." The change from structuralist to current narrative theory "is reflected in new conceptions of the interaction between texts and readers" (188–89).
7. See also Lanser's account of how narratology and feminism are perceived differently: "With a few exceptions, feminist criticism does not ordinarily consider the technical aspects of narration, and narrative poetics does not ordinarily consider the social properties and political implications of narrative voice. Formalist poetics may seem to feminists naively empiricist, masking ideology as objective truth, sacrificing significance for precision, incapable of producing distinctions that are textually meaningful" (*Fictions of Authority*, 4–5).
8. See, for example, Alison Booth, *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*; Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*; Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*; Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative*; Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*.
9. Lanser also raised what she felt were two related issues: (1) the status of narrative as mimesis or semiosis ("structuralist narratology has suppressed the representational aspects of fiction and emphasized the semiotic, while feminist criticism has done the opposite" ["Feminist Narratology," 344]); and (2) the importance of context for determining meaning (343). As this introduction shows, Brewer's and Lanser's validation of context was later echoed in Chatman, Bal, Prince, and Warhol.
10. Diengott tries to dismiss Warhol's essay "Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator: Earnest Interventions in Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot," which Lanser cites as an example of feminist narratology in practice. Is it not more important to read texts through narratology than to dispute taxonomies and definitions?



11. See Prince's revised version of this argument, "On Narratology: Criteria, Corpus, Context," *Narrative* 3.1 (January 1995): 73-84. See also Susan Lanser's response to Prince in *Narrative* 3.1, "Sexing the Narrative: Propriety, Desire, and the Engendering of Narratology."

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the look, the body, and the

heroine of persuasion

*A Feminist-Narratological View of Jane Austen*

robyn warhol

Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818) is a novel constructed around what was, for its time, a radically unusual narrative premise: the love affair that should have culminated in a marriage to end a conventional romance has gone awry, and the heroine of the piece must begin again, eight and a half years later, on her quest for narrative closure. As Nancy Miller pointed out some time ago, the feminocentric text of Austen's period—the novel with a female protagonist—could reach closure in one of two ways: the heroine can get married, or she can die. Either resolution depends on a change of status for the heroine's body: it can cease being virginal, or it can cease to live. For some feminist critics, Austen's apparent willingness to remain locked into this binary conception of the possibilities for heroines has been a problem.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the heroine's body, however, I read *Persuasion* as a story of oppositions being called into question, as well as a story of lost love regained. Feminist readers in the 1990s may wish, like Anne Elliot, to reclaim an old attachment.

What happens when a feminist resists the powerful temptation to think of Jane Austen's heroines as persons and scrutinizes them as functions of texts instead? Feminist narratology, which is the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender, provides a method for reclaiming Jane Austen as a feminist novelist. It gives us the analytical tools to distinguish her "story" (*what* happens in a text) from her "discourse" (*how* the story is rendered in language). In Austen, the interplay between *story*, in which the independent heroine must, as some critics have it, "swindle into a wife," and *discourse*, through

which traditional power relations can be subverted, carries important implications for feminist literary theory.

A close look at the narrative discourse of *Persuasion* yields an alternate view of Austen's literary feminism, discernible in her text's representation of a heroine's access to knowledge (through the act of looking) and to pleasure (through textual consciousness of the body). Although some non-feminist critical analysis of Austen's narrative techniques has laid a foundation for talking about the forms Austen employs in her fiction—especially free indirect discourse, or what Dorrit Cohn calls “narrated monologue” (109)—feminist narratology can provide a context for politicizing that analysis, for considering the gendered implications of the way Austen puts a novel together.<sup>2</sup>

As an alternative to a story-centered analysis of *Persuasion*, I propose to take a gender-conscious look at Austen's management of focalization, that is, her use of Anne Elliot as the central consciousness through which the story gets transmitted. As Louise Flavin observes, “In no other Austen novel is so much of what happens filtered through a central consciousness” (23); Flavin describes the resulting effect as a “complexity of polyvocality . . . achieved by having a narrator report what a character hears another character say that another character has said” (21). Of course, the characters—Anne included—are textual constructs, not literally “consciousnesses”: as Michael Orange puts it, “It might be better to say that the narration filters knowledge of aspects of one part of itself, which it represents as ‘Captain Wentworth,’ by means almost exclusively of another, labeled ‘Anne Elliot.’ There is no Captain Wentworth beyond Anne Elliot's point of view until very late in the novel, and no Anne Elliot outside this narration” (66).<sup>3</sup> Still, studies of focalization in this novel typically conclude that the layering of voices in free indirect discourse has the effect of giving “the illusion of depth to character,” to use John Dussinger's phrase (99). Yet while everyone grants that “Anne Elliot” seems “deep,” no one stops to consider what it means for this focal character to be constructed as female.

At the simplest level, it means that the novel's heroine must be almost obsessed with the act of looking, an activity that—as Claudia Johnson has established and as I will explain below—was not associated with female characters in the novels of Austen's predecessors. This heroine *has* to look, for the conditions of narration depend entirely on her observing everything that ought to be told. Anne's visual perceptions are crucial to the

narrative movement, particularly because hers is a world bound by proprieties which dictate that so many things “should not be said” (Austen, 238), or indeed—as Janis Stout has pointed out—a world where verbal language is so limited in its capacity to convey significant feelings. Looking and interpreting others' looks come to function for Austen's last heroine as an alternative language, a means of communication without recourse to words.

Because looking is a physical action, a function of those organs called eyes, representations of the act of looking continually draw attention in this text to the heroine's own body: its placement on the scene she is observing, its visceral reaction to what she sees, and its appearance as mirrored in the remarks of others on Anne's “looks.” The female body, therefore, comes into the narrative foreground not just as the vehicle of looking in the novel but also as the object of the gaze of other characters. Anne Elliot has no moment of looking at herself, no glance into a mirror or contemplation of any part of her body she might see—she becomes visible in the text only through the comments others make about how she looks. The first description of Anne is filtered through her father's perspective (although, since Anne is the focal character, I read this passage as her understanding of her father's view of her appearance): “A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own); there could be nothing in them now that she was faded and thin, to excite his esteem” (37). Later, as Anne's “bloom” begins to return, the narrative continues to convey Anne's appearance through her father's remarks. The narrator reports that “Anne and her father chancing to be alone together, he began to compliment her on her improved looks; he thought her ‘less thin in her person, in her cheeks; her skin, her complexion, greatly improved—clearer, fresher’” (158). At no point in the novel does Anne take an unmediated look at her own body; her consciousness registers her appearance only through what others tell her about how she looks.

This heroine's body takes shape, then, in the objectifying view of other characters, especially male characters. When she feels herself to be under someone's scrutiny, Anne reacts with “sensations,” sometimes pleasurable, sometimes disagreeable. This focus on looks and looking results in *Persuasion*'s being the most physical, the most literally “sensational,” of Austen's novels, in that the heroine's experiences—and the textual transmission of them through her perspective—are thoroughly grounded in the senses.<sup>4</sup>

The female body comes explicitly into the foreground in the famous argument scene between Anne Elliot and Captain Harville over the differences between the sexes. The point under debate is whether men's or women's love lasts longest "when existence or when hope is gone"; Harville argues for men's greater constancy, on the grounds of "a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; . . . as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings'" (236). Anne counters that if men's feelings are strongest, "the same spirit of analogy will authorise me to assert that ours are the most tender." In this physical connection, "tenderness" implies soreness, sensitivity, and susceptibility to pain, and Anne's position as focal character—as much as her experience as heroine—puts her in a peculiar position of authority to speak of such physical vulnerability. By making Anne the central consciousness and by placing her body always on the narrative scene no matter how "painful" or "agitating" to Anne the circumstances, the novelist subjects her heroine's body to a kind of textual violence. Early in the novel and throughout her period of uncertainty about Wentworth's marital intentions, Anne is markedly uncomfortable in her body, uncomfortable with the female body in general and particularly with the "large, fat" person of Mrs. Musgrove. But by gradually bringing together Anne's capacity for looking (and its attendant power to gain knowledge within the public realm) with the heroine's growing appreciation for the life of the body (and its intensely private set of significances), the text blurs the strictly binary divisions between external appearance and intrinsic value, between seeing and being seen, and between the public and the private realism that have operated under patriarchy (in Jane Austen's time as in ours) to keep women oppressed. The feminism of Austen's last novel resides not so much in the heroine's marrying the man of her choice as in the text's dismantling those oppositions which it represents as making life in the female body so painful.

Before looking more closely at the female body in *Persuasion*, though, I want to return to the question of "looking" itself, especially in its function here as a narrative device. On the level of narrative discourse, I will be concentrating here on the "focalization" of Austen's text in the sense proposed by Gérard Genette and defined in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*: "The perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented; the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which they are rendered" (31). To find the focal character of a passage of narration, one asks whether there are different answers to the questions, Who is speaking? and Who is seeing? In this novel the nameless narrator

speaks, but Anne generally is the one who sees. *Persuasion* is, therefore, structured by "internal focalization" (to use Genette's term), because the perspective is—as Prince puts it—"locatable (in one character or another) and entails conceptual or perceptual restrictions (with what is presented being governed by one character's or another's perspective)" (32). Genette's concept of focalization closely resembles what film theorists call the "gaze" in visual texts.

It seems to me that narratology has not made as much use as it might of the notion of the "gaze" as it has developed in film studies. Just as the gaze in film and the focalization of verbal texts are similar in their function, they might also resemble each other in their potential for carrying connotations of gender. Feminist film theorists (notably Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane) have argued from a psychoanalytic perspective that the position of spectatorship in Hollywood movies is always male; some commentators, such as John Berger, extend this observation into culture at large: "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47). Whether this is invariably true of the gaze in popular culture has become debatable, leading some feminists to posit a female viewing position that is not, as Mulvey's and Doane's work suggests, a kind of cross-dressing or adoption of a masculine subject position but something distinct. Suzanne Moore has suggested that a distinctly "female gaze" might exist and that if it does, "it does not simply replicate a monolithic and masculinized stare, but instead involves a whole variety of looks and glances—an interplay of possibilities" (Moore in Gamman and Marshment, 59). Moore, very careful to avoid implying that gendered positions are "fixed outside social conditions," offers a liberation from what some see as an essentializing tendency in the more properly psychoanalytic theory of the gaze. Feminist narratology might begin from Moore's position, arguing that in a given text the focalization represents a feminine perspective. In fiction there is no structural reason why the position of spectatorship must necessarily be male. What *Persuasion* does is to distinguish among kinds of looking, juxtaposing the feminine focalization that relies on the heroine's viewpoint with the objectifying gaze—often associated in this novel with male characters—which others in the text direct at the heroine's body.

In verbal narration, as in film, the "gaze" and the "look" are distinct from each other, though often related: the first occurs in the realm of the "extradiegetic," outside the world of the story, whereas the second can be located