

chapter one

THE NARRATIVE TURN



Deconstruction and Narrative

In the last decade literary and cultural critics have increasingly turned toward the language of narrative and storytelling to describe the act of assigning meaning to some object or textual feature. Hayden White's once-controversial claim that historiography is a form of narration that is as much concerned with formal closure and generic expectations (expectations of "cohesion") as it is with its "correspondence" to historical fact (*Tropics* 66) has now been extended to many other fields. It has become commonplace to see the analysis of literature as relying on literary histories that are always constructions with their own tendency to create entities such as "American Literature" for their own strategic purposes (McHale, *Constructing* 1). In contrast to White's early assumption that the hard sciences are the antithesis of narration (*Tropics* 30), Donna J. Haraway has mounted a feminist critique of the biological sciences by revealing the operation of "fictive strategies" and "allowable stories" within primatology (85). Perhaps more thoroughly than any of these, postcolonial criticism has associated "nations" and "narration"—claiming that the "social" is entwined with the narratives that members of a society tell about themselves—in its attempt to reveal imperialism and its alternatives in diverse cultural products (Bhabha, *Nation*). In these instances, narrative is equated with the production of historical, literary, cultural, and even scientific knowledge.

Narrative seems to appeal to critics today as an alternative to deconstructive language of textual deferral, slippage, and indeterminacy. Indeed, to refer to narrative as a "turn" from deconstruction is itself an ironic echo of the revolution that deconstruction brought to historical and literary studies two decades ago. An endless spate of books and articles trumpeted the "linguistic turn" that deconstruction was sup-

posed to have introduced into the humanities—a turn that included narrative, ironically, as one form of the deconstructive interest in language.¹ We cannot understand what critics mean when they appeal to narrative in contemporary criticism without recognizing narrative's ambiguous relationship to deconstruction. Although some have suggested that narrative may be part of our basic phenomenological perception of the world (Kerby), in contemporary criticism narrative usually describes knowledge organized through language. Deconstruction has provided the most elaborate theory of how language influences understanding, but critics have seen the infinite textual unraveling of *différance* as a dead end incapable of justifying the need to write and to deconstruct. Like deconstructionists, critics who describe knowledge as a "narrative" are suspicious of claims to objectivity. As Christopher Norris notes, the popularity of describing knowledge as a narrative construction "mostly goes along with a marked reaction against the kinds of wholesale explanatory theory which would seek to transcend their own special context or localized conditions of cultural production" (*Contest* 21). Narrative, however, is a much less threatening model for language's influence on knowledge than the deconstructionist idea that "there is nothing outside of the text." A narrative, after all, usually has a narrator who can take responsibility for the narratives he or she constructs. While describing oneself as a "narrator" admits that one's conclusions are interested, by confessing this bias a writer can indirectly *increase* the ethical force of his or her claims. This paradoxical claim to legitimacy at work within contemporary criticism is noted well by John McGowan in his critique of Edward W. Said. In turning to the deconstructionist language of "otherness" Said returns to a traditional humanism, according to McGowan. We have not recognized, McGowan claims,

how parasitic the whole concept of an other is on liberal traditions of individualism. To put it another way, to imagine the other as distant and separate is profoundly undialectical. The poststructuralist skepticism about claims made for and about the existence of otherness stems from an acute awareness that the other participates in a relationship that defines him as other. The very notion that otherness affords some kind of purity or freedom rests on an assumption of self-sufficiency, of an identity forged in the absence of social ties. (175)

This valorization of otherness helps to produce an image of the critic as capable of recognizing and admitting one's own bias; the result, according to McGowan, is a contradictory image of the contemporary intellectual as free precisely by virtue of admitting one's place within poststructuralist representational and metaphysical systems. McGow-

an writes, "Said, like much of the left, wants to maintain a firmer distinction between oppressors and oppressed than poststructuralist theory, with its extremely sensitive notions of appropriation and complicity, would allow. Said posits a version of the postmodern monolith insofar as he finds that worldliness and interest delegitimize all existing social forms and that all cultures have enormous powers of 'identity-enforcement,' but he also claims a heroic disentanglement from such determinants for the critic" (173). In contrast to Andrew Ross's conclusion that postmodernist criticism rejects the "universal intellectual" (Introduction xiii), Said's attitude seems to reflect that of the traditional, humanist literary critic, historian, or social scientist. Precisely this contradiction is at work within the rhetoric of narration in contemporary criticism. Calling one's writing a "narrative" and confessing to being a "narrator" with particular interests and subject to certain formal constraints seems to recognize a real-world multiplicity (and the "otherness" oppressed by prior writing) that readers are asked likewise to accept. In claiming that all knowledge is a narrative construction, literary, social, and cultural critics seem to regain from deconstruction a sense of the value of research and interpretation.² Whether these critics are right in their assessment of the limitations of deconstruction—and we will see in chapter 2 that deconstruction's relationship to the world and to the criticism that comes after it is considerably more complex than these comments suggest—this critique has provided the impetus to rethink critical practice.

The apparent contradictions that McGowan observes in Said's writing underlie current arguments about narrative after deconstruction. The debate over the value of this narrative model for knowledge is particularly clear in contemporary feminism, which has been both attracted and repelled by deconstruction. Feminism has been accused of essentialism more than most forms of social criticism, and has tried to come to terms with deconstruction's claim that even a well-intentioned critique of patriarchy is a textual construction. To many feminists, describing knowledge as narrative is no improvement on deconstruction, since both foster skepticism toward the theoretical concepts necessary for the critique of social inequalities. Seyla Benhabib asserts the need for concepts such as "victim" and "oppression" in feminist criticism:

While it is no longer possible or desirable to produce "grand narratives of history," the "death of history" thesis [i.e., poststructuralism] occludes the epistemological interest in history and in historical narrative which accompany the aspirations of all struggling historical actors. Once this "interest" in recovering the lives and struggles of those "losers" and "victims" of history is lost, can we produce engaged feminist theory? ("Feminism" 23)

Like many feminists, Benhabib is clearly ambivalent about equating narrative and knowledge. Although describing conventional knowledge as a narrative can question traditional values that exclude some individuals and groups, the logical and ethical force of any consequent call for social change is weakened when we admit that those calls likewise depend on narratives. Why should we act on knowledge that is “just a story”? This question haunts contemporary criticism concerned with social change; as Jane Flax remarks, “If there is no objective basis for distinguishing between true and false beliefs, then it seems that power alone will determine the outcome of competing truth claims. This is a frightening prospect for those who lack (or are oppressed by) the power of others” (42). Although the narrative model describes how critics write in a social context, theorists have not been able to explain why knowledge produced through narratives should be more compelling than knowledge produced through a play of *différance*. This is the mystery of post-deconstructive interest in narrative—how narrative can be reinterpreted as a mode of textual construction that straddles the line between language and real-world responsibilities, between textual forms and the writer’s political and social location.

The task of this book is to explain why narrative has reappeared as a way of speaking about textual construction after deconstruction and how narrative can be deployed to address the interaction between text and world. In referring to post-deconstructive narrative, I mean just this—narrative that is aware of, and anxious about, deconstruction. Post-deconstructive criticism is defined by its departure from deconstruction—even though, as I will argue in chapter 2, that departure is incomplete and in fact based in part on a self-interested misreading of deconstruction. This is not to claim that all narrative today has a single style or that recent narrative is always motivated by deconstruction; instead I explore how narrative is being re-created by a variety of contemporary critics as a way of thinking about the textual issues raised by deconstruction. In approaching narrative in this way, I am obviously departing significantly from the various ways in which we usually think of narrative—as a particular type of manipulation of narrators and narratees, as the human negotiation of temporality, and so on.³ The task of this chapter is to sketch out the scope of the term *narrative* in this post-deconstructive context.

Narrative Totality and Narrative Openness

Narrative has elicited an ambivalent response as a model for knowing because critics often use the term *narrative* to refer to two interre-

lated but distinct qualities of discourse. On the one hand, narrative implies totality and seamlessness; on the other hand, narrative suggests a more open-ended and tentative form of discourse in which the role of the writer is evident. The struggle between these two qualities in the current “narrative turn” is particularly clear in the work of Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard’s well-known characterization of postmodernity as “the incredulity toward metanarratives” (*Postmodern* xxiv) distinguishes two ways of giving authority to discursive knowledge: the traditional authority granted by metanarratives and the more limited authority of language games. Metanarratives are sweeping “stories” in which knowledge claims are given significance and made to seem natural. The “narrative of freedom,” for example, was the means by which scientific knowledge rightfully freed itself from “priests and tyrants” by claiming that “all peoples have a right to science” (31). Language games, conversely, depend on discursive rules that are capable of change and that grant authority to knowledge claims only in limited ways. Can some narratives be open-ended like language games, or does narrative by its nature incline toward the sweeping totality of metanarratives? Although narrative draws attention to the poles of communication in the same way that language games do,⁴ Lyotard answers this question in different, even contradictory ways. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard assaults “metanarratives” and calls for “local knowledge” based on language games: “any consensus on the rules defining a game and the ‘moves’ playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favors a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in time and space” (66). In this work, language games remain open and subject to change (“local”), and can achieve this openness only by renouncing metanarrative claims to universal legitimacy. Although Lyotard discusses “little narratives” that are not metanarratives in this early work (60), narrative by its nature seems to resist challenge. In *The Postmodern Condition*, then, Lyotard thinks of narrative primarily as creating wholes and less as revealing the role of a “narrator.” Lyotard’s *Instructions païennes*, a work roughly contemporary with *The Postmodern Condition*, in contrast sees narrative as more open and not inherently totalizing. Cecile Lindsay summarizes how Lyotard defines narrative as the “stuff” of culture and as the core of language games in this work: “The referents of a narrative are never events or brute facts in themselves, but rather other narratives. A multitude of varying narratives can take their points of departure from any proffered narrative. The question of the greater or lesser ‘truth’ of the various narratives thus has no general pertinence, just as the universality or

omnitemporality of any narrative is undercut by its inscription within a given pragmatic context” (53). In *Instructions païennes* Lyotard celebrates what Richard Rorty refers to as “first-order narratives” (86), stories that circulate within the culture and that are capable of taking on a role in language games. In this work Lyotard seems to be concerned more with narrative’s ability to draw attention to its “narrator” and less with how it creates wholes. In more recent writings, however, Lyotard once again emphasizes how narrative creates a sense of totality. In *The Differend*, Lyotard writes, “narrative is perhaps the genre of discourse within which the heterogeneity of phrase regimens, and even the heterogeneity of genres of discourse, have the easiest time passing unnoticed” (151). Lyotard vacillates, then, in his treatment of narrative—at times emphasizing its ability to create wholes, at times more interested in how it draws our attention to its creation by a writer in a specific social context and thus renders the text’s claims more tentative.

Lyotard’s vacillating treatment of narrative explains why individual critics respond to his work in very different ways. Lyotard’s interpreters often focus on one side of his treatment of narrative and fail to recognize his concern for the other; that is, they criticize him either for celebrating narrative as an *act* of construction without being aware of its need for wholes, or for seeing in narrative a concern for wholes without addressing narrative’s social production and reception. In their widely reprinted critique of Lyotard, Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson follow the first course. They assume that Lyotard is interested in the social production of narrative and chide him for failing to see the necessity of narrative totalities:

A first step [in creating a “postmodern feminism”] is to recognize, *contra* Lyotard, that postmodern critique need forswear neither large historical narratives nor analyses of societal macrostructures. This point is important for feminists, since sexism has a long history and is deeply and pervasively embedded in contemporary societies. Thus, postmodern feminists need not abandon the large theoretical tools needed to address large political problems. (34)

Fraser and Nicholson treat Lyotard as an advocate of narrative’s ability to reflect on its own production so that they can make their case for narrative totalities. Other critics approach Lyotard’s work from the opposite perspective; they take him as a theorist of narrative totality in order to argue for the importance of how narrative is created and produced. Allen Dunn’s reading of Lyotard’s notion of the “differend” exemplifies this latter approach:

[T]he differend's very immunity from the language of adjudication [as an example of the language game] threatens to reduce it to mere tautology, to a programmatic discontent with systems simply because they are systems. According to the logic of the differend, there is no way of analyzing the evils of hegemony, of explaining why notions of a cognitive totality must necessarily be harmful, nor can we learn anything about the differend from its historical contexts, since the differend is produced by a pure contingency that is devoid of cause or historical determination. (197)

For Dunn, Lyotard is concerned with "cognitive totality" and fails to understand the "historical contexts" in which such language is deployed. Both articles approach narrative through only one of its two aspects; in this they share Lyotard's inability to bring together narrative's tendency to create wholes and its awareness of its "constructedness." The conflict between these two qualities of discourse is an inherent part of the post-deconstructive turn to narrative. As I have suggested, precisely what attracts critics to narrative is its ability to be ambiguously deconstructive. Deconstruction is seen by critics variously as too much concerned with textual slippage or too much enamored with inescapable textual laws—a duality neatly embodied in Jane Flax's fear that the slippage between truth and falsity will end up reifying the current system of power. Narrative seems to accept both textual indeterminacy and totality while bringing this conflict to the surface and—most importantly—suggesting that these two might be resolved productively. Striking a balance between textual totality and a self-reflection that renders the whole text more tentative is the task of post-deconstructive narrative.

Lyotard himself actually suggests the way in which this balance might be struck in precisely the text that Dunn so dislikes. *The Differend* studies the most basic level of discourse capable of being judged true or false: the phrase. For Lyotard, a community defines what will count as a true statement: "Reality is not what is 'given' to this or that 'subject,' it is a state of the referent (that about which one speaks) which results from the effectuation of establishment procedures defined by a unanimously agreed-upon protocol, and from the possibility offered to anyone to recommence this effectuation as often as he or she wants" (4). Lyotard claims that some phenomena cannot be discussed adequately within a given community's discursive rules. What does not fit within these rules Lyotard calls the "differend":

The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases

which are in principle possible. This state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: "One cannot find the words," etc. A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling, unless one wants this differend to be smothered right away in a litigation and for the alarm sounded by the feeling to have been useless. (13)

For Lyotard, the differend is not a statement that challenges the validity of normally accepted discursive rules; within his understanding of discourse, that is impossible, since statements cannot be formulated except through such rules. Rather, the differend represents the inability of the community's "phrase universes" to apply in a given instance. We can never argue directly for social change based on such discursive aporia since, by definition, they cannot be described using traditional moral imperatives. Such instances are instead opportunities for the wholesale change of a discursive system.

A community can recognize limitations within its discursive system because discourse performs two functions that can be at odds with each other. Arguing against linguistic theories that reduce reference to sense (Saussure) or sense to reference (Russell), Lyotard distinguishes between two basic types of phrases necessary for communication: "A cognitive phrase is validated thanks to another phrase, an ostensive one or one which displays. This is formulated as *Here's a case of it*. In every phrase, *of it* refers to the cognitive phrase" (41). Lyotard offers the following example of the differences between the cognitive phrase and the ostensive phrase: "The phrase *Here is a red flower* is transformed into two phrases, a cognitive phrase or definition: 'Red corresponds to wavelengths in the spectrum from 650 to 750 millimicrons of the radiation emitted by an object'; and an ostensive phrase: 'The color of this flower here is a case of it'" (41). For Lyotard, a phrase can be judged true and valid only when cognitive phrases are joined to an "object as an extra-linguistic permanence, as a 'given'" (33) by means of an ostensive phrase: either the direct deictics of spatiotemporal reference (here, now) or the "quasi-deictics" of a proper name. The object designated by a name or a deictic reference cannot be exhausted by a single cognitive phrase: "a named referent is real when it is also the possible case (the object of an ostensive phrase) of an unknown sense (presented by a not yet current phrase)" (47). Such an object makes discussion possible, since it allows many different cognitive phrases to be offered dialogically in a given context. Although these objects might appear to us to be concrete in and of themselves, they are named and designated through discourse and convention: "How can it be known that the referent is the same? *The same* signifies at least that it is locatable at the

same place among common and accessible cross-references. This is what the names of chronology, of topography, of anthroponymy, etc. permit us to do. Once placed in these systems, the referent loses the marks of a current 'given'" (38). Ostensive references to concrete objects are just as discursive as cognitive references, and just as much dependent on community convention and rules.⁵ The gap between these two types of reference is what creates our sense that the object designated by the name is concrete, that it exceeds the concept: "If the name can act as a linchpin between an ostensive phrase with its deictics and any given phrase with its sense or senses, it is because it is independent of the current showing and signified" (43). The concreteness of the objects that a community might discuss is, then, an effect of the gap between two different types of language use. These two forms of language use, in turn, seem quite similar to the two qualities that critics have associated with post-deconstructive narrative—its totality and self-conscious tentativeness. Cognitive discourse refers to the abstract system of language and concepts which, at least since Ferdinand de Saussure, we have thought about as a complete system that divides up all of experience. Conversely, ostensive reference seems to be the reference to concrete objects that would open language out to the real world and thus encourage new expressions. Obviously, this parallel is not perfect, since ostensive reference is not by itself open-ended. Nonetheless, we can see Lyotard in *The Differend* working through some of the deconstructive problems that will drive critics to an interest in narrative.

Narrative itself has a particularly complex role within the discursive dynamics that Lyotard sketches in *The Differend*. In *The Postmodern Condition*, narrative primarily establishes ostensive reference: "Even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course" (15). Lyotard repeats this association in *The Differend* by quoting Saul A. Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*: "a baby is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain" (91). Narrative thus establishes ostensive reference, and its objects become the concrete elements that are the basis of dialogue, even though dialogue itself is antithetical to the kind of totalization that Lyotard often associates with narrative. Statements that can be legitimated (i.e., have an ostensive as well as cognitive element) draw on narratives in order to define names, but also contrast themselves to such narratives as dialogically open within a certain dis-

cursive community. In *The Differend* Lyotard resolves his earlier vacillation between seeing narrative as totalizing and seeing it as admitting its own construction by making this tension essential to narrative's place within discourse in general. Without narrative's totality we could not firmly define an object's name for an individual discursive community; without narrative's awareness of its own construction we could not use these names as part of a larger system of dialogue and debate. What unites narrative's totality and tentativeness—its availability to other articulations—is the concrete “linchpin” of the named object under discussion. Narrative by itself does not make this object concrete since this object is open to multiple cognitive phrases only when it leaves the seamless narrative of naming and enters into the arena of dialogue and legitimation. A narrative creates a concrete entity, instead, only at the moment when that entity is no longer discussed “narratively”—when narrative's totality is put aside for the sake of a more open form of discourse. Lyotard seems to be struggling here to define a fundamentally different way of thinking about narrative's place in the dialectic of totality and openness. He offers a vision of narrative as one part of a type of discourse that admits its totality while also making its objects available for other articulations—indeed, even encouraging us to recognize how one total system might be rejected for an entirely new way of placing that object in discourse.

By now, it is clear that when I speak of post-deconstructive narrative, I am not implying a distinct genre of writing. Rather, narrative is part of the functioning of discourse in general. For Lyotard, narrative is simply the history that stands behind the given name, a history that *might be* appealed to in order to define and clarify a reference to a concrete entity. Narrative here is part of all language use. Thus in this project when I speak about narrative after deconstruction, I am really describing a certain hitherto unrecognized quality of textuality in general that has appeared to critics to be an answer to some of the problems raised by deconstruction. In particular, as we will see, narrative seems to be a quality of discourse that might be *exploited* to produce texts that better foreground their open-endedness, their availability to other articulations. Lyotard is far from giving us a fully formed theory of post-deconstructive narrative in *The Differend*, since he is writing less about narrative itself and more about how narrative might have a place in the general dynamics of debate. He, nonetheless, signals what narrative promises to do, and suggests that its ability to reference objects and to create a particular sense of concreteness is the essence of its power. That narrative can create such a sense of concreteness is evident throughout post-deconstructive criticism. Simon During's discussion of

nationalism and literature in *Nation and Narration* is a good example of how post-deconstructive criticism can use such concreteness to talk about the discontinuity and open-endedness in discourse. During begins his study with the observation that “the nation-state is, for better or worse, the political institution which has the most efficacy and legitimacy in the world as it is” (139); he goes on to argue that the concept of “nation” is necessary even for groups marginalized by its current definition. A given culture, During argues, may have many nationalisms, each claiming to describe the culture totally. To develop a model of culturally disunified totalities, During turns to the “civil Imaginary”:

The term names prose writings which provide representations of social existence from the beginning of the eighteenth century through the period of the classic realist novel and beyond. At its beginnings the civil Imaginary does not cover just what we would today call fiction: Addison and Steele’s journalism stand at its point of emergence. What these writings have in common with Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding’s novels is the production of narratives, moral cruxes, a linguistic decorum, and character types which cover the social field of the post-1688 world.

The civil Imaginary is an attempt to order what Steele calls “the uncontrollable jumble of Persons and Things” in that society. Thus its purpose is in part ethical in the Foucauldian sense. It produces representations of manners, taste, behaviour, utterances for imitation by individual lives. (142)

During defines the civil in terms of the types of entities that it recognizes. In Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, During finds an imaginative and less didactical type of novel that reworks the entities of the civil Imaginary. Scott and Austen, writes During, “[force] their extensions of reality back into the real. However much their techniques and interests differ; for both, to be imaginative is also to be realistic” (148). These writers are able to be more imaginative because the novel’s own form allows for a heterogeneity of entities: “The text’s unity is the unity of culture—a set of overlapping, unprogrammable connections and analogies within the strictly delimited frame of the work itself” (147). The novel’s acceptance of heterogeneous entities, During reasons, allows postcolonial novelists to deploy the idea of “nation” without accepting hegemony. Postcolonial writers, During claims, use “realism’s folding of the Imaginary into the real” (151) in order to work toward a “global” but discontinuous civil Imaginary. This paradoxical idea of a total but discontinuous civil space depends on the concrete entities that compose the civil Imaginary. Such concrete entities entail “global” narrative structures (“representations of manners, taste, behaviour” and the ethics on which they rest) to organize them, yet have the capacity to

enter into new relations. Such concrete entities allow, paradoxically, the interrelation of many totalities.

Narrative's apparent ability to create such moments of concreteness will be most important to critics as they struggle to resolve deconstruction's totalizing textual system and its attractive power to reveal slippages within hegemony. Nonetheless, even critics not particularly engaged in deconstructive issues have become interested recently in narrative's creation and manipulation of concrete objects. Narratology itself is a case in point. The study of narrative methods developed as a distinct field of study beginning with Vladimir Propp's analysis of the formal patterns within the plots of Russian folktales, but entered the mainstream of American academic study primarily as a tool for stylistic analysis. Gerard Genette's study of temporal ordering in Marcel Proust popularized a new direction for the study of narrative based on how the events of the novel are ordered and presented within the text. Although these concerns are by no means discredited in current narratology, more philosophical issues of fictional reference have developed as an increasingly important area of study.⁶ Theorists commonly group inquiry into fictional reference, the organization of fictional space, and the interrelations between real-world and fictional entities under the broad term *fictional semantics*. Thomas G. Pavel has argued that studying the concrete objects of the fictional text can explain how texts bring together many totalities, a "plurality of worlds." For Pavel, narratives work through the clashes between these worlds: "Competition between neighboring [ontological] landscapes always leads to a process of ontological focalization, to a sorting out and ordering of the worlds in place" (139). Contemporary fictional semantics, Pavel argues, arises out of the inadequacy of traditional referential theories, which presuppose a one-to-one relation between name and object. For Pavel, fictional semantics must use richer and more complex models of ontological realms:

This amounts to a plea for richer models that include realms different from the actual world. The constitution of such models would allow the theory of fiction to look for explanations beyond the level of fictional individuals. . . . [F]ictional beings do not necessarily come into existence through individual gates or blocks in their referential history; rather, their fate is linked with the movements of populous groups that share the same ontological destiny. Fictionality cannot be understood as an individual feature: it encompasses entire realms of beings. (42)

For Pavel "objectness" cannot be defined by an entity's being on the receiving end of a subject's perception or referential act; rather, being an object depends on that object's function within a whole economy of

the real and the fictional. Although his image of textual openness is considerably less radical and his understanding of the concreteness of narrative less complex than Lyotard's, nonetheless Pavel's theory of fictional worlds suggests how broadly we have begun to think of narrative as a matter of creating and manipulating textual concreteness.

Recent Theories of Materiality

When I suggest that post-deconstructive narrative works by manipulating textual concreteness, I am raising a broad and tangled philosophical question about what makes an object "concrete." When we refer to "concrete entities" in Lyotard's writing, we really imply two distinct things: that these elements are objects, and that they are concrete. Are objects by their nature "concrete"? Or is "concreteness" produced by an object's context? And just as *narrative* has been a term that has become ubiquitous within post-deconstructive criticism while being used in seemingly contradictory ways, so too has the issue of concreteness—renamed "materiality"—pervaded the post-deconstructive landscape. Indeed, materiality as a concept and issue is deployed currently by critics under the banner of very different theoretical schools. Elizabeth Grosz's book of materialist feminism, *Volatile Bodies*, takes as its starting point Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of human embodiment. Judith Butler's widely influential *Bodies that Matter* is a postphenomenological study of materialization as a discursive process heavily indebted to deconstruction. Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian discussion of the peculiar materiality of commodity objects in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is presented as an explicit step beyond poststructural textualism. However, Žižek's psychoanalytic understanding of materialism is directly opposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose materialist theory of "desiring machines" is offered as an explicit escape from the psychoanalytic emphasis on lack. Although these conflicting theories of materiality are themselves not *textual* theories and consequently have no direct relationship to narrative, they articulate a network of concerns that illuminate our inquiry into post-deconstructive narrative because they arise out of the same struggle with deconstruction.

Normally we think of "matter" as *the* common quality of natural objects. In his study of the origins of the concept of matter in ancient Greek philosophy, Samuel Sambursky argues that developing a concept of matter was the first step in formulating a scientific inquiry into nature. The theory of matter, Sambursky writes, is the "attempt to rationalize phenomena and explain them within the framework of gen-

eral hypotheses. The object aimed at [is] giving general validity to the experience obtained from regarding the world as a single orderly unit—a cosmos the laws of which can be discovered and expressed in scientific terms” (4). Recent theories, however, analyze the idea of “the material” in order to challenge the belief that objects are knowable. Materiality has been an especially important concept in recent feminism. Western metaphysics traditionally has drawn a strict line between the body and the mind. Many feminists have noted that the philosophical attempt to locate identity in a disembodied consciousness starts from a male model of the body. In pregnancy, in contrast, we can distinguish body and spirit much less clearly. Theorists have gone on to suggest that examples drawn from the female body could lead to a richer understanding of the “embodiment” of consciousness in flesh (Diprose). The body that we occupy is material and concrete, but not necessarily a distinct and stable object. Understanding how the body might be “material” without being an object is important for contemporary feminism because associating women with the body is a traditional means of marginalizing them. As Grosz writes,

Relying on essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men. The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women’s bodies and services. (*Volatile* 14)

To challenge the way in which women have been defined as “more corporeal” than men, feminism must show a relation between the body and the “purely conceptual order” that patriarchal thought seeks to occupy.

This corporeal feminism seeks to connect the body and the “conceptual order” by challenging the traditional distinction between subject and object, a distinction that implicitly undervalues the physical world and severs its connection with the subject. As Grosz writes, “The mind/body relation is frequently correlated with the distinctions between reason and passion, sense and sensibility, outside and inside, self and other, depth and surface, reality and appearance, mechanism and vitalism, transcendence and immanence . . . and so on. These lateral associations provide whatever ‘positive’ characteristic the body may be accorded in systems where it is the subordinated counterpart of mind” (3). As soon as we define knowledge as the relation between sub-

jective knower and objective reality, knowledge means overcoming a gap between two categorically different spheres. Seyla Benhabib argues that the Cartesian distinction between subject and object underlies modern philosophy's epistemological crisis: "Modern philosophy began with the loss of the world. The decision of the autonomous bourgeois subject to take nothing and no authority for granted, whose content and strictures had not been subjected to rigorous examination, and that had not withstood the test of 'clarity and distinctness,' began with the withdrawal from the world" ("Epistemologies" 109). Benhabib claims that epistemology based on the distinction between subject and object will find the world "lost" and knowledge to be constructed according to the observer's bias. If such suspicion toward knowledge is most fully articulated in deconstruction, corporeal feminism's interest in materiality is post-deconstructive precisely in exploring the possibility of regaining the world, of life without the Cartesian split between subject and object. Rosalyn Diprose's work on female "embodiment" is a good example of how thinking about the material body as something other than a distinct object undermines the Cartesian distinction. By revisiting traditional questions about the nature of our "being in the world," Diprose challenges us to take account of how we inhabit our bodies themselves:

Underlying all these questions is some assumption about the meaning of "in." An ethics based on universal rational principles assumes that our "being" is a discrete entity separate from the "world" such that we are "in" the world after the advent of both. An ethics based on the problematic of place, on the other hand, claims that our "being" and the "world" are constituted by the relation "in." (19)

Diprose argues that feminists have accepted too readily from a male philosophical tradition the idea that the world is independent of, and radically different than the subject. To conceive of the subject and world as constituted by their relation to each other, as Diprose recommends, means rethinking what we mean by "objectivity."

Corporeal feminism provides a theory not of materiality in narrative but of the materiality of the extra-textual body. Nonetheless, this theory reveals how a nuanced understanding of post-deconstructive narrative's manipulation of textual concreteness will need to be developed. In particular, corporeal feminism raises the issue of how this materiality will appear to us and be recognized. As should already be clear, materiality cannot simply be a stable and objectively knowable quality of the things of the world or discourse, since such concreteness would return us to the traditional language of distinct subject and object.

Instead, corporeal feminism has often turned to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory as a model of subject/object relations based on interaction rather than on opposition. Grosz draws on Merleau-Ponty's notion of "touch" to describe our corporeal being in the world. Unlike sight's tendency to spatialize the world, and unlike the temporal continuity of hearing, touch implies a greater give-and-take between subject and world: "Touch is regarded as a contact sense. . . . [I]t provides contiguous access to an abiding object; the surface of the toucher and the touched must partially coincide" (*Volatile* 98). Grosz and other feminist critics have seen in this idea of "touch" a corporeality that does not fit easily within traditional ways of understanding the body as an object. Merleau-Ponty certainly encourages us to believe that "touch" is inherently connected to the body by using the term *flesh* to describe a substance that bridges subject and object:

There is an experience of the visible thing as pre-existing my vision, but this experience is not a fusion, a coincidence: because my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched, because, therefore, in this sense they see and touch the visible, the tangible, from within, because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which nevertheless it is surrounded, the world and I are within one another, and there is no anteriority of the *percipere* to the *percipi*, there is simultaneity or even retardation. (123)

Merleau-Ponty's rather mysterious idea of "flesh" seems to explain how subject and object participate in a total world, what phenomenologists describe as "Being" in general. M. C. Dillon understands Merleau-Ponty's concept as such an overarching Being: "Merleau-Ponty claims that there is a continuity between my body and the things surrounding me in the world I inhabit. Indeed, I can touch worldly things precisely because I am myself a worldly thing. If I were an incorporeal being, I could not palpate the things around me or interrogate the world with my hands" (159). Although Dillon focuses on how subject and object share in a larger Being, Merleau-Ponty also makes it clear that this Being allows for heterogeneity in the elements that it holds together. The world's unified heterogeneity is most clear when Merleau-Ponty describes the "atmosphere" of Being:

Far from opening upon the blinding light of pure Being or of the Object, our life has, in the astronomical sense of the word, an atmosphere: it is constantly enshrouded by those mists we call the sensible world or history, the *one* of the corporeal life and the *one* of the human life, the present and the past, as a pell-mell ensemble of bodies and minds, promiscuity of visages, words, actions, with, between them all, that cohesion which cannot be

denied them since they are all differences, extreme divergences of the same something. (84)

For Merleau-Ponty the flesh (total Being) does two things: it overarches all individual elements (objects as well as the subjects that perceive them) while also allowing those elements to remain distinct and to form a “pell-mell ensemble.” Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid turning “flesh” into a single all-pervasive substance, a “pure Being” that we can recognize directly; he wants to complicate but not dismiss the distinction between subject and object. Nonetheless, some critics have felt that describing a general substance that subjects and objects share in does indeed erase the distinction between subject and object. Emmanuel Levinas notes the difficulty of applying Merleau-Ponty’s theory of flesh to interpersonal relations:

[C]an the social unity toward which it [Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of “flesh”] claims to proceed be thought solely on the basis of an intercorporeity understood as the solidarity of an organism in its *esthetic* unity? Is the meaning of intersubjectivity at the level of sociality attained while being conceived by analogy with the image of the joining of a person’s hands, “the right knowing what the left is doing?” Is the handshake a “taking cognizance of” and as it were a coinciding of two thought-worlds in the mutual knowledge of one by the other? Is it not the *difference*—the proximity of one’s neighbor? (“Sensibility” 63)

Levinas argues that without a sense of difference between individuals we cannot speak of ethical and communal relations. Any theory of subject/object relations must walk a path, then, between two dangers: accepting the traditional belief that subjects and objects are distinct a priori, and subsuming subject and object into a general “Being” that does not allow us to talk about the very real gaps that exist between objects and subjects, objects and objects, and subjects and subjects.

Merleau-Ponty’s theory, contextualized by Levinas’s critique, suggests how we will have to approach materiality in narrative texts. Merleau-Ponty defines three different elements of the world: subject, object, and the “flesh” that mediates between them. Dillon’s comment that “I can touch worldly things precisely because I am myself a worldly thing” suggests that “flesh” represents the materiality of these other two elements, the fact that objects and subjects are concrete entities that jostle against each other in the world. If we say, however, that everything is material by virtue of the fact that it exists within the world, we have both created a worthless category (since everything is material) and undermined the real distinction between instances when we are aware of an object’s materiality and those when we are not.

Materiality cannot be understood as a *static* substance or quality that overarches subject and object. This static understanding of flesh is what Levinas critiques in Merleau-Ponty: “It is in sensibility, according to Merleau-Ponty, that the carnal (or the mental) manifests its ambiguity or ambivalence of the extension or interiority, in which the *felt*, which is out there, is ipso facto a *feeling*. The sensible content is itself inseparable from that incarnation, of which it is, according to Merleau-Ponty, the ‘reflection’ or the ‘counterpart’” (“Intersubjectivity” 57). Levinas focuses on the ambiguity that is the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of flesh, that touching also means being touched. According to Levinas, treating the interaction between self and other as a static ambiguity erases the line between inside and outside and makes other people into reflections of one’s own feelings. We need, instead, a *dynamic* model of how materiality functions in the relation between subject and object. Samuel Weber has recently argued that individuals work to create “objectivity” rather than merely encountering it. He ignores the normal definition of the word *objective* as what is true or unbiased, and instead treats objectivity as the condition of being an object. Arguing that the object (or “objectivity”) is partially produced by the subject suggests a dynamic model of subject and object. Weber writes,

First, the firm guidance that the object, as the other of the subject, is called upon to provide presupposes a stability that is achieved only at the cost of excluding, fending off, or fencing out others—that is, other possibilities, other ways, other encounters. Second, such exclusions serve the interest of that privileged other of objectivity that turns out to be the subject seeking to stabilize itself. And finally, this stability is not exempt from the tension and tendencies that it seeks to harness. (39)

Weber argues that the subject uses the object for “firm guidance,” and that the object itself is created by “excluding, fending off, or fencing out others.” These “others” are the unrealized ways of defining and isolating any material object. A material object, Weber suggests, is granted “objectivity” when the many possible ways of circumscribing it are shaped into a single form of “stability.” This distinction between the messy network of potentials that surround a material object, and the neat but constructed stability of “objectivity” echoes the distinction in Merleau-Ponty’s theory between subject, object, and the materiality (flesh) that overarches them. Both Merleau-Ponty and Weber distinguish between what we can call “objectivity” and “materiality.” Using Weber’s reworking of the term, we can say that the world is objective when it is made up of individual, self-contained, and stable objects. Materiality, conversely, describes the world as a network of potential

objects. Objectivity seeks to separate the subject from the object so that both will appear stable. When we are aware of the materiality of an object, conversely, we recognize our involvement in the outside world, the fact that we may choose different ways of defining objects that in turn affect how we think of ourselves as subjects.

We can observe, then, a complex but cohesive dynamic suggested by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and developed by contemporary critics in different, often conflicting ways. A subject cannot simply choose to recognize materiality and avoid objectivity; rather, materiality and objectivity are halves of the same process. The dynamic model of subject/object relations makes us aware of the materiality of the "other," but does not suggest that we can avoid turning others into objects. Levinas writes, "That person [the other] cannot be represented and given to knowledge in his or her uniqueness, because there is no science but of generality. But the nonrepresentable—is it not precisely the inside, which, *appresented*, is approachable? . . . It is, in proximity, all the novelty of the social; proximity to the other, who, eluding possession, falls to my responsibility" ("Sensibility" 66). In demanding that we recognize our "proximity to the other" Levinas does not claim that we can avoid turning other people into objects "given to knowledge." Rather, the proximity that Levinas describes frames and questions objectivity. It exposes our relation to the other and suggests that we have, indeed, created that object according to our own interests. For Merleau-Ponty, materiality (flesh) describes a general Being that encompasses subject and object. Levinas and Weber transform this theory to suggest that materiality is the shadow of objectivity, a penumbra of other possibilities that surrounds any object. Where Merleau-Ponty's static understanding of materiality hints that we might be able to think about Being in general without reference to specific objects, Levinas and Weber insist that materiality and objectivity are locked in a dynamic interaction. Materiality appears only in our act of creating a fixed and stable object, and we cannot create objects without raising the issue of materiality.

This is not, of course, a theory of materiality *in* narrative. As we try to understand post-deconstructive narrative and its appeal to textual concreteness we will need to consider how the dynamics of object, subject, and materiality are shaped and changed by a textual context. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of sympathy between these theories of narrative and materiality that I have discussed. Both see themselves inhabiting a post-deconstructive world; both are unhappy with the dichotomies and dead ends that deconstruction seems to pose; both see an inquiry into our ideas of objects and concreteness to provide a new

dynamic for knowledge. What is most exciting for post-deconstructive narrative about the concept of materiality is what Weber describes—the way in which materiality can both reference a whole system of “being” and yet at the same time remind us of the other possibilities that surround the object. Post-deconstructive narrative, we saw, inherited precisely this problem from deconstruction—how texts can be totalizing systems and yet be subject to self-reflection and hence tentative in a way that makes them capable of being used by others to articulate its objects in very different ways. Post-deconstructive narrative, then, can best be understood through its complex engagement with materiality. This is the great challenge of post-deconstructive narrative, a challenge that it pursues by returning to the fundamental problems and contradictions of deconstruction itself.