Problems for Narrative Theory:  
*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

The attempts of critics thus far to describe and analyze the narrating techniques used by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* have been peculiarly unilluminating when one notes that these techniques are obtrusive enough to have attracted comment from virtually everyone to review or critique the novel. While this may be in part due to the possibility that Fowles’s work has not attracted much serious criticism, I think it can be demonstrated that even the most recent and comprehensive theories of narrative find difficulty in accounting for all aspects of the narrating. That a best-seller, which presumably causes no serious problems for the average reader, should be a source of confusion for literary critics suggests that our theories are failing to account for certain narrative possibilities. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* may serve as a sort of touchstone in assessing the applicability and comprehensiveness of recent theories for analyzing specific narrative techniques.

Most critics do attempt at some level to offer a technical description of the narration. Campbell’s comment that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is a “third-person” book cannot do justice to the variety of techniques used in the novel, many of which are not tied to use of the third person.1 Rackham’s suggestion that the intrusion of the narrator into the fiction “might be called a science-fiction journey backward in time” or Evarts’ description of this device as “eccentric reference” are examples of a general lack of emphasis on putting analysis into the context of a critical terminology which can be discussed or understood by other critics.2

The context within which the narrating has most commonly been located is that of the intrusive Victorian narrator. Many critics find little to distinguish Fowles’s narrator from those of popular Victorian writers. Watt has argued that “the authorial intrusions . . . are not very different from Thackeray’s sceptical asides or Sterne’s tricks with time.”3 Oates would seem to be agreeing when she refers to his characters as “puppets,” presumably an allusion to Thackeray’s (and Fowles’s) use of this term to describe the relation of narrator to character.4 Thorpe also finds Fowles working “in the Victorian manner” and using “the Victorian convention of the omniscient author.”5 Allen is so convinced that Fowles does nothing differently from the Victorians that he expresses contempt for those reviewers who have been “bewildered” by the narration. He asserts that Scott and Eliot did the same things and remarks that “one can only assume that an acquaintance with classic English fiction is
no longer a pre-requisite for reviewing novels.” He dismisses the “experimental” features as “a boring red herring” not worth discussion.⁶

Other critics, while agreeing that Fowles is using Victorian conventions, see distinctions to be made between the classic and modern uses of the devices. McDowell argues that “Fowles’ commentary approximates the ‘alienation effects’ used in the modern theater, whereby the dramatist interrupts his work to dispel illusion (rather than, as with the Victorian novelist, to intensify it). . . . Fowles’ use of Victorian aesthetic convention serves yet another purpose. It allows him to be purposefully anachronistic. . . .”⁷ Lehmann-Haupt also remarks on the “anachronistic comments” of the narrator, as does Olshen, who also sees “a modern, cinematic panorama” suggested by the “long-shots of the three major participants” given at the beginning of the novel.⁸ He does, however, see the entry of the narrator into the story as a natural function of “the familiar voice of the omniscient narrator of Victorian fiction” (70) and points out, echoing Allen, that “the seemingly experimental device of multiple endings was not unknown to Victorian novelists” (89). This difficulty in deciding what is Victorian and what is modern has been approached in general terms by Kaplan, who sees “two levels of commentary within the novel,” one “particularly Victorian” and the “other level of authority [representing] the artist as magician, as magus, as the great keeper and controller of the clock.”⁹

The wide range of disagreement about the nature of Fowles’s narration seems to result in part from a general failure to examine closely the technical devices used in the novel and in part from failure to use a precise terminology to describe those devices which are examined, a characteristic problem in discussions of point of view. The general statements about the narrating and the comparisons between modern and Victorian practice are made without first accurately analyzing specific instances of techniques. A few critics have recognized the necessity of closer analysis and have produced clearer discussions. Huifaker finds three major differences between Fowles’s practice and that of his predecessors. First, according to Huifaker, rather than exercising complete omniscience, Fowles’s narrator limits himself: “Like a modern novelist, he had withheld his heroine’s inner thoughts, though revealing those of other characters.”¹⁰ Second is “his demurral over authorial omnipotence” (105), as exemplified by his attribution of autonomy to Charles on pages 81-82 of the novel. Third is the point that the narrator enters the fiction. Huifaker makes clear a distinction blurred by other critics:

Fowles’s often playful intrusions are sometimes as near to devices of Fielding and Sterne as to techniques used by their Victorian successors, but his personal appearance in the novel is more extreme than most inventions of either century. In older traditions, the author sometimes steps into the presence of his reader, but Fowles keeps the reader at some distance and actually joins his characters. Fielding climbs into a coach with the reader of Tom Jones, and Dickens yanks the reader of The Old Curiosity Shop away by the hand on a cross-country trip, but neither ever barges into a character’s railway compartment. (103)
Adam also points up distinctions to be made between Fowles’s narrating and that of earlier writers, arguing that he often uses the convention to blur rather than reinforce the distinction between the fictive and the real, most emphatically perhaps in those passages where the novelist takes on the attributes of a character, or the character those of a novelist. An outrageous time-traveller on a Victorian train, Fowles stares at the sleeping Charles in Chapter 55, while in Chapter 13 we are told that Charles, with a will of his own, has taken the path to the dairy against the wishes of his author. Related to this is his habit of referring to the characters’ lives outside the novel, and to the novelist’s familiarity with them: we are told, for example, of his purchase of Sarah’s Toby jug, or of Ernestine’s death on the day Hitler invades Poland. Fowles obviously delights in the paradoxes he raises, and while one cannot discuss here their implications at length, they would seem to highlight the need for reconsideration of such terms as “author,” “character,” “persona,” or “illusion.”

Wolfe agrees that current narrative theories are particularly poorly equipped to analyze this interaction between narrator and character. “His addressing the sleeping face of a character in a railroad coach, ‘What the devil am I going to do with you?’ joins narrator to narration in a comic stroke that baffles aesthetic dogma.”

These ad hoc approaches to the analysis of a complex narrative structure have generated predictably incomplete views. One would expect that the application of more comprehensive theories would be more profitable. Huffaker, Adam, and Wolfe all single out the narrator’s entry into Charles’ railway coach as a particularly interesting example of Fowles’s experimentation with narrating, and I will analyze this scene according to two of the most comprehensive of recent treatments of the aesthetics of narrating: the theories outlined in Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* and Susan Sniader Lanser’s *The Narrative Act.*

Lanser proposes that there are four possible levels of narration: the extrafictional voice, closely associated with the historical author, who organizes, titles, introduces, and supplies epigraphs for the fiction (122, 125); the public narrator, who directly addresses a public narratee and takes on the role of “author” of the fiction, whether or not he is a character in it (138); the private narrator, who is part of the fiction and cannot address the reader (138); and focalizers, point of view characters who do not consciously narrate for an audience (141-42). Lanser argues that commonly two of the three voices, those of the public narrator and extrafictional voice (associated with the historical author), are so closely identified as to be equivalent (151). The public narrator’s claim (365) that he has been the one to set the epigraphs into the text and his awareness of chapter numbers (81) indicate that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is an example of a novel in which the public narrator is to be closely identified with the extrafictional voice. These narrators are also identified with Fowles himself. Fowles and the public narrator are both currently residents of Lyme Regis, and the narrator’s claim that he now has Sarah’s Toby jug parallels Fowles’s claim in an interview that he has Charles’ tests.
This novel, then, would seem to represent Lanser's basic type of narration in which the public narrator, extrafictional voice, and historical author are equivalent.

Thus Lanser's system usefully describes the narrative structure used throughout virtually the entire novel, resolving much of the confusion inherent in descriptions not grounded in a comprehensive theory. A problem enters, however, with the intrusive author-figure (315-18) who is identified with the public narrator (317) whom we have been associating with the extrafictional narrator. But Lanser considers that "markings of the distinction between extrafictional and fictional voice include . . . characterization of the narrator such that s/he cannot 'be' the author (such as in a change of . . . historical setting) . . ." (151). If we follow this suggestion literally, then, this narrator cannot be identified with the one who narrates the rest of the book (although he tells us to make such an identification) because the change of historical setting marks them as distinct. He cannot, on the other hand, be a private narrator, because Lanser postulates that a private narrator cannot address the reading public (138). But this narrator, while staring at Charles, tells us that he is going to give two endings to the story, one in the last chapter, and that he will decide which one by flipping a coin, a gesture seen by Charles (318). Under these guidelines it is impossible that an extrafictional narrator be in the compartment with Charles and also impossible that a public narrator who is not the extrafictional voice (because he is dramatized as a character) control the ordering of the chapters.

Lanser has foreseen this type of violation of narrative decorum and the pitfalls of considering categories to be mutually exclusive. She postulates that "a text or portion of text may inhabit a mid-point on the axis or even change positions during the course of a single narrative." Rather than consider these as two separate public narrators (Fowles tells us they are not), we must see this as an example of a text that "is in some sense both A and -A" (156). But while this system can allow for such a violation of narrative decorum, the principle of the conflation of author and narrator(s) in this case creates a problem to be overcome rather than a clear solution. Further, the "A and -A" formula does not yet provide a useful way to describe the movement of this narrator through time and narrative levels.

The difficulty would seem to stem from Lanser's contention that "the unmarked case of narration for public narrators is that the narrating voice is equated with the textual author (the extrafictional voice or 'implied author')" (151). This reminds us of the anonymous reviewer's remark that "therefore John Fowles has had to imagine a narrator about 150 years old, and still in full vigor, to tell the story he wants in the appropriate style." Of course, this unusual example hardly constitutes "the unmarked case." But is the concept any more helpful in dealing with simpler cases? Lanser calls the aspect of her system which treats this identification of narrator and author "authorial equiv-
Alence” (155). We have seen the difficulty of applying this to the narrator of Chapter 55. Are there benefits to the use of this category of classification which might counterbalance this difficulty? She claims that this is “the first important aspect of a narrator’s status or relationship to the narrative speech act, one of several crucial questions that must be asked about any narrative voice” (156).

But examination of the sample readings of two short stories given in her book do not indicate that Lanser herself gains anything from the axis of authorial equivalence. Discussing Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” she argues that one key to understanding the narrator’s stance is “its homologous relationship to Kate Chopin’s own situation as a woman writer” (246-47) and that “by the conventions of authorial equivalence” the narrator “may also be assumed to share the personality and values—the imaginative and ideological consciousness—of the authorial voice” (250). But her reading requires no reference to Chopin’s values and ideology as expressed outside the story: “this ideology comes through the text,” as she points out (251), and there seems to be no reason to go beyond the narrator to an “author.” The second story she analyzes, “The Killers,” never even calls for the use of the term “authorial equivalence,” much less the application of the concept to the story (264-76). In short, Lanser’s suggested conflation of author and narrator seems to offer a disadvantage in at least one case (The French Lieutenant’s Woman) and no evident advantage to justify its use in the cases she relies on to demonstrate the utility of her theory.

Genette flatly denies the validity of using any such identification of author and narrator in discussing narrative, and goes so far as to argue the irrelevance of dividing narrative elements according to degree of historical factuality or fictionality: “In short, we shall not confound extradiegetic with real historical existence, nor diegetic (or even meta-diegetic) status with fiction” (230). In other words, the reality or unreality of an event or personality has no effect upon its narrative level. To move from the normal narrative level of The French Lieutenant’s Woman to that of Chapter 55 is to move from extraheterodiegetic to extrahomodiegetic narration: a first degree narrator absent from the story becomes a first degree narrator who enters the story. According to Genette’s schema, “this trope, the metalepsis, with which the narrator pretends to enter (with or without his reader) into the diegetic universe” causes no theoretical difficulties (101, n. 33). The same narrator still speaks to the same “extradiegetic narratee, who merges with the implied reader and with whom each real reader can identify” (260).

Genette’s theory seems in this respect to allow a more simple and precise identification of narrative levels. But this does not yet describe the temporal movement of the narrator, a problem equally in need of some elucidation. An extension of Genette’s terminology may be necessary to describe a case like this. Let us postulate that all metalepsis is from the narrating “present” to the narrated “present” (or vice-versa). What we wish to indicate then is the re-
lation, precedence or antecedence, between the narrating and diegetic presents. The unmarked case will be simultaneity. Genette cites a passage from Balzac which illustrates this case. “While the venerable churchman climbs the ramps of Angouleme, it is not useless to explain...” as if the narrating were contemporaneous with the story and had to fill up the latter’s dead spaces” (235). *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* presents an example of what may be called, adapting the terminology provided by Genette, *analeptic metalepsis*. The narrator changes narrative levels and in doing so moves to an earlier point in time. If, conversely, Charles were to enter the narrator’s study, we would have a *proleptic metalepsis*, a movement forward in time by the agent who is changing levels. With this minor addition, the violation of narrative decorum in Chapter 55 can be accounted for within Genette’s system with reasonable precision.

But in another respect Genette’s theory is, in the case of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, incomplete. It places a great deal of emphasis on the temporal relations between the narrating act and the story, and with little modification can describe these relations. But his system does not allow for the possibility that the spatial relations between these instances may be relevant (215-16). (Lanser does allude to the narrator’s spatial relation to scenes being described, but only in a sense similar to camera placement in cinema, that is, seeing through a character’s eyes or seeing him from a bird’s-eye view, and so forth (192). This is not necessarily related to the place from which the narrative is supposedly produced, which is Genette’s concern here, and an aspect of narration which Lanser’s theory does not directly address.) Genette’s position is that “the narrative place is very rarely specified, and is almost never relevant” (216). This moderate statement is modified into a more extreme one in an accompanying footnote in which he explains the nature of the exceptions to his position: “It could be relevant, but for reasons which are not exactly spatial in kind: for a ‘first-person’ narrative to be produced in prison, on a hospital bed, in a psychiatric institution, can constitute a decisive element of advance notice about the denouement.” Clearly the “third-person” narrative of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* does not fall under any of these rubrics. But while the time of the narrating act is of paramount importance to this novel, as virtually every critic of the novel has noted, the location of the narrating act also affects our reading.

We can firmly locate the narrator as residing in or very near the town of Lyme Regis. The opening words of the novel, “An easterly is the most disagreeable wind in Lyme Bay” (9), suggest at once that the narrator is familiar with the area, an impression immediately reinforced: “No house lay visibly then, or, beyond a brief misery of beach huts, lies today in that direction.” Subsequent references bear out the hypothesis that the narrator lives in Lyme Regis: “Scientific agriculture, in the form of myxomatosis, has only very recently lost us the Green forever” (77, my emphasis); “perhaps I now live in
one of the houses I have brought into the fiction" (80); "a fashionable young London architect now has the place and comes [not 'goes'] there for weekends" (129).18

The dozens of descriptions of Lyme Regis in 1967 provide still better evidence for the location of the narrating instance when we remark the absence of any such descriptions of the other locations of the novel. A substantial portion of the action takes place in Exeter, and the town is described at length in Chapter 36, but nowhere does the narrator exhibit any knowledge of the town in modern times beyond the oblique "knowledge" that it then "was a great deal farther from the capitol than it is today" (217). The three other locations featured prominently in the novel, Winsyatt, London, and America, are similarly treated as if the narrator has little or no direct acquaintance with them as they exist in 1967. Although he does describe them fully in 1867, he avoids contrasting past and present conditions. The most extended description of any modern place besides Lyme Regis occurs when the narrator says that strip-tease "is done today in countless Soho dives" (240), a description hardly comparable to those of Lyme.

The narrator ostentatiously affirms his intimate familiarity with the town and its surroundings in 1967, both by continually referring its past to its present condition and by carefully failing to associate himself with any other modern location. His evident insistence on the relevance of the place of narrating should lead us to modify Genette's dictum and attempt to discover the functions of this spatial juxtaposition. The most obvious function is to make the novel more realistic. The physical descriptions of the area and the discussions of its history, from prehistoric times to 1967, gain in authority and hence believability by coming from a narrator so clearly steeped in the study of his native region. The descriptions of the paths along the cliff face and the meeting-places of Charles and Sarah carry a greater specificity and more strongly induce our visualization of them by the implication that these are "real" locations with which the narrator is physically and recently familiar rather than imaginary settings. The interest of the writer in the area as a resident draws him, and therefore the reader, more fully into the spatial world of the novel. Such factors help account for the striking fact that this experimentally written work, which consciously and frequently shows itself a fiction made by a writer, creates so powerfully a sense of the reality of Lyme Regis and its inhabitants and visitors.

This paradoxical state of affairs has been noted by most of the book's critics (many of whom have already been mentioned), if often with admitted puzzlement. Many of their discussions imply that this is not so much a matter of the confusion of past and present as of the merging of the "fictional" and "real" Lyme Regis. Evarts (57), Adam (344), Olshen (66), Boston (52), Hutcheon (84), and Eddins (218) all comment on the spatial correlation of place as a narrative feature distinct from the temporal dislocations.19 The linking and
authenticating functions of this spatial continuity between narrator and actors help justify Huffaker's discounting of the temporal relation as "more synchronistic than anachronistic" because of the variety of references which link the fiction "to known reality in recent history" and "intensify the authenticity, the reality of [Fowles's] story" (99). At the same time, the spatial continuity between the characters' and narrator's worlds also serves to undermine the authenticity of both worlds by frustrating the narratee's expectations about the separation (or even opposition) of fiction and reality. Fowles overlaps and blurs the spatial as well as the temporal distinctions between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to emphasize the resultant thematic point that Sarah and Charles are anachronistic misplacements. While the temporal shiftings are of primary importance, Genette's decision to deemphasize consideration of the place of narrating excludes an important aspect of the narration of this novel from analysis.

This problem of space can be fairly easily solved by Lanser's model, however, as the metaleptic problem could be accomodated by Genette's. The question of space may be tied to that of narrator's stance, as the question of levels was tied to status. (Status considers the relations between author and narrator, stance those between narrator and text.) Specifically, there is a line on her matrix for analysis of the ways in which "spatial and temporal stance provides mechanisms for structuring the relationship between a narrator and the textual world" (191). Her intention here is to cover what we might call "point of view" in the strictest sense—from what point in space or time do we "see" the action of the story, i.e., from above or beside, as recent or distant. The particular advantage of this category is that it combines space and time, the two relevant variables for this example.

I would suggest the addition of an axis for the location and description of the space around the narrator to the axis already provided for the location of the field of the narrated (or "viewed"). One approach would be to set up a spectrum of possibilities addressing the spatial relationships, including distance and similarity or contrast, between the narrating and the narrated, similar to the system Lanser has set up to address the psychological distance between the two. Thus, without worrying here about fine gradations, the relation in the case of The French Lieutenant's Woman would be toward spatial coincidence rather than difference and of posterior (by a hundred years) rather than anterior temporality. In this example the scope of Lanser's enterprise becomes evident. While one can manage to fit the metalepsis in Chapter 55 into her schema, albeit not as readily as into Genette's, it is difficult to imagine how one could address the spatial issue at all with Genette's schema.

Although it is not necessary for dealing with this novel, Lanser's system may be further expanded to include other aspects of space. Prince has suggested that, in addition to the space around the narrating and the narrated, the space around the narratee and the space upon which the text is written may be
Problems for Narrative Theory

significant.21 These latter categories may be tied to Lanser's discussion of contact, a term which designates descriptions of "the kinds and modes of contact which the narrator establishes with the textual readership" (174). She uses Piwowarczyk's model of the degree zero narratee (derived from Prince's), which allows for specification of the spatial location of the narratee.22 Consideration of the space of the text itself, the physical pieces of paper on which it is written, would require an elaboration of Lanser's treatment of mode, an aspect of contact, to allow for references to the medium of contact. Indeed, such an elaboration would be useful in the case of The French Lieutenant's Woman, a novel that seems to test the limits of narrative theory at every boundary. Wolfe has noted that the physical appearance of the hardbound edition of the text furthers the theme of anachronistic misplacement we have seen developed in the blurrings of temporal and spatial distinctions within the fiction: "A long novel, especially by post-Jamesian standards, it is printed on a large page in large Victorian-looking typeface; the generous margins framing the print add further to the book's Victorian expansiveness" (130).

After all of this disputation, it may not be quite clear that I agree almost entirely with both Lanser and Genette and find both systems virtually unsailable. My intention here is only to suggest some minor refinements to large and lucid theoretical structures with the object of clarifying the ways in which they can be made to accommodate even the most difficult narrative cruxes. Given the concern of contemporary criticism with the minutest details about the ways in which texts can generate meanings, it will presumably continue to be necessary to make such adjustments to keep theoretical models abreast of literary innovations.

Notes

1 James Campbell, "An Interview with John Fowles," Contemporary Literature, 17 (1976), 463.
One need only mention the very simple trick, so often employed by novelists, whereby the author himself takes part in the narrative, thus establishing perspectives which would not have arisen out of the mere narration of the events described. Wayne Booth once called this the technique of the "unreliable narrator."

I think that the trick is not always simple, and that it does not constitute a form of Booth's concept of unreliability, which is a function of "the moral and intellectual qualities of the narrator" and their distance from those of the implied author (The Rhetoric of Fiction, 2nd ed. [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981], p. 158). In this regard the narrator in The French Lieutenant's Woman is quite reliable in his metaleptic forays.

This is a conscious reaction against the New Critical tenet of the separation of author and narrator, although a New Critical theorist like Monroe Beardsley is flexible enough to allow for such identification in some cases: "the speaker of a literary work cannot be identified with the author . . . unless the author has provided a pragmatic context, or a claim of one, that connects the speaker with himself"; Aesthetics (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1958), p. 240. What we have here is a shift in presumption: Lanser identifies the two unless separation is clearly marked, whereas Beardsley considers separation to be the unmarked case. As this essay suggests, I agree with Beardsley. But Lanser's remark that the narrator cannot move back in time while remaining identified with the extrafictional voice is not an essential aspect of her presumption. At one point she seems to equivocate somewhat by saying that the author is "kin to but not identical with the biographical person who wrote the text" (152), but she allows only for such slight difference as to rule out, for example, an interpretation suggesting that Wordsworth wrote "Composed on Westminster Bridge" while standing on the bridge. But given this exception, I can see no particular reason that anything else in the poem need be associated with Wordsworth unless it be the emotions and ideas expressed. But as these are only determinable from interpretation of the text, what would we profit by identifying Wordsworth and the narrator?

An interesting example of proleptic metalepsis occurs in Virgil's Aeneid, in which the prehistorical Aeneas exclaims "crudelis tu quoque" (1. 407). This is a quotation of his own creator's Eclogue 8, in which the phrase is repeated as a refrain through lines 48-50. Later in the Aeneid (1.603-05), Virgil has Aeneas allude to Catullus 76, lines 17-26, elaborating the device by giving his character knowledge of another contemporary poet. This example is of particular interest because it suggests the extent to which complex narrative play is characteristic of literatures other than the postmodern. The editions of Virgil cited are both edited by R. D. Williams: The Aeneid of Virgil, Books 1-6 (New York: St. Martin's, 1972), and The Eclogues and Georgics (New York:
Problems for Narrative Theory 217


18 See particularly pages 42, 55, 59, 76, 77, 104, 105, 153, 190, 192, for explicit comparisons between Lyme Regis in 1867 and in 1967. The number of very brief or implicit comparisons substantially adds to this list.


20 Lanser has suggested that this aspect may rather be tied to status than stance. I proceed otherwise at my own (and perhaps the reader’s) risk. This essay has been improved by Professor Lanser’s generous criticism at several points, including some upon which we still differ.
