

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor. The authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

The Engaging Narrator

To the Editor:

In “Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator: Earnest Interventions in Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot” (101 [1986]: 811–18), Robyn R. Warhol makes an important distinction between distancing and engaging narrators. But it seems to me that she unnecessarily limits the scope of her concept of the engaging narrator by envisaging the issue in the final paragraph as a technique that may prove vital in differentiating women from men writers (817). Her question, has “the technique . . . been more widely used by male novelists than this study suggests?” can be answered in the affirmative without our looking beyond the novelists she herself cites. The “canonic example” she adduces from *Le Père Goriot* (811), though used by both Prince and Genette, is the exception rather than the rule in Balzac. In the long description of the Pension Vauquer at the beginning of the novel the narrator is certainly “engaging” when he invites “you” to compare the sitting room with the dining room next door. Similarly, at the opening of *Eugénie Grandet* the reader is engaged to enter (“Entrez”) the small shops where “a father or a mother comes and sells goods to you as you desire” or where “you will see a dealer in barrel-staves . . . etc.” Such an engaging narrator is even more common in Henry James, to whose essays Warhol refers (815). *A Portrait of a Lady* and *The Bostonians*, for example, are repeatedly punctuated by addresses from an engaging narrator to a “you” who is intended to respond with recognition and identification.

In focusing on gender differentiation Warhol has overlooked the potential of her distinction as an approach to handling the authenticity of the fictional illusion. The engaging narrator takes a risk when he interferes with the integrity of the illusion, but he does so not in order to convey, as does the self-conscious narrator, that this is “only a story.” Admittedly, the engagement with “you” does concede the fictional nature of the narrative in progress. However, what it says can be read as “this is a story, a true story” (not “only a story”). Far from scuttling the illusion, the engagement underlines its veracity. So the ultimate effect of drawing the narratee into the narrative is to diminish the boundaries between the fictive and the actual. Warhol does point to this when she cites Genette’s hypothesis “that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic” and adds that “[t]his result is the direct reverse of what occurs in the engaging use of metalepsis” (818n9). Yet she does not seem to see the implications of her theory

for an analysis of realist narrative. The engaging narrator is a key element in the conventions of nineteenth-century realism as a means of accrediting the illusion even in the very act of appearing to undermine it. Warhol’s concept of the engaging narrator can be more useful than she realizes.

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Reply:

While I appreciate Lilian Furst’s declaring the engaging narrator an important element of realism, I was dismayed to read that my idea is “more useful” than I realize. I accept the point Furst argues in the second half of her letter; indeed, that very point is where my inquiries into engaging narrative strategies began, untainted by gender theory.

Furst explicates an idea I left implicit in my article because it seemed to me self-evident. In the introduction to my paper, I say that Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot “experimented with engaging narrative because it was central to their own idea of fiction. Writing to inspire belief in the situations their novels describe—and admittedly hoping to move actual readers to sympathize with real-life slaves, workers, or ordinary middle-class people—these novelists used engaging narrators to encourage actual readers to identify with the ‘you’ in the texts” (811). Put more directly, they were writing realist fiction; their narrative interventions—far from subverting realism, as critics since James have supposed they would—demonstrate their hope that realist fiction could interact with the reader’s world. As I put it in the article, “direct address to the narratee can ‘realize’ the fictional situation for the actual reader” (816), that is, make the novel realistic.

No specialist in French literature, I defer to Furst’s assertion that Balzac’s narrators frequently address his readers. However, the examples Furst cites here are not engaging (in my sense of the term), even though they are instances of direct address. As I explained in my response to Cynthia Bernstein’s letter in the March Forum, the narrator who situates “you” on the site of a fiction is necessarily distancing. Actual readers are even less likely to identify themselves with a narratee who is walking from an imaginary sitting room into an equally fictional dining room than they are to recognize themselves in the white-handed reader in the comfortable armchair. The “you” that engaging narrators address is literally you, not

a fictive narratee who could visit a shop existing only in a novel.

Both Bernstein and Furst have suggested that placing a narratee on the scene has the effect of drawing actual readers into the fictional world. I disagree. When Eliot's narrator says "you perceive," "you remember," "you understand," I know she refers to experiences I could conceivably have while I am reading; when Balzac's says I will see a dealer in barrel-staves, I know I probably won't. In the position of reader I can recognize myself in Eliot's "you," but not in Balzac's, at least not in the examples Furst cites.

I can understand Furst's eagerness to defend engaging address as appropriate to realism, since my theory grew out of a similar impulse. I set out in my early work on this subject to "prove" that Eliot's habit of addressing her reader is not the mistake that traditional formalist criticism considers it but an indicator of a pre-Jamesian theory of formal realism. Eliot's fiction, like Gaskell's and Stowe's, aims, as Furst puts it, "to diminish the boundaries between the fictive and the actual." When distancing narrators (such as Fielding's, Thackeray's, and Trollope's) play with metalepsis by diminishing those boundaries, they do so for the sake of metafiction, to achieve the effect Furst calls "scuttling the illusion." When engaging narrators do so, they attempt instead, just as Furst says, to underline their fictions' veracity.

In her response to my article, Furst seems to conflate my remarks on the rhetoric of distancing and engaging interventions. My definitions and examples were meant to show that distancing narrators intrude to "interfere with the integrity of the illusion." Engaging narrators intervene in their stories for a very different reason: to persuade readers that the stories are both "real" and "true" and that each reader is individually responsible for carrying over into life what he or she has gleaned from the

fiction. Yes, the engaging narrator does imply that "this is a true story," but for these three novelists at least, I would insist it is "*only* a (true) story." The story represents the urgency of actual readers' taking steps to change the real-world situations the fictions depict. If this does not describe the techniques of the novelists Furst has in mind, those novelists' strategies are something other than engaging.

Since I am working with terms and definitions I have coined myself, I suppose all this might look like some kind of shell game, in which I manipulate the pieces until only women novelists turn up under the shell marked "engaging." When I began this project, though, I had no thought of discriminating among novelists according to gender. Studying the relation of narrative intervention to realism in mid-nineteenth-century novels, I expected to find engaging strategies in Hawthorne, Dickens, and Trollope. But, as my examples indicate, I found instead that their addresses to the reader are usually distancing. I never envisaged the engaging narrator as "a technique that may prove vital in differentiating women from men writers." What interests me are questions like, Why would men and women writing within the same genre in the same time and place make such different choices among narrative strategies? Is it merely coincidental that the engaging narrator, typical of women's novels of the period, is one feature of realism that traditional definitions of the genre have suppressed or ignored? My current research aims to find historical explanations for these women's choice of strategy; I am also trying to account for literary history's having overlooked the engaging narrator as a convention central to realism.

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