INTRODUCTION

Narrative Breakthroughs: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject

Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the Quixote and Hamlet a spectator of Hamlet? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious. (Borges 196)

The subject is engendered precisely by the process of its engagement in the narrative genres. (de Lauretis 106)

[We have a] new consciousness . . . of the real having become unreal, because brutally endowed with significance and then as brutally deprived of it. (Brooke-Rose, Rhetoric of the Unreal, 10)

At least since Don Quixote overstepped his prescribed bounds to offer critiques of the Quixote and its apocryphal sequel, the novel has toyed with the borders between the theoretically mutually exclusive zones of (extra-textual) reality, the fictional frame (extradiegetic level), the main story (diegesis), and the story-within-the-story (hypodiegesis).¹ Narratologists have labeled such transgression of the boundaries between narrative levels “metalepsis,” but despite the device’s fundamentally disruptive effect on the fabric of narrative, on the possibilities for achieving coherent readings, and on the very distinction between fiction and reality, the theoretical “analysis” of metalepsis has generally remained confined to its naming and definition in the mind-numbing taxonomies of narratology. At the same time, surely because of this disruptive potential, the artistic exploitation of metalepsis has run rampant in the postmodern era of the collapse of
master narratives, the dismantling of the category of the real, and the deconstruction of binary and hierarchical systems of understanding. When one begins to explore the workings of metalepsis in postmodern fiction, one discovers that beyond the amusement the device affords both playful authors and sporting readers, it provides an apt tool for depicting and enacting some of the key philosophical reconceptualizations of postmodernity. Metalepsis dramatizes the problematization of the boundary between fiction and reality endemic to the postmodern condition. More specifically, because it disrupts narrative hierarchy in order either to reinforce or to undermine the ontological status of fictional subjects or selves, it provides a model of the dynamics of subject construction in an age that has witnessed both the deconstruction of the essential self in favor of a subject constituted in and by narrative and the complication of a simple, teleological model of narrative with an emphasis on the form’s repetitive, self-undermining, and even violent aspects.

In this book, I trace the metaleptic construction of the subject through the works of three diverse and deft practitioners of the art of metalepsis, each of whom puts the device to a unique and well-targeted use: Samuel Beckett, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Angela Carter. To oversimplify: Beckett depicts such construction as the excruciating but eternal human condition, and draws out in repetitive and painful detail the emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical consequences of the narrative process. Brooke-Rose specifies metaleptic subject construction as the “postmodern condition,” as she not only depicts but replicates the disruptive intellectual effects of the postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives, exploiting metalepsis to undermine her readers’ traditional modes of understanding. Angela Carter exposes the political nature of subject construction and insists on a material, embodied subject in order to play out the process’s material effects on the condition of women in patriarchal society; ultimately, she proposes strategies for subversive repetitions of the process that might alter that condition. In the service of his or her metaleptic vision, each of these authors plays a distinct game with readers, toying in different ways with readers’ roles and positions and emphasizing different facets of the relation between metaleptic text and external world.

Despite these novelists’ divergences, however, I also aim to use my readings of the complex and evolving metanarratives that they spin out of such wrinkles and ruptures in their narrative fabric to abstract a model of a cyclical metaleptic construction of the subject that has significant implications for narrative theory. Even at its mildest, metalepsis disrupts the
constitutive boundary of a fictional narrative—the one between inside and outside, between story and world. When a text repeatedly indulges in such subversion, the result is inevitably jarring, and its effects run the gamut from startling diversion through destabilization and disorientation to outright violation. If I emphasize a violent streak underlying this persistent breaching of constitutive boundaries, it is because I detect, even in the metaleptic joke or game, a certain aggression toward the subject, whether internal or external to the text. This repetitive or cyclical violence offers a counterpoint to the violent tendency that narrative theory has heretofore ascribed to the form’s teleology. This attribution of a certain violence to the drive toward the end may derive from a focus on plot to the exclusion of narrative’s other aspects or of the narrative structure as a whole; where, after all, might one locate something as active as destabilization or violence in a “structure,” whose apparent stasis contrasts so markedly with the mobility of plot? When one attends to the structural ruptures, however, one can see narrative’s structuring, as well as its self-deconstructive moves, as a process, unfolding over time through its writing, its reading, and the living of its characters, and in this process I locate another kind of tendency toward violence. In doing so, I de-emphasize the destruction caused by teleological violence, which may culminate in what Peter Brooks calls “the death of the reader in the text” (Brooks 108), in order to explore the alternately constructive and deconstructive tendencies of this structural disruption.

In addition to raising new questions for narrative theory, the metaleptic dynamic we may distill from the texts of Beckett, Brooke-Rose, and Carter may open up new ways of thinking about social and political experience, for, from the constructionist perspective, this dynamic mirrors the process by which our sometimes violent narrative framings, deframings, and reframings of our world, ourselves, and others make us what we (for all practical purposes) are. And indeed, in some manifestations, fictional metaleptic subject constructions actually test out strategies by which we might become something else.

**Metalepsis: Denotation and Connotation**

One of the founders of modern narratology, Gérard Genette, defines metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic [in my terms, hypodiegetic] universe, etc.), or the inverse” (Narrative Discourse
Two aspects of this definition will play key roles in my readings: the connotations of “intrusion” and the notion of a “universe.”

While metalepsis in practice may present itself as a collapsing, a blurring, or a dissolution of boundaries as frequently as it appears as an individual subject’s premeditated act of breaching borders, the sense of violation inherent in the term “intrusion” haunts my readings of the dynamic. For regardless of the fluidity in which a given metaleptic move cloaks itself, it necessarily violates the structure of the narrative and disrupts the reading process that relies on that structure for its constituting of meaning. The pairing of metalepsis with the physical violation staged in many of Angela Carter’s novels, for example, foregrounds the violence implicit in such intrusions.

That Genette sees such violation as an entry into another universe stresses the theoretical independence and distinct ontological status of diegetic realms: each universe sees itself as “reality”; each is real in its own terms. But although the crossing or erasure of boundaries between universes may well flatten them into parallel realms or zones, part of the shock value of metalepsis derives from the fact that these universes are originally conceived as hierarchically ordered. From the inherent hierarchy comes the narratological concept of “levels,” according to which “narration is always at a higher narrative level than the story it narrates” (Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, 92). Because it traverses an ontological hierarchy, metalepsis has the power to endow subjects with greater or lesser degrees of “reality”—in effect, to promote them into subjectivity and demote them from it.

“Level,” of course, is the technical, narratological term; most readers of fiction have grown accustomed instead to the concepts of “frames” and “embedded narratives.” Each terminology suggests a different conceptual topology for narrative: in the frame model, the hypodiegesis is conceived as an *inner* circle and the diegesis as an *outer*; in the levels model, the diegesis is seen as *higher* than the hypodiegesis, as reality has a higher ontological status than fiction. Since each conceptualization is helpful in different situations, I combine them here into a topographical map that renders narrative as a concave arrangement of concentric rings, extratextual reality being the outermost, uppermost ring.

Because I am concerned with the reader’s navigation of these “levels” and the effect that their transgression has on their navigator, I should clarify who, exactly, this “reader” is. For although it is precisely the function of metalepsis to trouble the tidy stratification of narrative (and with it, in some
cases, the firm separation of narrative’s addressees), the theoretically distinct levels of a narrative correspond to levels of authors, on the one hand, and levels of readers, on the other. Rhetorical and reader-response critics have long stressed the distinctions among the actual author, the implied author, and the narrator, on one side of narrative communication, and the actual reader, the implied reader, and the narratee, on the other side. Because I am concerned with levels of narrative, I subdivide the implied reader, provisionally designating as the “extradiegetic reader” (EDR) the reader implied, constructed, and indeed required by the extradiegetic level—the one corresponding, in some way, to the implied author—and as the “diegetic reader” (DR) the reader implied, constructed, and required by the diegetic level, that level corresponding to the (diegetic-level) narrator. The first of these readers is my more impersonally constructed but simultaneously more active version of Peter Rabinowitz’s authorial audience, the one that he claims we “try” to join in order best to understand a text; the second is my parallel of Rabinowitz’s narrative audience, the one we “pretend” to join as part of the game of fiction. The figure usually referred to as a real or actual reader I rename the extratextual reader (ETR), to indicate that s/he at least begins reading from a position outside of the text in question, if not outside of textuality in general. Both the DR and the EDR are constructed by a kind of collaboration of the internal forces of the fictional text and the external projections of the ETR and our own (discursive) world. In theory, of course, there may be a hypodiegetic reader as well, and so on ad infinitum (but, as I will argue below, these lower-level readers seem divorced from “us” in some crucial way).9

Just as the positing of levels of readers stops at the extratextual reader (though perhaps we may add a “metatextual reader” up above in the critical-theoretical stratosphere), the extratextual world provides what might be considered a natural limit for narrative levels and for movement outward and upward through the rings of my topographical map. But inward/downward excavation, by contrast, could conceivably prove infinite, in the manner of the mise-en-abîme. Texts that generate such intricate geographies shift at least part of their focus to the erection of narrative boundaries and enable us to see how the building works with and against the transgression in the process of constructing subjects. Of course, many experimenters with metalepsis stick with bi- or tri-level structures, making no showy gesture toward the abyss, contenting themselves with a more circumscribed exploration of the borders nearer the surface. Brian McHale seems to argue that many authors have not only used metalepsis in this
limited way but have even done so *unwittingly*, in the process of playing out some of the traditional themes of Western narrative: “Love . . . makes fiction go round . . . [and] love as a principle of fiction is, in at least two senses, metaleptic. If authors love their characters, and if texts seduce their readers, then these relations involve violations of ontological boundaries. . . . These metaleptic relations are permanent features of modern western literature; but of course, ‘traditional’ fiction keeps them more or less in the background, out of reach of fictional self-consciousness” (*Postmodernist* 222–23).

If we accept McHale’s broad definition of metalepsis, we can see that Western narrative’s subconscious metaleptic tendency pervades even the realist fiction whose universes appear so well contained and the modernist fiction that, despite or because of its premonitions of an impending breakdown of traditional notions of the subject and reality, strives valiantly to maintain the container as an ever-more-elaborate and self-conscious structure. But during periods when the relationship between fiction and “reality” is understood to be complex and unstable, the transgression of the narrative boundaries that mark degrees of fictionality proves a particularly strategic, and therefore conscious and pointed, tool.

In the eighteenth century, for example, as the English novel began to carve out a niche somewhere between history and romance, writers and readers confronted with new interest the interface between the fictive and the real. In a response to that interface that would eventually underwrite the realist tradition, “straight” (proto-)novels like *Robinson Crusoe* built on what Ian Watt has called “the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience” (Watt 32) and valorized the reality pole of the opposition by masquerading as histories. In a contrary and more nuanced response, early comic novelists, aware of and intrigued by “the stubborn ambiguity of the relationship between literary creation and reality” (Alter 101), called into question the dominance of the latter term. Indeed, Robert Alter suggests that this ambiguity is “the real subject of the novel,” a generalization that leads to “a Great Tradition with very different emphases from Mr. Leavis’ [and Mr. Watt’s], from Cervantes to Fielding to Sterne and Diderot, and on to Joyce and Nabokov” (101).

As Alter’s emphasis on the unstable distinction between fiction and reality implies, we may define both Great Traditions in terms of their relations to metalepsis. Although the works described by Watt may invade extratextual reality by their very claims to historical truth, they confess to no participation in hierarchical structure and so foreground no traversing of levels: despite their requisite framing apparatus—the authenticating
device of the editor’s letter, for instance—they insist that both frame and story belong to the same “universe” as author and (extratextual) reader. Thus Daniel Defoe’s frame narrator takes pains to assure the reader of *Robinson Crusoe* that “The editor believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it” (Defoe 7), and Defoe’s works of “‘form’d facts’. . . . were for many years read as genuine histories” (Mayer 197). Samuel Richardson, not wanting to think of his book as fiction (which to him implied “the marvelous, the improbable, the romances, calculated . . . ‘for amusement only’ and tending to inflame the minds they should instruct”), attempted to “secure the credulity of his readers” by basing *Pamela* on a true story (Sale vii–viii). After *Clarissa*’s publication, Richardson further decried critics’ undermining of the “Historical Faith which Fiction is generally read with” (Carroll 85).

On the other side of the aisle, such representatives of Robert Alter’s Great Tradition as Swift, Fielding, and Sterne indulged in metalepses designed to undermine readers’ security in their exclusively extratextual existence and their certainty about the separation between life and literature. Sterne, for example, invites readers to participate in *Tristram Shandy* by drawing the Widow Wadman; he repeatedly attempts to synchronize the time of diegetic events with extradiegetic duration—either the time of their narration (including digressions) or the time of their reading; and he writes readers’ responses into his fiction, attributing reactions and misreadings variously to Madam, Sir, and Your Worship (the Critic), inviting us to identify with one of the above, and then scolding us for the blind spots he has created for us. Like Sterne, Swift writes his extradiegetic reader into an uncomfortable role in his text by leaving no unsatirized position for that reader to occupy; he deploys his double-bind satire to “entrap” readers “into a response whose intensity seems out of all proportion to its cause,” so that “instead of the reader reading the work, it seems to read him” (Vieth 230–31). And while *Tom Jones*, for example, apparently gives readers more realistic *plot* from which to suspend their disbelief than do works of Swift or Sterne, Fielding consistently undermines the boundaries he claims to draw around fiction—those that separate it from literary theory, from life, and from the reader.

**Postmodern Constructionism and World-Text Relations**

In the postmodern era, metalepsis has once again risen to prominence. Indeed, perhaps beginning with the overtly violent boundary blasting of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Flann O’Brien’s proto-postmodern novel published
in 1939, it seems to have returned with a vengeance. And most appropriately so, for in the “postmodern condition,” “fiction” seems to have bled unstanchably into the domain where “reality” once reigned, and many novelists recognize metalepsis as a tool for exploring the nature and consequences of such a mutually infective relationship between the fictive and the real. In the view of Jean-François Lyotard, the “incredulity toward metanarratives” that defines postmodern existence has flattened such hierarchies of knowledge into networks of fluid categories (xxiv, 39). In the resultant world, everything heretofore considered real can now be seen to be constructed by intersecting, commingling discourses. In such a fluid, discursive universe, Lyotard notes, “the social subject itself seems to dissolve in [the] dissemination of language games” (40). Following Michel Foucault, I would amend this statement by noting that the “subject” that “dissolves” is the one formulated by a depth model (in other words, a hierarchical model) that posits an inner realm or essence as distinct from the surface self—anything from the dualistic Cartesian subject to the traditional Freudian conception of the psyche. What remains after the dissolution is precisely the “social subject” as constituted by various discourses.

The tenets of constructionism—that subjects and realities are constituted by discourse—seem custom-made for literary exploration through metalepsis, which blurs or collapses the boundaries between fiction and reality, narrative and subjectivity. Here I explore works that build on constructionist premises as I attempt to elucidate the way in which such construction would operate and the sorts of (side) effects it might have. This book’s provisional acceptance of constructionism contrasts markedly with the anticonstructionist anxiety behind Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s A Glance Beyond Doubt: because Rimmon-Kenan feels “uncomfortable with the complete divorce between representation and reality, between subjectivity and selves” (17), she attempts, through fiction, to resurrect necessarily modified versions of traditional humanist conceptions of representation and subjectivity in order, it seems, to combat the eerily empty feeling of being reduced to the status of a discursive construction.

Without denying the effects of what may well seem an undesirable or even dangerous reduction—indeed, I will argue that Beckett’s readers, for instance, are made to share Rimmon-Kenan’s discomfort about their own “human condition” of writtenness—I find much compelling in the idea that “we” are in some sense the product of cultural “stories.” Rather than dismiss constructionism as a temporary aberration or narrowly averted
evil, I wish to find out what it can teach us—about the narratives that constitute the subject’s raw materials, about the narratives that depict the operation of subject construction, and about our own mode of being in the world.

What, then, is the nature of the relation between the text that seems to be contained within the covers of a novel and the discursive world outside those covers? More specifically, what is the relation between metalepsis in fiction and what I’m suggesting is a sociopolitical parallel in our own world? I would argue both that the metalepsis in fictional texts bears a mimetic relation to subject-construction processes in our own world, and that, thanks in part to the parallel operation of boundary violation in both worlds, which are, from the constructionist perspective, equally discursive, it may be made to reach through the final frontier, the boundary between fictional text and extratextual reader, to effect our construction as subjects, at least in some small way. In these interactive modes, metalepsis may have not only a rhetorical effect on us—teaching us new ways to read and to think about our own world—but even a transformative effect, allowing us, momentarily, to experience new ways of being, as radically metaleptic novels construct our subjectivity to some degree.18

As the analyses that follow will demonstrate, the rhetorical effects of metalepsis seem to rely on a firm border between the DR and the ETR—giving the ETR a sense of perspective on the experiences in which the DR participates—whereas the transformative effect builds upon a dissolution of these distinctions among levels of readers. In chapter 1, I follow Beckett’s multifaceted metalepses, as they play the reader like a yo-yo, expanding and collapsing “our” levels in much the same way (and with equally dizzying effects) as they do the levels of narrative. In chapters 2 and 3, I trace the more single-minded metaleptic approaches of Brooke-Rose and Carter, as each perfects a different interactive metaleptic mode—Brooke-Rose disintegrating readerly boundaries in service of the intellectual (and psychological) transformation of her readers, Carter primarily reinforcing the intra-reader borders the better to enforce her political and ethical rhetoric. The rhetorical impact of Carter’s use of the device depends on an essential mimesis: by demonstrating the subjectifying (or objectifying) operation of metalepsis in her fantastic or sci-fi worlds, she opens readers’ eyes to its remarkably similar operation in our own world, where, her novels assume, we too are constructed by discourse. This fundamental constructionism, which fiction so “naturally” imitates, also yields a subject who can be transformed by its encounters with
discourse—even with fictional narrative. But if, as the underlying mime-
sis of the metaleptic text implies, the discursive constitution of the social subject parallels the literary process of subject construction, the dynamics of metalepsis may offer a disturbing but intriguing lesson about the “real” social process. For the workings of metalepsis suggest that narrative con-
stitutes the subject in part by breaking down the very structures that 
apparently define subjects and lend them their air of stability.

Moreover, such destructive construction, which sometimes takes rather 
violent forms, supplements a violence that some (especially feminist) theo-
rists already recognize in the erection of the boundaries. According to Foucault, it is in the processes through which discourse continually con-
structs subjects—in effect, creating discursive boundaries to categorize and 
define them—that one can discern the operations of power. He sees power 
as ubiquitous in all human relations, continually constituting individuals as 
its subjects and objects, and being, in turn, “produced from one moment 
to the next” by their interactions (Sexuality 93). Feminist theorists, such as 
Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis, who work with Foucault’s theories 
have stressed a certain violence discernible in the power moves that produce 
subjects, a violence particularly visible in (but, I would argue, not exclusive 
to) the gendering inherent in subject construction. The “marking off” of a 
boundary “will have some normative force and, indeed, some violence, for 
it can construct only through erasing” (Butler, Bodies, 11). According to this 
line of thought, the construction of “reality” by discourse entails what 
Brooke-Rose has called “brutality.” “Brutality” implies a pre-existing object 
to be brutalized, and, indeed, in his otherwise thorough destabilization of 
the subject, Foucault brackets the body to serve as the stable ground on 
which society inscribes identity. Judith Butler has thrown into question 
even this fundamental materiality, suggesting that the material body, too, is 
a cultural construction. “Matter,” explains Butler, should be understood as 
“a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of 
boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (Bodies 9, italics in original). If 
such a proposition is hard to grasp in the abstract, fiction can help by “lit-
eralizing” its premises; after all, bodies in fiction, on whatever narrative level 
they appear, are made and unmade in and by language.19

I would contend, however, that if the erection of boundaries can be 
violent, their transgression may be more obviously so, despite or because 
of the fact that it sometimes serves paradoxically to reinforce the boundar-
ies that have constructed subjects to begin with—as the rape of a woman 
helps to (re)constitute her as “feminine” (as passive object or masochist),20 
or as carnival’s dissolution of hierarchy, as Mikhail Bakhtin has shown,
ultimately solidifies the established social order. Beckett’s fictions attest that even the isolated consciousness must play out the vicious cycle of boundary building and breaching in order to attain subjectivity, for the “subjectification” process apparently requires the projection—and then dismissal or destruction—of hypothetical “others.” “Narrative,” writes Teresa de Lauretis, “endlessly reconstructs [the world] as a two-character drama in which the human person creates and recreates himself out of an abstract or purely symbolic other” (de Lauretis 121). As the dynamics of both rape and carnival suggest, such a drama carries serious sociopolitical implications: the violation of boundaries reinforces the subject status of the powerful at the expense of that of the disempowered; it reproduces one participant as the subject-as-agent and the other as the (political) subject ruled by the first. In other words, in spite of the theoretical potential for liberation implied by a subjectivity conceived as narrative (if we are made of stories, can’t we rewrite ourselves?), subjects engaged in such a process of mutual construction find it hard to escape the stubborn reinforcement of a power hierarchy.

In some cases, however, the narratives I explore present a reversible power hierarchy: in Brooke-Rose’s Thru, for example, two mutual-constructors continually swap roles as both strive to achieve the active form of subjecthood, in a more balanced but equally cyclical process of subjectification. In their repeated undermining of narrative hierarchy, such partners create a sort of optical illusion that can fool the viewer into believing in their simultaneous subjectivity. And indeed, if the subject is a narrative construct, the most one can hope for is to create such an illusion of stability, much as the stringing together of the discrete frames of a film projects an apparently continuous image (hence Carter’s stress on “persistence of vision” and the essential role of the viewer more generally). Ultimately, some of the postmodern narratives I examine suggest that the rapidity of the building/breaching oscillation must effectively blur the boundaries in order to result in a fluid subject, one no longer readable in our traditional, hierarchical-binary terms. Perhaps, as Brooke-Rose and Carter suggest, such a perpetually self-deconstructive narrative will give rise to a new way of reading and, eventually, a new kind of subject.

**Metaleptic Subject Construction in Action**

A quick glance at what may be the quintessential novel of violent metalesis, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (a key precursor to the postmodern novels I will explore here), offers a blueprint for the subject-construction process,
as O’Brien’s subjects (re)construct themselves and one another through the erection and violation of narrative boundaries.

To lay out the rather complex narrative geography: The actual Irish writer Brian O’Nolan invents an alter ego named Flann O’Brien (one of two pen names used by O’Nolan), who “writes” the novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, inventing an unnamed college student and aspiring novelist to serve as its narrator and protagonist. As part of his novel, the student invents Dermot Trellis, a “member of the author class”; Trellis, for his part, invents a character named Sheila Lamont, “a woman of unprecedented virtue,” for the express purpose of staging her assault and resultant fall from grace as one of the key plots of a “moving” and “salutary” morality tale (O’Brien 138, 48). Before the character invented to play Sheila’s assailant, John Furriskey, can answer his calling, Trellis becomes “so blinded by her beauty (which is naturally the type of beauty nearest to his heart) that he so far forgets himself as to assault her himself” (86). As a result of this unorthodox rape, Sheila becomes pregnant and eventually gives birth to a “quasi-illusory,” “semi-human” son, Orlick (206–7).

To translate this plotting into the terms of narratology: Brian O’Nolan is extratextual; Flann O’Brien is extradiegetic; the college student is diegetic (D); Dermot Trellis is hypodiegetic (HD); Sheila Lamont is hypo-hypodiegetic (H2D); and Orlick, inheriting ontological status from both his father and his mother, is a hybrid HD-H2D character.

But we are not halfway there. The border-straddling son, having inherited his father’s skills of invention, next collaborates with his H2D colleagues (characters Trellis has borrowed from other works and “hired” to play roles in his book) on yet another work of “fiction” starring none other than Dermot Trellis. The action of this inner (now H3D) fiction consists almost entirely of the allegedly supernatural torture of the presumably H3D Trellis, but even as it is composed, its effects are felt by the HD Trellis. By metaleptically leapfrogging Trellis’s original narrative level and subjugating their erstwhile superior, these innermost writers attempt to level the narrative playing field; as Furriskey remarks when the writing-torture begins, “We’re here at last. From now on it’s a fight to the finish, fair field and no favour” (251).

In the process, Orlick and company rewrite their writer. As a first step, they invent a catalogue of sins to define his character and constitute his guilt (“ANTHRAX, paid no attention to regulations governing the movements of animals affected with./ BOYS, corner, consorted with. / CONVERSATIONS, licentious, conducted by telephone with unnamed
female servants of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs,” etc. [O’Brien 245]); and then they “compose a [horrendously violent] story on the subject of Trellis” as “fitting punishment indeed for the usage he has given others”—i.e., his characters (236). For all its playfulness, the rewriting of Trellis anticipates in parodic form the production of the soul through “methods of punishment, supervision and constraint” described decades later by Michel Foucault (Discipline 29). In a system of judicial torture, writes Foucault, truth is “produced . . . according to a ritual,” and guilt is “constituted by each of the elements that [make] it possible to recognize a guilty person” (41–42). As in the historical torture Foucault will later describe, “the ritual that produce[s] the truth” of Trellis’s guilt unfolds “side by side with the ritual that impose[s] the punishment” (42).

After staging a farcical trial, the characters/writers (who also play the roles of witnesses, jurors, and judges) are about to execute Trellis, even in the face of the possible effect of his death on them, his creatures, when they fall prey to an HD character’s careless action. Teresa, Trellis’s servant, burns “the pages which made and sustained [their] existence.” No longer perpetuated in print, they vanish, and Trellis returns simultaneously to his home and his proper narrative level, convinced that he has been tormented by “bad nightmares and queer dreams” born of “too much thinking and writing” (313). He thus assumes the authorship (albeit unconscious) of his ordeal, as he returns his inferiors to the H²D realm over which he believes he rules.

The story of Trellis and his level-leaping antagonists offers us several rules of thumb for the narrative construction of the subject. First, one may construct others by erecting written boundaries: even those characters whom Trellis has borrowed from other authors must be revised to match their new job descriptions, all designed to keep them, among other things, on the H²D level. Trellis assumes that such definitions will subjugate the characters, reproduce them as his subjects.

But he tries to keep his inferiors under his thumb by surrounding them with literal boundaries as well, “compelling” them “to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them and see that there is no boozing” (47). In instituting such a policy, Trellis is asking for trouble: he has inadvertently opened the door to his characters’ subjectification and his own subjugation, for such a sharing of living quarters is already metalectic. So, rule two: subject-constructing metalespsis may take the form of a “temporary sharing of a common level.” Indeed, William Nelles sees this as “the basic ‘unmarked’ case of metalespsis” [Nelles 93]; Beckett will explore its possibilities in the aptly titled Company.
If such a “sharing” seems to avoid the “intrusive” or violent aspect of metalepsis, the H2D characters restore its force. For the third and most obvious rule suggested by *At Swim-Two-Birds* is that one may construct others through the *transgression* of boundaries—as, in this instance, Orlick and company break out of their scripted roles and violate the theoretically impermeable barrier surrounding “the author” (*their* author, despite his HD status), in order to turn the tables on him, rendering him a written being.

The conspirators are able to effect such a rupture only because Trellis ceases, temporarily, what must be a continual reconstruction: his “absolute control over his minions . . . is abandoned when he falls asleep” (O’Brien 47–48), as, evidently, is his control over *himself.* So, rule four, subjects must be constructed and maintained continually—hence the Orlick gang’s disappearance when the writing that invents them is destroyed. (Teresa’s ability to desubjectify written creatures through erasure or *un*writing prefigures another of Beckett’s experiments, which he carries out most single-mindedly in *Worstward Ho.*)

Finally, as the experiences of Trellis make painfully clear, constituting another’s “subjectivity” implies a certain power relationship; in a sense, as Foucault’s analysis of torture suggests, to effect another’s subjectification is really to subjugate and so, in effect, to objectify that other; at the same time, the act of so constituting another temporarily solidifies one’s own subjectivity, even as it renders it symbiotically dependent upon its object (as the power of the master is “produced” by his slaves).

None of these rules of subject construction *requires* the physical torture, which merely serves as a metaphorical concretization of the cultural construction of the subject. But the physical metaphor does crystallize the process in an often gruesome deed that one cannot overlook. Recognizing this, two of the authors whose works I study here, Angela Carter and, to a lesser extent, Samuel Beckett, have followed O’Brien in *embodying* the violation and pain of subjectification. In Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman,* for instance, diegetic-level characters are raped by others who may be the projections of their fantasies (i.e., hypodiegetic characters). If so, as in *At Swim-Two-Birds,* lower-level characters physically violate and thereby (re)construct the subjectivity of higher-level ones. In a similarly reciprocal construction process, the narrator-protagonist of Beckett’s *How It Is* tortures and writes on the body of Pim, a character he may well invent, in order to force out of Pim the stories that he, himself voiceless, cannot tell, but that, in turn, constitute him.
In exploring such physical violence, I turn to some theories about real violence and its effects on, or even constitution of, the subject—from Freud’s and Jessica Benjamin’s analyses of sadomasochism, to Sharon Marcus’s feminist analysis of rape, to Foucault’s and Ñacuñán Sáez’s historically grounded theories about torture. Insofar as these analyses theorize the violent production of certain kinds of subjects, I find that they offer incisive tools for the analysis of narratives that represent such violent production both directly, thematically, in scenes of rape or torture, and indirectly, structurally, in metalepses that violate constitutive boundaries.

Given my suggestion, above, that metaleptic texts may have transformative effects on their readers, in some limited way producing them as subjects just as Marcus or Foucault claims physical violence produces its victims as subjects (objects), it seems crucial to consider the possible effects on readers of representations of violence in general. In exploring fiction’s direct, thematic representation of physical violence, Laura Tanner outlines a dangerous tendency of readers to distance themselves from fictional rape and torture, and she attempts to shatter readers’ sense of (extratextual) invulnerability. In *Intimate Violence*, Tanner focuses on the effects of fictional depictions of physical violence on the reader’s “awareness of his or her own empirical body,” arguing that our usual self-disembodying mode of responding to such representations allows them “to obscure the material dynamics of bodily violation, erasing not only the victim’s body but his or her pain” (Tanner 9). Tanner’s project of elucidating the sociopolitical impact of fictional violence leads her to read the reader’s “experience of intellectual limitation” as a metaphor for “the physical limitation of the victim” (Tanner 10).

Since I am concerned here with the construction of the subject (including the reading subject) by narrative, I implicitly reverse the tenor and vehicle of Tanner’s metaphor, focusing on depictions of physical violence only insofar as they parallel metalepsis and thereby illustrate less tangible (more intellectually or psychically violent) processes of subject construction.

*At Swim-Two-Birds*, for example, invites this kind of metaphorical reading by framing the physical violence in layers of self-conscious storytelling designed to dazzle us with its ingenuity and shift our focus from boils and broken bones to the metaleptic magic that causes them. In its very insulation of the extratextual reader from the torture of Dermot Trellis, O’Brien’s novel points to some interesting considerations about the effects of metalepsis on different levels of readers. Theoretically, a text that engages in metalepsis and therefore multiplies narrative levels, the better
to violate the boundaries between them, would generate multiple inner-
level readers, one for each ring of hypodiegesis.23 But although, in my
terms, an HDR would simply be a construct of the HD narrative that we
help to constitute, I don’t believe these theoretically H#D readers func-
tion, vis-à-vis the ETR, in the same way as the DR does. For one thing,
while it is relatively easy to conceptualize what it means for us to project
ourselves into one fictional reader or, to borrow Peter Rabinowitz’s char-
acterization, to “pretend” to be the diegetic reader—to pretend to believe
that the student “really” exists and to pretend to take his descriptions of
his life as autobiographical—I would be hard-pressed to say what it means
for us to project ourselves into that fictional reader’s projection, or to
pretend to pretend to be a hypodiegetic reader—to pretend to pretend to
believe that Dermot Trellis is “real” and that his exploits at the Red Swan
Hotel actually happen—let alone to pretend to pretend to pretend to believe
in the existence of Trellis’s characters, whether borrowed or invented. I
believe that we cannot take that leap (or even pretend to take it). So that
any narrative device that works its magic below the threshold of the die-
gesis can amuse the ETR but cannot have a disruptive effect on us analog-
gous to the one it has on its corresponding-level reader; but when the text
plays its game with or on the DR, it may well affect or infect the EDR
and even the ETR. The extent to which it touches the ETR, however, and
the sorts of responses it induces in us vary considerably. Much will
depend upon the thematic way in which the particular metalepsis plays
itself out and therefore how it affects the DR, as well as on whether the
text in question works to reinforce or undermine the boundaries between
levels of readers and thereby determines the extent of spillover from DR
effects to ED or ET territory. Each of the authors I study takes a different
approach to this aspect of metalepsis: Beckett explores both the insidious
undermining of such boundaries and their subtle rebuilding; Brooke-
Rose systematically eliminates them; and Carter generally maintains them
in the service of her political rhetoric, subverting them only rarely.

The ramifications of these strategies will become clearer as we explore
each author’s work, but one generalization may be in order. It seems likely
that although the variants of the model of metaleptic subject construction
that, like Carter’s Doctor Hoffman and Beckett’s How It Is, illustrate the
dynamic of metalepsis with parallel (thematic) physical violence may
shock their unsuspecting readers and drive points home by referring us to
real-life events, variants that focus on—and participate in—the psychic
and intellectual violence inflicted by crumbling structures of understand-
ing may in fact wield greater power than their bloodier counterparts to violate traditional narrative boundaries, as their metalepsis breaches the final frontier between text and extratextual reader. Whereas we can, perhaps unfortunately, watch from a safe distance the rape and torture of fictive “subjects”—no matter how emotionally or psychologically tormented the DR might feel—we may not be able to immunize ourselves against the effects of sudden, destabilizing shifts in the hierarchies by which we make sense of the world. These narratives may, in other words, have a transformative effect, as they *enact upon us* something of the (de) construction of the subject they simultaneously depict.

In Brooke-Rose’s *Out*, for example, we find ourselves in a world for which we are given no clear framework of understanding; our disorientation parallels that of the “displaced” focalizor, and we are made not only to witness but to *participate in* the desperate effort to build a new frame through which to make sense of the language and images we encounter. Beckett’s characters register this kind of psychic pain as well as any to be found in fiction: the anguish of the Unnamable in his efforts to find a safe narrative level, free of the pain and suffering inflicted by the compulsion to narrate, is almost palpable; and surely many a reader can attest to its contagion. We must continually strive to grasp even the most basic narrative situation, struggling both to piece together the Unnamable (as he does his creatures) and to understand the implications of his *story for us* (as he grapples with *Their story of him*). To some extent, in other words, we find ourselves assimilated, just like the Unnamable, into the eternal chain of torturers and victims, those who construct and those who are constructed. In the world as envisioned by constructionism, then, the transgression of the boundaries between diegetic levels might begin to have the effect that Borges claimed for the *Quixote*, of unsettling readers’ sense of their own reality.

**Redrawing the Violent Streak of Narrative**

Several theorists have posited a certain homology between sadomasochistic violence and the operations of narrative; Brian McHale has even made a specific connection with metalepsis. To date, however, most of the work that has fleshed out such connections has leaned heavily toward psychoanalysis. Robert Caserio has delineated what he calls “two opposed yet complementary schools of Freudian narratology” (294), one represented by Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot*, the other by Leo Bersani and Ulysse
Dutoit’s *The Forms of Violence*—both of which apply to narrativity concepts derived from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Although these narrative theories address the violent tendencies of narrative, their grounding in *desire* as theorized by Freud leads them not only to situate that desire in pre-constituted subjects but also implicitly or explicitly to locate violent sadism or masochism in narrative’s drive toward the *end* or the fixity of that end.²⁶

The Brooks school presents narrative as both *product* and *form* of the tension between the death instinct or “the drive toward the end” and the pleasure principle that binds and temporarily suspends that teleological drive. Ultimately, through the playing out of this tension, narrative and reader achieve the proper end. Although he does not use the term “masochism,” the kind of sexual excitation and “discharge” Brooks envisions as the basic form of narrative places a premium on the delay and then *explosion* of pleasure; in so theorizing the narrative text, Brooks does use terms such as “painful,” “demonic,” and “perverse” (Brooks 100, 102).

In Bersani and Dutoit’s version of narrative, the death instinct seems to have won its battle with the pleasure principle, for the end has become even more important than it was in Brooks’s theory. Bersani and Dutoit argue that narrative form in general, like the explicitly violent and sexual narratives of the Marquis de Sade, follows a “calculated movement toward explosive climaxes.” Through the pacing of this movement, the narrative aims to produce a mimetic response in its reader, an erotic stimulation; ultimately, it rewards such stimulation with a violent climax (ideally murder), providing a “definitive and not merely provisional closure,” as “both the logical *dénouement* of a narrative line and a radical repudiation of all narrative lines whatsoever.” Furthermore, Bersani and Dutoit imply that there is a certain violence inherent not only in these ends-to-end-all-ends but also in the stabilized images (another kind of ends) generated along the way by narrative’s “rigidly hierarchical organization of people and events” (*Forms* 40–41).

Although Caserio sees himself as an innovator in this field who decouples sadism from masochism in order to draw an analogy between narrativity and “erotogenic masochism” alone, he ultimately propounds a theory equally focused on ends, “immobilization,” and “bound states,” concluding that the reader derives masochistic pleasure from *arresting* understanding through narrative’s “disambiguating” moments. Moreover, such masochism apparently serves some subject-defining purpose, for Caserio’s theory of subjectification focuses on a certain “punctuation”—both intrusive and fixating—through which we produce both ego and ideal, as he casts the
“self” as a product of arrested mobility.

In “Desire in Narrative,” Teresa de Lauretis offers a feminist take on psychoanalytic narratology and concludes that narrative’s sadism consists in imposing a kind of oscillation on its female readers. Whereas male readers more easily identify with just the sort of linear movement toward climax that other psychoanalytic narratologists associate with both (male) sexuality and the death drive, female readers, she argues, must also identify with the (female) object of desire, the “death” toward which the subject drives—in other words, with the figure of narrative closure. Thus, even as de Lauretis views narrative as imposing endless mobility on female readers, she envisions this mobility as a shuttling between two aspects of teleology: the drive toward the end and the end itself.27

De Lauretis does supplement her Freud with a certain constructionism, as she argues that narratives, along with Freudian desire, constitute subjectivity. In spite of her insistence on ends, this constructionist tendency leads de Lauretis to recognize the importance of middles and repeated beginnings as well: she argues that narrative “endlessly reconstructs [the world] as a two-character drama in which the human person creates and recreates himself” (121, emphasis mine). A further shift away from an essentialist concept of the self and its desire toward a more purely constructionist vision leads me to locate narrative’s violent tendency not in its end but in its middle, its process—in the constant reconstruction of subjects and realities necessary for their continued existence.28 For whereas narrative’s teleological violence may position readers, conceived as already-constituted subjects, vis-à-vis an event, a series of events, or an image, the cyclical, structural disruption and violation I trace have a more radical effect on readers conceived as subjects-in-process. In its most potent forms, the disorientation induced by metalepsis insistently deconstructs and reconstructs our mental maps and so, in some way, ourselves. Taken to the extreme of Brooke-Rose’s Thru, for example, or, in a more politically charged version, Carter’s Nights at the Circus, the metaleptic cycle forces us to read deconstructively: we must refrain from shutting down meaning, re-containing narrative and its subjects within our usual frames, and instead remain open to unresolvable ambiguities—an openness that reflects both on the ambiguous internal subjects and on the external subject that can so read them.

Moreover, if, as the constructionist view has it, the subject external to these novels is the internal subject of cultural, familial, and self narratives, if it is produced in and by its stories just as the novels’ characters are in
and by theirs, the dynamics of the metaleptic cycle might apply to the
construction of real subjects as well as fictional ones. Indeed, if Beckett’s
depiction of the “human condition” hits its mark, the self-stories upon
which we all rely consist almost entirely of erecting and collapsing bound-
daries in ongoing efforts to attain subjectivity—or to free ourselves of it.
And Carter’s images of the violating construction of women by power-
happy men certainly stand out as the most (dare I say) realistic moments
in otherwise fantastic tales. In other words, by focusing specifically on
metaleptic fiction, I may be able to reflect more accurately the way narra-
tive works to constitute subjects.

The Subject Brutally Endowed with Significance

In chapter 1, I analyze the metaleptic subject-construction cycle as envi-
sioned by Samuel Beckett. As they make their way from the (at least lin-
guistic) overabundance of Watt to the pristine “lessness” of Worstward Ho,
Beckett’s subjects become increasingly preoccupied with their own writ-
tenness; as early as the trilogy (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable),
they recognize that to live is to narrate. At the same time, they grow
increasingly pained by their very (narrative) existence and seek some way
to achieve closure of a narrative that appears unrelentingly cyclical, whose
every end is another beginning, and through which they are perpetually
reconstituted in spite of themselves. Because the cycle can appear so seam-
less—flowing even across boundaries between texts—it is hard to envision
a way to break it. On the one hand, the cycle itself consists of a series of
ruptures, as the subject is defined through breaches of narrative boundar-
ies; but such ruptures have reconstructive effects, paradoxically asserting
the inevitability of the boundaries they breach. On the other hand, meta-
lepsis seems to offer a logical escape route from narrative, and so the
subject replicates the metaleptic moves that construct him in a futile
effort to destroy himself. By reading Beckett for metalepsis, I lay bare the
apparently excruciating requirements of narrative subjectivity, as well as
the strategies his subjects devise for escaping from it.

For although readers and critics have long recognized the Beckett pro-
tagonist’s struggle to dissolve his subjectivity, to be born (again, or more
fully) so as to be able (really) to die, it would be too easy to see the process
as a series of random or even undifferentiated efforts dictated only by the
protagonist’s immediate variety of pain and the extent to which he
remains conscious of his previous failures.29 By analyzing the struggle in
terms of narrative structure, and in particular the construction and de(con)struction effected by the metaleptic cycle, I break down the process into more intelligible terms, exposing it as a series of discrete steps that explore as thoroughly as possible all potential escape hatches from the narrative of life. As a first strategy, the subject may attempt outward metalepsis, up into the light of the ontologically superior plane where he locates his writer-torturers and where he hopes to become real enough to die a real death; next, he tries inward metalepsis, down into the windowless prisons of language that the subject constructs for his alter egos and within which he hopes to hide from the pain of “reality”; eventually, he plays metalepsis as a collapse of all levels into one, convincing himself that from there he alone has projected all others; and finally, in an acknowledgment that if life is narrative, reading perpetuates it, he takes a stab at drawing the reader into his diegesis—a move for which he has paved the way through an erosion of the boundaries between diegetic, extradiegetic, and extratextual readers. Beckett achieves this reader absorption most successfully in Company, where he undertakes the kind of transformative metalepsis that is Brooke-Rose’s hallmark.

In a sense, this last strategy may threaten to subsume the cyclical disruptions into narrative’s more widely recognized teleological violence, as reader and narrator-protagonist now strive together for their joint textual “death.” But Beckett shows that, given the narrative nature of the subject, even the concerted effort to cease being inevitably results in continued self-production—not only because, as the teleologists would have it, one must traverse narrative’s dilatory space in order to reach the proper ending, but, more threateningly and perplexingly, because one cannot stop narrating the self as long as there is a self to do the narrating. Beckett lays bare the impasse implied by the cycle, the impossibility of breaking free of all narrative when one must necessarily do so through narrative. By focusing on metalepsis, I reveal the teleological drive of Beckett’s subjects, their evident desire for narrative’s ending, as something far more complex: a simultaneous desire for and fear of narrative’s structuring, the erection of frames that can construct subjects, whose violation can work both to construct and to deconstruct them, and whose collapse can, the subjects hope, destroy them.

Despite the implicit isolation of his subject’s struggle, Beckett evinces an awareness of the social nature of the narrative subject. Even as it continues the exploration of what often seems the individual’s existentialist crisis, for instance, How It Is also offers a stark vision of the sadistic power
politics of subject construction that Carter will specify, explore, and attempt to rewrite.

. . . and Then as Brutally Deprived of It

In chapter 2, I move from the agony inherent in Beckett’s construction to the confusion induced by Christine Brooke-Rose’s deconstruction. Her use of metalepsis requires an even more emphatic destruction of boundaries among levels of readers, at times dissolving the diegetic reader entirely, with confounding and disruptive consequences for the EDR and ETR, in an effort to transform us, if only momentarily, into subjects adapted to the fluid postmodern condition.

As a theorist as well as a novelist, Brooke-Rose first contextualizes the narrative construction of the subject that Beckett has depicted as how it is within the historical and philosophical moment of the postmodern era. Her postmodern novels take the postmodern condition as their subject matter and so elucidate through both form and content the disruptive intellectual effects of that condition. Coming after Beckett’s psychological, emotional, and sometimes physical upheaval, Brooke-Rose’s intellectual games may at first seem tame, but they prove potent in their enactment on the reader of the destabilization they simultaneously depict. By casting her subjects as readers of their narrative worlds and deconstructing those worlds even as they and we try to construct them, Brooke-Rose ensures that the reading of her novels coincides with the reading in her novels, and that her metalepses undermine both focalizors’ and readers’ traditional modes of understanding.

Given their sometimes overtly political contexts, Brooke-Rose’s experimental novels do manage to raise questions about some of society’s power structures and master narratives. But whereas Angela Carter will address those questions head-on and even propose some answers, Brooke-Rose’s primary concern in what I call her “prepositional series” (Out, Between, and Thru) lies in the displacement and deconstruction of the humanist subject and the construction of a postmodern subject defined, as the prepositions indicate, in ever-changing relation to narrative structures. Because Brooke-Rose tends to place her reader in the same relation as her focalizors to those structures, we experience a destabilization parallel to theirs. In Thru, where the deconstruction of narrative and subjectivity reaches a fever pitch, the novelist attempts to induct us into a deconstructive mode of reading, one that must forego all efforts to shut down meaning and instead remain
indefinitely open to the free fall of shifting truths. And Brooke-Rose does manage to shake her readers’ foundations (potentially, as I have suggested, an emotionally and psychologically as well as intellectually disturbing experience), despite her focalizors’ repeated demonstrations that—thanks to the very structure of the language that constitutes us—when faced with ruins, we rebuild our structures, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the postmodern earthquake continues unabated.

Endowing the Subject with New and Improved Significance

If Brooke-Rose introduces the free fall of narrative destructuring in *Thru*, Angela Carter attempts to direct it toward a specific, feminist-political end. In part by reinforcing the stratification of readers, Carter exposes the way in which our current constructions of subjects and realities reproduce and reinforce oppressive power hierarchies, and she proposes that if, as both Beckett and, less emphatically, Brooke-Rose have indicated, we can’t help but rebuild our structures, we might at least redesign the kinds of structures we build. In chapter 3, I trace Carter’s elaborate and often graphic exposure of the violent power politics inherent in the metaphorically metaleptic subject-construction process as well as her varied attempts at working within that inescapable process to undermine the prevailing hierarchies and rewrite the outcome.

Through a range of thematic manifestations of metalepsis—tattoos, rape, puppet play—all of which she develops into a fully imagined diegetic universe in which the DR can immerse herself, Carter explores the ways in which cultural narratives violate (usually female) subjects, often physically as well as psychologically, erasing their sense of themselves in order to reconstruct them as virtually subjectless representations of men’s self-stories. While Carter implicates readers, as wielders of an active, voyeuristic gaze, in the same sort of *mise-en-abîme* of violators and victims that Beckett has elaborated, she simultaneously holds the EDR back from the edge of the abyss so that we may maintain our academic (or political) distance and read the moral of the story—a practice that requires the rhetorical force of metalepsis. Carter would not suggest that readers can step outside all narrative in such a way as to render themselves nondiscursive. (As Judith Butler argues, “To enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the ‘I’ that might enter is always already inside” [*Gender* 148]. But she does leave the EDR on the periphery of her novels where he can gain perspective on their narratives’ effects on characters and consider
ways to transform both narratives and (therefore) effects. These might be ways, to judge from the efforts of some of Carter’s bolder characters, to repeat those narratives in the manner recommended by Butler: parodically, subversively, aiming “through a radical proliferation of [prescribed identity] to displace the very . . . norms that enable the repetition itself” (Gender 148). In this way, Carter seems to speculate, we may take incremental political action against oppressive subject construction, effectively blurring the boundaries that define and enforce power hierarchies.

Carter does not suggest that such a subversive rewriting will be easy: as her own dramatizations reveal, the meaning of any narrative is determined by its reading, and a society schooled in the inscription of oppressive hierarchy continues to reappropriate deviant narratives as repetitions of the same old story. But some of Carter’s later novels—especially the persistently ambiguous Nights at the Circus—give wing to the notion that one can find ways to so blur traditional boundaries, so deconstruct binaries, that even hard-liners must read more open-endedly, admitting their inability to reconstruct the other by reference to the usual categories. Thus, Carter proposes that if the subjectification process is interminable, we might at least find ways to spin the spiral in other, more empowering directions.

There, of course, we reach beyond the traditional boundaries of literature into the domains of politics and philosophy—a frightening prospect for a subject who has studiously avoided venturing out of her circumscribed realm. Like the Unnamable, I attempt to retreat inward, into the narrative structures of “pure” fiction, as I relate my narrative of the narratives of others, along with my narrative about (metaleptic) narrative itself. Of course, my move into metanarrative already marks a step outward, and, as I begin my journey into Beckett’s metanarratives, I know that Carter lies ahead, ready to ambush me with the political and material effects of the metaleptic process that, as a narrative device that dynamically disrupts static narrative structure, must breach the boundaries of strict narratological interpretation. As Beckett’s Opener confesses, “I’m afraid to open/ But I must open./ So I open” (Cascando 16–17).