Coda:
Toward a Deconstructive Narratology

*Form* fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create. . . . The force of that which engenders . . . is precisely that which resists geometrical metaphorization and is the proper object of literary criticism. (Derrida, "Force" 4–5, 20)

In their efforts to classify (and so theoretically stabilize) every conceivable aspect of narrative, narratologists tend to categorize metalepsis under the general heading of “narrative levels.” In Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction*, it shows up unnamed, as the elided dynamic behind the (passively) “transgressed” levels of Pierre or *Tristram Shandy*, or as the seemingly innocuous device through which “modern self-conscious texts . . . play with narrative levels,” all subsumed in a section on apparently static “Subordination relations: narrative levels” (91–94, emphases mine). Gérard Genette stresses the reconstructive aspect of metaleptic “games,” which, he points out, “demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep,” a boundary that he calls “a shifting but sacred frontier” (*Narrative Discourse* 235, 236, emphases mine); even when Genette admits that the device creates a “disturbance . . . so strong [that] it far transcends simple technical ‘ambiguity,’” he marginalizes metalepsis, suggesting that it be “set down only to humor . . . or to the fantastic . . . or to some mixture of the two” (*Revisited* 88).

But although metalepsis may infiltrate narratological taxonomies camouflaged as just another element of narrative structure, it harbors the potential to undermine the whole elaborate construction (and its tidy, well-labeled diagram). For not only is metalepsis a dynamic force rather than a static element; its function is precisely to undo, at least temporarily, stable levels and definite boundaries. Seen in its mutinous nature as a narrative device that disrupts narrative structure, metalepsis clearly resembles the feminist strategies with which Carter associates it: both are modes of working within the terms of narrative to create ambiguity and so subvert narrative itself. In reading narratives for metalepsis, then, I have made rather deconstructive use of a structuralist category, and thereby, I believe, breathed some new life into narratology, recycling it as a resource for the analysis of narrative conceived as process rather than product.
Because metalepsis inevitably operates within the terms of narrative, and because violating narrative boundaries tends to call attention to the inescapability (or “sacredness”) of those boundaries, the device frequently has rather reconstructive effects, as attested by my readings of Beckett’s narrative imperative as well as of Carter’s more political exposés of cultural scripts. Although the Beckettian subject strives to escape from narrative by way of metalepsis, he finds, time and again, that his crossing or collapsing of narrative boundaries leads only to the reinforcement of narrative structure—and, therefore, to an extension of his “life.” Carter demonstrates the way in which the representatives of patriarchal culture violate the narrative (and other) boundaries defining gendered subjects in order to reinforce their gendered positions and shore up the power hierarchy itself. But given the recognition by Beckett, Carter, Brooke-Rose, and their fictional subjects that one cannot escape narrative—at least while retaining subjectivity—metalepsis may well prove a key means toward revolution of any kind, from the destabilization of the reader in Brooke-Rose to the subversion and erosion of patriarchal power in Carter. Such deconstructive metalepsis, like any deconstructive strategy, changes a system by working within its terms to call those very terms into question.

Because the rupturing of narrative by metalepsis (deconstructively) encompasses both reconstructive and deconstructive tendencies, it provides an apt figure for, as well as demonstration of, the iterative processes whereby subjects are made (and unmade). A focus on metalepsis complicates our understanding of the disruptiveness or violence of that process, as well as of the operations of power underlying it, and, therefore, of possible modes of social change.

All these lessons rely on the inescapably narrative nature of the subject that clearly informs the novels of all three of these authors. But even as many critics acknowledge Beckett’s or Carter’s vision of the narrative construction of the subject, they seem to want to bracket narrativity and remetaphorize the subject as the deep and autonomous self of humanism, amenable to the same kinds of psychological, sociological, philosophical, political, and even biological analyses we have long adopted for the interpretation of fiction. If some critics return to constructionism in the end, they often do so only by a gesture of retroactive relabeling, suggesting, for example, that if subjects conform to Freudian categories, that is because psychoanalytic discourse has contributed to their construction. Indeed, the pull of “realism” seems to inhere in the novel form to such an extent that even readers of Brooke-Rose’s apparently hermetically sealed narratives
about narrative (fiction “about the fictionality of fiction,” as she has said of *Thru* [Hayman and Cohen 4]) persistently apply to her texts various modes of humanist analysis, reclothing in psyches, bodies, “common humanity” the terrifying nakedness of the subject-as-narrative-construct. Many readers implicitly suggest, as Sarah Birch explicitly argues, that Brooke-Rose’s novels use the structures proposed by “structuralist theories of meaning . . . as metaphors for personal relations” (Birch 89, emphasis mine). Risking the dangers of metaphor myself, I would suggest that such critical responses to narratives about narrative replicate the first escape tactic essayed by the Beckettian subject—to climb out of this all-encompassing narrative into the safety of some real world up above in the light. Such a strategy, we recall, fails so miserably in *The Unnamable* that later protagonists don’t even attempt it.

In focusing, by contrast, on a narrative device common to all these narratives, I move in the opposite direction and find *within* narrative the revolving door of metalepsis, which, by operating within the terms of narrative structure, winds up offering us a way “out” (to the reader’s subjectivity or to the politics of our own extratextual world—both, of course, narrative constructs), much as the miniature Trans-Siberian Express carried Fevvers, through narrative, out of one narrative . . . and into another. Although the metanarratives (about the narratives of Beckett, Brooke-Rose, and Carter) into which my train travels all bear the imprint of the metaleptic tracks I have laid and so resemble each other in some respects, they also conform to the unique terrain of each author’s fiction—and indeed allow us to view their geographies from a new vantage point.

Reading Beckett from this perspective brings to light the movement and countermovement of his narratives, both of which rely on the same sorts of metaleptic steps. First, the apparently fluid cycle of subject construction is revealed as a series of theoretically disruptive moves; second, the intentionally disruptive steps taken by the subject in his effort to *destroy* the narrative are revealed as moves strikingly similar to the metalepses that *perpetuate* it, and therefore as destined to fail. Every attempt to “still” the “stirrings” inevitably results in their stirring *still*. Having “found himself in such a place” as Beckett’s barren landscape of the skull, the subject must but cannot reconcile himself to the fact that there is “no danger or hope as the case might be of his ever getting out of it” (*Stirrings Still*, section 3).

Beckett’s narratives thus primarily showcase metalepsis in its reconstructive aspect. Their relentless repetition of the metalepsis that rein-
forces boundaries contributes to the painful, depressing, but resonant
effect of his fiction, as well as to the wry laughter that rings just beneath
the surface of the anguish—it is a good joke, this rotten, inescapable life
story that, like a flattened cartoon character, insistently resurrects itself.
(And it is one in which, in Beckett’s rendition, we are forced to partici-
pate, as these texts’ metalepses repeatedly collapse the levels of readers and
then build them up again, creating another parallel movement and coun-
termovement.) Genette’s association of metalepsis with the humor of
Sterne and Diderot seems appropriate to Beckett as well, and something
of the witty playfulness of Watt’s invention of the Lynches continues to
echo through the grim visions of metalectic subject construction in the
later novels. These novels’ increasing minimalism communicates ever
greater despair at the impossibility of ending any narrative that
has unleashed its hidden metalectic powers of reconstitution. Even the
“meremost minimum” narrative, Beckett’s fiction demonstrates, is still a
narrative—we can still read it and, in so doing, participate in its produc-
tion not only of ourselves as diegetic readers but of the Beckettian subject
. . . even against his “will.” Indeed, Beckett frames this ability as an imper-
ative, a regrettable fact of a regrettable life. When, in Company, the more
deconstructive aspect of metalepsis comes into play, however, effectively
breaking down the boundary between text and reader, the mere fact of our
peculiar and mobile “identification” with Beckett’s subject strikes me, on
some “level,” as heartening. Perhaps, after all, misery does love company.

Although Beckett was clearly a major influence on Brooke-Rose, she
seems to pursue only some of his interests, homing in on language and
narrative structure in order to build minimalist language games into far
more elaborate acrobatics, while focusing primarily on the dissolution
rather than erection of boundaries between levels of readers and thereby
developing the transformative potential of metalepsis. As these games
expand to become the content as well as the form of her prepositional
novels, any residue of three-dimensional characters (or three-tiered read-
ers), seems to vanish; even Brooke-Rose’s self-imposed grammatical
limitations—no “to be,” or only “unrealized tenses”—seem designed to
foreclose the possibility of constructing such humanist subjects. Given
this single-mindedness, I would argue that one can only fully appreciate
the prepositional novels as language games.

And yet, when I delve more deeply into the nature of one of the more
pervasive language games Brooke-Rose plays rather than relying on the
kind of metaphor Birch delineates as a bridge to the “outside” world, I
find that the deconstructive quality of metalepsis harnessed by Brooke-Rose offers its own kind of bridge. This bridge leads not to some generic deep subject but rather to the extratextual reader engaged in reading the text, who undergoes the kind of destabilizing experience that effectively deconstructs the boundaries of narrative (and the notion of extratextuality itself). In other words, the bridge of metalepsis brings us into the narrative even as that narrative explodes—unlike the bridge of metaphor, which transfers the explosives out of the narrative and over to the safe, high ground of “personal relations,” where they can be defused. Brooke-Rose literalizes (or, more accurately, refigures) this destabilization of the reader and narrative in Textermination (1991), where, after much confusion of diegetic levels, a “real” earthquake disrupts a literary (as in Modern Language Association) convention and wipes out all the participating scholars. Although narrative necessarily resurfaces—as the (widely borrowed) fictional characters who attended the convention in order to pray for “existence” rise from the rubble and get on with their narratively constructed lives—in a world constituted by discourse, deconstructive language games can clearly have profound effects.

If Carter learns from Beckett as well, she seems to take a different page (or two) from his “book,” not only accepting but celebrating his narratives’ violence and the embodiment of their diegetic creatures: an emphasis on a certain kind of “personal” boundary reflected as well in her segregation of readers into the diegetic reader, who can feel the immediate effects of the actions in the diegetic worlds, and the extradiegetic reader, who retains firm enough boundaries to receive the lessons about life and power that Carter wishes to teach. Carter magnifies her diegetic bodies and their interactions, and with them fills her rich, wildly intertextual, even intergeneric fictional worlds, embracing the life that, even if it is a narrative construct, needn’t look like a narratological diagram. In one of her trade-mark eccentric vignettes in Wise Children (1991), in fact, this embodied life looks more like a perverse, dancing, multicolor map of the world. The body that sports this elaborate tattoo belongs to Gorgeous George, a comic performer first encountered at Brighton Pavilion in the heyday of Britain’s international power. His identifying markings highlight in pink the vast and glorious British Empire, and, to the tune of “God Save the King” and “Rule Britannia,” he strips down to a g-string made out of the Union Jack (WC [Wise Children] 66–67).

Like Beckett, Carter builds on the reconstructive metalepsis that violates boundaries only to reconstitute the subject, fleshing out the process with
an understanding of its gendering of the subject and its power politics more generally. George's violent construction of himself, for instance, clearly bolsters not only his position as patriotic British subject but the entire colonialist power structure; some observers so identify George with the Empire or the Crown that they have “tears in their eyes . . . and shout . . . ‘Good old George! Hurrah for George!’” (WC 67)—although, of course, the appeal is limited to those who stand to “inherit . . . the gravy”—“the pink bits on his bum and belly” (67–68). But Carter's humor as well as her political impact also rely on the exploitation and politicization of the deconstructive quality of metalepsis, which, as Brooke-Rose has shown, has the power to undermine narrative itself. When, years later, old Gorgeous is lifted out of his original narrative and plunked down in the middle of the Hollywood of the American “Empire,” his whole self-construction comes tumbling down; he becomes merely a tacky artifact, as he is demoted from joker to joke, taking the fall from subjectivity to objectification previously reserved for the colonized subjects who inhabit the “pink bits.”

By exploring both the reconstructive and deconstructive aspects of metalepsis, we can reach an enriched understanding of the modus operandi of both the Gorgeous George vignette and Carter's novels in general. On the one hand, we may engage with these narratives on the level of fantasy or science fiction or fairy-tale, as the DR buys into their fully realized worlds, engrossing us as she becomes bewitched, terrorized, amused, or moved by them, just as George's original British audience received him with laughter, tears, and “applause that never quite died down during the entire display” (WC 67). On the other hand, we may stand aloof as EDRs and decode both George scenario and the novels at large as political parables. Metalepsis helps us make a connection between the delight and the instruction: the link between the novels' violence (a key ingredient of their life) and the politics of subject construction is metalepsis, the violence by which narrative constructs. So a focus on metalepsis not only helps explain why and how the same tactics can reinforce patriarchal oppression and, through inversions, parodies, and rereadings, potentially undermine it; it also preserves both seemingly contradictory facets of Carter's project (the one that draws the DR into the fictional experience, the one that pushes the EDR out to the rhetorical import) and unites them in a single shifting and ambiguous picture.

If a focus on metalepsis can illuminate such diverse texts, perhaps this kind of deconstructive narratological reading has something to offer to
postmodern narrative more generally. It might, in fact, bring new life to
all narrative, given Brian McHale’s characterization of “traditional”
Western fiction as somehow subconsciously and pervasively metaleptic
(Postmodernist 222–23) and Andrew Gibson’s more emphatic belief that
“narrative levels . . . are always in hybridised or composite relations with
each other” so that narrative “is itself a form of resistance to our stratifying
procedures” (Gibson 234). Although the effect of such a deconstructive
reading must vary according to its particular object (lest one turn all texts
into postmodern texts), perhaps by stressing (in both senses of the
word) metalepsis as the chink in the realist or modernist armor, the
breach in narrative structure that undermines such narratives’ illusions of
bounded, essential selves and worlds, one might at least reach a new
understanding of the processes whereby such texts maintain, and subtly
undercut, their illusions.

Moreover, various narrative theorists have described other such chinks,
other seemingly self-deconstructive aspects of narrative: I think particu-
larly of Jonathan Culler’s “double logic” whereby events make meaning
and meaning makes events (“Story” 178); or of J. Hillis Miller’s two forms
of repetition, the rational recognition of similarities and the ungrounded
and dreamlike association between apparently different objects or events,
which coexist in defiance of the law of noncontradiction (Miller 9, 17);
or of the two contradictory identifications that Teresa de Lauretis sees
narrative as imposing on female readers (de Lauretis 143). Such irresolv-
able ambiguities imply a certain movement in narrative—not unlike the
metaleptic oscillation of boundary building and breaching—that simply
does not lend itself to containment within static taxonomies, requiring
for its interpretation what Derrida calls an “energetics” rather than a “geo-
metrics” (Derrida, “Force,” 16). Like the subject who simultaneously effects
and is generated by the oscillation of metalepsis, narrative itself might be
studied more fruitfully, especially in the light of constructionism, not as
an inert product, nor even simply as the process that produces that prod-
uct, but as that which is constantly producing and unproducing and
being produced and unproduced in turn. An applied, deconstructive nar-
ratology might lead to an explosive—or evolutionary—new mode of
understanding for both the narratives contained within the boundaries of
books and the narratives by, through, and in which we live.

The stumbling block for such an approach, unfortunately, lies in the
attempt to theorize it—for, from the point of view of deconstruction, such
a “narratology” can only be “applied,” a practice rather than a methodol-
ogy. As a general principle, this uncodifiability of deconstruction derives directly from its insistence on the self-undermining nature of any system or truth. It is, in a sense, a matter of practicing what one preaches. But in the case of an “energetics” of narrative, the impossibility of abstracting a theory or methodology is ensured by the complexity and inherent mobility of the elements to be systematized. Even to name these movements as “bidirectionalities” or “oscillations,” for example, is already to oversimplify, to spatialize these temporal relations, steadying them by mapping their poles and the directions of the two trajectories—a translation that slows down and divides the movement whose defining feature is its indivisibility, its simultaneity of contrary directions.

Arriving here, as I have, through structuralist narratology, however, I do feel a certain “narratological desire” to reduce these elements to their lowest common denominators and to systematize them into the sort of diagrammable, spatial, mathematical model that Derrida sees as the native mode of Western metaphysics. Perhaps, I feel compelled to suggest, we can plot the bidirectionalities or oscillations of Culler, Miller, and de Lauretis, for instance, along various axes either within the narrative text or between it and the author, the reader, the world, or other literature. We might say, to begin simply, that Culler’s double logic operates between the story and the discourse within the fictional text itself—although of course the story really only exists in the mind of the author and (perhaps differently) in the (re)construction of the reader, which already lends our first axis some shadows or doubles.

When we try to plot Miller’s two forms of repetition on the same map, we encounter even greater complexity: in one sense, what Miller calls “rational, willed, intentional remembering,” which underwrites repetition based on similarity, might be seen as the underlying force of Culler’s story-to-discourse movement, and what Miller calls “dreamlike” or “involuntary memory”—which results in repetition based on difference or “opaque similarities” and creates “memories” of things that did not really happen, “construct[ing] an imaginary life, ‘lived life,’”—might be related to Culler’s discourse-to-story movement (Miller 7–9). But Miller’s bidirectionality may also work within the discourse alone, and indeed he traces the operation of the two forms of repetition, each of which “calls up the other, by an inevitable compulsion” (9), in some of Thomas Hardy’s novels. Moreover, even within the second pole of that intradiscursive bidirectionality, we may find yet another oscillation inherent in the very nature of dream memory: Miller gives the example of Walter Benjamin’s emblem of “a sock which is also an empty sack, but also
at the same time a gift inside the sack, filling it, but also a sock again.” Here, Miller explains, “the meaning generated by the echoing of two dissimilar things in the second form of repetition” is an “image” that lies “neither in one thing nor the other but between them, in their relation” (Miller 9). Even at this early stage in our would-be geometrics we have discovered a sort of fractal, a mise-en-abîme of oscillations that begins to be difficult to conceptualize. (Moreover, Miller also discusses the two forms of repetition in the context of a larger bidirectionality between the imagined world and the real one—an axis along which the New Historicists plot their bidirectional movement as well, as they trace the mutual construction of history and literature.)

The oscillations of de Lauretis and her female reader are also multidimensional. On the one hand, de Lauretis begins with an apparently unidirectional line within the text, the drive toward the end, but she also recognizes that end as the Brooksian “time before the beginning” and stresses the womblike nature of the figure of closure. Then she draws a line between the female reader and this already-bidirectional line within the text, as she shows (moving from reader to text) that the already gendered reader must identify with both textual movements and (moving back from the text to the reader) that such identifications reinforce the reader’s gender(ing). And, as I hope I have shown, metalepsis itself operates both within the text, undermining the whole hierarchy of levels (which do not necessarily map onto the story/discourse binary), and between text and reader, writer, world, and other texts.

Already, it seems clear not only that any one self-deconstructive aspect of narrative may replicate itself along a variety of axes, but that not all of these axes lie on the same plane or could be plotted on the same map. Indeed, like fractals, which are created at the boundary between chaos and order, multi-axial oscillating narratives may require for their explication some cross between a theory of order (though not necessarily spatial order) and chaos theory, which would argue, as I understand it, that they are subjected to so many variables that they become almost random.

All of which may give us some inkling of why deconstruction is a practice rather than a theory and suggest that any practice of deconstructive narratology would have not only to trace out simultaneous-contrary movement in narratives but possibly, somehow, to engage in such movement itself. As Culler argues with regard to his double logic, the critic’s decision to focus on one directionality or the other, to treat either story or discourse as the cause and the other as the effect, is all that really maintains the boundary between the two; such a choice of directions, argues Culler,
“leads to a narratology that misses some of the curious complexity of narratives and fails to account for much of their impact” (“Story” 186). Of course, without such a pointed hierarchizing, the two poles would begin to infect each other in the manner of the rhetoricians’ “metalepsis,” which, according to Paul de Man, ultimately deconstructs the basic structure of polarity itself, shaking our “original, binary model” and leaving us with “an arbitrary, open system” (de Man 107). And given that the binary model has built the very tools with which we understand any system, we must somehow conceive new tools in order to grapple with arbitrary openness, and with simultaneous-contrary movement rather than polarized structure. Indeed, rather than devising a new kind of “temporal” map in order to plot out force rather than form, Derrida suggests that “it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an economy escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions” (“Force” 19–20).

Even Derrida admits, however, that “our discourse irreducibly belongs to the system of metaphysical oppositions”; his suggestion for escaping from this system, like Judith Butler’s strategy for revolutionary political action, requires a subversion from within: “The break with this structure of belonging can be announced only through a certain organization, a certain strategic arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the strengths of the field to turn its own strategems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly delimiting it” (“Force” 20, emphases in original). Yet the inherent difficulty of staging such a revolt in the form of a logical (metaphysical) argument leads Derrida to a more performative mode. And he is not alone: as Mark Currie points out, in recent decades, we have seen a general “conflation of critical and literary writing” and “a discernible trend towards . . . the theoretical fiction or the narratological narrative”—toward “a performative and not a constative narratology” (Currie 49, 57).

Currie explains the key role of the postmodern novel in such a shift:

The postmodern novel is the novel in rebellion against two major laws of philosophical logic. The first is the law of non-contradiction which says that an argument is flawed if it contradicts itself. The second is the law of cause and effect which organises not only philosophical argument but the events of a novel, the relation of the novel to criticism, the relation between modernism and postmodernism, or personal and historical experience in general, as a linear sequence. The novel is superior to philosophy exactly because it
is not constrained by such laws. It has acquired an epistemological impor-
tance in contemporary culture because it has always had the power to ques-
tion the certainties of traditional philosophical argument, to be dialectical,
to be complex. (Currie 64)

In this context, I would suggest that, in their momentary transforma-
tion of their readers into naturally metaleptic subjects who can or must
identify with the flux, the authors whose postmodern novels I have
explored here begin to set in motion a new “economy” that might escape
the system of metaphysical oppositions. They have, at least in some
instances, managed to replicate the oscillation of intratextual metalepsis
in a key oscillation on the text-reader axis, and so not simply to perform
simultaneous counteractivities but to induce us to participate in the per-
formance. If narrative constructs and deconstructs us, and if it does so by
undermining its own structure, then perhaps we may best explore this
process not by generating a superstructure that can (in defiance of its own
tendency to self-deconstruct) somehow recontain all this upheaval, but, as
in Thru, by undermining the theorist’s every effort to impose a new struc-
ture. The answers to our questions about what narrative is or how it works
would then take the form of disruptive experiences of narrative at work.

If this seems like a shirking of responsibility, it is only so if we remain
trapped inside the metaphysics that underwrites structuralist narratology
and enforces the law of cause and effect by insisting that an understanding
of narrative can come only from, after, and outside of narrative itself. In
other words, without intending to frustrate the theorists, I must instigate
a countermovement of my own: against, or rather along with, the fiction-
interpretation-theory trajectory that leads from the metalepses of Beckett,
Brooke-Rose, and Carter to a general deconstructive narratology, I would
trace a movement back into the novels that embody, perform, or partici-
pate in the practice of such deconstruction. My return to particular narra-
tives replicates on the greater fiction-theory axis the oscillation I traced
above, whereby, in contrast to those critics intent on metaphorizing
constructionism and moving in one swift step from narrative to “reality,”
I sought inside narrative form a “revolving door” that ultimately (or peri-
odically) offered an outlet to the (equally discursive) world.

So although, like Beckett’s subject, who peers up into the presumably
extradiegetic light only to find more narrative, we may be unable to theo-
rize our way out of these metaleptic texts in any traditional or expected
way, we may discover that, in a realm where metalepsis is the rule, the way
out can lie inward. We, like Carter’s Eve(lyn) may have to negotiate the “geography of inwardness” in order to arrive “at an absolute elsewhere, a place [we] could never have imagined might exist” (PNE 56)—to paraphrase Beckett’s Murphy, such a place that “place” is not the word. Like the characters in Out who “sat on a bench together and learnt Perpetual Motion” (O 173), Murphy returns to his rocking chair (an oscillating machine, after all) and “trie[s] to come out in his mind,” that dark where “there was nothing but commotion and pure forms of commotion” (Murphy 175, 112, emphasis mine). We may thus teeter on the border between these metaleptic novels and new, so far unimaginable, conceptions of narrative, and, if our project succeeds, experience something akin to Murphy’s “sensation of being a missile without provenance or target, caught up in a tumult of non-Newtonian motion” (113). “Very tiring.” I suspect, “after working all day” (O 173).