Introduction

In this book I have two main concerns. Conceptually, I attempt to reinstate representation and rehumanize subjectivity—not by returning to traditional humanist perspectives, but by integrating the contemporary destabilization of these concepts and going beyond that destabilization by viewing narration as access. Historically, I trace a parallel movement—from conflict to dismantling to a tentative rehabilitation—in the Anglo-American novel of our century. The relation I establish between the two concerns is not an application of a theoretical hypothesis to works of literature or a corroboration of the hypothesis by them, nor is it only an analogy between conceptual and novelistic grappling with the same issues. Rather, I endeavor to theorize through literature, to use the novels as, in some sense, the source of theory. After all, “the poets were there before us,” as Freud remarked. However, it goes without saying that a reading of the novels with certain emphases in mind presupposes at least an implicit conceptual framework. The circularity this creates can be seen as a fruitful dialogue or interaction between literature and theory, a beneficent spiral rather than a vicious circle.

Throughout the history of philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and literary theory, the terms representation and subjectivity
(or their earlier versions, *mimesis* and *self*)\(^1\) have given rise to opposed views, each of which presented itself as excluding the other. Deconstruction has tried to dismantle the principle of binary opposition, but its perception of the mutual generation of opposites is firmly rooted in the same kind of dichotomous thinking.\(^2\) Theories of ideology inspired by Althusser and Foucault offer a way out of the dichotomy only at the cost of assumptions severing any relation to reality and self and rendering meaningless the very question of the possibility or impossibility of representation and subjectivity. My own suggestion of a way out is an attempt to shift the ground of the discussion, to understand the concepts within a different analytical framework.

Most disagreements about representation and subjectivity are based on postulating one of two relations between words and things: reference (involving a truth-claim of sorts)\(^3\) or specularity (mirroring, reflection, correspondence, similarity, verisimilitude). According to one polar view, language and literature can reflect, convey, render, or refer to reality, and utterances do emanate from a preexistent self, while according to the opposite view no such connection to reality and self can be reached through language and literature. The approach I suggest replaces these two relations by a third, which I call “access,” whose different connotations allow mutually modifying insights from divergent positions. Access, as I see it, is no longer a relation between words and things, but between different systems of signification, or different signifying processes. In this, my view resembles the theories of ideology mentioned above. Where it differs from them is in its claim for more than misrepresentation or discursive, ideological constructs. The approach I propose recognizes the problematic status of the concepts of representation and subjectivity, and yet attempts to save them from being both dismantled and totally engulfed in discursive practices. I suggest that narration is the main mode of access in literature (and perhaps life). On the one hand, it destabilizes representation and subjectivity; on the other, it opens a way to a modified and qualified rehabilitation.
Although representation and subjectivity can nourish many studies separately, and have often done so, I have decided to treat them together because they are two facets of the view of being as presence. *Presence*, the cornerstone of what has come to be called "logocentrism," designates both a world preceding expression and an "I" present to itself (see Derrida 1972, 193; 1976, 12). No wonder, then, that the same theoreticians who conceive of reality as preexisting language also see the "I" as resisting radical doubt, while theoreticians who question the existence of reality outside discourse also dismantle the autonomy of the individual. *Expressive realism* is the term Catherine Belsey uses to emphasize the affinity between representation and subjectivity in various trends of thinking. "Expressive realism," according to her, is "the theory that literature reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognize it as true" (1980, 7; Belsey's emphases). Belsey traces the transformations of this view from Aristotelian mimesis through the Renaissance, the eighteenth century, and Romanticism before proceeding to its undermining in what she calls the post-Saussurean perspective. The individual Belsey is concerned with is the author, but her description can be generalized to narrators and characters.

I conduct my exploration principally through an analysis of several twentieth-century novels that represent a theoretical avant-garde, a kind of laboratory where the problematics of representation and subjectivity is enacted, dramatized, and lived out, explicitly or implicitly, structurally and thematically. Literature has its own ways of "thinking" about conceptual problems, and theory can only benefit from integrating these alternative modes of knowing. Novelists manifest attitudes toward representation and subjectivity not by truth-claims or direct statements about correspondence to reality but by dramatizing relations among voices or positions.

I have chosen to analyze Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941),
Brooke-Rose's *Thru* (1975), Beckett's *Company* (1980), and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)—all twentieth-century texts, because the issues I wish to examine have become particularly pressing in our period. The five novels share an interrogation of the problems of representation and subjectivity, though some put more emphasis on the former, others on the latter. They also dramatize these issues through an attempt to reproduce a personal and/or communal history. Narration plays a crucial role in the affinity that emerges between the problematics of reconstructing the past and retrieving memory and the problematics of representation and subjectivity.

The interaction between literary texts and conceptual problems outlines a twentieth-century movement from ambivalence about representation and subjectivity (*Absalom, Absalom*! and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*), to their negation or engulfment in discursive practices (*Thru*; partly in *Company*), to an attempt at regaining the lost possibilities (partly in *Company*; mainly in *Beloved*). The mapping of the moments punctuated by these novels is not new. What is new, I believe, and integral to the approach I advocate, is the analysis of the ways in which changing attitudes to representation and subjectivity are enacted by specific strategies of storytelling. In the novels I analyze, the problem of representation is dramatized mainly through a manipulation of narrative levels: their multiplication, analogies among them, and transgressions of the boundaries marking their separateness. The problem of subjectivity takes the form of undecidability concerning the narrator's identity and structural position vis-à-vis the events narrated. An explanation of some technical terms I use is given in the appendix.

The movement that emerges from my exploration of the novels is generally analogous to the transition from modernism to postmodernism to a countertendency within postmodernism. One must, however, remember that such transitions are never clear-cut; there is always a certain degree of overlap between
trends. Modernism foregrounds epistemological problems, whereas postmodernism puts in doubt not only our capacity to know but also the ontological status of the world that is the object of knowledge (McHale 1987, 9–10). Many of the insights and techniques of both modernism and postmodernism have been incorporated by the countertendency I detect, but in it they have been used to re-engage with reality (hence also with representation) and rehumanize subjectivity. Though in no way exclusive to ethnic and feminist writing, reinstating inclinations are particularly strong in these literatures, which are motivated by the desire to rescue a history from the oblivion to which the majority group has consigned it and give a voice to those silenced by the system. From this perspective Absalom, Absalom! and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight can be seen as border texts between modernism and postmodernism, Thru as clearly postmodernist, Company as having one foot in mainstream postmodernism and one in the countertendency within it, and Beloved as a leading countertext within postmodernism. What is interesting, however, is not the labeling of the novels but the many parallels between the historical moments they stage, the larger literary movements, the conceptual trajectory of literary theory, and the shape of this exploration of theoretical issues through literature. Around these, encompassing them and rendering their affinity intelligible, are the contours of the cultural landscapes of our period.