Once upon a time (or so some present-day theorists would like to believe), language was conceived of as imitating or mirroring reality. Whether anchored in interpretations of Aristotle's concept of mimesis or not, such views assume a direct relation between words and things, between the verbal and the nonverbal domain. Words stand for something else; they become a transparent channel to an extralinguistic outside, which is taken to exist before its verbalization. An awareness of the nontransparency of language and of its problematic relation to the world has often led to the replacement of mimesis by representation and of reality by reality-models, schemata, or any number of related terms. While denying language the capacity to imitate a nonlinguistic reality, many traditional views of representation still conceive of language and literature as articulations, reproductions of a prior presence. No wonder, then, that representation in this sense is often conflated with mimesis, as in Auerbach's seminal study (1953) or in the widespread use of the adjectives mimetic and nonmimetic in debates about representation. Traces of the tradition can be detected even within narratology, which has
often aligned itself with a nonhumanist ideology. The logical priority of reality (or, in more cautious formulations, fictional reality) underlies formalist and structuralist conceptions of fabula and histoire, whether these are explicitly seen as preceding the sjužet or récit, or as abstracted and reconstructed from it. Similarly, if one defines narration as a verbal act “consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened” (Smith 1980, 232), one grants the events a logical priority over their telling.3

The difference between the notion of mimesis and traditional concepts of representation hinges on the nature of the relation between language and reality (imitation versus reference, correspondence, adequation, standing for). Neither the existence of some relation nor the antecedence of reality is questioned. But the radicalization of the critique in post-Saussurean linguistics, in the philosophies of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and their adherents, and in Lacanian psychoanalysis has given rise to the dichotomy that I will here simplify as the possibility versus the impossibility of representation. Grave doubts have been cast on the capacity of language to reach—let alone represent—the world. The presumption of the existence of a reality prior to the act of representation has also come under fire. Some see the world as “always already textualized by an arche-writing or system of differentiation,” and as “a mirage of language,” to be excluded from linguistic and literary discussion (Scholes 1980, 206). Instead of a thing-in-itself, reality is now considered an absence, and language replaces, rather than reflecting or even conveying, this absent reality.

Let me linger a little on the case of psychoanalysis, because narration is of paramount importance in it, and the development of my own view must therefore take careful account of the destabilization of representation from this perspective. Psychoanalysis believes that the traumatic experiences that influence a person’s whole life tend to be repressed, that is, made absent to consciousness. These “absent” events, experiences that are not remem-
bered, get repeated and acted out in the person’s life and in the process of transference (see, e.g., Freud 1958). Since, as far as consciousness goes, the repressed is an absence for the analysand, its repetition becomes in a sense the first presence, the first “performance” of the absence. Going beyond the notion of the repressed experiences as an absence to consciousness, Lacan claims that they are also absent in the sense of never having occurred in the person’s life. According to Lacan, “It is less out of anything real . . . than precisely out of what never was, that what repeats itself springs” (translated in Johnson 1978, 504). If Freud is right in maintaining that most infantile repressions have to do with the Oedipus complex, the castration complex, and their ramifications, then these would seem to represent events that have not occurred. A male child, the argument goes, has not been castrated by his father for his desire to sleep with his mother; he has only interpreted the absence of a penis in the female as a castration which threatens him. Barbara Johnson’s conclusion is that

Psychoanalysis is in fact itself the primal scene it is seeking: it is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. Psychoanalysis is not itself the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation called “castration” or “parental coitus” or “the Oedipus complex” or even “sexuality”—the traumatic deferred interpretation not of an event but as an event which never took place as such. The “primal scene” is not a scene but an interpretative infelicity whose result was to situate the interpreter in an intolerable position. And psychoanalysis is the reconstruction of that interpretative infelicity not as its interpretation, but as its first and last act. Psychoanalysis has content only insofar as it repeats the dis-content of what never took place. (1978, 499; Johnson’s emphases)

One may wish to take issue with these views both as interpretations of Freud’s theories and in themselves, for example, by que-
rying the equivalence they establish between absence to consciousness (epistemological absence) and absence tout court (ontological absence). True, the repressed is absent to consciousness, but—at least in Freud—it is present in the unconscious. No less problematic is the radical form of absence discussed by Lacan and Johnson. Most male children have not been castrated by their fathers, nor have they slept with their mothers (although we know now that incest is much more widespread than was thought in the past), but if, as psychoanalysis claims, they have fantasized such a scenario, hasn’t there been a psychic event? And can one really speak of absence except metaphorically? Moreover, the psychic event, which Johnson would call an interpretation, is often (though not always) based on an actual event—the child’s overhearing the “cries and whispers” of his or her parents while making love. My purpose here is not to argue with the centrality of absence in Lacanian psychoanalysis but rather to anticipate a relationship that will be useful in developing my own approach later.

Just as the critique of mimesis has led to the alternative notion of representation, so has the interrogation of representation given rise to new alternatives. But while substituting representation for mimesis was a modification, the alternatives to representation, particularly creation, play, textuality, intertextuality, and metatextuality, present themselves as counterconcepts.

If the literary situation, like its psychoanalytic counterpart, is a performative repetition of an absence, then representation gives way to presentation, reproduction to production, and re-creation to creation. Spariosu relates such views to the “romantic ideology which privileged the subject as constituting rather than ‘imitating’ or ‘reflecting’ the object” (1982, 53). He also relates it to the Einsteinian revolution in physics, where the claim is no longer “to disclose a certain (objective) reality, but rather to invent it” (ibid., 33). Whereas Descartes, speaking of the properties of triangles, stated, “No one can say that I have invented or imagined them,”
mathematicians today say precisely this. In *The Evolution of Physics*, Einstein talks constantly about the “important invention” of the electromagnetic field and all the other realities “created by modern physics,” and he rejoices in the new concepts because they have enabled us “to create a more subtle reality” (quoted in Spariosu 1982, 33). Similarly, for Feyerabend, “Facts do not create the theory, but theory creates its own facts” (ibid.).

From this perspective, language and literature are seen as a creation rather than a re-creation of reality. Creation in this sense is closely related to the concept of play, which has become a catchword since Derrida, but which is equally central to the recent theorizing of a non-deconstructionist like Wolfgang Iser. In “The Play of the Text,” Iser says: “The following essay is an attempt to raise play above representation as an umbrella concept to cover all the ongoing operations of the textual process. It has two heuristic advantages: (1) play does not have to concern itself with what it might stand for, and (2) play does not have to picture anything outside itself. It allows author-text-reader to be conceived as a dynamic interrelationship that moves toward a final result” (1989, 250). The connection between play, creation, and absence becomes clear later in the essay: “The play-movement takes place when the schema ceases to function as a form of accommodation, and instead of taking its shape from the object to be imitated, now imposes a shape on what is absent” (1989, 254–55).

The concept of play, especially in its variant as the “free play of signifiers,” does not always lead to a view of literature as creating, rather than re-creating, a reality. Indeed, reality, whether re-created or created, is often completely excluded from nonrepresentational approaches, and what literature is said to produce is pure textuality. If, within the representational framework, writing and narrating are seen as transitive verbs (they tell something), according to the opposite view both become intransitive verbs: They tell, or even better, they merely unfold (Barthes 1972).
Like textuality, intertextuality is frequently opposed to representation. Whereas representation is based on a reference from words to things, intertextuality is a reference from words to words, or rather from texts to texts. The concept of "text" is often expanded to designate the whole world. The world, as a network of signs, becomes a text (or series of texts); intertextuality replaces representation.

As an alternative to representation, metatextuality can be added to textuality and intertextuality. The despair that arises from confronting the incapacity of language to "reach" the world is sometimes counteracted by a search for a metalinguistic place from which to speak of the limitations of language and literature (Thiher 1984, 117). This results in metatexts, self-conscious or self-referential literature, works that interrogate or dramatize their own difficulties in representing reality. Such works often function as a kind of metacommentary on theory or philosophy, discourses that more commonly enjoy a metastatus in relation to literature.

An inalienable essence, uniqueness (or individuality), unity, and stability (or continuity)—these are the most common attributes of the self in its traditional conceptions, and they have all been challenged by novelists and theoreticians in our century. Frequently, the self is seen as a contingency of roles and functions (Mead 1934). The notion of individuality or uniqueness gives place to that of an anonymous, prehuman stratum underlying all singular variations (Lawrence 1914; Sarraste 1956). Unity has been replaced by "the divided self" (Laing 1960), "the split subject" (Lacan 1966), "a group acting together" (Cixous 1974). And stability gives way to flux (Woolf 1925). "The researches of psychoanalysis, of linguistics, of anthropology," writes Foucault, "have 'decentered' the subject in relation to the laws of its desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions, or the play of its mythical and imaginative discourse" (1969, 22). The verb
decenter, it is worth noting, is used here, as in many contemporary writings, in two different, though perhaps related, senses. One has to do with the absence or loss of an inner center holding together the different aspects of the individual. The other concerns the replacement of the anthropocentric view by an outlook that puts impersonal systems rather than people in the center. To use Culler’s description, “The self is dissolved as its various functions are ascribed to impersonal systems which operate through it” (1981, 33).

A corollary of both senses of decentering is observable in the language used by Foucault, namely the substitution of the term subject for self. Like the grammatical subject, the human subject is reduced in this theory to a structural position in a system governed by differences. Similarly, in Lacan’s linguistically based psychoanalysis, subject refers to the individual when s/he is inserted into the symbolic order, i.e., the order of language, law, social systems, “the name of the father”—systems of differences in which the subject undergoes an alienation from him/herself and is subjected to signifying chains.

As is well known, the dissolution of the self has had devastating consequences for the status of characters in narrative fiction as well as for the author’s mode of existence (or nonexistence) within the text. Since I foreground narration, my focus is on the relations between the teller and his/her utterances. Reformulated from this limited perspective, the traditional view holds that utterances presuppose, or constitute, a stance from which they are conducted, and that this stance is attributable to a voice emanating from a self. The more recent views, on the other hand, contend that the public system of language, its rule-governed character, the play of rhetorical devices and intertextual references, and the presence of aporias and internal splits are signs of a disconnection between language and an individual voice and self (see Harrison 1991, 188–218). The speaker is considered “a storehouse of his culture’s linguistic system, of its codes,
syntagms, and potential paradigmatic options” (Thiher 1984, 128). Voice becomes a position within the linguistic system, and the knowable self a linguistic construct (a subject). Heidegger’s famous statement “Die Sprache spricht! nicht der Mensch” is by now almost a truism, reverberating in Wittgenstein’s tenet that play is not defined by people but rather defines them, as well as by the deconstructionist idea that we are spoken by language, and Barthes’s declaration: “Le discours, ou mieux encore, le langage parle, c’est tout” (1970, 48).

In narratology proper, the divergence of opinion focuses mainly on the narrator’s mode of existence. Classically, the narrator corresponded to a fictional person whose psychological makeup and moral values could be reconstructed from the text, even when the narrator is omniscient, a voice external to the narrated events (see, e.g., Booth 1961; Ewen 1974). In structuralist narratology, on the other hand, the narrator is often treated as a narrative instance, and if the term voice is used (Genette 1972; Rimmon-Kenan 1983), it is taken in a quasi-grammatical sense, restricted to the narrator’s structural position with regard to the narrated world. This is consistent with the narratological depersonification of the traditionally personlike agents in narrative fiction, namely, the exclusion of the author and the implied author and the reduction of characters to the sum total of their actions. In deconstruction, the very notion of a narrator becomes superfluous. The text is performed by language, not by a specific person, voice, or even instance.

The conflicting views concerning both representation and subjectivity are refined yet duplicated by the largely deconstructionist insights that differences exist not only between positions but also within them, and that opposites, being each other’s polar condition of possibility, generate each other in perpetual oscillation. In the process of deconstructing the possibility of representation as well as of literal meaning, de Man inserts a significant caveat: “It
would be quite foolish to assume that one can lightheartedly move away from the constraint of referential meaning” (1979, 201). In typical zigzag fashion, however, he follows this with a claim that in Rousseau’s Second Discourse, referential language “becomes an aberrant trope that conceals the radical figurality of language behind the illusion that it can properly mean” (ibid., 202). At the far end of de Man’s deconstruction of the self there is a recuperation of this very notion, but the retrieval uncannily includes its own negation:

In all these instances, rhetoric functions as a key to the discovery of the self, and it functions with such ease that one may well begin to wonder whether the lock indeed shapes the key or whether it is not the other way round, that a lock (and a secret room or box behind it) had to be invented in order to give a function to the key. For what could be more distressing than a bunch of highly refined keys just lying around without any corresponding locks worthy of being opened? Perhaps there are none, and perhaps the most refined key of all, the key of keys, is the one that gives access to the Pandora’s box in which this darkest secret is kept hidden. This would imply the existence of at least one lock worthy of being raped, the Self as the relentless undoer of selfhood. (ibid., 173)

What such complications show, I believe (and the insight goes beyond the specific concepts of representation and subjectivity) is that any two propositions, considered as totalities in a binary opposition, inevitably generate each other, become a necessary other for each other. “The pressure toward meaning and the pressure toward its undoing can never cancel each other out” (de Man 1979, 161), and even the most powerful critiques of logocentrism cannot escape the logocentric premises they undermine. Pendergast describes this interdependence in terms of the liar’s paradox: “It places logical constraints upon the attack on mimesis and representational discourse generally, in that any such attack is
obliged, as a condition of its intelligibility, to adopt the very categories of the object it attacks.” This predicament can easily be seen in Derrida’s work: “Derrida’s own deconstruction of the set of terms which support the mimetic project (truth, reference, etc.) is—self-confessedly—impossible without recourse to these terms” (Prendergast 1986, 18).

Within the deconstructionist framework, any (hypothetical) impulse to transcend dichotomies would automatically engender the undercutting recognition that dichotomies cannot be transcended, and this new pair of opposites would start a further movement of oscillation, and so on and on in ever-increasing self-consciousness. Such a movement comes to a halt (or perhaps never begins) in theories of ideology inspired by Althusser and Foucault. Here the question whether representation is or is not possible is literally im-pertinent, because representation is, from the start, dissociated from reality. In these views, which permeate some versions of semiotics, feminism, New Historicism, and British cultural materialism, representation is related not to reality but to discursive practices. The practices are ideological constructs, and the term ideology designates “not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they ‘live’” (Althusser 1971, 165). Ideology, in this sense, functions as unproclaimed fiction, wool over one’s eyes, in the service of the powers that be. As a discursive, ideological construct, representation becomes re-presentation, that is, presenting again and again: “Ideology is always repeated, always re-presented, always already ‘known’ from previous discourses, images and myths. Ideology re-presents not the real, nor a distorted reflection of the real, but the ‘obvious.’ What it suppresses is its own construction in signifying practice” (Belsey 1980, 148 n. 10). Within this conceptual framework, subjectivity is a type of representation, linguistically and discursively constructed, informed by ideology, and having no unmediated relation to an experience of self and others.
Given a conception of representation as that which is constructed in and by discourse (or by some other signifying system), having no connection to the world, the whole question of the capacity or incapacity of language and literature to represent reality becomes irrelevant. This does not mean, however, as some deconstructionist writing holds, that representation is impossible. On the contrary, representation is everywhere, but its meaning is completely changed. Such studies regularly shift from the singular to the plural, from "representation" to "representations." This move is motivated partly by an insistence on the plurality of coexisting discourses and partly by the use of representation to designate not the act or process of representing but its products, represented objects. These theories of ideology collapse not only the possible/impossible dichotomy but also the presumed contrast between representation and its counterconcepts. An example: Earlier in this chapter, the view of language and literature as constructing (creating) reality was presented as opposed to its view as reconstructing (representing) it. Here they are treated as quasi-synonymous. Below is part of a statement from a semiotic feminist study influenced by these new directions, where the quasi-synonymity is implied by the parallelism of the appositive clauses: "If we then want to bring our bodies and our pleasures closer, where we might see what they are like; better still, where we might represent them from another perspective, construct them with another standard of measurement, or understand them within other terms of analysis" (de Lauretis 1987, 38; emphases mine). Representation becomes paradoxically contained within the view that questioned it, a form of construction, rather than its binary opposite. I have no desire to ignore the destabilization of representation or its alignment with construction. On the contrary, I wish to integrate these views in my rethinking. But I feel uncomfortable with the complete divorce between representation and reality, between subjectivity and selves.

Nor is my discomfort idiosyncratic. Quite a few moral philosophers today return to the notion of self (e.g., Taylor 1989;
Harrison 1991) and reinject human agency into theories that had emphasized the dominance of social systems and ideological constructs. Moreover, realignments with reality and selves are often mediated by the notion of narrative. Alisdair Maclntyre thus speaks about “the narrative unity of life” (1981); Paul Ricoeur invokes the “narrative identity which constitutes us” (1991). Ricoeur’s view is most relevant here because it uses narrative to reflect about both representation and subjectivity, and it explicitly relates to narratological models like Genette’s.

Rejecting the neat opposition between stories and reality, as it expresses itself, for example, in the dictum, “Stories are recounted and not lived; life is lived and not recounted,” Ricoeur insists on a multiplicity of arguments, which “compel us to grant to experience as such a virtual narrativity” (1991, 29). To him, lived experience is a chain of stories that demand to be told, and—like reality—the subject also emerges from potential stories in which he or she is entangled. The advantage of the concept of narrative identity, according to Ricoeur, is that it replaces the view of identity as sameness (idem) by that of identity as self (ipse), giving room for change, development, dynamism.

These are attractive views, and so is their development in Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* (1985). But Ricoeur foregrounds narrative, the product, whereas I emphasize narration, the process of production. This characterization of Ricoeur’s endeavor may sound inaccurate, since he takes narratology to task for neglecting narration and confining analysis only to its traces in the accomplished narrative: “Narratology, however, strives to record only the marks of narration found in the text” (1985, 82). Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that Ricoeur’s concern with narration (or narrating) is limited to its temporality. In criticizing Genette, he says: “Postponing any discussion of the time of narration is not without its drawbacks” (85), and later: “These pages [of Genette’s] are at the very least premature, when we consider that the study of the time of narration is postponed” (86). But narra-
tion, as I see it, is an ongoing process, constantly open to what T. S. Eliot calls "visions and revisions," offering a glance toward the concepts under consideration rather than freezing them as stable, secure products. Another advantage of my emphasis on narration is the hierarchy it both establishes and disrupts between narrative levels.

Enter narration, and it enters as a mode of access. By *narration*, I mean the act or process of telling—whether by an external narrating voice, by an internal character-narrator, or by a character within the narrative who tells a story within the overall story. Behind all these is the author's act of narration, which (as I argue in the conclusion) calls for a reexploration in a separate study. Here I will consider the author only when his/her role is foregrounded by the text under consideration. I use the term *access* here because its connotations are double-edged. This term's duality epitomizes an argument that both incorporates the problematization of representation and subjectivity and reestablishes them in spite of doubt. In playing with the various connotations of *access*, I am consciously engaged in a game not very different from the one practiced by Shreve and Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* By letting metaphor, analogy, and *mise en abyme* function as arguments, I wish to emphasize my position about literature's way of "knowing" and the advantages of theorizing through literature.

This said, "let me play a while now" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 280). On the one hand, *access* means "approach," "passage," "channel," "doorway," implying the presence of some further space. By analogy, this suggests that narration opens or constitutes a direct approach to reality and subjectivity. On the other hand, "Access" has also become the brand name of one kind of credit card. A credit card is granted purchasing power because—on the basis of trust inscribed in institutionalized conventions—it represents a promise of money (even if the money is not available in the user's bank account at that moment). Money, of course, is a
sign system, a representation, and a credit card is thus a representation of a representation. The operative relation here is not between signs and things but between two sign systems. In fact, the situation is even more complex. Money does not directly represent the object to be purchased; it signifies what economists call "value." Value is measured in relation to other values, leading to a layering of differential systems. These systems give access to things in the world on the basis of an act of substitution that again involves a convention-governed trust or faith.

Like the use of a credit card, the act of narration does not represent the world directly. Rather, it represents modes of representation, possibilities of doubt and credence, in the worlds the characters inhabit. These may be filtered through a variety of narrators and points of view or through other forms of what Bakhtin (1981) calls "polyphony" and "heteroglossia." From the point of view of ideological theories, narration can be seen as putting in motion an interaction between discursive practices, but—as in the credit card analogy—I believe that the interaction issues in a gesture of substitution offering indirect access to a "world." The whole process, and in particular the final leap, requires—like the operation of "Access"—trust or faith governed by convention.

The idea of access (without the credit card association) has become accessible to me through both Jameson and Iser, although Jameson talks about historiography and Iser (like myself) about fiction,7 Jameson emphasizes the "represented reality," while Iser deals with the "representing appearance," and their positions on the issues in question are far from similar. Resisting the deconstructionist dismantling of reality in historiography, Jameson says:

What Althusser's own insistence on history as an absent cause makes clear, but what is missing from the formula as it is canonically worded, is that he does not at all draw the fashionable conclusion that because history is a text, the "referent"
does not exist. We would therefore propose the following revised formulation: that history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious. (1980, 35)

True, Jameson speaks about “narrativization” (presumably meaning organization as a narrative), not about “narration” (the act or process of telling), but his narrativization, like my narration, is seen as the only access to what is otherwise inaccessible. The status of history in Jameson’s theory is complex. It is an “absent cause,” yet by no means a nonexistent referent; it is “the Real,” but the Real in a Lacanian sense, hence also “the Impossible.” Jameson both affirms and undercuts reality in this paradoxical statement; he problematizes and insists on representation.

Iser’s stance, on the other hand, is explicitly antirepresentational, although on close scrutiny his “mode of access” may invite a reading against the grain. Every appearance, says Iser, “is a faked mode of access to what cannot become present” (1993, 300), and “staging prevents the inaccessible from being occupied. It does give form to the inaccessible but it preserves the status of the latter by revealing itself as a simulacrum” (ibid., 301). “Faked or unfaked” is a matter of truth-value; access and giving form belong to the operative realm. By putting the emphasis on mode of access rather than on faked, Iser’s statement can be read as (or turned into?) an affirmation of some contact in spite of the problematic nature of the mode and the inaccessibility of the object.

So much for representation. How does the Access analogy operate for subjectivity? A credit card is operative in a given system only on the basis of a number specific to its owner. The number, itself a sign, does not express the essence of its owner; it only represents the subject by differentiating him/her from other subjects.
Like the personal number on a credit card, the narrating subject is at least "something that might make a mark on something," to use Absalom, Absalom! again (127). In addition, a circularity governs both "Access" and narration. Just as a credit card simultaneously assumes a user and inscribes him/her as a personal number, so narration both presupposes a narrator and creates him/her in the process of telling.

An approach through narration also grants the narrating subject access to agency within (or in spite of) the ideological constructs to which he or she is subjected. Since, as Bakhtin and others have shown, there are several competing discourses at any given time, one form of (fairly limited) freedom is the ability to choose a specific discourse in which to take up a position. It is not my purpose here to offer a list of the possibly infinite ways in which narrators can position themselves within discourses. Some will come up in the textual analyses that follow (chapters 2 through 6 below). For the sake of clarity, however, let me draw again on Absalom, Absalom!—the novel from which all the brief examples in this section are taken—to illustrate one type of self-positioning. Here the character-narrators invest their discourse with certain generic characteristics informed by their chosen attitude toward the events threatening to imprison them. Rosa’s narrative is imbued with a Gothic spirit, Mr. Compson’s with the spirit of Greek tragedy, Quentin narrates a chivalric romance, and Shreve ironically spins a tall tale. Of course, the generic characteristics are also discursive constructs, inscribing subjects within themselves, but in these instances the inscriptions are self-willed, a mark of the narrating subject. Going beyond such a mark of the narrating subject, Bakhtin grants him/her “an internally persuasive discourse,” achieved by interweaving “others’ words” and “one’s own word” (1981, 342–46). “One’s own word” is, of course, not ideology-free, but it does permit “play with its borders” and “spontaneously creative stylizing variants” (343)—a certain degree of freedom.
From a different perspective, the very structure of the relation between the act of narration and the narrated events potentially frees the narrating subject from complete unconscious entrapment in discursive practices. According to Althusser, the subject believes him/herself to be outside ideology, although in fact s/he is totally in it. I suggest that this need not apply to the narrating subject because of the doubleness of his/her position.\(^\text{10}\) The classical model, as it has come to us from Genette (1972), conceives of the act or process responsible for producing the narrative as being, by definition, on a higher logical level than the story it narrates. By the same token, narration within a narrative is above the events it tells, this being the governing principle of Genette's distinction between narrative levels (see the appendix for explanation). The same applies to so-called first-person narratives, where the narrator as a speaking subject is at a higher level than his/her (usually younger) version as a protagonist. This logical position of narration as against a narrated "reality" allows it to maintain a certain freedom from the network of illusions in which—according to ideological theories—it is enmeshed qua discursive practice. The narrator in the classical model is positioned not only in the hierarchy of levels but also in a lateral relation of participation, the difference here being between inside and outside (a narrator who is or is not part of the narrated events). The very possibility of being outside, of telling the story of another, creates a certain distance; but even when the narrator is part of the narrated "reality," perhaps even its protagonist, complete unconscious entrapment may be inhibited by the split in the hierarchy between protagonist and narrator.

That there can be a stance above or outside ideological constructs is precisely what theories of ideology question, along with the narratological model that makes room for it. Am I not, then, involved in a circular argument? Yes and no. The hierarchy of levels and lateral relations that, to my mind, secures a certain degree of distance or freedom on the part of the narrating subject is seen
by various ideological theorists as a subordination of other voices to the narrator’s “higher authority” (Seltzer 1984; Bender 1987; Miller 1988). My own position is the reverse: There would be no narrative levels and no lateral relations without a proliferation of different versions and disparate understandings of the events, often complicating those of the overall narrator. Each voice has a certain degree of freedom in relation to the events it narrates, and ideology in the novel (I agree with Bakhtin) cannot totalize and unify all subject-positions. The novels discussed below also problematize the classical model in different degrees through a multiplication of narrative levels and a creation of analogies and metalepses among them, as well as by an undecidability concerning the identity of the narrator and his/her position with regard to the narrated objects. However, the novels also suggest (in varying degrees) a return to representation and subjectivity through a different use of the same destabilizing strategies. Thus, for example, the construction of the subject sometimes depends on a detour via the other (which involves blurring the inside/outside distinction), and the multiplication of narrative levels (hence also of narrators) can become a way of taking charge of one’s own subjectivity as well as of gaining a convoluted and indirect access to a “reality.” This doubleness explains why my exploration of representation and subjectivity through five transitional twentieth-century novels has come to focus on narrative levels and the identity of the narrator.

For an exploration by means of literature, however, the discussion has remained abstract for too long. Let me now move toward concreteness by surveying the ways in which the novels “theorize” representation and subjectivity through strategies of narration. Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* are, in different ways, under the sign of conflict. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the belief in representation is juxtaposed with the playfulness of creation. The narrators’ reliability, as well as the status of narration as a reconstruction of (past)
reality, is undermined by the multiplication of narrative levels, the absence or slanting of first-hand narration, each narrator’s telling mainly what he or she has heard from others, and the contradictions among the narrators. All these obstacles to reliability in the classical sense become assets when one conceives of narration as invention or imaginative creation. This conception ripples inward to the level of the events and outward to the reading process, and in all cases creation is seen not only as a manifestation of free play but also as an exercise of power.

The problematic status of subjectivity is dramatized in this novel by two main features of narration. Whereas the direct participants in the drama (with the exception of Rosa) do not narrate, those who do narrate did not participate in the events. As a result, the subjectivity of the non-narrating characters is, to a large extent, a construction by others: You are what others say about you. Conversely, the narrating characters become subjects by telling about others, or rather “living,” enacting the objects of their narration: You are what you say (performatively) about others. Further complications arise from difficulties in attributing utterances to speakers, caused by a frequent ambiguity or indeterminacy of the speaker, a superimposition of voices, and a uniformity of style. I will discuss narratological, thematic, and deconstructive “solutions,” the first two seen as enhancing the connection between narration and originating subject, the last as challenging it.

In Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the problem of representation is filtered through the attempt to reconstruct a “real life” of an individual. I therefore start my analysis by focusing on the destabilization of the roles of narrating subject and narrated object. Is the novel a biography, V telling Sebastian’s story? Or is it an autobiography, Sebastian telling his own story, using V as a persona? Further complications arise from the autobiography hypothesis, for the novel might also be V’s (intended or unintended) narration of his own life-story through Sebastian. By
blocking the choice between these alternatives, the novel suggests both the alienation of the subject through the other and the constitution of the other through the narrating subject.

Like *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* oscillates between affirming the possibility of representation and dismantling it by showing how reality recedes before layers of narration and by putting in doubt the reliability of all the narrators. The act of telling, which is unable to reach reality, becomes a struggle over the power to shape it by shaping the narrative. The conflict between representation and creation acquires an additional dimension in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, as creation takes the self-reflexive form of the writing of fiction. Analogies and metalepses between narrative levels manifest the interchangeability between reality and fiction. The analogies between Sebastian's novels and Sebastian's life reinforce the representational view of narration, the novels being conceived as rendering the life. On the other hand, the analogies and metalepses between Sebastian's novels and V's quest reveal the former as dictating the latter, and by implication fiction as creating reality. By foregrounding the fictionality of reality and the reality of fiction, as well as destabilizing not only the concept of representation but also that of reality, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* becomes a more radical questioning of representation than *Absalom, Absalom!* though it too does not abandon representation completely.

Whereas *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* are conflicted (in different degrees) about representation and subjectivity, Brooke-Rose's *Thru* comes very close to a total deconstruction of both. More extreme than any analogies and metalepses is the book's reversibility of the hierarchy usually assumed to exist among narrative levels. Like Escher's famous *Drawing Hands*, *Thru* playfully frustrates any attempt to distinguish between narrating subject and narrated object, container and contained, outside and inside, higher and lower narrative levels. It plunges the reader into a universe of paradox, infinite re-
gress, and tight loop, collapsing the presumed separation between reality and narration and subverting the very notion of representation. The subverted notion gives way to creation, play, textuality, intertextuality, and metatextuality. However, since Thru sees the whole world as a text, the textuality of literature becomes a dramatization of the textuality of the world, so that the novel has an unexpected representational dimension. Representation of a more traditional type is also present in Thru, especially where love and sex, gender inequality, illness, and various ideologies are concerned. Yet these themes tend to undergo a deconstruction soon after being scenically rendered. They are also often revealed as constructs within “delirious discourses,” social clichés through which subjects “live” their own experiences.

Intertwined with the dismantling of representation is the dissolution of the traditional self. By turning narrating subjects into narrated (or invented) objects, reversing narrative levels depersonifies narrators, and they become texts, stories, even fictions. The confusion of voices, the quick and often unmarked transition from one narrator to another, and the abundant use of intertextuality all contribute to the effacement of any link between narration and an autonomous self. The narrator as an originating self dies in the act or process of narration, even as the process gives birth to a speaking subject who is a signifier in the symbolic order, endowed by ideological discourse with the illusory status of a self.

Beckett’s Company has many affinities with Thru, but it also offers a tentative access to the dismantled concepts on a different plane. As in Thru, representation is subverted by a reversibility of the hierarchy between narrators and objects of narration. Yet while Thru prevents narration from being associated with any originating consciousness, Company finally does come to rest within the mind of the one on his back in the dark. This devising mind becomes the object of representation, and—from this point of view—the reversibility of narrative levels enacts different
positions of the mind in relation to itself: The mind talks to itself about itself, occasionally perceives itself as if from the outside, and often imagines—or even invents—its own activity.

Equally double-edged is the treatment of the subject. One can see the splitting of narration into sections in the second person and sections in the third, as well as the explicit avoidance of the first person, as a dramatization of the dissolution of the traditional self. The severing of the present from the past, the focus on separate parts of the body rather than the whole, and the fragmentation of the text parallel the self’s dissolution. These symptoms may also indicate the self-alienation that language necessitates. The limitations of language are often considered responsible for the reduction of the traditional self to a subject (or better, several subjects) in *Company*. But what is a reduction from one perspective becomes a celebration of plurality and freedom from another—the freedom of a plural subject from rigidifying conceptualizations in both language and philosophy. And the other side of fragmentation is reduplication, an emergence of otherness, which is a necessary condition for both company and narration.

Morrison’s *Beloved* is no less obsessed with narratives and narration than the four novels discussed above, nor is it oblivious to the problems of representation and subjectivity. Nevertheless, it becomes—even more strongly than *Company*—a complex rehabilitation of these concepts through narration. The conditions necessary for acceding to what the novel calls “a self” emerge from a comparison between the multilayered telling of Denver’s birth, rendered as memories of stories, and the primary narration of Beloved’s second coming, or rebirth. In Denver’s case, the layering of focalization and narration is necessary: only through memory and storytelling is birth transformed into a claim of ownership and an access to self. Beloved’s rebirth, however, is not rendered through her memories (as focalizer) or her retrospective telling (as narrator), since these would have constituted her
"self," which is precisely what Beloved does not have. Objective corollaries of this lack are Beloved's physical fragmentation and her incapacity to dissociate herself from Sethe. The multiplication of narrative levels, which in the earlier texts enacted a doubt about the possibility of reaching reality and constituting a self, operates in Beloved as an access to both.

Similarly, ambiguity, the Fantastic, and magical realism—techniques often used for nonrepresentational, self-reflexive purposes—are subordinate in Beloved to the attempt (and the difficulty) of making believable the unbelievable horrors of slavery, of trying to represent an unbearable reality. The ambiguity of Beloved's mode of existence (natural/supernatural) enacts the tension inherent in such an enterprise as well as the double-edged response to trauma.

Culminating in a glimpse of retrieval, the path sketched in the preceding overview is fairly optimistic. Nevertheless, I do not wish to project the "glance beyond doubt" back onto texts where conflicts or skepticism predominate, for that would be an anachronism unworthy of both the literary texts and the historico-theoretical trajectory I am trying to trace. Maintaining a delicate balance between the overall approach—derived mainly from within the novels—and the intricacies of narration in each text is one of the challenges of the specific analyses that follow.