Conclusion

Through an analysis of five twentieth-century novels, I have suggested a new approach to representation and subjectivity and have outlined a map of changing attitudes toward these concepts in our time. The attempt to theorize via literature is, at least partly, a reaction against impositions of theoretical models on literary texts or reductions of literary texts to the status of examples. Such tendencies, which had their rationale (theory, it was believed, should be concerned with the general rather than the specific), were particularly pronounced in structuralist narratology (including my own past work) and have often led to an unfortunate severing of any living contact between poetics and literature. The proposed return to the texts is also motivated by a belief that literature is a mode of knowledge different from (but in no way inferior to) theory and philosophy. For this reason, a study of theoretical problems through an analysis of literary texts can yield insights impossible for a purely conceptual inquiry. Just as the approach treats philosophical problems from a defamiliarizing (hence refreshing) narratological angle, so does it open up narratology to questions generally considered outside its purview.
I wish to acknowledge openly, however, both the burden that this approach puts on the textual readings—the proof of that burden is in the reading—and the circularity involved in the procedure. While deriving my theoretical claims from the novels themselves, I have not come to the texts as a tabula rasa, and a reading of literature with certain conceptual concerns in mind necessarily implies some theoretical orientation. Theorizing through a limited number of novels also raises the question: Is the emergent theory valid only for these novels, or others similar to them, or is it more generally applicable? The question becomes doubly acute because the novels I discuss share a foregrounding of the problems with which my book is concerned and may therefore be said to be both too easily amenable to this kind of analysis and not typical enough of the novel genre. I counter this hypothetical objection by pointing out a potential virtue in what seems like a limitation. Rather than militating against their use for my purposes, the foregrounding of the conceptual problems by the texts I choose may bring what usually lies underneath to the surface. This argument could be taken a step further with the help of de Man’s rebuttal of the category of “self-conscious literature” (on the grounds that all literature is). I believe, however, that there are degrees of self-consciousness and degrees of foregrounding, and that the approach I suggest may look more “spectacular” in relation to some texts than in relation to others. This brings me to the earlier question of applicability. To my mind, if the theory is valid, it is valid for all fictional narratives, though it may have different shapes, nuances, and degrees in different texts. While an empirical demonstration of such a claim is impracticable, given the infinite number of available narratives, future studies may usefully take up novels that do not foreground the issues, but also do not prevent them from emerging. A study focusing on the realist tradition of the nineteenth century may be of special interest in this context, both because this tradition tends to shun self-conscious display and because it often uses external (omniscient) narrators, who are less easily conceived of as subjects.
Conclusion

Because my theory emerges largely from within the novels, but can also reach beyond these five texts, a delicate balance is needed not only between textual and conceptual analysis, but also between theoretical and historical poetics. The desire to rehabilitate representation and rehumanize subjectivity has motivated my project as a whole. However, the diachronic study locates the novels at different points along the continuum: *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* are conflicted, in varying degrees, about both representation and subjectivity; *Thru* dismantles both; *Company* dismantles them but also tentatively regains them on a different level; and *Beloved* integrates the destabilization and yet glances beyond doubt to a new affirmation. The need to find the correct balance between my general argument and the location of each text on the historical map is a challenge I hope I have met.

I was attracted to twentieth-century novels both because the issues at stake have become particularly acute in our period (though they are by no means exclusive to it) and because of the analogy (as well as the mutual influence) between the transition punctuated by the novels and the conceptual trajectory of literary theory. I have attributed this homology to the cultural landscape of our period, but I am also aware of the shadow of circularity. Can the shift be located in the sequence of novels, or does it result from the changing theoretical orientations I bring to bear upon them? Unfortunately, the question seems to me unanswerable. Indeed, it is a variation on the age-old crux: Is *x* in the text, or in our reading of (or approach to) the text? That both questions cannot be answered definitively does not, however, render the asking futile. Among other things, it alerts us to the possibility that ours is a profession where one finds what one is looking for.

My book attempts to break away both from traditional views of representation and subjectivity and from their poststructuralist dismantling, whether in deconstruction or in Althusser- and Foucault-inspired theories of ideology. The project of rehabilitation is not meant as a regression to earlier positions but as a spiraling
movement that integrates skepticism and yet glances beyond it. The glance beyond is effected by shifting the ground from reference and specularity to access achieved through narration. I play with various connotations of access so as to go through destabilization and entrapment within discursive constructs, but emphasize the final act of substitution as a reaching gesture that involves a convention-governed trust or faith.

The mobile stance informing my concept of an access-function is reinforced by the stress on narration, highlighting the act or process of production rather than the final product. This dynamic grasp of the issue has the advantage of going beyond most structuralist narratology. A question that immediately arises, however, is: Whose act of production? This book is concerned with narrators, though it does insert occasional references to authors when the texts foreground them. It seems to me, however, that a theory that attempts to go beyond a view of the narrator as a structural position to a consideration of his/her subjectivity should be able to open itself up to a similar treatment of authors. Whether approached as one of the voices in a Bakhtinian polyphony or as the agent whose act of production is responsible for the various fictional narrations, the reborn author will not be the same as the one whose death was so definitively announced. But it is clear to me that some rebirth is called for by a theory that spotlights narration. The distinction between the real and the implied author may be less radical than it seemed in the days of New Criticism and structuralism, since the real author is also in some sense implied. What we know about the author is drawn mainly from discourses by and about him or her (literary texts, letters, notes, memoirs by friends, etc.).\textsuperscript{1} This is rather similar to the way the character-narrators in Absalom, Absalom! and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight try to interpret "reality" and the subjects inhabiting it: they read documents, listen to stories, infer, and create.

The narrators' transference-like repetition of the events they narrate confers further dynamism on the act of narration. The
performative dimension that is explicitly dramatized in Quentin’s and Shreve’s reliving of Henry and Bon, as well as in V’s transformation into Sebastian Knight (or vice versa), exists, I suggest, in every act of narration.

And in every act of reading. In Absalom, Absalom! the readers find themselves in a position analogous to Sutpen’s victims’, confronted with gaps, absences, and obscurities that impede the desire for intelligibility. Their attempts to figure out the story often involve imaginative invention, like the creation of a hypothetical scene between Quentin and Henry in which the principal secret is supposedly divulged. In Beloved, the readers’ oscillation between a supernatural and a natural interpretation of the title character’s identity is a performative repetition of the response to trauma by the characters and the overall narrator. What these texts dramatize explicitly may be implicitly true of narrators and readers in all texts: processing the text in the act of reading, the readers also “perform” it, experientially repeating the narrators’ acts of production. My description of the access function of narration also applies to readers, as they gain access through a performative repetition of the processes of the text. They too operate a metaphoric credit card, with its institutionalized conventions and its trust-governed gesture of substitution.

“The reader is the writer and the writer the reader,” says Thru (30) in an extreme formulation of what many theoreticians prefer to see as equivalence or complementarity. The centrality of listening or reading to the functioning of narration is obvious in the novels I discuss. The Quentin-Shreve collaboration in Absalom, Absalom! is a “happy marriage of speaking and hearing” (316) in which the narratee is just as active as the narrator. In Beloved, narration becomes most strongly creative, and most strongly a way of claiming ownership of the self, when it is shared with another (Denver with Beloved, Paul D with Sethe, on so on). And the lonely creature in Company devises a hearer to make both narration and company possible.
Equally kinetic are the transformations disrupting the stratification of narrative levels: subversion, interpenetration, reversibility, interchangeability, and mutual cancellations. The same strategies, differently used, serve both the destabilization of representation and subjectivity and their rehabilitation. Thus, whereas the multiplication of narrative levels in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* enacts a doubt about the possibility of reaching reality and constituting a self, in *Beloved* it operates as an access to both.

My analysis of representation and subjectivity through the concept of narration can be fruitfully linked to the current narrative turn in a variety of disciplines—historiography, psychoanalysis, sociology, communication studies, and jurisprudence. Although my book is concerned with fictional narration, it clearly stands to gain from the perceived continuity with extraliterary practices. I venture to say, however, that my perspective can also enrich these new orientations in at least two respects. The concept of narrative is often used in these disciplines to counter the notion of truth-claims or factuality. In *I, Pierre Rivière* (1978), Foucault tells the main event—the multiple murder—from various points of view and through various narrators, none of whom is more authoritative than the others. The result is, in many ways, similar to the novels I analyze here: a demystification of truth, a destabilization of reality, a questioning of event. Hayden White (1978) sees history as a species of narrative and classifies it under various tropes, using the concept of plot. Donald Spence (1982) speaks about "narrative truth" rather than "historical truth" in psychoanalysis. Difficulties with knowledge, reality, and the like have often led to an emphasis on the fictional status of (or fictional dimension in) historiography, psychoanalysis, and other disciplines. Within these developments, narrative is also part of a reaction against theory, at least in its traditional acception as objective, verifiable, universal. Paradoxically, narrative theory is often used today in order to dislodge theory.
Obviously, I cannot do justice to these fascinating approaches here, nor can I broach a serious discussion of my agreements and disagreements with their assumptions and procedures. All I can do is suggest that the interface between them and the theory I have developed may give rise to a use of narrative (and even more, narration) that does not substitute for reality but offers a complex access to it. It may also help reestablish a contact between narrative and theory, where theory will be enriched by the specificity of narratives, while narratives will open up to a form of theorizing that grows out of them, integrates both destabilization and a dynamics of “visions and revisions,” and yet gestures toward some kind of re-affirmation.