

LEN GUTKIN,
 “IF NOT BY REALITY’S YARDSTICK’: NARRATIVE UNRELIABILITY, RETROSPECTION, AND MYTH IN MARY CAPONEGRO”

Mary Caponegro is a virtuoso of the first-person, the voice in which a significant proportion of her fiction is told—all of *Complexities of Intimacy* save the final story, “The Epilogue of the Progeny,” which swaps first- for second-person; two of the six stories in *All Fall Down*; and two of five in *Five Doubts*. But in her first major collection, *The Star Café*, three of four stories are in the third person. As if to make up for this first-person deficit, the book’s longest story (a novella, really), *Materia Prima*, features the first-person in different guises. First, there is a somewhat Proustian mode of adult retrospection; second, there is an idiom of childhood immediacy, evoking the infant Stephen of Joyce’s *Portrait* (transposed into first person). Towards the story’s end, Caponegro unexpectedly modulates into a semi-omniscient (and metafictionally self-reflexive) third-person and then, even more unexpectedly, into drama. It’s as if she is ringing all the changes in what Gérard Genette, in *The Architext*, refers to as the “modes,” the grammatical situations at the origin of literary genre.¹

In this essay, I want to attend to Caponegro’s interest in the first-person with respect to what I take to be two of the most important dimensions of her fiction at the level of both form and theme: *unreliability* (or *metamorphosis*). These are obviously linked, but they are not the same. With respect to unreliability, the problem is narratological and rhetorical. Caponegro’s narrators, like the priest of “The Father’s Blessing,” sometimes pretend benevolence while in fact communicating sinister intentions, or, like the narrator of “The Daughter’s Lamentation,” weave webs of dense eloquence around an unsayable kernel. We might recognize behind these tactics Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Camus’s *The Fall*, and, more distantly, the Dostoevsky of *Notes from Underground*—texts that offer first-person speakers who say either more or less than they mean, seductive raconteurs whose rhetorical beauties mask immorality or criminality or deceptiveness or, at the very best, compromised, partial self-knowledge.²

¹ For Genette, the “mode” is “the most undeniably universal category inasmuch as it is based on the transhistorical and translinguistic fact of pragmatic situations”; genre, conversely, is a historically conditioned product: “modes and themes, intersecting, jointly include and determine genres.” See Gérard Genette, *The Architext. An Introduction*, Engl. Trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: California U.P., 1992) 74, 73. Northrop Frye’s division of genres on the basis of the “radical of presentation” is also pertinent—the alternation of radicals of presentation within the same story contributes to the generic hybridity, and the experimentalism, of Caponegro’s work. Northrop Frye, “Rhetorical Criticism,” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) 246.

² In an essay on first-person unreliability and *Lolita*, James Phelan usefully distinguishes between “estranging unreliability,” which “increases the [affective or interpretive] distance between the narrator and the authorial audience,” and “bonding unreliability,” which brings them closer together. James Phelan, “Estranging Unreli-

Such texts, with their fissured, ironic, self-undermining narrators, are of course occasions of mutability of a sort. They speak to the shifting nature of appearances, the opaque transformations of motive, the sudden emergence, in the psychological landscape, of a distorting feature that distorts the whole. Broadly speaking, these are inheritances of a certain Gothic strain in modernism; in Caponegro's case we might be tempted to identify a specific locus in the first-person fantasias of John Hawkes, her graduate mentor at Brown University.

Mutability, in Caponegro's work, has a less rhetorical aspect. Her stories regularly feature transformations, metamorphoses, of the sort found in Eastern European modernists like Kafka and Bruno Schulz and, in the post-war period, made especially familiar by the writers of the Latin American boom associated with "magic realism." (In an evaluation of her work written when she was an undergraduate, the novelist William Gaddis noted his own preference for realistic fantasy over Caponegro's interest in the frankly fantastic.) In Caponegro's stories, emotional or aesthetic climaxes often coincide with a magical transformation, as when, in "The Mother's Mirror," the narrator discovers all the members of her family, with whom she had become disillusioned, literally re-enchanted by the steam of the shower; or when, in "The Father's Blessing," the sinister narrating priest spies a mother crawling into and temporarily inhabiting her daughter's own womb; or when, perhaps paradigmatically, the anorexic bird-obsessed teenager of *Materia Prima* is transformed into the Phoenix of mythology, an event which understandably confounds her mother. The species of anti-realism on display here is drawn less, perhaps, from "The Metamorphosis" than from "Leda and the Swan." No matter how violent or unexpected or wrenching, these are explosions of enchantment, grown-up fantasies, regions of narrative possibility having much to do, generically, with fairy-tales.

And like fairy-tales, their intensest catheches are to do with gender and sexuality. Like Angela Carter, Caponegro's fabulism is rooted in feminist attention to the codes by which sex is made into meaning. Childbirth is one though certainly not the only signal theme here. Two of the examples cited above involve the resolution, amplification, or symbolization of tensions between mother and daughter, in both cases around reproduction. Caponegro's first-person speakers, indeed, gesture towards the disturbing or liberating possibility that one might become two, an "I" turned to "we," or even to "you." These possibilities unfold at the level of theme but also of grammar.

With this cluster of concerns in mind—the first-person and the kinds of narrative presence it permits; fabulist or magic-realist metamorphosis as linchpin of her practice; and an interest in female experience and, in particular, the conditions of mother- and daughterhood—I want to sketch a theory of Caponegro's narrative technique. My main texts will be *Materia Prima* and "The Father's Blessing."

The stories in *The Complexities of Intimacy* bring to a very high level the ambiguities involved in first-person unreliability—indeed, we might think of the title as a gloss on the peculiarly opaque "complexity" proposed by the fictional "I," preferring transparency while depending on patterns of omission that give the fiction its interest.³ "The

ability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*," in Elke D'hoker and Gunther Martens eds., *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First Person Novel* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2008) 9. A narrator like Humbert Humbert toggles between both kinds of unreliability—much of the interpretive interest of *Lolita* consists in figuring out when the implied author intends bonding, and when estrangement. Without a lengthy technical detour, I want here briefly to suggest that first-person narrative *seductiveness* of the kind characterizing *Lolita*, *The Fall*, or Caponegro's "The Father's Blessing" is the product of this toggling between estranging and bonding unreliability.

³ At their most extreme, such patterns of omission involve the withholding of a crucial fact, in the light of

Mother's Mirror" presents a relatively straightforward version of this sort of first-person narrative irony. The speaker, in the process of appearing to present herself as fair-minded and generous, suggests rather the opposite: that she can be judgmental, withholding, even petty. Here she is describing a piece of broken kitchen-ware, speculating on the culprit: "[Our son's] girlfriend is our guess, but we are not so small, so petty, as to mention it, make issue of it."⁴ The denial of pettiness that reveals pettiness, underscored by the pedantic or pretentious royal "we," all contribute to the suggestion that the speaker may be more self-justifying than just—that she may not know herself, that she reveals more than she realizes.

"The Father's Blessing" handles first-person unreliability in a more sinister, and also more rhetorically complex, manner. "Allow me," the priest begins, "if you would, to tell you of a wedding, which took place not long ago, a wedding no different from any other—not objectively—in which I played my role to everyone's satisfaction, at least initially."⁵ This packed sentence performs something like the overt signaling of first-person unreliability, particularly in that "not objectively," set off by dashes. Not objectively—meaning, of course, that we are in the realm of the insistently subjective, in which the truth of events is inseparable from the medium of the teller.

And the teller, accordingly, is pleased with, prides himself on, his verbal dexterity, what he calls "my own eloquence."⁶ A little later on, the Father makes statements that, considered together, might be taken to provide a thesis about the relationship between rhetorical shiftiness and a broader epistemological—indeed ontological—uncertainty: "Such a man," he says of himself, "has evolved the skill of flexibility." "[O]ur world fluctuates before us daily; appearances ever-unreliable indices of truth." Flexibility is the appropriate mode for handling a reality as shifty, as fluctuating, as the Father says ours is, but for the unreliable first-person narrator there is always the possibility that it is rhetoric which gives rise to the instability in the order of things, and not vice versa. As he had earlier explained, "[O]ne wants to believe sheer force of one's sincerity will smooth the roughest road [...] Yet one must exercise caution, for sincerity is a dangerous thing."⁷

All in all, the oily eloquence of the Father might be taken as participating in a set of generic conventions associated with unreliable first-persons such as *The Fall's* Jean-Baptiste Clamence or *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert—what we might think of as the "over-signaling" of unreliability. In this tradition, indications that a narrator is not to be trusted come so thick and so fast that the point of aesthetic interest is not that we get to infer unreliability gradually, through the gaps, blind-spots, or suppressions in the speaker's account, but, rather, that we have to figure out how to navigate a veritable overabundance of declarations of unreliability—we have to determine how different kinds of unreliability might interact, or whether, after all, there is no "true" version of events which an unreliable account might be understood to distort or fall short of. When the

which everything would change. "I'm a big fan of the lie of omission," as one of the narrators of Gillian Flynn's recent bestselling thriller *Gone Girl*, a pulp masterpiece of narratorial unreliability, puts it (New York: Crown Publ., 2012) 133.

⁴ Mary Caponegro, "The Mother's Mirror," in *The Complexities of Intimacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2001) 35.

⁵ Mary Caponegro, "The Father's Blessing," in *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56, 58, 47.

newly-married Kathleen tells her mother that she's not too comfortable with this strange priest, her mother's response is a kind of joke about the generic conventions of first-person unreliability as such: "He keeps in touch, and you can tell he cares. I sense he's very... trustworthy" [ellipsis in original].⁸ No reader can miss her naiveté. The text will not allow it.

Where Caponegro is most innovative, though, is in yoking her experiments in the tradition of unreliable first-person eloquence to her interest in the metamorphoses and transformations of the fairy-tale or magical realism. In "The Father's Blessing," the central metamorphosis is staged as a spectacle for the narrator's voyeuristic consumption, but one that, as we will see, ultimately excludes him. "I was right against the door now," the Father narrates, "squatting to make my eye level with the keyhole."⁹ This convoluted posture combines power and abjection in a manner emblematic of the Father's whole character and, more broadly, of the unreliable first-person tradition to which he belongs. What he witnesses involves instabilities not to do with his own unreliability, his own self-serving slipperiness, but—as in so much of Caponegro's fiction—with the mercurial nature of a fictional universe conceived not in realist but in fabulist terms:

I watched the bride splay her legs; she spread them as far, it seemed, as legs could separate, and farther still—perhaps she had as an adolescent performed the acrobatic maneuver called a split; she might have been a cheerleader—it seemed it must be terribly uncomfortable but this time she uttered no cries, not a sound, as they, adopting what appeared an exaggerated yoga posture, crept inside, one after another, to be embraced by those contours which are even in the imagination, forbidden to the man who inhabits, as vocation, a chamber of secrets. I heard them twice removed now, as if underwater.¹⁰

In this womb that somehow encompasses daughter and mother both, our speaker—a master insinuator of himself into situations where he doesn't belong—finds himself excluded, at least physically. His eavesdropping continues, though, as he proudly reports that "the two women had no suspicion that they were in some fashion exposed to the practiced ear of the man whose profession is to listen through a membrane to all the world's secrets."¹¹ When the women emerge from the womb, the Father, resourceful as ever, finds a way to introduce himself into a position of surprising intimacy: he joins the mother in nursing at the daughter's breasts. From one point of view, this intrusion is the pinnacle of the Father's oily, insidious insinuation of himself into the intimate lives of his parishioners: "I am here!" I whispered it so softly that it might have been an angel's voice, or strand of dream. And the bride's gasp was likewise a subterranean response to dreamt image or sensation, when I took into my mouth the darkened mounded center of the aureole..."¹² Not just pinnacle but apotheosis; the Father has become "an angel," a figure unbound by normal human constraints and, in his own mind at least, partaking of the divinity he is called, professionally, to serve and mediate.

⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰ Ibid., 62-63.

¹¹ Ibid., 63.

¹² Ibid., 67-68.

But, on the Father's own account, his encounter with "physiological processes that had remained for the greater part of my life abstract" has presented a problem of existential stakes, which he is unable to contain or conquer by his customary self-assurance:

Perhaps if I rested here with them [...] I could become for them a part of their landscape, a part of their life. I had the sense that they had been changed by their visit with each other, as most certainly had I by my covert interaction [...] [M]y own truths seemed disturbingly incomplete. What would I learn from this? How could I apply these lessons? In so many senses, failure felt the order of the day.¹³

To be sure, this admission of "failure" is highly rhetorical, like everything else the Father says, and we would be perfectly justified in reading his highly-wrought confession of a lapse in ontological self-confidence as the calculated presentation of vulnerability or faltering—a denser, more complex instance of that kind of irony with which the Father began ("in which I played my part to everyone's satisfaction"), in which the interest lies in a profession of sincerity whose very over-statement signals its falseness.

But even if this is true—even if the Father's claim to being at an existential loss should be met skeptically—the story's conclusion nevertheless dramatizes the process by which rhetoric itself serves to manage a reality too messy otherwise to bear.

Suffering from indigestion occasioned by the ingestion of mother's milk, the Father sets out to calm both his mind and his stomach the only way he knows how: with words. He begins to compose a sermon in which, we gather, he will describe some version of the strange events he has just undergone (perhaps the story even *is* this sermon, culminating, Proust-like, with the scene of its own composition). His metaphors are drawn, pointedly, from the realm of female bodily experience he has just surreally participated in: "Consider me, if you would, a kind of...midwife, who mediates collectively your birth in Christ, your baptism into a new life"¹⁴ (ellipsis in original). The story's concluding sentences suggest that the composition of compelling rhetoric can itself allay the threatening instability of the material, the bodily: "No sooner had I penned the words than I began to feel some mitigation of the turbulence within my bowels. Realizing that these were indeed the means through which I could calm myself and my digestion, I proceeded with the outline for my homily."¹⁵

Such an equation, in which rhetoric or language might control the instabilities of the bodily, unfolds in "The Father's Blessing" according to a schematically gendered logic whereby discourses coded as "male" are opposed to a recalcitrant material reality coded as "female." This opposition is here explicitly resolved with reference to the Eucharist. Although this gender schema has, I think, an important relationship to the history of the kind of unreliable narrator I have invoked as background or lineage for Caponegro's work (Camus, Nabokov), it is by no means the usual pattern for her—rather, a useful exception. For a different configuration of gender and first-person narrative unreliability, one arguably more exemplary of Caponegro's corpus, I want to turn to *Materia Prima*, the longest piece in *The Star Café and Other Stories*.

Materia Prima begins with, in effect, a discussion of narrative reliability, here presented in terms of a meditation on the perils and inaccuracies of memory. The speaker opens by recalling that, when she was a child, it was her extended family's custom to

¹³ Ibid., 70.

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

discuss the past after Thursday dinner, but that when she herself would try and contribute to these “nostalgic evening[s],” her contributions were disbelieved—she couldn’t possibly remember such things, she wasn’t even there! It was “as if the madeleine had been snatched from Proust’s mouth”:

I don’t think I would have been half as hurt had their denial been conscious and specific, had they taken the trouble to do precise calculations: reconstruct the dates for instance, whatever vacation trip was in question, and then determined how old I had in fact been at the time before assessing the reliability of my recollection. Rather it was this systematic dismissal of potential remembrance that I found so frustrating and painful.

For I knew that my own images were intense, vivid, and in some way accurate, if not by reality’s yardstick, then by some other less secular measure.¹⁶

“Reliability,” here, is overtly theorized as a problem not of narration but of memory, or, more accurately, as the complex intertwinement of narration and recollective cognition. It is Caponegro herself, we might say, who has “snatched” not the madeleine, but a whole discursive complex “from Proust’s mouth.” (The Eucharistic conclusion to “The Father’s Blessing” comes to mind; in a biographical mood, we might ascribe such preoccupations to Caponegro’s Catholic upbringing.) But for all of Proust’s own Catholic reliance on a mode of recollection drawing on the Eucharist as model for the instantiation of the immaterial in matter, his own fictional world is rooted in the very “secular measure” that the narrator of *Materia Prima* disclaims. The generic opposition to the “secular,” here, will be the magical and the mythic.

But *Materia Prima* first proposes another opposition to Proust, a counter-mode of first-person recollection, a kind of stream-of-consciousness immediacy associated above all with Joyce and his imitators. These passages are interpolated into the text in italics; they represent Clara’s childhood consciousness supposedly unmediated by the prisms of recollection. Here is a representative paragraph:

*we come home from groceries and find granny falled on the floor her cane past where she can reach. My mom gets upset. I would be upset to except granny says I am alright I’ve only fallen help me up now please.*¹⁷

The bulk of *Materia Prima* alternates between three modes: Clara’s adult recollections of her childhood experiences, which culminate in increasing isolation, anorexia, and obsessive scientific reading about birds; italicized passages of stream-of-consciousness immediacy, in which, as above, errors in grammar or elided connective phrases and non-standard capitalization produce the impression of childish cognition; and finally, passages of technical material from books of avian biology (presumably representing Clara’s reading material but also having larger symbolic resonances with the more conventionally narrative passages—not unlike in the collage-texts of Paul Metcalf).

I will bracket the third mode for the time being. For now, I want to think about what the interaction of the first two does for first-person narrative claims for veridicality and verisimilitude. In Caponegro’s Proustian mode, the effect is one of layered qualification, in which truth-claims about the past and about the narrator’s own psychology are relativized. This relativization, indeed, is Clara’s major theme. Out of the very difficul-

¹⁶ Mary Caponegro, “Materia Prima,” in *The Star Café* (New York: Norton, 1990) 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

ty of accurately constructing a psycho-narrative, she arrives at her story. Clara is quite transparent about this interpretation of her own development: “As a result [of her parents’ skepticism about her reconstructions of the past]; yes, I am fairly certain of this causality, I decided, even young as I then was, to devote myself to the study of the natural sciences.”¹⁸ Such psychological reflexivity roots Caponegro’s experimental practice firmly in Proustian modernism.

Unlike Marcel, though, Clara’s strategy for correcting for memory’s recalcitrant inadequacies—what she calls, in an evocative and mysterious phrase, “that stone barring our tomb we call memory”—entails her immersion in the solidier realities described by the biological sciences. “Each day, systematically, I tried to correct my allegedly invalid perceptions: to redeem them by way of the empirical.”¹⁹ Clara conceives of avian life as superior to human precisely because it lacks the pitfalls associated with memory, notoriously imperfect. “Psychological nuance did not have a chance to interfere with perfection.” She elaborates:

Though thrust into what might be perceived as a brutal environment, i.e., nature, the fledgling’s circumstance is also characterized by—and we would be imperceptive, even unjust, not to acknowledge—a purity, a precision that contrasts (quite favorably to my mind) with the murky set of variables wrought by that complex phenomenon we call personality [...] I was attracted to the idea of behavior by instinct: how utterly simple.²⁰

What is especially interesting here is how Clara (or Caponegro) has converted an epistemological problem—the fraught remembrance of things past—into an aesthetic one that, as we will see, then takes on *moral* stakes. For Clara, “allegedly invalid perception” has been from the first related to the possibility of shame, but if (imperfect) perception gives rise to shame, then an inarguably *right* perception—here, a perception about the superiority of beings (birds) for whom (recollective) perception is distinctly not an issue (they are bird-brains, after all)—is the site of shame’s overcoming. “[W]e would be imperceptive” not to recognize the superiority of imperceptiveness. For humans, Clara says, “self-consciousness” is an “uneasy blend of boastfulness and shame”; humans are “never able to bypass the plodding, point-by-point progress of the ratiocinative,” but birds “are not encumbered; for them there is no issue, with no developed brain to hinder span of form.”²¹

Pure form without reflection or self-consciousness is the paradoxical desideratum of Clara’s meditative reminiscences, and, in its overcoming of shame, superior to consciousness both aesthetically and morally. But the italicized passages of Clara’s childhood stream-of-consciousness might be taken to represent a different alternative to the “plodding, point-by-point progress of the ratiocinative”²²—they suggest that experience can be apprehended in its sensory immediacy, thereby circumventing the layered anxieties and epistemological impasses wrought by recollection. Such immediate apprehension of experience cannot find itself vulnerable to the skepticism with which Clara’s

¹⁸ Ibid., 55.

¹⁹ Ibid., 62, 59.

²⁰ Ibid., 59-60.

²¹ Ibid., 71, 73.

²² Ibid., 71.

claims to remembrance at the Thursday night dinners was met—the madeleine cannot be snatched from the mouth. But stream-of-consciousness, alas, does not prove immune to the creeping anxiety occasioned by all self-consciousness, an anxiety incited by the agonized perception of a gap between one’s self and one’s fellows. The final passage of italicized stream-of-consciousness indicates the crisis:

*I would rather go back to the school with all the girls whose difference is one sameness than be here with different laura who has turned the same as them. but I can't go back to school mamma tells me no matter how good the grades are. a hundred A's she says can't make up for behavior [...] will she ever grow up to be normal I hear through the closed bedroom door*²³

And, in the parallel development described in the recollective passage immediately following this one, the burdens of self-consciousness, and its correction by some other kind of discourse, are explicitly identified: “It is understatement to claim that my parents were no longer pleased with me [...] All relationships [...] were reduced to alienation. Irreconcilable alienation. And the more the imagery of literature yielded to my labors, the richer my dreams became, sometimes themselves equivalent of poem or myth. These realms, exclusively, held hope: a glimpse of liberation.”²⁴

In concert, these two varieties of first-person narration produce a kind of double-vision. It is not simply that the italicized, stream-of-consciousness narrative might be taken as, in some straightforwardly mimetic way, the appropriate medium for a chronologically prior phase in Clara’s developmental narrative, while the non-italicized, retrospective portion serves as the mimetically appropriate idiom for the sophisticated adult Clara will become. This isn’t *Portrait of the Artist* transposed into the first-person, after all. To be sure, the effect of the two styles’ juxtaposition is a fuller psychological portrait of Clara, but the incongruity between each suggests that, together, we are getting something *other* than “the whole story,” as it were, of Clara’s development. We are getting, instead, a metafictional exploration of the kinds of problems different first-person idioms make available and, conversely, suppress or avoid.

The impasse between these two modes comes to a head when, quite unexpectedly, Caponegro abandons them for drama. This modal switch coincides with the story’s culminating generic shift, into unambiguously magical or mythic territory, as if the fabulist transformations of external reality require the abandonment of the *perspectival* ambiguities inherent to both Proustian retrospect and Joycean stream-of-consciousness. In an amplification of the metafictional self-reflexivity already inflecting her alternating narrative modes, the narrator explicitly announces the swerve into a different genre altogether:

And now we must alter our perspective. This mode of telling is no longer adequate, for the events which follow are of a different order from all which have been recorded until this point. Let us consider, for example, the information we have just received. It is a passage from a reference book, is it not? And yet we know Clara no longer has access to reference books.²⁵

The passage in question describes the myth of the Phoenix, such reference material

²³ Ibid., 73.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibid., 73, 73, 74.

having taken over the position earlier granted to biology text-books. But, as the narrator points out, we know that Clara has been prohibited from access to her books, so there is no way to fit this reference reading into any coherent diegetic frame. Caponegro exposes the artifice of fictional narrative at the very point at which the story abandons the constraints of realism. Later in her career—in *The Complexities of Intimacy*, for example—Caponegro will not need to exploit the resources of this kind of metafiction in order to shift into the magical, but her doing so in this important early story suggests, I think, that she is working through the disambiguation of two distinct types of narrative experiment, each of which might be thought of as abandoning realism. First, there are the *epistemological* distortions attendant on modernism's heightening of the subjective (Proustian or Joycean) first-person; second, there are the *ontological* distortions involved in myth, fabulism, or magic-realism.²⁶ Here, this pivot from first-person narration to drama happens via a narratorial “we” who is also “us,” that is, the audience. “We must alter our perspective,” “let us consider the information we have just received.”²⁷ Narrator and narratee are collapsed into one, here, as if the story's teller will join its hearer as part of a newly enlarged audience for what follows, a play beginning with the stage-direction “ENTER MOTHER.”²⁸

Mother's anxious monologue, addressed to Clara as she struggles out of sleep, directs transformation into socially approved channels: “Then before you know it you'll be all grown up with a husband and you'll want a baby [...] Nature will work in you to make a change.”²⁹ But a third-person narrator continually punctuates the dramatic lines and stage directions, pulling the drama back into the format of prose fiction, even as it reminds us that the first-person voices we'd grown accustomed to over the course of this story have been decisively abandoned. The following lovely passage might be taken as much for a commentary on Caponegro's sly metafictional technique as a gloss on Clara's magical transformation:

Our meager human memory and fantasies and hopes weave a web of nostalgia to which we are bound; locked into compulsion through anticipation or dread, through repetition [...] But bonds that once seemed more than real, substantial, even immortal, when we finally see *through* them, become tenuous indeed.³⁰

The bonds in question are, of course, those tethering Clara to her human form, the laws of nature (and of realism) that would prohibit her mythic transformation. But they are just as much the modal bonds of the first-person, with its Proustian “web of nostalgia,” here broken in favor of new forms.

First-person epistemological uncertainty, then, has been abandoned as if in order to make way for the ontological uncertainty powering the mythical transformations of

²⁶ For the classic discussion of modernism and postmodernism in terms of epistemology and ontology, see Brian McHale. For McHale, modernism is paradigmatically about the complication of epistemology, whereas “[i]n postmodern texts [...] epistemology is backgrounded, as the price for foregrounding ontology.” Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York-London: Methuen, 1987) 11. In fact, “postmodern” texts very frequently extend modernism's interest in epistemology, while also setting up ontological dilemmas (as in much American metafiction).

²⁷ Mary Caponegro, “Materia prima,” in *The Star Café*, 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

Materia Prima's last movement. The story's very title suggests this evolution, or reversion—from the sophisticated psychologisms of the retrospective reminiscence or the stream-of-consciousness (both techniques related to modernist ideas about the science of mind) to the magical metamorphosis as primal material of fiction itself.

As in "The Father's Blessing," magic transformations occur in proximity to maternity, though *Materia Prima* does not have them remain there. "Do you know, Clara," her mother asks, "I think you could make yourself into a little compact ball, right now, so I could hug you tight. We'd be all warm and close then, nothing between us anymore."³¹ We have here an early version of the mother/daughter womb-meld in "The Father's Blessing." But, unlike in the later story, maternity itself is here transcended in favor of some less definite, even more all-encompassing principle of change. What I want to emphasize in closing is that the transformative potential actualized by Clara's mythic transformation is expressed, towards *Materia Prima*'s conclusion, as a repudiation of the operations of cognitive retrospect itself—implicitly, that is, a repudiation of the first-person. Caponegro ingeniously rhymes her formal and her thematic concerns. I quote at length:

The present and the past, which seem to us vast landscapes, as tangible as earth, have actually no integrity until resolved as trinity, in future. When we think of these packages of memory and experience as discrete entities, we lead ourselves into error. Clara knows this now. The perceptions to which she clung as life rafts were in truth no more substantial than the metaphorical body of water they might float upon. Isolate, such units are illusory, untenable; and the more tenaciously we cling, the more they slip. To see instead the flow from past to present into what has yet to be is to be less deceived: to see there is continuum which cannot be, except artificially, arrested. Clara's mother cannot fully know this yet, but on this night she has drawn closer. She and Clara's father did not intend this lesson when they ostensibly denied their daughter validity of memory. But even inadvertent teaching must be given credit.³²

Clara, here, abandons "perceptions" precisely because they are epistemologically marred—"error" is inevitable. First-person retrospection is "untenable." She has learned the lesson of her parents' skepticism too well, such that psychology itself, and not just psychology but the human body in which it is embedded, must disappear (her anorexia carried to its logical conclusion), along with any version of the first-person that might support it. If *Materia Prima* has an argument, it is this: mythic transformation cannot be sustained in the first-person; metamorphosis is itself an allegory for the erasure of first-person subjectivity. The story enacts this claim, but Caponegro—as *The Complexities of Intimacy* would go on to show—will not herself adhere to it. Perhaps, as a writer so intensely drawn to the first-person, she sensed the risks of abandoning it too absolutely, the risk that pure change might also be nothingness. Here's how Clara's journey concludes:

Now there is no stopping the girl's creation, her perpetuation: secret to unceasing song. Her mother cannot quite see what or where her daughter is, and may never solve the mystery of what became of her. Perhaps she will, for some time, feel frustration, guilt or anger for what might be perceived as unavailability. Even annihilation.³³

³¹ Ibid., 86.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibid., 87.