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Unreliable Narration between Authors' Intentions and Readers' Cognitive Strategies

**** Draft version, please don't quote ****

I

When Ansgar Nünning up through the 90'ies published a series of articles where he repeatedly claimed the inadequacy of the existing theories on unreliable narration, he opened for an important aspect which hitherto had only received very little if any attention.¹ Nünning claimed that unreliable narrators should and could not to be understood

“as a structural nor as a semantic aspect of the textbase alone, but only by taking into account the conceptual frameworks that readers bring for the text”.²

According to Nünning, determining

“whether a narrator is unreliable is not just an innocent descriptive statement but a subjectively tinged value-judgment or projection governed by the normative presuppositions and moral convictions of the critic, which as a rule remain unacknowledged.”³

Seen from this point of view a paedophile would not find anything wrong with Nabokov's *Lolita*, just as

“a male chauvinist fetishist who gets his kicks out of making love to dummies is unlikely to detect any distance between his norms and those of the mad monologist in Ian McEwan's ‘Dead as They Come’”.⁴

Even though Nünning did not provide analytical evidence of this claim, he did suggest that in order to gain full understanding of what is at stake when determining a text's narrator as unreliable,

we have to introduce frame theory, pragmatics and the theory of ‘naturalization’ as formulated by e.g. Jonathan Culler and Tamar Yacobi.⁵ Thus Nünning adapted the critique he himself had levelled against the concept of ‘the implied author’ as a way for the reader to naturalize the text according to communicative strategies.⁶ According to Nünning the same applies to the unreliable narrator: When the reader is presented to textual inconsistencies (self contradictions, illogical circumstances) one solution is, according to Nünning to subordinate them the concept of ‘unreliable narrator’.

Nünning’s attempt was provocative and exaggerated, but did to a certain extent make an accurate point. The fact is that we can find several examples where the detection of a narrator’s unreliability, or at least the extent of it, seems to be governed by some historical delay. Goldschmidt’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* is an example as shown by Vera Nünning, and one can find parallel studies of other examples by Dorrit Cohn and Bruno Zerweck⁷. But the theoretical framework for the textual mechanisms and narratorial conventions serving as the basis for this flexibility in the narrator’s reliability still hasn’t been described adequately. Nünning’s own proposal is more a theory of semiotics or interpretation than a theory of unreliable narration, as his examples on frames and extra-textual circumstances by which the reader determines or postulates narrational unreliability are on a very general level: general world-knowledge, historical world-models or cultural codes, theories of personality and models of psychological coherence, knowledge of the social, moral or linguistic norms relevant for the period, general literary conventions, genre conventions intertextual frames, etc.⁸ – all in all frames and circumstances with relevance to all kinds of textual aspects and not to unreliable narration as such.

I have discussed Nünning’s proposal in detail elsewhere⁹ and will have to leave out my reservations here in favour of what should be praised – that is bringing focus on the fact that the reader’s constructive involvement does play an important role in the determination of a narrator’s unreliability. By this redirection away from the text towards the cognitive process of the reader Nünning has questioned nearly all former conceptualizations of unreliable narration insofar as these are constructed upon Booth’s initiating definition where a narrator was “reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not.”¹⁰ This attempt to theorize unreliable narration in relation to authorial communication has been stressed ever since Booth even in more semiotic oriented studies. Seymour Chatman, for example, first by reformulating a deanthropomorphized version of the implied author/reader on semiotic grounds as an ‘it’ (and not a s/he), that is a “principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative”¹¹, and later by pleading for a pragmatic and not

ontological understanding.¹² Even in more thorough attempts to base narrative theory on semiotics, the authorial component seems non-disposable.¹³

The fact that Nünning has to rephrase this approach is not strange at all considered in the light of his critique of the concept of the implied author, where he describes it as a misleading ‘critical passpartout’, an anthropomorphization of an abstract structural construct. He suggests that we approach the text with a more classical Structuralist model in mind: the text as relying on a structure not being present empirically, but only as a system of relations – an absent cause only identifiable on behalf of the consequences. As shown in many Structuralist studies, the analysis hereof has to consider the text as nothing else but text and therefore in general approach it on linguistic and semiotic grounds. And from this premise, to the conclusion that both the implied author and the unreliable narrator are readerly constructs, there is not far.

Recently, though, one of the most faithful advocates of the implied author, James Phelan, has criticized Nünning for the total neglect of the significance of authorial agency. Phelan claims that the interpretive move to read textual inconsistencies as a signal of unreliability doesn’t make any hermeneutic sense if it isn’t based on the assumption, that ‘someone’ designed the inconsistency as a signal of unreliability.¹⁴ Furthermore, he redefines this ‘someone’ by returning to Booth’s original definition and stressing the continuity (but not necessarily identity) between the empirical and the implied author. Compared to Chatman’s 1990-attempt to define the implied author on Structuralist grounds by pleading for a pragmatic (and not ontological) understanding of the implied author as being a bulwark against biographical and intentional fallacies, Phelan’s suggestion is rhetorical. Chatman maintains an understanding of the implied author as a structural principle identical with the text as such and an intention related to an inferred authorial subjectivity. However, an unclear mixture of textual structures and an anthropomorphic subjectivity persists. By admitting the implied author some connection to the empirical author, Phelan (re)establishes a closer link between these two instances than most text-centred literary theories have acknowledged. Instead of Chatman’s understanding of the implied author as a structural principle, Phelan sees it as an agent responsible of bringing the text into existence His redefinition can therefore be seen as a reconsideration of the aspects of intention, which both the New Criticism and Structuralism actively neglected. By this Phelan provides a subtle reopening of the discussion of the communicative and ethical perspectives of literature started by Booth, and develops an approach where we can (re)consider the understanding of literature as a construction created by an author as a way of communicating meanings and beliefs.

The problem we have to confront, however, is whether the question of authorial control (empirical or implied) is of any relevance when we are trying to understand the phenomena of unreliable narration and unreliable narrators. We might claim that it is only in an extra-textual or extra-diegetic respect that the authorial control is relevant; that is if we want to contextualize a work in (literary) history, in an authorship, etc. Unlike the narrator, the author isn't partaking in the diegesis, and when we are working on the detection of a narrator's unreliability, we approach the problem as a diegetic issue. We do not at first hand make considerations about what the author wants to tell us by using an unreliable narrator. To exemplify: if we ask what it is that reveals to us that the narrator of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) Humbert Humbert is unreliable, the answer is more likely that it is due to his misinterpretation of the Dolores Haze's signals as being sexual, rather than a deviation from the norms of the implied author referred to as Nabokov. As it is, Nabokov doesn't exist in Humbert's world, and when we discuss the world of Humbert, his motives and (mis)understandings, Nabokov has to be excluded. This might seem a rather superfluous point to make since the argument could be challenged by pointing at the fact that it is Nabokov who sanctions the normativity of the world Humbert misinterprets. But one should be aware of blending diegetic and extradiegetic concerns. Having recourse to the author as an answer to complexities in the diegesis is an analytical and interpretational 'deus ex machina' – i.e. an easy way of solving textual problems by interference from outside the text.

This problem becomes even more visible when we approach what we might label 'unstable unreliability' – i.e. texts where the detection of the narrator's unreliability primarily depends on the reader's active partaking in the construction of meaning. Here, it doesn't make much sense to include an authorial agent as a controller of the semiotic process. If we, with reference to Booth's study of irony¹⁵, bring in the distinction between stable and unstable irony as a way of classifying unreliable narration¹⁶, we can propose that one of the characteristics of 'classical' unreliable narration is that it is possible for the reader to infer a relatively consistent diegetic universe up against which the first-person narrator's unreliability is measured. The reader's reconstruction of this universe is guided by different means such as the narrator's misinterpretation of reported actions and sayings, other narrators' corresponding reports, or a close resemblance between the fictional and the factual world letting the reader judge the sayings and doings of the narrator in accordance with his or her own norms and values. This stable type of unreliable narration is contrasted by an unstable type being a prominent feature of much modernist and postmodernist fiction which often diminishes (if not eliminates) the possibility for the reader to

follow these reconstructive strategies, by giving us no correctional standpoint in the text (there is no privileged diegetic normativity), but leaving only a highly disturbed narration. Here, the reader often will seek shelter under psychological standard-categories of schizophrenia, psychosis, paranoia, etc., and thereby by external means naturalize the text.

The border between the stable and the unstable unreliability is not very clear though, and as mentioned elsewhere history of interpretation shows that texts which at one time has been considered straightforward reliable, in a new historical situation (changes in ideology and culture) turns out to be read as unreliable. The ‘mechanism’ triggering this radical change is to be found in the fact, that the normative system of the story world, once being in accordance with the consensual understanding of reality, now is being discredited. But since the reader’s ‘entry’ to this story world is by an intradiegetic narrator, who in the first place served the role as a trustworthy witness, s/he imposes the narrator the responsibility for the unacceptable norm of the work.

II

A special case of interest here is first person present tense narration or what Dorrit Cohn has labelled “simultaneous narration”.¹⁷ As Monika Fludernik points out the use of present tense has an interesting consequence for the reader’s “(re-)conceptualization of the natural storytelling frame, where a story has to have happened in the past in order to become tellable.”¹⁸ Simultaneous narration cannot be ascribed to our standard notion of a narrative since it does not establish the spatial and temporal distance to the incidents narrated we normally consider essential for a ‘natural’ narrational situation. Cohn quotes e. g. Rimmon-Kenan for claiming that “[c]ommon sense tells us that events may be narrated only after they happen”.¹⁹ This understanding, though, has problems if it is transferred to first person, presents tense narration (hereafter abbreviated FPPT) in the form it is seen in Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* (1957), Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1982), Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1990) and Dennis Cooper’s *My Loose Thread* (2002 – see excerpt below). One could claim that the widespread use of FPPT is to be understood with reference to audio-visual media narration insofar that it also establishes a recording ‘here-and-now’ mode. Up through the 20th century, as it will be known, the exploration of the possibility of adapting cinematographic narrational forms to written fiction has been common.²⁰ But as Fludernik and Cohn notes, one cannot generalize this understanding to all uses of present tense in relation to first person narrators, since also feelings and

thoughts very well might be part of the telling, which is also seen in the Cooper excerpt. Neither can FPPT be identified with what has been labelled 'historical present' since this concept, as Cohn rightly notes, designates an 'as if' form, where the narrating subject tries to recreate a situation from the past by describing it from the perspective of the incidents. In that sense historical present serves as a sort of covered preterite being disclosed by knowledge of future incidents or the like. In contrast to the historical present, FPPT not just simulates but *is* narrating from the incidents. Dorrit Cohn characterizes it as a "fictional present"²¹ with reference to Käte Hamburgers "fictional past", that is the epic preterite, where the deictic temporal adverbials are connected to the preterite and thereby establish fictive I-origos from which the deictic markers depart. Further more Cohn shows that fictional present not only differs from the historical present but also deviates from 'interior monologue', understood as "texts that present themselves as mental quotations from start to finish, as unmediated mimesis of consciousness".²² Even though the latter notion can cover parts of the narration in simultaneous narrated texts, it does not fit all aspects. As Cohn points out the inner happenings can very well be "mediated by a knowingly analytical voice"²³, and extended stretches of time become time and again compressed in summary sentences whereby the sense of an unrolling mental quotation is being undermined.

Cohn draws attention to three central and interdependent characteristics for simultaneous narration: firstly, the incongruity of the narrative situation insofar as it cannot be naturalized by the reader's attempt to postulate a verisimilar narrative situation (tape-recording, oral diary, etc.). Secondly, the semantic implications of the narrative tense, e. g. the fact that the narrator's imaginations and observations are being juxtaposed and presented in the same temporal grammar which facilitates a high degree of uncertainty regarding what is true and false, real and fantasy, inside the fiction. Thirdly, "the absolute focalization of its narrated experience" which rests on analogy between action, thought and narration. To Cohn's list we can add a fourth characteristic – namely that the FPPT promotes a complete elimination of any visible signs of an authorial or narrational agent beyond the first person narrator. One could go as far as claiming that the author is reduced to a paratextual function that sanctions the work's status as fiction, and leaves the whole act of narration to the character-narrator. The narration belongs solely to the character and is therefore characterized by what Phelan has described as narrator functions (that is communication on the axis between the narrator and the narratee) and not disclosure functions (communication on the axis between author and authorial audience). In cases like this it might perhaps make better sense to talk about an omitted rather than an implied author.

FPPT is in general most certainly promoting unreliability, especially because of what Cohn described above as the semantic implications of the narrative tense where the narrator's imaginations and observations are juxtaposed and presented in the same temporal grammar. Here the determination of what ground a narrator's unreliability stands on is more a matter of interpretation in the Nietzschean creative sense than in the hermeneutic unveiling sense. FPPT narration will most often be full of contradictions and misunderstandings, but the questions of *why* the narrator is as s/he is does not find a satisfactory answer, but leaves the reader speculating and pending between an infinite number of cultural and psychological frames.

III

The problem with subordinating the unreliable narrator an authorial control can also be approached by considering the status of the concept in relation to factual narratives. Even though Booth in his last essay on the implied author²⁴ made an attempt to convince us that we are operating with implied author-like constructions in daily communication one cannot but regret that he lacked to confront the unreliability problem in the same stroke since the problems of maintaining the implied author-unreliable narrator relation shows its problems most clearly here. It has on several occasions been claimed that unreliable narrators are a distinct feature of fictional narrative. By Cohn, in her discussion of 'discordant narration', by claiming "that the diagnosis of "discordance" can apply only to a fictional narrative, not to the kind of story-telling (oral or written) that presumes to refer to real facts; though we often apply the term "unreliable" to voices we regard as wrong-headed in non-fictional works (historical, journalistic, biographical, or autobiographical), the narrator of such works is the author, the author is the narrator, so that we cannot imply a significance that differs from the one they explicitly proclaim."²⁵ Fludernik argues that even though we can imagine a 'real' Jason Compson (as from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*), our response will be very different. We will "believe the same thing about a real-world Jason Compson that we do about the fictional persona – he is a nasty character – but the *peculiar effect of literary unreliability* will not arise in real life. In real life we do *not* have the feeling that an author (implied or real) is communing with us behind a real-life Jason's back, trying to teach us a lesson of detective ingenuity."²⁶

One cannot help but speculating whether this rejection of the transferability of the concept to factual narratives is determined by the fact that it has been defined with reference to the implied author. We should not neglect the fact that it is among the concepts with the clearest connection to our experiences with 'real' narrators. As noted by Greta Olson²⁷ concepts like

‘unreliable’, ‘untrustworthy’ and ‘fallible’ all come from our intercourse with human beings, not texts, and we are constantly surrounded by ‘real’ unreliable narrators. But to claim that their unreliability is based on a deviation from the morals, convictions, codes or conventions of an implied author makes just about as much sense as if we claim God responsible for our actions and doings. Our recognition of ‘real’ narrators’ unreliability is based on our decoding of their misunderstandings and our superior knowledge – and whether we are engaging with the narrator face to face or through written or audiovisual mediation in genres like news broadcasting, documentaries, etc. I have reflected upon this issue in more detail elsewhere²⁸, and will for now have to jump to conclusion and claim that even though there of course is a fundamental and important difference between fact and fiction, there is no difference in our detection of narrational unreliability, just as the effect is if not the same then at least comparable.²⁹

When we are becoming aware of a narrator’s potential unreliability a change in our focus appears. We no longer only concern ourselves with the story being told, but also with the teller’s stake in the story, and even though the examination of a narrator’s reliability shall base its evidence on the text, we have to acknowledge that contextual facts and circumstances do play a role. Booth actually touches upon this issue indirectly in his analysis of Henry James’ “The Liar” in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*³⁰, when he shows that the story’s “complex irony” best can “be seen by contrasting the two views of what takes place, Lyon’s and the reader’s”³¹, by making a careful listing of how the reader’s view of the events differs from the narrator’s. What Booth shows here, but only barely reflects upon, is that the reader’s determination of a narrator’s unreliability to a large extent is based on a comparison of the narrator-character’s behavioural patterns with his or her own understanding of behaviour, and the same thing goes to a far extend for historical facts and culturally determined beliefs. Expressed in more general terms we can say that when the fictional story world of the text is comparable to and obeying the same (or at least some of the same) rules as the reader’s factual world, the reader relies on this frame of reference as being presupposed by the text. In this respect it is evident that unreliable narration cannot be considered without inclusion of the reader’s cognitive capacities and that explanations leaning too heavily up against the implied author as the primary frame of reference will be more reductive than the phenomenon deserves.

IV

Nonetheless, when examining fictional narratives we will have to do some consideration regarding the author’s status and function. Also Ansgar Nünning seems to have come to a similar conclusion

when he in his latest essay on unreliable narration gives full credit to Phelan's redefinition of the implied author and at the same time explicitly rejects some of his former (and on several occasions repeated) conclusions. Nünning claims that his exclusive focus on the reader's response for the determination of a narrator's unreliability needs to be

“supplemented by the insight that the narrator's unintentional self-incrimination in turn presupposes an intentional act by some sort of higher-level authorial agency, though it may be open to debate whether we should attribute the constructive and intentional acts to ‘the implied author’ or ‘the real author.’”³²

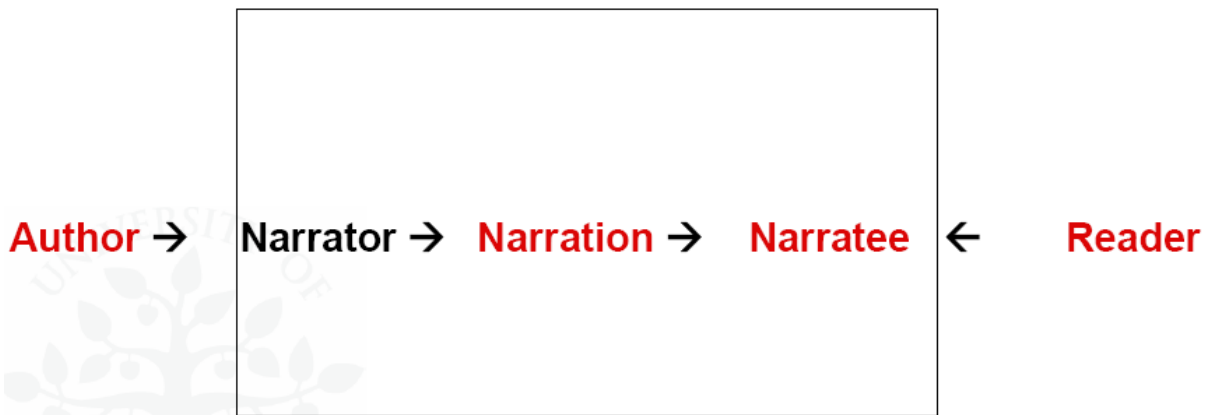
Phelan, for his part, has also tried to close the discussion by suggesting that “focus on these issues [the location of the unreliability] in our respective laboratories of narrative theory has prevented us from paying sufficient attention to the diversity of unreliable narration existing in the wild”.³³ Instead of maintaining the never ending discussion of what determines unreliability in the narration, Phelan wants us to start studying some unreliable narrators and develop the vocabulary by which we analyze and discuss them, and does so by suggesting a dichotomy between ‘estranging’ and ‘bonding’ unreliability, formulated within the rhetorical framework.

One cannot but approve these attempts to if not unite, then at least approach two very diverse theoretical stands on the same issue. Nevertheless, if the hope was that the result should be a ‘third way’, bringing together the best of the two theories, one will get disappointed. Nünning, for his part, promises to combine them for us, but what he offers at the end of the day in his analysis of Ian McEwan's “Dead as They Come” is a detailed listing of different textual indicators for the character-narrator being unreliable, and regularly mentioning of the implied author as being the one who have “furnished” the story with these textual signals or “equipped the narrator with idiosyncratic verbal habits”³⁴, etc. The intriguing and provocative questions he himself has made repeatedly on other occasions (and even earlier in the same essay), seem more or less forgotten. In Nünning's earlier mentioning of McEwan's short story, the suggestion has been that “a male chauvinist fetishist who gets his kicks out of making love to store mannequins is unlikely to detect any distance between his norms and those of the mad monologist in Ian McEwan's “Dead as They Come””.³⁵ But unfortunately he does not show us how and why. Actually, one could easily doubt whether it would be the case. This is not said to discredit Nünning's analysis in general. Quite contrary since his study is detailed and convincing in its uncovering of reading conventions,

linguistic markers of unreliability in the character-narrator's telling, etc., but it is obvious that his inclusion of the implied author is superfluous. The only function of the implied author in his interpretation is to be the source of the arrangement of the narrative, and his conception seems close to that of Flaubert, when he claimed that the author should be: "as God is in creation, invisible and all-powerful; one must sense him everywhere but never see him."³⁶ What might be in question though, is whether we in general are 'sensing' the author, when we are dealing with unreliable narrators, and if we do, what function this author has?

IV

To approach this aspect, we can turn our attention towards what we might call 'the reader-cognitive process' involved in unreliable narration; that is how and on what basis we respond on signals or impressions of the narrator being unreliable. To this we need a basic communicational model:



I will partly follow Phelan in his critique of the semiotic attempts to explain the implied *author* in terms of textual structures, but instead of the by Phelan suggested term 'the implied author', I take the full step by considering the continuity between implied and empirical author and label it 'the author'. Here, we are close to Genette, when he discusses the same issue in *Nouveau Discourse du récit*³⁷ and claims that there is only one author – and all we know about him we learn through the texts he has written. This author can, but will not necessarily, appear in the text as an observable communicative agent. In many cases – the epistolary novel, the first person confessional novel, in FPPT as discussed above, and in many focalized novels – the authorial presence is limited to paratextual functions, while in other cases, the author plays a more explicit role – by showing omniscience, being ironic or authoritarian in making comments on the story, etc. In these cases, the boundary between the author and the narrator (being impersonal) is blurred.

In the other end of the communicative axis, at the *reader-position*, the same claim of continuity we made on behalf of the author can be made between the implied reader and the empirical reader: The two subjects are not identical, but to be able to understand the text, the empirical reader has to lend him-/herself to the implied reader by disregarding personal issues, etc. In the same way, there is not always a clear cut between the reader and the narratee position. Often the narratee of the text is very explicitly the reader as in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" or Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1876). In other cases the narratee is the narrator him- or herself, and in yet other cases the narratee subject is less clear. In the former discussed FPPT narration it is very hard to positively determine a narratee because of the lack of appeal to any receiving instance and the mixing of recording, recalling and reflecting modes. And also here is the boundary between the narratee and the reader blurred, if not the narratee dissolves in favor of its corresponding subject outside the diegesis: the reader.

The detection of *the narration* as unreliable can be based on several issues – and several suggestions have been made to account for these. Kathleen Wall has brought attention to what she named 'verbal tics', that is small interjections and comments which hint an uncertainty in the narrators relating of the events³⁸. Gaby Allrath has done systematic studies of the textual signals evoking narrational unreliability, counting explicit claims of own reliability, subjective efforts of partiality, absurdities or violations of the logic and the premises the story world rests on, changes in the use of pronouns, marked attention towards own reactions, etc.³⁹. Another way of getting around this is through pragmatics and Grice's conversational maxims as done by Theresa Heyd⁴⁰, since the reader's determination of the narration as unreliable to a large extend depends on the narrator's exaggerated violation hereof.

To account for the diversity in the ways in which narrational unreliability is established I have myself suggested a four-folded taxonomy taking into consideration both textual, intertextual and extratextual issues:⁴¹

Intranarrational unreliability designates the 'classical' definition—that is unreliability established and supported by a large stock of discursive markers. These can 'verbal tics' or unresolved self-contradictions, etc. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (see excerpt below) could be considered an example while the narrator continuously defends his sanity but does it with reference to situations and behavioral patterns that most definitely expose insanity.

Internarrational unreliability designates the situation in which a narrator's version of incidents is contrasted by another or several other narrators' versions. The other narrator can, in this

respect, be identical with the first if, for example, a span of time or gained knowledge occurs between the two positions. Likewise, different forms of embedment are possible. In opposition to the intranarrational version, internarrational unreliability is not necessarily marked discursively in the unreliable narrator's discourse, but comes into being by the framing of other voices and a non-correspondence with what is taking form as the factual story on their behalf—either because they are of greater authority, or because they serve as independent but agreeing witnesses. This is the case with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), especially where the third part's unreliability (Jason Compson's) is unveiled by its contrasts with Dilsey's omniscient part.

Intra- and the internarrational unreliability are alike insofar as they both rest on textually observable issues manifested as conflict. They are therefore both to be considered as intratextual relations - but differing since it seems reasonable to isolate the narrator's/focalizer's discourse as one textual level, which in itself can contain internal contradictions (intranarrational unreliability) or be contradicted by other narrator's/focalizer's discourses in the same text (internarrational unreliability).

When it comes to the two remaining categories, they then differ from the intratextual variants since they depend on extra- or contextual issues.

Intertextual unreliability is, in this respect, based on manifest character types which by the mere mentioning direct the reader's attention towards their reliability. We see this in the well-known epigram in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) or the title of *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull* (1954). In this aspect, Booth's idea of the deviating moral of the character-narrator can play a role since there is a large stock of types that recur in different texts from different times – see Riggan's *Picaros, Madmen, Naiifs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First Person Narrator*⁴² which points out and follows some of the essential types.

Finally, the *extratextual* variant designates unreliability depending on the reader's direct implementation of own values or knowledge in the textual world. This category is the most ambiguous—and it seems obvious to consider its difference to the other groups as paralleling Booth's distinction between stable and unstable irony. Under the title "Discordant narration", Cohn has suggested a distinction between unreliable and discordant narrators depending on whether the misinformation the narrator is relating is based on factual flaws or differences in ideology between the narrator and the author. It is not the place here to enter into a discussion on Cohn's suggestive points and conclusions, but her observations on how there tends to be historical shifts in the evaluation of narrators with discordant aspects can serve as evidence. What Cohn shows is that

narrators that are at first considered reliable are often later ‘disclosed’ in the history of interpretation as unreliable or—in Cohn’s suggested terminology—discordant. Among her examples is a long discussion of Marlow from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and his relationship to the colonialism he—perhaps, perhaps not—is supporting.

Considered in the light of Booth’s irony-classification, we are here dealing with Unstable-Infinite irony, meaning that the irony is ambiguous and a general feature for the whole text. And this is the perhaps most commonly acknowledged form of the extratextual unreliability. On the other hand, we do also find it serving as a totally stable feature and on a much more local basis. When the fictional story world of the text is comparable to and obeying the same (or at least some of the same) rules as the factual world, the reader relies on this frame of reference as being presupposed by the text. An illustrative example is found in Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991). The novel, told by the highly unreliable Patrick Bateman, contains a series of ‘pop essays’ on Whitney Houston, Talking Heads and Huey Lewis among others. The reader familiar with the contemporary pop scene would reckon that Bateman is pretty much on the wrong track in his interpretations of these artists’ works. He does for example state that Huey Lewis’ ‘Hip to be square’ is a ‘rollicking ode to conformity’⁴³, but totally misses the irony in Lewis’ text. Obviously, only the reader who is in possession of knowledge about this issue will catch this marker of unreliability and only if he also tears down the thin curtain drawn between the fictional reality and the factual and considers *American Psycho*’s Huey Lewis as identical with the real Huey Lewis. In this sense, there is no fundamental difference between how we determine a narrator’s unreliability whether we are working with fictitious or factual narratives. In both cases, our detection is caused by the reader’s recognition of inconsistencies and contradiegetic elements within the narrator’s discourse or between the narrator’s telling and the story-world about which he tells and which, in large part, might only be present by implication.

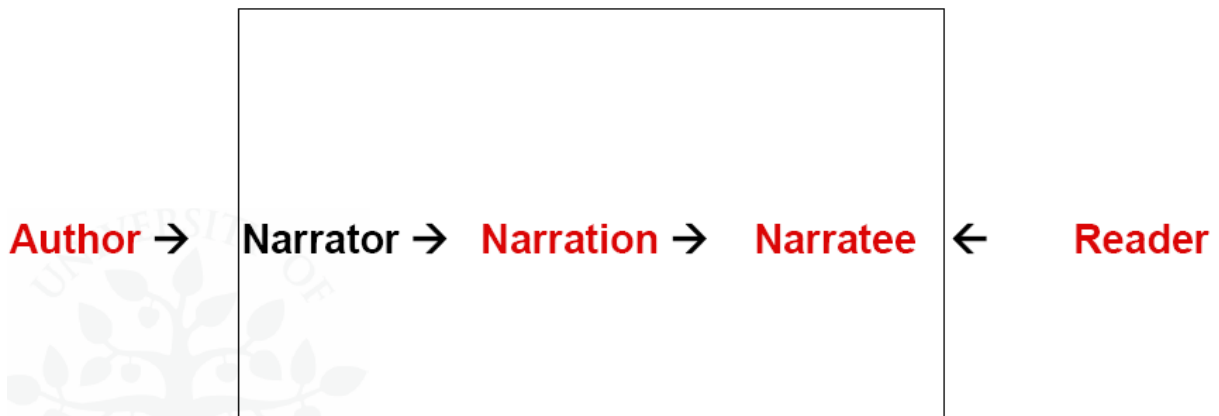
This function can take different forms—from the simple interpretation of a character’s behavioral pattern on the basis of which we interpret non-fictionalized human beings, to the narrator’s misinterpretation of common historical facts. And in this case the marker of unreliability is essential, overt, and stable—even though it is contextually determined.

The four basic forms of narrational unreliability I have sketched here will, of course, often function together in a text so that the unreliability both is marked *in* the narrator’s discourse, *by other* narrators relating, *by virtue of the type* of the character-narrator, and in relation to the knowledge *the reader* brings to the text. It is thus possible to determine four different strategies for

the same effect—but they should, exactly because of their divergence, be treated as distinct features.

As already mentioned the distinction between stable and unstable irony can function very well as a general framework for the function of the narration:

Stable Irony



Unstable Irony

We can from this point specify the function of the narratee in unreliable narration more precisely and first use an example with an explicitly marked narratee, namely Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843):

“TRUE! --nervous --very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses --not destroyed --not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily --how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

...

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?

5

...

10 No doubt I now grew very pale; --but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened
voice. Yet the sound increased --and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound -
--much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath --
and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly --more vehemently; but the
15 noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with
violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I
paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations
of the men --but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed --I
raved --I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon
20 the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder --
louder --louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they
heard not? Almighty God! --no, no! They heard! --they suspected! --they knew! --they
were making a mockery of my horror!-this I thought, and this I think. But anything
was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could
25 bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now --
again! --hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

 “Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed! --tear up the planks!
here, here! --It is the beating of his hideous heart!””⁴⁴

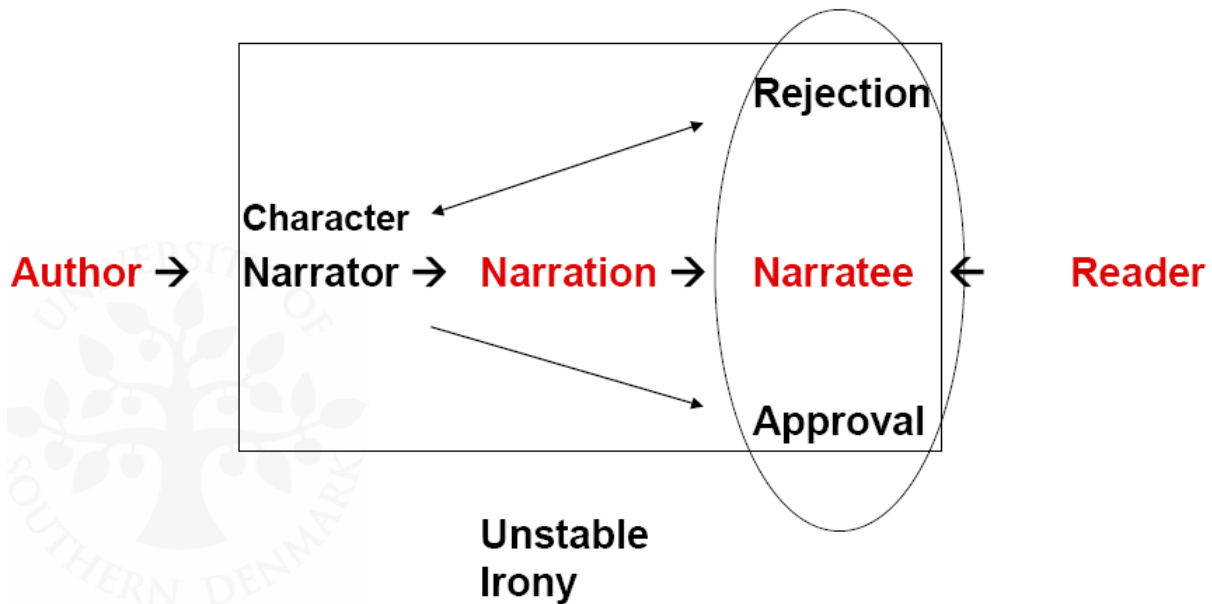
The narrator of the Tell-Tale Heart fails to tell his story calmly even though he claims that he can without any problem. The communicative situation is very explicit in the first 14 lines of the quotation, where the narratee is addressed directly, but the more engaged the narrator becomes with the story he is telling, the more out of sight the narratee seems. The skeptical narratee he started out addressing is no longer present to him; nor is the attempt to prevent the label of madness. Instead he tells to no one directly, except perhaps himself as signaled in the “-this I thought, and this I think” in line 22.

This split function of the narratee is crucial: In the beginning of the story the narration is directed towards a potentially rejecting receiver; in the final half it has no direction – the narratee’s understanding is taken for granted. This distance can be located in the first sentence as the distance between the opening’s acknowledgement of being nervous – “TRUE! --nervous --very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am” - and the question “but why will you say that I am

mad?”, a distance between a knowing and intimate narratee on the one hand and a skeptical, rejecting narratee on the other. In that sense the relation between the narrator and the narratee takes the form of a process: The narrator appeals to the understanding of the narratee but is at the same time aware of the narratee being skeptical, and it is exactly this expected skepticism that causes the dynamic of the narration and further builds up the character of a madman.

We can generalize this doubleness of the narratee by calling it the narratee’s double function of ‘approval’ and ‘rejection’, and suggest that our understanding of the narration as unreliable partly is caused by the narrator’s attempt to resist the rejective side of the narratee since this is the source of self corrections, self interruptions, verbal tics, etc.

Stable Irony

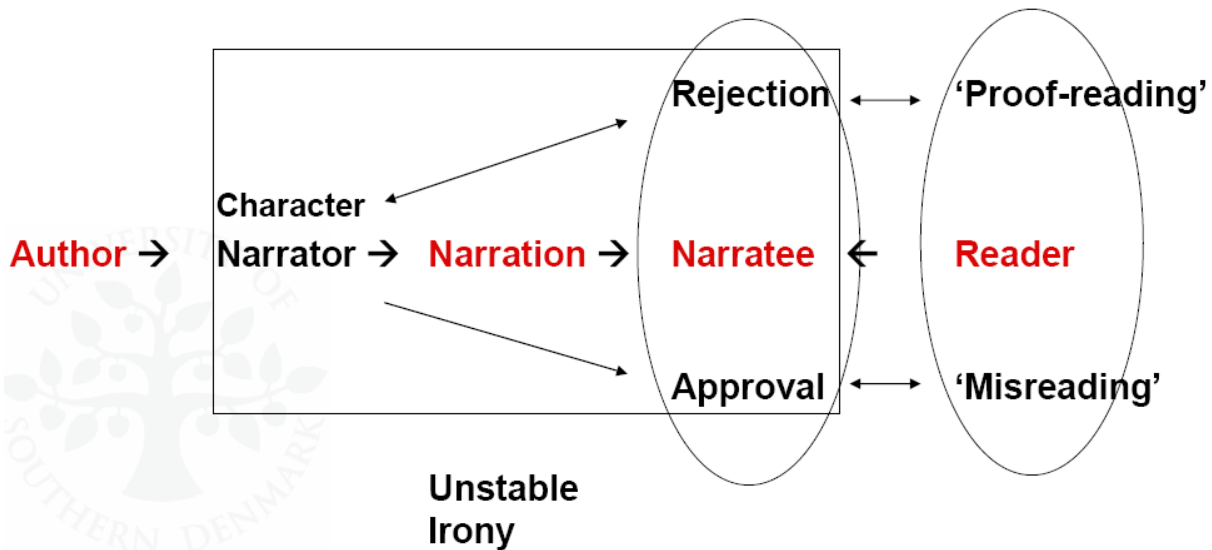


In that sense this direct communicational act also comes to serve as a framework by which the reader understands the incidents narrated as questionable. When the narrator in the final part of the story hears things that the other present characters doesn’t hear, we do not have any faith in his claim of acuteness of senses – especially not since he fails to keep himself distant to the incidents being told. The narration expresses sensational involvement in the incidents but loses at the same time the narratee of sight, locking the narrator in his obsessive madness as expressed in the “-this I thought, and this I think”.

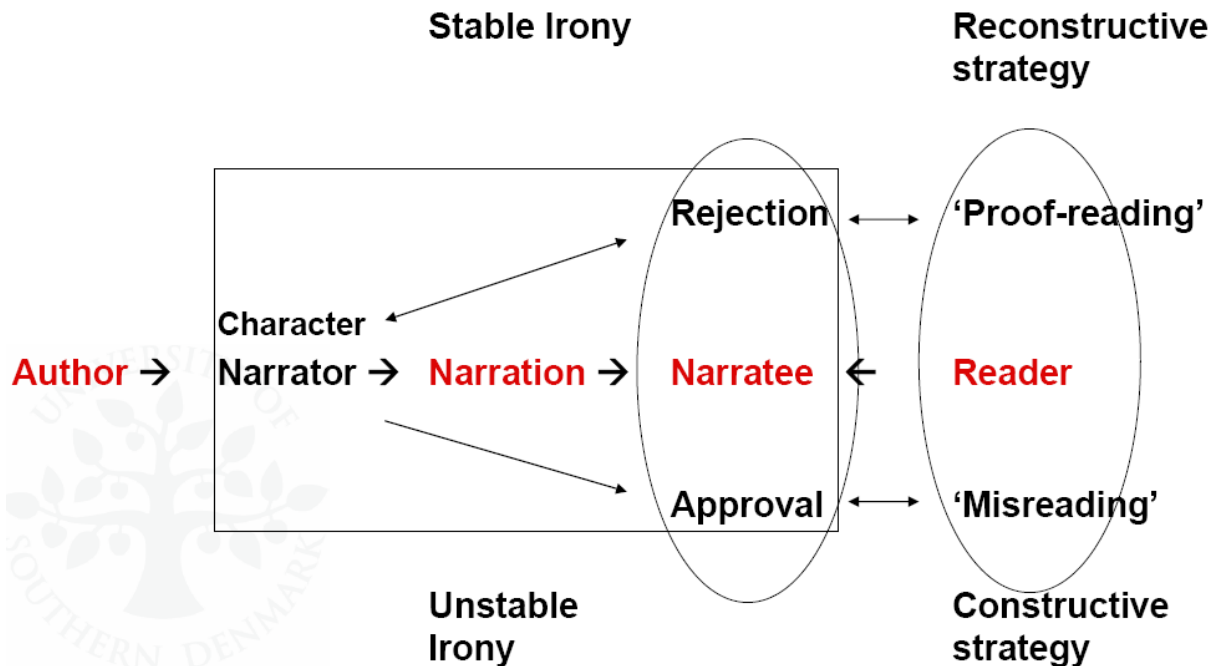
The double function of the narratee is in that respect repeated at the reader-position of the scheme. Reading unreliable narrated stories sets the reader in a double role of at the one hand

lending him- or herself to a literal reading of the narrated, and on the other hand a correcting reading disclosing what ‘really’ happened. We can therefore, slightly metaphorically, call the former a ‘misreading function’ and the latter the ‘proof-reading function’.

Stable Irony



The emphasis of these functions will of course vary from text to text – and from reading to reading, which is a complexity we will leave out for now. “The Tell Tale Heart” is quite unproblematic: the reader’s proof-reading function is privileged due to the explicitness of the narrator’s unreliability and the narratee’s rejective function. The misreading is therefore only hypothetical, and considered with regard to our irony classification Poe’s text is to be categorized as stable. Therefore the reading strategy followed by the reader can be labeled as reconstructive insofar as s/he has no problems recounting for the diegesis’ ‘real’ order and to what extent the narrator is misrepresenting it through his telling. In that sense the more marked the narratee’s rejection of the narrated is, the more emphatic is the proof-reading function of the reader. On the other hand, in cases where the narrator doesn’t counter the narratee’s potential rejection, the reader’s misreading function is emphasized. The reader will not in the same way be given directions to reconstruct the diegesis beyond the narrator’s telling, but will instead have to take recourse to a constructive strategy to dissolve internal contradictions and inconsistencies in the narration by referring to text-external frames of reference such as psychology, socio-cultural frames, consensual understandings of behavior, historical knowledge, generic considerations, etc.



“The Tell-Tale Heart” can serve as an example here again, if we expand our scope of our interpretation of the narrator’s unreliability from the reconstruction of the misrepresented part of the fabula to the not included parts and ask the obvious question of why the narrator acts as he does – is he a case of schizophrenia and paranoia? Is there an oedipal conflict present in his killing of the old man? These questions cannot be satisfactorily answered on behalf of the text alone, and we could go as far as claiming that it is one of its great aesthetic values that it doesn’t give unambiguous answers. Therefore the reader will seek out in a larger frame of reference to find help to naturalize the textual inconsistencies.

This act of constructive interpretation is perhaps most visible in unreliable FPPT narration as discussed earlier. With reference to Cohn’s study, I brought attention to the semantic implications of this narrative tense where the narrator’s imaginations and observations are being juxtaposed and presented in the same temporal grammar, and whereby it is very uncertain what is true and false, real and fantasy. In these cases the narration takes on a very unstable ironical mode, leaving the reader in a position beyond the determination of true and false, since all that can be said for truth is that the narrator’s relating of the events is false. In cases like these the narratee is, as mentioned, indeterminable – the narrator tells to no one specific and the rejective and the approving function becomes closer connected to the narrator himself. We can observe this in the following excerpt from Dennis Cooper’s *My Loose Thread*:

“I’m at breakfast. It’s always something easy to make like a cold cereal. Dad watches taped golf from the weekend, and my mom reads the paper. Something in her is going off about me. I can see it’s not the world. Jim’s food is already a ruin, which is the only thing wrong.

5 ‘Jim rode his bike,’ she says. Not hello, or anything. That’s news, since I always drive him to school.

 ‘Yeah?’

She turns a page fast, and it rips. But I’m tired enough from one or maybe two hour’s sleep, that her shit doesn’t reach me.

10 ‘Say it, mom.’

 ‘Your dad had a cramp, and I was up, and I saw you,’ she says.

 ‘Meaning what?’ I’m pretty sure I was naked, and holding my clothes and my shoes in a wad.

 ‘I called Dr. Thorne,’ she says.

15 ‘What did Jim say?’

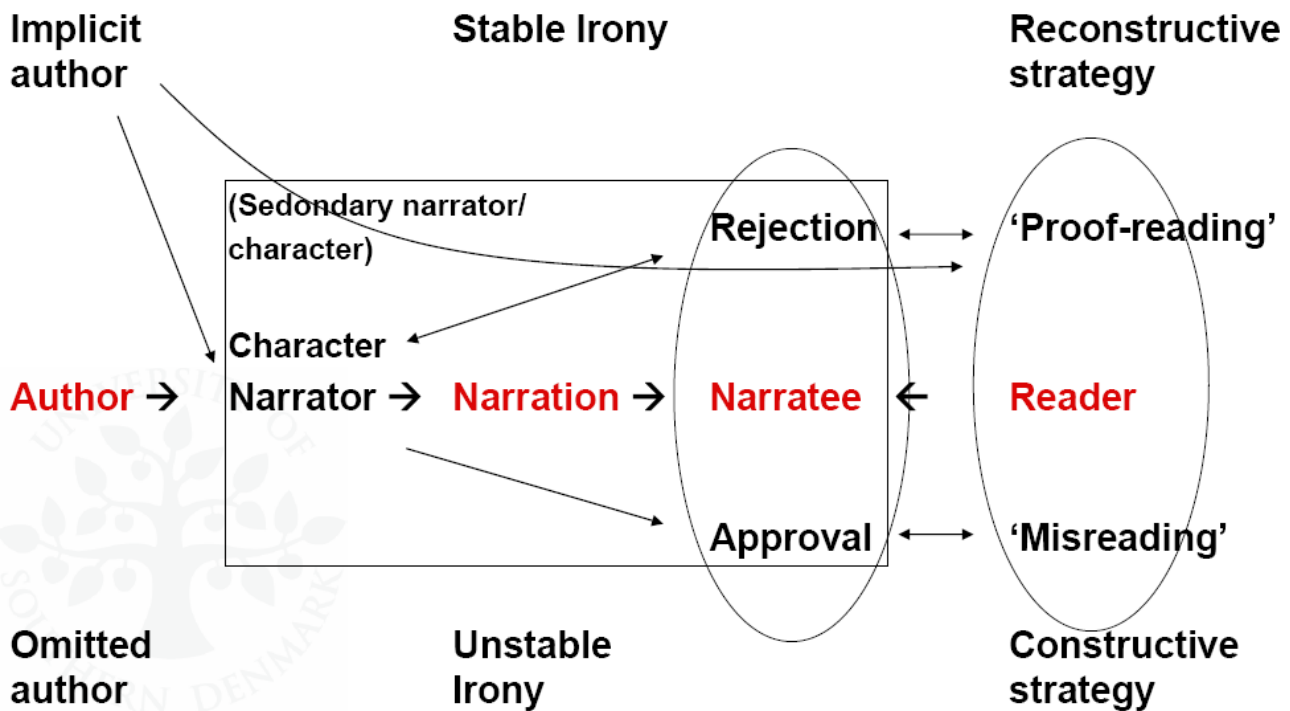
 ‘He protected you,’ she says.

 ‘From what?’ I throw my cereal bowl at the wall.”

...

20 I think Rand is still on the floor of my bedroom. I mean in some way. I know he didn’t die there. He got up after a couple of minutes, and left. But I think he’d come there if he could go anywhere. That’s the Franks’ big idea, or their excuse. The dead don’t want to be dead, and they only give a shit about life. When I got back to my bedroom last night, I thought a lot about Rand, then decided. I killed the boy because I can’t kill myself. That’s why I hit him so hard. I realize he isn’t Jim. When I get that upset, it
25 doesn’t take much to remind me.”⁴⁵

Observe how the teller describes his own throwing of the cereal bowl in line 17 without any emotion expressed in the telling – a distance we might consider a mark of another narratorial agent ‘beyond’ the I of the character-narrator, but which should rather be understood as a character trait of the disturbed young man telling and acting. This recording, laconic, mode of telling is changed in line 19 into a reflecting and doubting mode expressed through all the precautions – I think, I guess, I mean, maybe, I can’t tell, etc. – prompting the reader’s proofreading function, but leaving him or her with an explicit awareness of misreading because of the indeterminacy of the story world’s ‘real’ order. Here a naturalization will have to involve a constructive strategy. This is also part of the reason why it doesn’t make much sense to claim an authorial agent controlling the discourse in a case like this. Since the text doesn’t establish any privileged normativity or unambiguous reconstructable story world, the determination of an (implied) author, understood as a “core of norms and choices” (Booth) or someone “responsible for the choices that creates the narrative text [...] and that imbues the text with his or her values” seems rather mistaken.⁴⁶ The author’s presence is, so to say, taking the form of absence. We can therefore call ‘him’ the omitted author – a bare frame sanctioning the narrative as fiction and promoting a more *scriptible* than *lisible* text, to use the terminology of Roland Barthes, and thereby also hinting that in the far corner of this direction we find the works of Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet among others. In contrast, unreliable narration moving in the direction of stable irony might promote a sense of authorial control using the unreliable narrator as a means of stating a point through indirection, but still maintaining a stabilized and consistent story world which the narrator misinterprets – perhaps by including secondary narrators in what we earlier described as internarrational unreliability (as in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*) or by making caricature of the character-narrator.



This is partly the case in the Poe example, but not as manifestly as in e.g. *Huckleberry Finn*, where – as Booth rightly noticed – “the narrator claims to be naturally wicked while the author silently praises his virtues behind his back.”⁴⁷ But it shall be emphasized that in both the case of the omitted and the implicit author, the authorial agent does not play a secondary (if any) role in the reader’s detection of the narrator’s unreliability. This negotiation takes place between the narrator, the narratee and the reader.

V

The purpose of this study has been twofold:

First of all I have wished to question the basic conception of unreliable narration as being understood in relation to the implied author. My claim has been that this understanding is misleading and that the claimed limitation of the unreliable narrator to fiction is caused exactly by this misunderstanding. When e.g. born-again rhetorician Ansgar Nünning proposes that “the use of the unreliable narrator in genres other than narrative fiction – for instance dramatic genres like the memory play or in the dramatic monologue – as well as in other media and domains (incl. law and politics) deserves more attention than it hitherto has been given”⁴⁸, it seems hard to combine this future task with his consent to the idea that “the narrator’s unintentional self-incrimination [...] presupposes an

intentional act by some sort of higher-level authorial agency”. How are we to locate a higher-level authorial agency in the narratives of law and politics? And instead of trying to locate/construct implied authors in this kind of texts, shouldn't we rather be questioning our conception?

The second aim has been to raise a discussion of the concept of the implied author. The rhetorical study of literature as it has been developed of the successors of Booth has given us indispensable tools for studying fiction and ethics, but the immense dependence on the implied author as the key concept for the theory causes more complications than it solves. To the rhetoricians the implied author is the cause for all dispositions in the narrative, whether they are of structural, semantical or ethical concern, and they do not hesitate to formulate these dispositions as intentions, that is: the implied author's conscious choices. There is something paradoxical about attributing all meaning establishing features of the text to one, consciously controlling subjectivity in an age where semiotics, reader-response criticism and cognitive sciences have done considerable efforts to show, that the reader has a major effect on what textual constructs means. Further more, the high focus on authorial intention shades the fact that entering a certain language game or a certain discourse – in this case the discourse of narrative – predetermines the possible meanings and developments of the told and functions 'beyond' the control of the speaker/author, so to say.⁴⁹ We can still choose to describe such aspects in terms of intention, but will have to understand it in a more abstract manner as a matter of 'directedness' inherent in language and discourse. Authorial intention is in this sense only one intention between others and in many cases perhaps not the most significant one.

My critique of the rhetoricians conception of the implied author are therefore not to be understood as yet an barthesian attempt to kill the author⁵⁰, but a plea for us to consider the almightiness 'he' seems to have gained in recent literary theory. There are pragmatic reasons to postulate a strong, homogenizing authorial subjectivity behind the text: It functions as a unifying concept that brings together disparate aspects of textuality; it is normative authority sanctioning the norms and values of the story world (in 'real life' aka. 'God'); it is an excellent tool for organizing and understanding History's Grand Archive of literary texts; and in the implied-version (being separated from the flesh-and-blood author) it is a mechanism in our continuous development of democracy, protecting what Derrida once labeled 'this strange institution called literature' – that is an institution for the freedom of speech.⁵¹ But all these aspects of the authorial agent are of extratextual interest and not really a concern we are engaging in the reading process or in the interpretative act. Here the author is,

at best, a communicative agent – if not absent, since just as well as it is common sense that written fiction need an author, it is also common sense that the author often explicitly withdraws from the work when it comes to determination of what it means.

Nonetheless there is one major reason for us to maintain the idea of the author as the authority determining what a text means. If not for anything else, the believe in authorial control of the text is a strong working hypothesis. In an interview with Stefano Rosso Paul de Man was asked about the difference between his own way of reading and that of Jacques Derrida and he answered the following:

“I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger, I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them. I assume, as a working hypothesis (as a working hypothesis, because I know better than that), that the text *knows* in an absolute way what it’s doing. I know this is not the case, but it is a necessary working hypothesis that Rousseau knows at any time what he is doing and as such there is no need to deconstruct Rousseau. In a complicated way, I would hold to that statement that “the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive” rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from the outside of the text. The difference is that Derrida’s text is so brilliant, so incisive, so strong that whatever happens in Derrida, it happens between him and his own text. He doesn’t need Rousseau, he doesn’t need anybody else; I do need them very badly because I never had an idea of my own, it was always through a text, through the critical examination of a text ... I am a philologist and not a philosopher ...”⁵²

To all those of us who consider ourselves more philologists than philosophers, the author is an important concept in creating understanding of a text. If we can agree on this, the main difference between the here presented conception and that of the rhetoricians is perhaps not as big as we thought and will be best explained as a difference of perspective. To rhetoricians literature is considered an act of creation, while the conception here presented is based on semiotics and more oriented towards the act of reception. Valuable concepts like e.g. Phelan’s distinction of ‘disclosure functions’ and ‘narrator functions’ suits both conceptions, even though they might be followed by a long and tiresome

metaanalytical discussion of whether they are describing “functions available to the implied author”⁵³ or textual marks causing the reader to construct an idea of an authorial presence behind the text.

But if we can agree that the believe in the author’s all-embracing control of the text and its meaning is only a working hypothesis, we are also obliged to work out ways of describing what actually is happening in the process of reading and making meaning. And the author’s authority might very well have to be more delimited here.

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Notes

¹ See Nünning 1997a, Nünning 1998b, Nünning 1998a, Nünning 1999.

² Nünning 1999: 60.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.: 61.

⁵ See Culler 1975, Yacobi 1981 and Yacobi 2000.

⁶ Nünning 1997b.

⁷ Nünning 1998, Cohn 2000, Zerweck 2001.

⁸ Nünning 1999: 67f.

⁹ Hansen 2003, Hansen 2007a.

¹⁰ Booth 1991 [1961/83]: 158f.

¹¹ Chatman 1978: 148.

¹² Chatman 1990.

¹³ See e.g. Rimmon-Kenan's account in Rimmon-Kenan 1983.

¹⁴ Phelan 2005: 48.

¹⁵ Booth 1974.

¹⁶ Also suggested in Olson 2003.

¹⁷ Cohn 1999: 96-108.. I have studied FPPT more thoroughly in Hansen 2006 and Hansen Forthcoming.

¹⁸ Fludernik 1996: 223.

¹⁹ Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 89. Quoted in Cohn 1999: 96.

²⁰ See e. g. Robbe-Grillet's considerations in Robbe-Grillet 1966..

²¹ Cohn 1999: 106.

²² Ibid.: 103.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Booth 2005.

²⁵ Cohn 2000: 307.

²⁶ Fludernik 2001: 97.

²⁷ Olson 2003.

²⁸ Hansen 2005, Hansen 2007b.

²⁹ Presenting this idea at a seminar at Örebro University, Pekka Tammi (Helsinki) objected by claiming that the effect on us, the readers, is very different whether it is a factual or a fictive narrative we are encountering. In the latter case our response on an unreliable narrator will be of aesthetic pleasure, while it in the former will be of annoyance and scepticism. I totally agree with Professor Tammi, but will add that the aesthetic pleasure we are feeling in the case of the fictive text is including the annoyance and scepticism – on an aesthetic basis, so to say.

³⁰ Booth 1991 [1961/83]: 347-54.

³¹ Ibid.: 347.

³² Nünning 2005: 100.

³³ Phelan 2007: 225.

³⁴ Nünning 2005: 103.

³⁵ Ibid.: 97.

³⁶ Gustave Flaubert, letter to Marie-Sophie Leroyer de Chantepie, 18 March 1857.

³⁷ Genette 1983.

³⁸ Wall 1994.

³⁹ Allrath 1998 – see also Busch 1998..

⁴⁰ Heyd 2006.

⁴¹ Hansen 2003, Hansen 2005, Hansen 2007a. In a recent article Dan Shen and Dejin Xu is suggesting a comparable approach with identical terms (but partly different conceptions). See Shen and Xu 2007.

⁴² Riggan 1981.

⁴³ Ellis 1991: 357.

⁴⁴ Poe 1985.

⁴⁵ Cooper 2002: 23.

⁴⁶ Phelan 2005: 216.

⁴⁷ Booth 1991 [1961/83]: 159.

⁴⁸ Nünning 2005: 105.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Cullers analysis of the double logic of narrative in Culler 1981 is to me still one of the best demonstrations of this.

⁵⁰ Barthes 1988.

⁵¹ Derrida and Attridge 1992.

⁵² Rosso and Man 1986: 791.

⁵³ Phelan 2005: 214.