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Who Is the Narrator?

Richard Walsh

University of York

Who *is* the narrator? Today most literary critics are happy to regard the narrator as an inherent feature of narrative, although the coherence of any distinct concept of such a narrating agent remains debatable, to say the least.¹ In calling the narrator into question, I want also to question the broad assumptions that have sustained the concept in critical practice; I do not think of it as a purely narratological matter, but one that has large consequences for our understanding of fiction. Indeed, the narrator's promotion from representational accident to structural essence has occurred specifically in response to the qualities of fiction, not narrative per se; and the concept has only been put to the most cursory use outside the fictional context. This is because the narrator, thus understood, functions primarily to establish a representational frame within which the narrative discourse may be read as report rather than invention.² In other words, it defines the extent to which we can set aside our knowledge that the narrative in hand is indeed fictional. By conceiving of a fictional narrative as issuing from a fictional narrator, the reader has cancelled out its fictionality, negotiated a mode of complicity with representation, and found a rationale for suspension of disbelief. I want to suggest, though, that certain dubious critical tendencies are perpetuated by this model of fiction. Firstly, critical interpretation tends, in point of detail, to be confined within the narrative's representational frame, rather than attending to its rhetorical import—with the common result that criticism indulges too far in collaboration with the fiction's own rhetoric of representation. Secondly, the representational frame induces a kind of critical double vision that separates this intrafictional perspective from a larger sense

of the fiction as a literary work (characterized by its style, technique, themes, symbolism, etc.); and the effect of this dichotomy is that such literary considerations become the belated response to a naive primary reading experience. I would want to argue that as the basis for reading fiction, a willing suspension of disbelief will not do: disbelief is essential to reading a work of fiction *as fictional*, and only by doing so can we apprehend the effects it achieves by means of fiction's own particular literary resources, including the involvement to which the phrase "suspension of disbelief" testifies. One of the consequences of rejecting the concept of the narrator is that the representational frame, as an impassable barrier between the creative and (putatively) informative aspects of fiction, is breached. It is with this in mind that I am going to question the idea that the narrator, as a distinct and inherent agent of fictional narrative, is a logical, or even plausible, construct.

I'd like to approach the problem schematically, in the first instance, by invoking two of Gérard Genette's distinctions: between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators (a matter of person: that is, in place of the common distinction between first- and third-person narrators, a more exact contrast between involvement and non-involvement in the story); and between intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrators (a matter of level: that is, the distinction between a narrator who narrates within a larger, framing narrative, and one whose narration itself constitutes the primary narrative). Between them, these distinctions produce four classes of narrators (Genette 1980: 248): my intention is to show that none of them require a distinct narrative agent. The two intradiegetic classes are relatively straightforward: these narrators are simply characters, within a narrative, who relate a story in which (respectively) they are and are not themselves involved. Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, sitting aboard the "Nellie" on the sea reach of the Thames and narrating his journey to the farthest point of navigation, is intradiegetic and homodiegetic; In *Sarrasine* Mme de Rochefide's

unnamed admirer, who tells her the sculptor's story on the evening after the Lanty ball, is intradiegetic and heterodiegetic. The extradiegetic categories are more difficult. Genette maintains that extradiegetic narrators, being outside any diegesis, cannot be characters—"for that would be meaningless" (Genette 1988: 85); yet an extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator like Huck Finn is, of course, identified with a character in the story. So the extradiegetic homodiegetic case seems to establish a clear distinction, even within the fictional frame, between characters and narrators. But obviously many such narrators—Huck Finn, Tristram Shandy, Humbert Humbert, Molloy—are at least as strongly characterized in the telling of their tales as they are in the role of protagonist. How then are they different from their intradiegetic counterparts? Genette has himself acknowledged that the distinction between extradiegetic and intradiegetic is relatively unimportant, given that "all that is needed to convert an extradiegetic narration into an embedded narration is a sentence of presentation" (1988: 95). He illustrates the point with a playful revision of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, a favoured extradiegetic homodiegetic narration. I shan't quote in full, as the crux is simply this: "Marcel cleared his throat and began: 'For a long time I used to go to bed early,' etc." (1988: 95). Very well, but consider the vastly different effect of this: "The ironic spinster cleared her throat and observed, 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune,' etc." This second case is the transformation of an extradiegetic *heterodiegetic* narration, and involves something that the first did not—namely the creation of a character (we might want to call her Jane). I shall return to the case of extradiegetic heterodiegetic narration in a moment, but first I want to pursue the implications of this difference for Genette's homodiegetic example. My point is that, in such a case, the only necessary effect of the transformation from extra- to intradiegetic is a specification of the narrating instance. This cannot amount to a

change in level, as for Genette a narrating instance is implied by every narrative: “the main point of *Narrative Discourse*, beginning with its title, reflects the assumption that there is an enunciating instance—the narrating—with its narrator and its narratee, fictive or not, represented or not, silent or chatty, but always present in what is indeed for me, I fear, an act of communication” (1988: 101). Indeed, to concede that a narrating instance is not implied by every narrative would be to concede to the linguistic arguments for non-narrated narratives advanced by Ann Banfield (1982) and others. Discourse, as an act of communication, is action; in fiction, the represented discourse of a homodiegetic narrator is therefore represented action. And what is action but the illustration of character? Extradiegetic homodiegetic narrators are indeed characters, and if there is any meaninglessness lurking in that formulation, it can be located in the concept of the extradiegetic itself. Narrators are always outside the frame of the stories they tell: “extradiegetic” appears to have the additional force of placing the narrator outside representation. But if the narrator is fictional, where would that be? In such cases the telling of the story is itself a represented event, as clearly represented as any act of speech, thought or writing in the story: we could legitimately put quotation marks around the whole.

The purpose of my attention to the extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator has been to establish this preliminary point: there is nothing about the internal logic of fictional representation that demands a qualitative distinction between narrators and characters. Such narrators, being represented, *are* characters, exactly as intradiegetic narrators are. But of course it is the fourth class of narration, the extradiegetic heterodiegetic, that constitutes the real issue. In this class fall those narratives that we might want to call “impersonally narrated,” such as *The Ambassadors*, *The Trial*, or *Mrs Dalloway*; as well as what is sometimes called “authorial narration”—*Tom Jones*, *Vanity Fair* or *Middlemarch*. The one irreducible fact underlying the impulse to attribute such

narratives to a narrator is that these narratives are fictional: despite the token gestures of narratologists whose bias towards fiction sits uneasily with their claims for the more general bearing of narratology, there is no more reason to posit a narrator for historical or biographical narrative than to attribute every non-fictional discourse to a textual agent.³ Genette's own early statement of the underlying assumption is representative: "the narrator of *Père Goriot* 'is' not Balzac," he says, "even if here and there he expresses Balzac's opinions, for this author-narrator is someone who 'knows' the Vauquer boardinghouse, its landlady and its lodgers, whereas all Balzac himself does is imagine them" (1980: 214). The function of the narrator is to allow the narrative to be read as something known rather than something imagined; something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction.⁴ But this view of the matter suffers the embarrassment that some of the things such a narrator is required to "know" are clear indices of the narrative's fictional status. The most obvious of these occurs with internal and free focalization—that is, the narrative's access to the mind of another: "her heart, like a larded partridge, sweltered before the fire of a burning desire to shake off the shroud of Vauquer and rise again as Goriot. She would marry again, sell her boarding-house, give her hand to this fine flower of citizenship . . ." (Balzac 1991[1835]: 16-17). The only way to account for such knowledge of characters' minds in terms of the narrator model is to take quite literally the figurative concept of "omniscient" narration: in order to know rather than imagine, the (evidently superhuman) agent of narration must indeed have such powers. "Omniscience," I would suggest, is not a faculty possessed by a certain class of narrators but, precisely, a quality of imagination. Even when authors self-consciously dwell upon their own omniscience with regard to their creations, the power itself is fanciful. The reader is not obliged to hypothesize a narrator who really is omniscient

within the terms of a given fiction, because the authorial imaginative act doesn't merely initiate a fiction, but pervades it.

There are other aspects of focalization, even where omniscience is apparently renounced, that prove unassimilable to the concept of the narrator as the one who "knows." Consider external focalization, which prohibits any access to the characters' thoughts: here "the focus is situated at a point in the diegetic universe chosen by the narrator, *outside every character*" (Genette 1988: 75). But this focus cannot be understood as a heterodiegetic narrator's own perspective, because that would make the narrator homodiegetic—even if anonymous and perhaps non-corporeal. Seymour Chatman, discussing the issue of focalization, has rightly insisted upon the radical difference between narratorial "slant" and character "filter": the narrator "is a reporter, not an 'observer' of the story world in the sense of literally witnessing it. It makes no sense to say that a story is told 'through' the narrator's perception since he/she/it is precisely *narrating*, which is not an act of perception but of presentation or representation" (1990: 142).⁵ He draws the necessary conclusions for the category of narration we are considering here: "The heterodiegetic narrator *never* saw the events because he/she/it never occupied the story world. . . . Even for so-called 'camera-eye' narration it is always and only *as if* the narrator were seeing the events transpire before his very eyes at the moment of narration" (ibid.: 144-45). How are we to understand this "as if"? We cannot resort again to omniscience, unless we compromise it by assuming a sustained narratorial reticence about the characters' thoughts, and other such matters. This reticence could only be disingenuous: in Genette's terms it would have to be described paradoxically, as a defining paralipsis. So the only way to construe external focalization would be as the work of the narrator's imagination: again the narrator's rationale, as the one who "knows," is undermined.

Of course, the point isn't really that the narrator "knows" at all; it's that the author can't know. The purpose of the narrator is to release the author from any accountability for the "facts" of fictional narrative. Genette has codified this principle in the double formula " $A = N \rightarrow \text{factual narrative}$ and $A \neq N \rightarrow \text{fictional narrative}$," where the equal sign symbolizes "the serious commitment of the author with regard to his narrative assertions" (1990a: 766, 770). This narrow definition of identity is adopted in preference to "onomastic or biographical identity" because the narrator of a manifestly fictional story may indeed be identified with its author in these terms, as is the case in Borges' "El Aleph," or in *Tom Jones*. It is perfectly clear that Fielding "does not in the least vouch for the historical veracity of the assertions of his narrative"; but Genette argues further that he does not "identify with the narrator who is supposed to have produced it, any more than I, good citizen, family man, and free-thinker, identify with the voice that, through my mouth, produces an ironic or playful statement such as, 'I am the Pope!'" (1990a: 768). The assumption is that fiction and irony are "nonserious" speech acts, and so require a distinction between their actual and pretended speakers. Genette is following John Searle, whose account of fictional utterances as pretended acts of assertion is the canonical speech act treatment; and if the implication of a narrator is not quite self-evident in Searle's pretence formula, it may arguably be present in another description, "imitating the making of an assertion," which he offers as equivalent (Searle 1975b: 324). Searle approaches fiction with priorities very different from those of the literary theorist, however: he remains in broad sympathy with J. L. Austin's view that such matters "fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language" (Austin 1975 [1962]: 22). Searle's somewhat hasty and dismissive response to fiction is motivated by the evident need to distinguish it from mere falsehood: if a fictional utterance is read simply as an authorial assertion, then it must be taken as infelicitous—an error or a lie—which

hardly satisfies our sense of how fiction works. But his own pretence theory is equally unsatisfactory from a literary point of view because, far from using speech act theory to explain fiction, it disqualifies fiction in order to protect speech act theory. To classify fiction as a “nonserious” speech act is simply to disallow it: the problem of fictionality is not accounted for, but merely displaced. So, instead of a real act of asserting something fictional, Searle gives us an imitated act of assertion: that is, a fictional act of assertion, since fictionality (unlike falsehood) is an ontological property, not just a property of propositions. A fictional act of assertion would not seem to be any less problematic than an act of asserting something fictional: it has merely expelled fictionality from the domain of speech act theory. And if this account of fiction as authorially disavowed assertion amounts to the creation of a narrator, as Genette assumes, then its question-begging is even more starkly exposed. Either the narrator is fictional, or the narrator asserts something fictional: in either case such an account can have no bearing at all on fictionality, which remains to be explained. The pretence formula can only accommodate fictionality by invoking a narrator simultaneously inside and outside the fiction.

Genette’s own response to Searle goes some way towards addressing the problem by arguing that the description of fiction as pretended assertion does not exclude the use of fictional utterances to perform some other, serious illocutionary act. The aim of his intervention “is by no means to *replace* Searle’s ‘Fictional texts are pretended assertions,’ but to *complete* it approximately as follows: ‘. . . which hide, under indirect speech acts, fictional speech acts that are themselves illocutionary acts *sui speciei*, serious by definition” (Genette 1990b: 66). Indirect speech acts (among which Genette includes figurative utterances, as simply indirect speech acts with an unacceptable literal meaning) are those in which one illocutionary act serves as the vehicle for another. “You’re standing on my foot” is also a request that you get off;

“Hegel is a dead horse” is also an assertion that it is no longer worth disputing with him.⁶ To be understood, indirect speech acts need to be considered in relation to their contexts, on the basis of a set of accepted rules for cooperative communication such as H. P. Grice has outlined. Grice’s “Cooperative Principle” states the criteria for the successful performance of a serious speech act in a few general maxims: one of these is the first maxim of Quality, “do not say what you believe to be false”; another is the maxim of Relation, “be relevant” (Grice 1975: 46). The literal illocution of an indirect speech act manifestly disregards the Cooperative Principle, typically by being irrelevant, but also by being false: if an indirect speech act were exhausted in its literal illocution, it would have to be regarded as infelicitous. But because this disregard for the Cooperative Principle is so blatant, we are led to suppose that the maxims are not just being violated, but exploited. This process, by which we are prompted to look for a nonliteral illocution that will successfully relate the speech act to its context, is what Grice terms “conversational implicature.” So, the maxim of quality may be furtively violated (as it is in lying), in which case the Cooperative Principle breaks down; but it may also be flouted (*blatantly* violated, as in irony, or in a work of fiction), in which case we are able to assume it is being exploited in the interests of conversational implicature, and so conclude that the Cooperative Principle is being maintained indirectly.

For Genette, fictional texts are indirect speech acts that imply, by means of pretended assertions, acts in the category of “declarative illocutions with an institutive function” (1990b: 64): that is, acts declaring the existence of a fictional world. The illocutionary act of establishing this fictional world, with the agreement of an audience—Genette cites “Coleridge’s durable phrase” (ibid.: 63)—is the serious element of the fictional utterance. I have two objections: firstly, if fictional utterances are indirect speech acts, they must do something more than institute a fictional world.

Genette sometimes appears to regard this declarative illocution as itself a fictional speech act, in which case it remains within the frame of fictionality, and adds nothing to Searle's account of the authorial speech act; but in any case it confines the creative act to the existential matter of fiction, without any sense of the extent to which this act concerns meaning, in language, rather than existence. This sits uncomfortably with Genette's claim that the novelist thereby creates "a *work* of fiction," as he seems to acknowledge when he says (with more than a hint of circularity) that the successful achievement of a fiction's illocutionary intention consists "at least" in having its fictional intention recognized (1990b: 62, 67-68). His own account seems to allow this much at most, in which case it cannot be a sufficient general formula; nor, I think, is it sufficient even on occasion.

Secondly, if fictional utterances are to have an indirect illocutionary force then the literal speech acts by which they achieve this cannot be pretended, but must be seriously performed. Genette can only interpret pretended speech acts as indirect speech acts by blurring two distinct concepts: he notes that Searle himself explicitly refuses to consider fiction as figurative utterance "in the name of a distinction, to my mind rather fragile, between 'nonserious' and 'nonliteral' " (1990b: 66). But Searle is right in this respect: as he defines it, seriousness attaches to illocutionary intention, whereas literalness attaches to sentence meaning. This is why he makes it clear that "to pretend" is itself an intentional verb: if you didn't intend to pretend, you didn't pretend (Searle 1975b: 325). Searle distinguishes between serious and nonserious (pretended) speech acts according to whether or not the illocutionary act was actually performed. If there is no actual performance, but only a "pseudoperformance" (1975b: 325), then there is no possibility of a serious indirect speech act because the felicity conditions (or maxims, after Grice) normally attaching to the speech act are suspended, in which case they cannot even be violated, much less flouted in the

interests of conversational implicature. Genette seems to interpret seriousness as sincerity, which allows him to say that any nonliteral illocution is obviously also, in its literal sense, nonserious (read insincere). But sincerity is just a condition upon the success of serious speech acts—it doesn't even arise *unless* the speech act is serious. If pretence is understood in the sense it has in Searle's account, then indirect speech acts and pretended speech acts are incompatible. And even if Genette has silently reformulated Searle's pretence account as "pretending to be the narrator," this translates the model for third-person fictional utterance into that for first-person fiction; in which case the discourse itself is intrafictional, and excludes the possibility of any indirect speech act declaring its fictionality.⁷ If the indirect speech act model applies to fictional utterance, then the pretence model does not; but if pretended speech acts are not involved in fiction, neither is the narrator.

My argument is that pretence can have no role in an account of fictional utterance, either alone or in combination with indirect speech acts. I don't wish to repudiate the idea of fictions as indirect speech acts: the broad outlines of Genette's account strike me as highly suggestive. But the model requires that fictional utterances are serious authorial speech acts, and this excludes any possibility of a default narrator. If, when Genette declares "I am the Pope," we assume that he is neither deceitful nor deluded but adhering to the Cooperative Principle, then we note the literal absurdity of the statement and understand, perhaps, "I acknowledge a fondness for issuing the occasional bull"—or some other relevant implicit meaning. There is no phantom voice here, because this is a serious speech act, the felicity of which is provided for indirectly, by conversational implicature. So it is with fiction: an author can seriously narrate a fictional narrative, because its relevance is not a matter of information; its falsehood, or indeed any adventitious veracity, is beside the point. Fiction may be related to the indirect speech act model in the following way: it is a series of

illocutionary acts of assertion (typically) which, whether true or false, are literally irrelevant because they cannot be taken as informative; but which imply, by virtue of their context—being presented as a novel, a romance, a tall tale, a shaggy-dog story—the illocutionary act of displaying a narrative. This implied act is normally transsentential, comprising as it does the whole narrative, and might better be described as a “discourse act”; but in any case it fulfils the criterion of relevance as an invitation to contemplate, to interpret, to evaluate; as something worthy of display, something “tellable.” That is, its relevance is not informative but exhibitiv: the question of its truthfulness is therefore not applicable as a felicity condition.⁸

The answer I am proposing to my original question, “who is the narrator?” is this: the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author. There is no intermediate position. The author of a fiction can adopt one of two strategies: to narrate a representation, or to represent a narration. I say this in full awareness of Genette’s criticisms of the concept of representation (1988: 42): indeed his point, that the term equivocates between “information” and “imitation,” is borne out by my own antithesis. “Representation” is a matter of (fictional) information in “to narrate a representation,” but a matter of (discursive) imitation in “to represent a narration.” But I persist in the usage on the grounds that this disjunction of means does not at all undermine the unity of the rhetorical end that I take “representation” to signify.

Where does unreliable narration fit into this scheme? The need for a concept of unreliable narration arises when we wish to explain inconsistencies in the narrative without blaming the author. This is not to say that we do not sometimes find the author culpable: when we discover Sancho, in chapter 25 of *Don Quixote*, riding the ass that was stolen from him in chapter 23, we can dismiss it as an oversight on Cervantes’ part. We need more substantial reasons than inconsistency alone if we are to identify unreliable narration. To be interpreted as unreliable, a narrative must

provide some logic by which its inconsistencies can be explained—some means of accounting for the narrator’s self-contradictions or manifest distortions. That is, unreliability cannot simply be attributed to an impersonal narrator: it must be motivated in terms of the psychology of a narrating character.⁹

But perhaps Chatman’s concept of narratorial “slant” suggests a more subtle, evaluative form of unreliability. Perhaps it is possible for the language of a novel in its own right, without implying any disjunction between the narration and the “facts” of the narrative, to cohere into an idiom, register, attitude or ideology that requires a distinction between author and narrator. That is after all the situation with first-person narration, although there are simpler and more obvious representational grounds for identifying a narrator when that narrator is homodiegetic. Is the narrative language alone sufficient to betray a narrator? Dorrit Cohn argues that just such a situation may arise when “reportive” narrative is interrupted by commentary. Her example is from *Death in Venice*, and prompts us, she thinks, to “personalize the source of the weighty intervention . . . as a rather narrow and opinionated moralist”—in other words, not Thomas Mann (Cohn 1990: 797). I don’t actually find the passage she quotes very provoking in this respect, but in any case I have strong reservations about the possibility of such narratorial characterization in principle. Clearly the difference between authorial and narratorial personality must be established in textual terms (it is Mann as author, not Mann as public figure, who concerns us here), yet the absence of textual indicators such as inconsistency necessitates an appeal to the author’s personality as already known, prior to the text. Authorial personality can be regarded as an intertextual phenomenon, to be abstracted from a writer’s whole corpus; but there still remains the unwarranted assumption that this personality is uniform, for otherwise there is no reason why the narration in question should not be taken to exhibit another aspect of authorial personality. Personality, after all, is not monolithic;

not timeless, not unitary, not even necessarily coherent. Indeed novelists, who are perhaps rather less straightforward than academics, are quite likely to attitudinize in diverse ways in their writing: such mannerism remains an aspect of self-presentation, and should not be granted an independent identity. Cohn recognizes that works like *Death in Venice* may indeed be taken as authorial narration, but thinks her interpretation preferable “for readers intent on salvaging the aesthetic and ideological integrity of the work in question” (1990: 799). The integrity she is actually concerned with is the author’s, not the work’s: I would suggest that the issue of integrity only arises because the work in question has been illegitimately excluded from a prior interpretation of authorial personality. In general, I think the possibility of distinguishing between authorial and narratorial personality depends upon that distinction being available to interpretation as a meaningful aspect of the text’s own representational rhetoric.¹⁰ At that point, I suspect, the passages of commentary to which Cohn appeals would have effectively cohered into a homodiegetic frame around the narrative.

I want, nonetheless, to consider one of the conclusions Cohn draws from the possibility that narrative language alone can characterize a narrator. For my purposes here that claim in itself causes no difficulty: it’s a characterization, involving creative work, and not something inherent in narrative as such. But since this characterization is occasional (it only occurs in passages of commentary within a continuous narrative) it must, in my terms, imply an intermittent character. For Cohn, the only logical way to account for this is to conclude that the narrator is always present, sometimes overt, and sometimes covert. “By extension and analogy,” fictions like *The Castle* or *A Portrait of the Artist* can then be taken to have covert narrators throughout (1990: 797-98). This covert narrator, wholly uncharacterized, is exactly the kind of pure narrative agent I am trying to eradicate.

Leaving aside the validity of “extension and analogy,” can there be such a thing as covert narration, even between passages of overt narration? I want to suggest that the underlying assumption here—that narrating characters must have continuity of being—is an instance of criticism internalizing a literal model of the logic of representation, and then using it against the text itself. In representational terms any narrating character is the source of the narrative language, certainly: but then representation itself is only a product of the fictional deployment of the same language. We need to understand these relations hierarchically, in that the language of fiction is its means of representation, and representation is its means of ascribing that language to a narrator. So to treat a represented instance of narration as ontologically prior to the language doing the representing is to press the logic of representation beyond representation itself, and make the subordinate term superordinate—that is, to assert a paradox in the name of logic. Yet this is exactly what the idea of covert narration demands: even when the representation of a narrator is not sustained, the whole discourse is interpreted as a unified narrating instance because the narrator, a local representational *issue* of the language, is translated into its global, literal *source*. We should keep in mind the fact that representational “logic” is actually a fictional rhetoric: it should not be made to exceed its brief. If a (hypothetical) novel’s language invokes a narrator in the interest of some local effect, then to interpret this effect as indicative of a ubiquitous but otherwise covert narrator is to miss this rhetorical subtlety completely in our rage to impose a uniform representational logic upon the novel.

The idea of an intermittent narrating character, on the other hand, would fit such a novel very well; and I think it entirely consonant with the rhetoric of fictional representation. Consider the situation of homodiegetic narrators: they are far from being ubiquitous presences, even if we discard such categorical aberrations as

Madame Bovary (Flaubert as Charles Bovary's classmate in the opening chapter) or *Vanity Fair* (Thackeray making his characters' acquaintance at Pumpernickel in chapter 62). As Genette has noted, Marcel has a striking propensity to disappear as narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* whenever Proust's purposes demand the omniscience his narrator denies him. (Genette 1980: 250-52). But if Marcel is too literary a narrator to make the argument, try Huck Finn. Huck is as strongly realized, and ingenuous, a narrator as you could wish for; yet Twain put an explanatory note in front of his novel drawing attention to the different dialects it contains, because he didn't want readers to "suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding" (Twain 1966[1884]: 48). He didn't do this to emphasize Huck's talents as a mimic: nor was it an oversight on his part—he'd paid particular attention to it, he was proud of it, and he wanted to make sure we notice his fine ear for dialect. The conclusion must be that, in those parts of the novel where Twain is accurately representing the various dialects of the Mississippi valley, the narrating Huck Finn is not merely covert, but entirely absent. I should emphasize that Twain's note is not essential to this point: it only makes starkly explicit the truth that a conflict of representational objectives is likely to arise in any mediated narrative. There is an inherent tension between the representational needs of the narrative transmission and those of the narrative events; and in the case of direct speech, it is almost always the character's language itself that is represented, not the narrator's representation of that language. At such points, the situation is a mirror image of our hypothetical novel: local elimination of the narrator rather than local creation of a narrator.¹¹

There is another figure who threatens to intervene in this discussion of the narrator: having made an appeal to the author, I need to take account of the implied author. Wayne Booth originally advanced the concept as a way of talking about authorial personality and intention without co-opting, or being encumbered by, the

author's actual biography—for reasons that are well founded in the history of criticism. But as his choice of term indicates, he objectified this concept as a distinct agent situated “between” the narrator and the author. If I am saying that in fact the narrator and the author are sometimes one and the same, I appear to have simply disregarded this intermediate figure. A short answer may be to observe that, as the conventional wisdom has it, the implied author (being implied) cannot actually *be* the narrator. In that case, perhaps the issue does not arise here: the “implied author” is just the author implied behind a narrating character; and when it is the author who narrates, the implied author obviously need not be invoked. But the argument might be pressed the other way round: if the locus of textual intent is *definitionally* the implied author, then the narrator cannot be simply the author—and so must be a distinct agent. A closer inspection of the implied author is needed to dismiss this objection.

It is possible, on reading Booth's original discussion in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, to extract two pertinent motives for distinguishing between the real author and the implied author. The first is a matter of authorial personality: against Ford Madox Ford, Booth insists that Fielding, Defoe and Thackeray cannot be accused of insincerity on the basis of external evidence: “A great work establishes the ‘sincerity’ of its implied author, regardless of how grossly the man who created that author may belie in his *other* forms of conduct the values embodied in his work. For all we know, the only sincere moments of his life may have been lived as he wrote his novel” (Booth 1983 [1961]: 75). As the second sentence suggests, Booth's defence here actually hovers between two strategies: to declare a separation between the real author and the implied author, or simply to refuse the uniformity that Ford's rigid “sincerity,” regardless of the diversity of its occasions, seems to impose upon personality. The second option, it seems to me, is quite sufficient. Booth's second motive has to do

with authorial intention: in order to explain our “apprehension of a completed artistic whole” as a textual phenomenon, we need “a term that is as broad as the work itself but still capable of calling attention to that work as the product of a choosing, evaluating person rather than as a self-existing thing” (1983 [1961]: 73, 74). Again, the distinction is blurred by equivocation: as Chatman has observed, “this definition straddles the fence of ‘intentionality,’ half accepting and half rejecting its relevance to textual structure. On the one hand, Booth disallows the intention of the real author, but on the other, he wishes to avoid calling texts ‘self-existing things’” (Chatman 1990: 81).

Chatman’s own defence of the implied author proposes to redefine the concept in order to “resist the anthropomorphic trap” due to which it continually gravitates back towards the real author in Booth’s usage (Chatman 1990: 88). Accordingly, he takes “the anti-intentionalist view that a published text *is* in fact a self-existing thing. . . . The text is itself the implied author” (ibid.: 81). His argument is founded upon a distinction between oral and written narrative: the oral situation is straightforward, thanks to the actual presence of the author; but in the case of a published fiction “the real author retires from the text,” and the implied author is invoked “on each reading” as the textual principle of invention and intent (1990: 75, 74). Chatman emphasizes his concept’s freedom from anthropomorphic assumptions by offering alternative terms: “‘text implication’ or ‘text instance’ or ‘text design’ or even simply ‘text intent’” (1990: 86). Yet even these terms indicate the tension in his argument. If the text is to be a self-existing thing, divorced from authorial intention, then there are no grounds for appealing to a concept of intent at all—it is no longer required. Chatman insists that “the *act* of a producer, a real author, obviously differs from the *product* of that act, the text”; but then he can only explain textuality by reinventing that act of production as itself immanent in the text: “If all meanings—implicit as well as

explicit—are the products of the text’s activity, and if this activity always presupposes agency, then we have to posit some such text principle or agent as the implied author” (1990: 83, 90). He conceives of the written text as manifesting, on each reading, its own intentional agency—that is, a virtual oral authorship equivalent to the actual presence of the author. This seems to be just a more subtle version of the anthropomorphic trap from which he claims to have escaped. If we want to talk about intent in fiction, we should accept that in doing so we are necessarily invoking the author. Of course our idea of the author of a written narrative is no more than an interpretation; but this is equally true with oral narrative.

It will be clear by now that I subscribe to Genette’s principle that “agents should not be multiplied unnecessarily” (1988: 148). Genette has himself rejected the concept of the implied author, reasoning that it has been “constituted by two distinctions that remain blind to each other: (1) IA is not the narrator, (2) IA is not the real author, and it is never seen that the first is a matter of the real author and the second is a matter of the narrator, with no room anywhere for a third agent that would be *neither* the narrator *nor* the real author” (1988: 145). It’s a nice knockdown argument, and I would only want to qualify it by extending its scope: there is no room anywhere for a third agent that would be neither a *character* nor the real author.

My argument against the narrator, then, comes down to this: fictions are narrated by their authors, or by characters. Extradiegetic homodiegetic narrators, being represented, are characters, just as all intradiegetic narrators are. Extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrators (that is, “impersonal” and “authorial” narrators), who cannot be represented without thereby being rendered homodiegetic or intradiegetic, are in no way distinguishable from authors. This assertion is unaffected by the fictionality of the narrative, since that is best accounted for by the function of conversational implicature in maintaining the felicity of speech acts; nor is it affected by issues of

unreliability, because unreliability always requires characterization; nor by covert narration, because that concept is an abuse of the logic of representation; nor by the implied author, because the senses in which that term conflicts with my argument are themselves bogus.

To repudiate the narrator as a distinct narrative agent intrinsic to the structure of fiction is to repudiate the idea of a closed border between the products of representation and the real-world discourse of the author. The narrator, postulated simultaneously inside and outside representation, dissociates the author from the *act* of representation: the concept accordingly divides critical attention between the events and characters of the fictional world in their own right, and the literary ends they serve as representations. The former mode of criticism requires that critics suspend their awareness of the narrative's fictionality, this awareness being reserved for the latter activity. But when the narrator disappears, so does this division in critical attention. By insisting that fictional representation is an authorial activity, I keep the fictionality of the narrative always in view: my critical attention is always to the literary act, the representational activity that is fiction. Instead of attending to representational content and artistic form by turns, I can integrate them at every point as aspects of a fiction's *argument*: that is, the end to which a particular fiction directs its rhetorical resources.

Having referred to the concept of argument as the instantiation of the "rhetoric of fiction," I want briefly to clarify my use of that phrase, so dear to Booth. In his own usage, Booth distinguished between a narrow sense, the (overt) rhetoric *in* fiction, and a broad sense, fiction *as* rhetoric, "an aspect of the whole work viewed as a total act of communication" (Booth 1983 [1961]: 415). Even in this broader sense, though, rhetoric is in the service of representation: it is the means by which the author tries "to impose his fictional world upon the reader" (*ibid.*: xiii). Chatman goes further,

distinguishing between this interior, “aesthetic” orientation and an “ideological” one: “Rhetoric working to ideological ends suades us of something outside the text, something about the world at large” (Chatman 1990: 197). This last sense is the one that interests me; but unlike Chatman I do not see it as distinct from his “aesthetic” sense, which retains representation as an end. Such aesthetic-rhetorical appeals serve to establish the rightness of a fictional representation, and this rightness is itself the “ideological” end to which that representation is being employed. By “the rhetoric of fiction,” then, I mean the entire resources of fiction as a rhetoric, in itself, for emotional and rational effect in real-world discourse; and by “argument” I mean simply the end to which these resources are used by a particular fiction. I would contend that the advantages of reading fiction this way far outweigh any regrets that might attend the demise of the narrator.

Notes

- ¹. The ubiquity of the narrator is a fundamental assumption for Gérard Genette (1980; 1988), Frank Stanzel (1984), Gerald Prince (1982), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and, despite having entertained ideas of non-narration in *Story and Discourse* (1978), Seymour Chatman (1990). Notable dissenters, on linguistic grounds, have been Käte Hamburger (1973 [1957]), Ann Banfield (1982) and S.-Y. Kuroda (1976). My own objections to the narrator are based upon representational rather than linguistic criteria: hence, I shall be arguing that certain “narrators” are outside representation, not that certain narratives function outside communication.
- ². Some narrators, of course, flaunt their inventiveness: an instance would be Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In such a case the representational frame endowed with an aura of fictional reality is coextensive with the personality and environment of the narrator himself. It is worth noting that if fictionality does indeed imply a narrator, such novels would require a second-order narrator to sanitize the inventiveness of the first. Critics have generally refrained from such follies.
- ³. Dorrit Cohn (1990: 791-800) proposes to make quite explicit the way the author/narrator distinction operates as a basic criterion for segregating fictional from historical narrative.
- ⁴. Stanzel is equally emphatic on this point: “while the authorial narrator and the first-person narrator can be differentiated according to their position in regard to the represented world of the characters, they cannot be distinguished according to their relationship to the apparatus of narrative transmission. . . . They originate in that primal motivation of all narration, to make the fictional world appear as reality” (Stanzel 1984: 17).
- ⁵. This observation is particularly salutary in relation to Stanzel’s rather equivocal account of the status of reflector-characters: “first-person narrators who are actualized only as an experiencing self, and who therefore restrict themselves to the reflection of experiences not overtly communicated, are reflector-characters”; “Since [a reflector-character] does not narrate, he cannot

function as a transmitter in the above sense [that of a teller-character]”; “The epistemological difference between a story which is communicated by a teller-character and one which is presented by a reflector-character lies mainly in the fact that the teller-character is always aware that he is narrating, while the reflector-character has no such awareness at all” (Stanzel 1984: 145, 146, 147).

6. Searle would not count the second example as an indirect speech act: his reason is that the literal assertion of a figurative utterance is defective (because evidently false), whereas the literal illocution of an indirect speech act is not. I would maintain that indirect speech acts are always literally defective, in terms of relevance. Searle acknowledges that they are indeed often defective in this respect, but denies that they are necessarily so (Searle 1975a: 70-71): it seems to me that, where utterances *may* be taken as literally felicitous, to precisely that extent they are ineffective as indirect speech acts.
7. I would want to argue further, against Genette and Searle, that first-person narration does not conform to a pretence account. For Genette, first-person narrative must “finally come down to the dramatic mode (a character speaks) and consist of serious illocutions more or less tacitly posited as *intrafictional*. The pretence here consists, as Plato and Searle agree, in a simulation, or substitution, of identity (Homer pretends to be Chryses, Doyle pretends to be Watson, as Sophocles pretends to be Oedipus or Creon)” (1990b: 68-69). I can accept the first sentence, and note that in saying so Genette appears to have retracted his claim that the first-person narrator is not a character; but against the second sentence I would argue that authors do not pretend to be narrating characters, they *represent* narrating characters. The possibility of unreliable narration demands this, because when such unreliability occurs the narratorial slant itself (rather than the events of the narrative) is the object of the author’s representational rhetoric: the distance between author and narrator is essential to interpretation. In first-person narration, authors do not imitate the narrating character, nor “the making of an assertion,” but a discursive idiom.

- ⁸. See Mary Louise Pratt (1977). Pratt's concept of "narrative display text" seems very close to what is needed here: it is notable that her only reason for ultimately subordinating this concept to the imitation speech act model is the assumption that all fictions have narrators (1977: 173, 207-8). My brief reformulation is only a sketch of the possible result of abandoning this assumption, and obviously needs clarification at several points: I am aware, for example, that the implied act I posit does not comfortably fit within the category of indirect speech acts as defined by Searle, or even Genette.
- ⁹. For a far more systematic analysis of unreliable narration, see Tamar Yacobi (1981; 1987), who places it in the context of alternative means of resolving interpretative incongruities—categorized as the genetic, generic, existential and functional principles. I am in broad sympathy with Yacobi's account, which I do not consider to be seriously undermined by my dissent from its declared premise: "Insofar as fictionality characterizes the discourse as well as the world of literature, literary communication is always mediated" (1987: 335). On the criteria for unreliability, see also Marie-Laure Ryan (1984: 127-28).
- ¹⁰. According to Yacobi, "To become unreliable, [the narrator] must be exposed as such by some definite norm of congruity and to some definite effect. . . . In the absence of concrete grounds—or what appears to be so on the surface—even if the distinction between author and narrator still holds in theory, then for all practical reading purposes it gets blurred, almost to the point of disappearance" (1987: 346-7). This hedged dichotomy between the practical and the theoretical (which exercises Yacobi again on page 357) is obviated once it is admitted that the mediation of a narrator is not inherent in fiction.
- ¹¹. Obviously this provides no basis for a qualitative distinction between extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators: Marlow and Mme de Rochefide's admirer are subject to the same constraints. Accordingly, it doesn't provide for any such distinction between narrating and other characters either. There is a recursiveness about the act of narration, compared to other

represented acts, that tends to highlight the representational contingency of character; but this contingency applies to any character, as recent innovative fiction has shown (I take the disintegration of Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* to be a quite explicit example). Representation involves no commitment to the continuity of characters except insofar as this is itself a privileged representational objective—which of course, in any broadly realist fiction, is the case most of the time.

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