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## The Unreliable Narrator: Simplifying the Device and Exploring its Role in Autobiography

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THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR: SIMPLIFYING THE DEVICE AND EXPLORING  
ITS ROLE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A Thesis Presented

by

JAMES A. FERRY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
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## ABSTRACT

### THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR: SIMPLIFYING THE DEVICE AND EXPLORING ITS ROLE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

FEBRUARY 2017

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The primary goal of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the unreliable narrator as a literary device. Furthermore, I argue that the distance between an author and narrator in realist fiction can be simulated in autobiographical prose. While previous studies have focused mainly on extra- and intertextual incongruities (factual inaccuracies; disparities between two nonfiction texts), the present study attempts to demonstrate that the memoirist can employ unreliable narration intratextually as a rhetorical tool. The paper begins with some examples of how the unreliable narrator is used, interpreted, misused and misinterpreted. The device's troubled history is examined—Wayne Booth and James Phelan have argued for an encoded strategy on the part of the (implied) author while Tamar Yacobi and Ansgar Nünning have embraced a reader-oriented model—as well as the recent (and in my opinion, inevitable) convergence of the rhetorical and cognitive/constructivist models. Aside from “What is the unreliable narrator,” two questions underlie the present study: 1) Does a fiction writer using homodiegetic narration have an obligation to adhere to formal mimeticism (do we believe it)? 2) Being that unreliable narrators are so prevalent in everyday life, why is the device, in nonfiction, considered almost verboten? Two texts are analyzed for the first question: Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is argued to be a mimetically successful fictive “memoir” penned by a disillusioned, albeit reliable, narrator. Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is presented as a synthetically flawless example of unreliable narration, but alas, a mimetic failure. Likewise, two texts are analyzed for the second question: Nick Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* is viewed through the lens of overt fiction as a means of depicting uncertainty in autobiography. Similarly, Richard's Wright's *Black Boy*, with its overarching themes of survival and deception, is examined for the narrator's use of “tall tales.” The critical and commercial success of both books suggests that the unreliable narrator does indeed have a place in autobiography—provided that the device is employed in service of a greater truth.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In traditional nonfiction, readers experience uncertainty as a problem of the author, not as a viable state for the narrator. It seems sloppy. More research should have been done, or that section should have been cut.—Hugh Ryan, author

In December of 2014, Erin Keane, staff writer at Salon.com (her bio describes her as “culture editor”), posted an article titled, “‘I’m an unreliable narrator’: Why Lena Dunham’s Barry mistake is bad news for all memoirists.” The article’s title refers to the opening line of the tenth chapter in Dunham’s book, *Not That Kind of Girl*. Intrigued, I obtained a copy. Sure enough on page fifty, at the opening of a chapter titled “Barry,” she writes, “I’m an unreliable narrator.”

This has to do with an anecdote—Dunham’s “memoir” is basically a solipsistic smorgasbord of millennial musings and anecdotes—earlier in the book concerning a sexual encounter with a crudely-sketched character called “Barry,” a pseudonym. At first, Dunham describes what could be a scene straight out of her hit show *Girls*. An “ill-fated evening of lovemaking” is blithely reduced to “a study in the way revulsion can quickly become desire when mixed with the right muscle relaxants” (42). Then, nine pages later, Dunham picks up the thread and refers to herself as an “unreliable narrator.” She then revises the “Barry” scene, this time depicting a sexual assault.

Like Keane, I found this problematic, but not in the same way. The Salon article has mainly to do with authorial integrity and editorial diligence. Keane argues that Dunham’s “bizarre double-dipping of the Barry story feels like a cop-out” and a justification for “keep[ing] the earlier passage about Barry in the book when it should

have been cut.” So for Keane, the problem is structural: Dunham’s use of the “unreliable narrator”—a device reserved for fiction—is sheer gimmickry, used only to preserve material that, once revised, was rendered superfluous. I’m flexible on this. A kinder interpretation would be that Dunham’s technique could be read as an artful reflection of her personal experience. Originally we’re presented with a scene depicting sloppy albeit consensual sex; a drunken misadventure or rite of passage. Later it’s revealed that the experience was, in Dunham’s words, “terribly aggressive.” Then we’re made privy to a conversation Dunham recalls having with a friend, Aubrey, who upon hearing the details of the encounter proclaims, “You were raped” (61). There’s a flash-forward to the writer’s room of *Girls*, wherein Dunham pitches a storyline about “A sexual encounter that no one can classify properly” (64). Unable to imagine “rape” being funny in any context, her colleagues resist and the idea is abandoned. And on page 60, there’s this:

When I was young, I read an article about a ten-year-old girl who was raped by a stranger on a dirt road. Now nearly forty, she recalled lying down in a gingham dress her mother had sewn for her and making sounds of pleasure to protect herself. It seemed terrifying and arousing and like a good escape plan. And I never forgot this story, but I didn’t remember until many days after Barry fucked me. Fucked me so hard that the next morning I had to sit in a hot bath to soothe myself. Then I remembered.

It seems to me that there’s more at work here than narrative padding, as Keane suggests. I suspect that Dunham employed this particular structure, as well as the “unreliable narrator” mask, to evoke a sense of her own ambivalence. What it was like for her to

realize, gradually over time, perhaps even years—and with feedback both direct and indirect—that she had in fact been raped.

Still, I felt there were problems. At the very least, Dunham’s reference to herself as an unreliable narrator struck me as a rather pedestrian use of the term.<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, I don’t read much fiction. Prior to embarking on this project, my knowledge about the unreliable narrator was rudimentary at best. But even I knew that they tend not to “come out” so overtly on the page. Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose? So right away, Dunham’s lack of subtlety bugged me as a writer. But I had issues with Keane’s article as well. Early on she surmises that the unreliable narrator is “rarely a sound technique for memoir,” which seemed reasonable enough to me, but her later statement that “memoirists have a *responsibility* to be reliable narrators of their own stories” (emphasis mine) seemed downright bossy. (As a memoirist, I’m somewhat averse to being told that certain tools don’t belong in my box.) For starters, the deck beneath Keane’s headline reads *Calling yourself “unreliable” is a fun rhetorical trick in fiction, but harder when writing about sexual assault*. Again, I’m open to a different take on Dunham’s handling of the material in this particular instance. But what Keane seems to be suggesting is that if Dunham’s book were a work of fiction then perhaps her unreliable narrator reference could be reclassified as “a fun rhetorical trick.” Would it really? Again, I’d always thought that unreliable narration was something implied and inferred, with some level of sophistication or dramatic irony, not made explicit. Keane goes on to describe the device

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<sup>1</sup> As I alluded to earlier, Dunham’s memoir, on the whole, reads like a punchline in search of a joke. It’s loaded with gems like “I only get BO in one armpit” (21) and ten full pages are devoted to food lists. The Barry thread is doubtless the most compelling thing in it, peppered as it is with awkward attempts at humor. Alas, *Not That Kind of Girl* was of course a smash hit for Random House.



as having a rich pedigree, though she mentions only two titles: *The Canterbury Tales* and *Gone Girl*. The unreliable narrator, Keane claims, “helps create suspense in otherwise straightforward stories. The longer the writer delays revealing the truth to the reader, the more the tension builds.” So for Keane, a novel featuring an unreliable narrator is the literary equivalent of an M. Night Shyamalan film. In order for any of it to make sense, we must wait—edge of our seats, popcorn cracking in our back molars—for the inevitable twist.

At this point I was somewhere between embarrassed and befuddled. I’d been through an MFA program and yet I had to admit that I knew very little about this thing we call the unreliable narrator. Not only that, but Lena Dunham—bestselling author, cultural icon, and self-proclaimed unreliable narrator—didn’t appear to know much more than I did. Worse still, Erin Keane, the editor charged with criticizing Dunham for having misappropriated the term, seemed to be the least knowledgeable of all. I began to wonder about all the confusion surrounding this particular device. And among those of us who supposedly devote so much energy to studying the craft. Damn, I thought, if we can’t even agree on what the hell this thing is, what does the average reader think?

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As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson indicate, “Life writing and the novel share features we ascribe to fictional writing: plot, dialogue, setting, characterization, and claims to a referential world” (9-10). We can take “referential world” to mean a story-world in which the characters and events exist within the bounds of formal mimeticism—what we consider, however likely or unlikely, to at least be possible. To be clear, we exclude from this all forms of fantasy-based fiction, futuristic dystopian tales, Kafka’s *The*

*Metamorphosis*, etc. We're talking about realist fiction, and for purposes of this paper, I'm limiting my analysis to *homodiegetic* or what James Phelan calls "character-narration." This is in contrast to *heterodiegetic* or what is commonly known as omniscient narration. The omniscient narrator looms over the story-world with godlike perspective, revealing the characters' thoughts and actions as narratively needed. Employing such a narrator has its advantages, but as readers we lose a certain intimacy—a connectedness that we feel with a voice bound by subjective reality. This is where unreliable narration enters the equation. When we engage with an omniscient narrator, we've already committed to a total suspension of disbelief (obviously, since no reporter can penetrate someone's mind); thus there's no point in pondering the narrator's reliability. But when we engage with a narrator who refers to him or herself in the first-person, we can begin to imagine a storyteller with all the foibles and fallibilities that we encounter in the real world.

To explore the unreliable narrator in autobiography, we clearly need a first-person "I"—a narrator who speaks from his or her subjective position. Though author and narrator are (ostensibly) the same person, the text cannot (or should not) be read "straight"; there's something implicit or encoded within the textual phenomena. Broadly speaking, we call this "subtext" which, as any writer will surely acknowledge, can be tricky. Charles Baxter, author of *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*, describes it thusly: "What is displayed evokes what is not displayed, like a party where the guests discuss, at length, those who are not in attendance" (3). Applying this analogy to unreliable narration, the "guests" would be the narrator and the reader, engaging each other directly, and those "not in attendance" would be the author and the implicit message(s) he or she has come to

impart. Whether it's the facts or events as depicted, or a particular set of ethics or values being propagated, we as readers are meant to understand things differently than the narrator's report. And since our engagement with realist fiction relies so heavily on lifelikeness, and since "unreliability"—from the child who misunderstands to the adult who misinterprets—is so much a part of our everyday lives, I argue that the distance often detected between author and narrator in realist fiction, what we call unreliable narration, can be similarly employed, to great effect, in autobiographical prose.

## CHAPTER 2

### GENESIS OF THE THESIS AND WHY WE SHOULD CARE

*Strangely (but albeit expectedly), the concept of the unreliable narrator has not as many other narratological conceptions transferred and included in the study of factual or natural narratives—even though it is among the concepts with the most clear connection to our experience with “real” narrators. We are constantly surrounded by “real” unreliable narrators*”—Per Krogh Hansen, narrative theorist

I have a friend who teaches preschool, and from time to time she’ll regale me with cute stories involving the kids. I like the one about the boy who approached her, during winter, and asked her if she “remembered when it was warm and sunny all the time.” Nice days, those. Now they’re gone, never to return. That the cyclical nature of the seasons eluded him—that he was the unwitting butt of his own adorable joke—amuses me, yes, but what gets me is that he apparently wasn’t sad. He was, according to my friend, simply nostalgic. *Those were the days.*

I’m a writer, which means that I have two shitty jobs. The one that pays me (a paltry wage) is a busy kitchen in Northampton, Massachusetts. I was there one day, prepping for the dinner rush, when a coworker decided to announce yet another story involving her boyfriend. She’d discovered a box of condoms in the glove compartment of his car. That the box was there to begin with didn’t seem to be an issue; what piqued her interest was that it had been opened. “When I asked him about it,” she said, “he told me that he just wanted to see what they looked like.” Wanted to see what the condoms *looked like*. I just waited, tried to “read” her expression for some clue as to how I should react. Then she smiled. “Can you believe that?” she said. “What a man-child!”

Of course I did not believe her. Well, maybe her facts were accurate but her interpretation was surely suspect. Another coworker had overheard the story (nothing this storyteller says is ever said quietly) and it took only eye contact with this person to know that we were surely colluding, somewhat guiltily, behind this woman's back. Her boyfriend's extracurricular love-life was well-known—the sort of watercooler scuttlebutt that reinforces the adage, “You're always the last to know”—thus it wasn't too difficult to naturalize the occurrence. Like the preschooler who lamented the passing of those warm sunny days, this woman's “narration” enables us to experience what Wayne Booth would call a kind of double vision: we have the effect of seeing things through her eyes, but the real message is that of some “agent” behind her words (*RoF* 280). In her case, there's ambiguity. Maybe she really believed what she was saying, or maybe she was grappling with the speciousness of it, perhaps feeling me out for a reaction; whether it was a sneaking suspicion or simply the sheer force of her own denial, I cannot say. In the case of the boy, the “agent” behind his error was immaturity; what he said he truly believed, but what I find extraordinary is what I “hear” when I think of that story. I imagine it like this: *Hold on to your innocence. Nice days come and nice days go, but there will always be new days. Cherish them.*

Marissa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon describe these exact phenomena in their joint effort, *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response*: “Parallels are easy to find in everyday conversational interactions. One can speak with children and hold fluent conversations even though they may have a limited view of the world; one may converse with individuals who have an obvious vested interest in a particular perspective or conclusion; and so on” (83). We are all unreliable narrators. Or we have

been. This is not to say that we're all dupes or liars; it's more nuanced than that. To tell a lie is to tell a fiction: the intention is to deliberately deceive, but to be unreliable is to—consciously or unconsciously—encode. If I'm telling you a lie, I'm hoping that you'll read me “straight” and take my words at face value. However, if I'm being unreliable, I'm communicating more than I'm actually saying. Perhaps I'm trying to spare your feelings (*It's not you, it's me*) or maybe I really need to save some time (*Just trust me on this one*). Perhaps I think I have your best interest at heart (*Don't make me make you an accessory after the fact*). Regardless, I'm communicating in a way that will require you to read between the lines; to use your superior knowledge; to decode my message. As Ansgar Nünning points out, “The almost steady rise of the unreliable narrator since the end of the eighteenth century suggests that there is indeed a close connection between the development of this narrative technique and the changing notions of subjectivity” (“But why” 95). Fiction writers did not *invent* this device. They were simply reflecting the emerging cultural discourse whereby moral and epistemological questions were growing increasingly ambiguous. These new narrators were “modern” in the sense that they resembled a great many of us. They were inherently full of shit.

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Wayne C. Booth is credited with coining the term “unreliable narrator.” The oft-cited quotation appears on page 158-9 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) of his great work, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: “I have called the narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the [author's] norms), *unreliable* when he does not.”<sup>2</sup> Much has been made of this, the referent for the “rhetorical” model of unreliable

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<sup>2</sup> The actual quote, within the parenthetical, reads the “implied” author, a can of worms I'll be opening soon enough.

narration. Booth has many disciples and detractors, but what should be acknowledged is that since his coinage of the term in 1961, virtually every theoretical contribution regarding the unreliable narrator can be traced back, at times almost verbatim, to his seminal work.

Booth draws a distinction between two types of unreliable narrators: those who are morally distant from the author and those who are intellectually distant. He cites Jason Compson, the narrator featured in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, as an example of the former. "Though our path through Jason's perverted moral world is clarified in many ways by what has come before, essentially it is built out of secret jokes passing between ourselves and the author" (*RoF* 306). Here's a sample of Compson's narration:

"Let [the farmer] make a big crop and it wont be worth picking; let him make a small crop and he wont have enough to gin. And what for? so a bunch of damn eastern jews, I'm not talking about men of the jewish religion," I says, "I've known some jews that were fine citizens. You might be one yourself," I says.

"No," he says, "I'm an American."

"No offense," I says. "I give every man his due, regardless of religion or anything else. I have nothing against the jews as an individual," I says. "It's just the race." (191) Here we have an excerpt from *Huck Finn*, showing Huck, our "intellectually" distant narrator, confronted by some men looking for runaway slaves:

"Well, there's five niggers run off to-night, up yonder above the head of the bend. Is your man white or black?"

I didn't answer up prompt. I tried to, but the words wouldn't come. I tried, for a second or two, to brace up and out with it, but I warn't man enough—hadn't the spunk of a rabbit. I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying, and up and says—

“He's white.” (67-8)

The difference is clear. Compson's clumsy attempt at affability (“No offense”) does nothing to ameliorate his unabashed bigotry, while Huck, with his “admission” that he's too cowardly to give up Jim, wins us over. In one instance we silently mock the narrator, in the other we silently praise him, but in both cases we are “with” the author.

I'll focus now on some of the proponents of Booth's model. In “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators,” Greta Olson argues for explicit differentiation between two subcategories of unreliable narration—“fallible” and “untrustworthy”—both of which Booth used somewhat interchangeably. Olson, who describes her model as an “amplification” of Booth's, talks about the “unspoken message behind the literal one.” Taking it a step further, Dorrit Cohn suggests that we split the term up officially. In her view, the “factual” sort of unreliability, whereby the narrator is “mis- or dis-informed,” deviates from the “ideological” kind to such a degree that the latter deserves its own category: discordant. Cohn describes the discordant narrator as “normatively inappropriate” and discordant narration in general as something “not explicitly spelled out, [but] silently signaled to the reader behind the narrator's back” (1). William Riggan, whose *Pícaros, Madmen, Naïfs, and Clowns* stands as the only book-length study of the unreliable narrator to date, uses similar language. In Riggan's view, the two overriding types of discrepancy are, again, moral and intellectual, both of which result in secret collusion between author and reader “making the narrator the butt of



obvious satire or of a complex and sustained irony” (36). Once again, the “norms” exemplified by the narrator are at variance with those of the author. Seymour Chatman agrees, though he places greater emphasis on the reader’s role: “[The reader] senses a discrepancy between a reasonable reconstruction of the story and the account given by the narrator. Two sets of norms conflict, and the covert set, once recognized, must win” (233). Of course, this aesthetic distance between narrator and reader had already been covered by Booth: “The narrator may be more or less distant from the *reader’s* own norms” (*RoF* 156, emphasis his); he cites Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as an extreme example.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan identifies three main sources of unreliability: the narrator’s limited knowledge, his or her personal involvement, and his or her problematic value scheme (101). Huck Finn, whose virtues are “silently praised” by Twain (*RoF* 159), falls into the first category. Twain clues us on page one, when Huck reports the supper ritual: “When you got to the table you couldn’t go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there weren’t anything the matter with them.” Jason Compson is clearly an example of a narrator whose value scheme is “problematic” to say the least; as the example above indicates, we’re meant to collude with Faulkner behind his bigoted narrator’s back. Many would cite Nick Carraway from *The Great Gatsby* as an example of reliability hindered by “personal involvement,” but I’m with Booth who concedes that Carraway’s “deep personal concern” drives the story, but that Fitzgerald’s disillusioned observer-narrator is in fact “thoroughly reliable” (*RoF* 176). I’ll be examining this text in chapter six.

My point for now is this: broadly speaking, narrative unreliability in fiction boils down to some sort of moral or epistemological deficiency on the part of the narrator, determinable by means of certain textual markers, local and structural, provided by the author. James Phelan, Booth's highest profile acolyte on the rhetorical team, explains: "[T]he rhetorical model does not privilege authorial intention over textual phenomena or reader response but instead produces a feedback loop among these three components of the rhetorical exchange" (*Living* 59). Phelan's contributions are particularly noteworthy, and I'll be referring to them periodically throughout this paper. I also want to talk about the alternative model: a cognitive/constructivist approach to unreliable narration spearheaded by Tamar Yacobi and Ansgar Nünning. But first I need to broach the controversial concept known as the implied author.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE IMPLIED AUTHOR AND ITS LINK TO THE DEVICE

*We argued that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art....There is hardly a problem of literary criticism in which the critic's approach will not be qualified by his view of "intention."*—W.K. Wimsatt Jr., & Monroe Beardsley, literary critics

It's generally believed that Booth created the concept of the "implied author" as a means of getting around the actual one. It was 1961, and the New Critics were arguing vigorously against authorial intention. Booth, meanwhile, was about to publish a book with *rhetoric* in the title. Clearly he couldn't disown the author altogether; he needed another agent. His description of the term seems to support this idea: "The implied author is always distinct from the 'real man'—whatever we take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself, a 'second self,' as he creates his work" (*RoF* 151). We can take this oft-cited quotation to mean that Booth believes that the author, in the act of creation, is simultaneously creating a mask: attempting to *better* oneself through the work. James Phelan agrees, adding: "Booth's definition of the implied author fits nicely with his overall refutation of the ideal of impersonality" (*Living* 39). This is supported by another of Booth's descriptions:

As [the author] writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal "man in general" but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works....However impersonal [the author] may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner—and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values. (*RoF* 70-71)

Booth's immediate problem was how to argue in favor of authorial rhetoric while steering clear of intentionality. The implied author was ostensibly designed to solve this problem, and the reason for the focus on it here is that the implied author, according to the rhetorical model, is the "yardstick" by which to measure the narrator's reliability. If we do away with the implied author, we destabilize the entire model. Thus I'll briefly explore two questions. (a) Can we actually define the implied author? (b) Has the implied author fulfilled its (semantical, syntactical) purposes?

Booth's followers have offered their own answers. Seymour Chatman originally described the implied author as an entity "*reconstructed* by the reader from the narrative. Not the narrator, but rather the principle that *invented* the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative" (148, emphasis mine). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan calls the implied author the "governing consciousness" of the work and the "*source* of [its] norms" and also "a *construct* inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text" (87-88, emphasis mine). The definition presented in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* is rather lengthy, but it describes the implied author as both the "implicit image of the author in the text" and the agent "accountable" for situations and events therein.

The implied author is "reconstructed" and "invented"; a "source" and a "construct." That it appears to be both an agent of the text's construction *and* embodied in the work itself is clearly a problem, and I'm hardly the first to notice.

Nünning dismisses the implied author as "an anthropomorphized phantom... at best probably indefinable and at worst indefensible" ("Unreliable" 54). Furthermore, he rightly points out that if we accept the implied author as the actual author's *creation*, then

we haven't eliminated authorial agency; we've simply reintroduced it "through the back door." Shedding light on the era in which the term was coined, Mieke Bal claims that the implied author was popular among critics and theorists because "it promised to account for the ideology of the text without condemning its author and vice versa—a very attractive proposition to autonomists of the 60's" (42). Having initially ignored the concept altogether, Gérard Genette offers a comprehensive takedown of the implied author in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, the crux of his argument being that the agency is simply unnecessary; we have an author, a narrator, and a reader and anything else gums up the works. Furthermore, he concurs with Bal's assessment of the concept's timeliness: "At a time when the dissociation between the (real) author and the narrator was not very common, implied author served to mark their difference" (*Revisited* 139). Booth himself echoes this sentiment in his (somewhat ironically) titled "Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?":

My most troubling example of frequent misreadings, as I now remember it, was Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Students consistently identified so fully with Holden Caulfield that they missed the ironic clues that Salinger provided about his hero's faults and weaknesses. Most of Holden's words were taken as if the author wanted everything he said to be read as straight. The critical neglect of the widespread misreading bothered me a lot. ("Resurrection" 76)<sup>3</sup>

In real life, we typically respond to inaccuracy—assuming that the "inaccurate one" is a naive pupil—with some sort of tutelage or training in that specific area of weakness or neglect. We don't create an entirely new gap in the knowledge base and attempt to fill

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<sup>3</sup> This passage represents a Boothian "slip": Who provided the Ironic clues? *Salinger* did.

*that*. It seems to me, then, that the better solution would be to focus on the chasm between the author and the narrator, our preexisting identifiable agents. Instead Booth uses such “misreadings” as a pretext to formulate his theory about the presumed difference between the author and the ghostly surrogate. *That’s the culprit! If only more people could recognize that the author creates a “second self,” then reader response would go so much smoother.* Even within the insular bubble of literary criticism, this seems like something of a leap. (It’s almost like saying that if Mark David Chapman had read Salinger’s book *properly* then maybe, just maybe, we’d still have John Lennon.) Indeed, Booth’s most recent essay on the subject reads at times like an extrapolation on an already amorphous value system: “In every corner of our lives, whenever we speak or write, we imply a version of our character that we know is quite different from many other selves that are exhibited in our flesh-and-blood world” (“Resurrection” 77). Of course we wear masks in our everyday lives; this is axiomatic, but why would we need to “resurrect” the implied author? The term is still employed faithfully within the field of narratology, though I’ve noticed that some theorists have relegated “implied” to parentheses (as if to placate). This gets to the heart of the current debate as I see it: If one encounters the implied author at all, it’s generally within the confines of narrative theory, and even here, one can simply replace “implied author” with “author” in virtually any context.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the only time one finds the implied author emphasized consistently is when (case in point) the implied author *is* the subject matter. Booth himself regularly drops the term, even when it would seem pertinent to his argument: “Our pleasure is

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<sup>4</sup> By comparison, we don’t feel the need to talk about the implied director of *Jaws* or *Schindler’s List*, even though doing so would support the theory in terms of “explaining” how one flesh-and-blood filmmaker could conjure such aesthetically different works.

compounded of pride in our own knowledge, ridicule of the ignorant narrator, and a sense of collusion with the silent *author* who, also knowing the facts, has created the trap for his narrator and for those readers who will not catch the allusion” (*RoF* 304-5, emphasis mine). “At every point we must decide on one out of many possible reconstructions, on the basis of a set of unshakable but silent beliefs that we are expected to share (however fleetingly) with the *author*” (*RoI* 168, emphasis mine). Booth is no longer with us, but I suspect that his defense of these “slips” would have amounted to an economy of words: if placing “implied” before “author” adds nothing to the immediate argument, then why bother? I couldn’t agree more.

The sheer amount of scholarship devoted to defending the implied author is, in my opinion, not helpful. Chatman jumped into the fray with his aptly titled, “In Defense of the Implied Author,” in which he argues that the concept is necessary because it “ensures against simplifying the real reader’s relations with the text and reducing them, as some contextualist theories would, to one more instance of ordinary conversational exchange” (*CtT* 74). Does it really? Even if a “real” reader were to conceptualize something as abstract and unnecessary as an implied author, I fail to see how that would ameliorate any mediation issues that may arise between textual phenomena and reader response. Not that Chatman tries to concretize that either, but he does offer a puzzling hypothetical:

I can say “I admire you” in a tone of voice that conveys precisely the opposite sentiment. Since I am the source of both the ostensible and real message, my interlocutor understands me to be a single speaker delivering a duplex message.

But suppose I tell a first person anecdote in a voice that is obviously not my own, and it becomes clear that the story is ironic, that the “I” ultimately responsible for

the story does not endorse it but is rather making fun of it and of its ostensible narrator—an “I” whom the real I am mimicking. In that instance there are clearly two narrative agents: I, who invented it, and the narrator “I,” whose voice I am imitating. (*CtT* 75)

Here Chatman is arguing that we need the implied author because sometimes the *narrator* is being ironic, and, well, that can be confusing. I could rebut this any number of ways, but I’ll stick with *Catcher in the Rye* for simplicity’s sake. How often is Holden Caulfield being ironic? Often enough, but let’s isolate his go-to phrase of “big deal” to describe any number of situations that he, the narrator, clearly regards as trivial. Following Chatman’s logic, we have Salinger speaking in the voice of a petulant teenager who is given to sarcasm, and for that reason, we need—to avoid confusion—an *implied* Salinger. Or we’re liable to end up thinking that *Holden* thinks that Pencey’s game against Saxon Hall really was a “big deal.” Or we might think that Salinger thinks so. This is Chatman channeling Booth, wielding the only tool they seem to have in their rhetorical shed on this issue: that the implied author is somehow a clarifying agent.

At least James Phelan, another of the implied author’s most ardent defenders, acknowledges the toughness of the sell. He describes the concept as a violation of “Occam’s razor” and he concedes Genette’s point that “insisting on a distinction between the author and the implied author is multiplying entities beyond necessity” (*Living* 45-6). Still, Phelan’s rhetorical nails are dug pretty deep. “Rhetorical theory’s interest not in the author’s private intentions but rather in his or her public, textualized intentions entails locating authorial agency in the implied rather than the actual author” (“Implied” 135). Squint and “public, textualized intentions” becomes plain old “intentions,” though I don’t



think Phelan would see it this way. In a sort of Hail Mary pass aimed at declaring the implied author indispensable, he cites Genette as an unlikely ally: “[As] Genette notes, the [implied author] helps explain such phenomena as hoaxes, ghost-written works, and collaborative works” (*Living* 46). What Phelan neglects to mention is that Genette, having raised the issue only to play devil’s advocate, ultimately declares these instances inapplicable due to their “fraudulent” status (*NDR* 146-7). Parodies are parodies, hoaxes are hoaxes. Ghost-written works are a matter of marketing and collaborative works are sufficiently categorized by the multiple names attributed. Simply put, there’s nothing *implied* in any of these cases. Like Booth, Phelan’s relentless quest to reroute authorial agency while bypassing intentionality is understandable, but unconvincing. At one point he proclaims that “the implied author is not a product of the text but rather the *agent responsible* for bringing the text into existence” (*Living* 45, emphasis mine). Elsewhere he defends locating intentionality in the implied author by saying “that we both come to know an author through reading his or her text and to recognize that the author has a life independent of the identity projected *in the text*” (“Implied” 136, emphasis mine). Again, are we talking about an “agent” of the text’s construction, or an identity “projected” from within? It can’t be both, and therefore the concept is fundamentally unsound. Make no mistake: there *is* an agent behind the text, and thus any textual clues that might serve as a “yardstick” by which we could—arguably—measure narrative reliability. I locate that agency in the actual author, the one whose existence (or prior existence) is not subject to debate.

If he believes it will serve his argument, Booth never shies from weaving in a personal anecdote. (And he likes to drop names.) Here's one from his most recent essay on the implied author:

Some decades ago Saul Bellow dramatized wonderfully the importance of authorial masking, when I asked him, "What're you up to these days?" He said, "Oh, I'm just spending four hours each day revising a novel, to be called *Herzog*." "What does that amount to, spending four hours every day revising a novel?" "Oh, I'm just wiping out those parts of myself that I don't like. ("Resurrection" 77)

Much can be made of this. I'll keep it simple by assuming that Booth means to extrapolate from Bellow's witticism a general truth about writers: that they manipulate their art to increase their likability quotient, hence the creation of an implied author. But Booth neglects to establish any link whatsoever between literary (or in Bellow's case, editorial) prowess and the reader's perception of authorial personhood. Many authors—Gore Vidal, Hubert Selby Jr. and Bret Easton Ellis just to name a few—have made whole careers (not to mention international fan bases) out of doing just the opposite: writing with flagrant disregard for how they'll be perceived publicly.

Of course, no discussion about the implied author would be complete without mentioning its theoretical counterpart, the implied reader. The term was apparently not coined by Booth (as some suspect) but by Wolfgang Iser. According to Iser, the implied reader "incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process" (xii). Likewise,

Gerard Prince (*Dictionary of Narratology*) defines it thus: “The audience presupposed by the text; a real reader’s second self” (43). So here we have the same problem that we had with the implied author: it is functionally an embodiment of the text while simultaneously being “actualized” by an agent outside of it. Other theorists have posited their own iterations: the “authorial” or “ideal” reader or Booth’s own “postulated” reader—each of which alludes to some phantom version of a *crafty* consumer of fiction: the one who “gets” whatever the author/text is supposedly trying to convey. But none of these terms are, for this paper at least, particularly useful. (And all should be distinguished from the “narratee” whom, as the narrator’s direct addressee, is wholly inscribed in the text.) I’m with Genette who presumes readers to be “fully competent. That does not mean superhuman intelligence, but a minimum perspicuity and a good mastery of the codes involved, including, of course, language” (*Revisited* 141).

Without getting into an elitist argument over what makes a “competent” reader, authors who publish are typically writing for a certain type of audience (the publishing industry, or course, demands this). Subtleties and nuances are bound to be lost on many readers, even voracious ones, and when it comes to consuming realist fiction, the line between what is felt and what is realized is often blurry. The author who employs a particular device may be hoping to achieve a certain effect—an effect that is unlikely to be processed by every reader. Booth addresses this issue specifically in terms of unreliable narration: “All of the great uses of unreliable narration depend for their success on far more subtle effects than merely flattering the reader or making him work. Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of *collusion* against all those...who do not get that point” (*RoF* 304, emphasis mine). The desired effect

achieved by unreliable narration—what the author is hoping for—is probably something like the following. The crafty reader gets it, but not all at once. First she detects the local clues: the narrator seems duplicitous or overly defensive. Then, gradually, she notices the structural discrepancies: events taking place in the scenic depictions (story, *mimesis*) are in conflict with what the narrator seems to want us to believe (discourse, *diegesis*). At first the device is merely felt, but eventually it is realized: *The narrator seemed at first to be suspect, but now I see that he is definitely unreliable, thus it's incumbent upon me to piece the real story together.*

But it wouldn't be much fun if *every* reader were so crafty, would it? This is what Booth means by “collusion”: the author wants the attentive reader to feel like part of an in-group, which means that there are some who are left out by necessity. Maybe that is sort of elitist, but it's really the only way for unreliable narration to achieve its full effect. Naturally there are novels in which the narrator's unreliability is perhaps a bit too obvious; the result is like noticing slivers of scaffolding peeking through an otherwise well-built set design. I'll be discussing such a *mimesis*-violating situation in chapter seven.

## CHAPTER 4

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMPETING MODELS

*He was a very loving man. He was always kissing and touching [Jenny] and her sisters.*—Forrest Gump, giving us his interpretation of his friend Jenny's father

The cognitive/constructivist model of unreliable narration, a reader-oriented approach, was conceived as an alternative to Booth's rhetorical model which, the constructivists claimed, placed too much emphasis on textual clues (supposedly) encoded by the author.

Nünning's oft-cited "Unreliable, compared to what? Towards a Cognitive Theory of *Unreliable Narration: Prolegomena and Hypotheses*" has been described by Monika Fludernik and others as a "radical reconceptualization" of the rhetorical approach.

Though Nünning would revise his theory considerably, I argue that even his original thesis was far less radical than its reputation.

Nünning seized upon the flaw in Booth's model: "The trouble with all of the definitions that are based on the implied author is that they try to define unreliability by relating it to a concept that is itself ill-defined and paradoxical" ("But Why" 86). Other

constructivists, like Bruno Zerweck, were content to ignore intentionality altogether:

"unreliability cannot be understood as a purely textual figure but is the *effect* of

interpretive strategies based on textual signals" (155, emphasis his). So we have the

reader and we have textual signals, the agency of which is either indiscernible or

irrelevant or both. The thinking here was this: Booth's argument cements the implied

author as the yardstick by which to measure unreliability. And since we can't define the

implied author, then the rhetorical baby goes out with the theoretical bathwater. In one

sylogistic fell swoop, Nünning and his followers essentially buried both the author (whose intentions we cannot discern) and the surrogate (whose existence we cannot concretize). Here Nünning argues for the reader-oriented approach:

The reader interprets what the narrator says in two quite different contexts. On the one hand, the reader is exposed to what the narrator wants and means to say. On the other hand, however, the statements of the narrator take on additional meaning for the reader, a meaning the narrator is not conscious of and does not intend to convey. Without being aware of it, unreliable narrators continually give the reader indirect information about their idiosyncrasies and state of mind. The peculiar effects of unreliable narration result from the conflict between the narrator's report of the 'facts' on the level of the story and the interpretations and judgements provided by the narrator. ("Unreliable" 58)

For starters, Elke D'hoker points out that Nünning's "interpretations" and "judgements" parallels Booth's "moral" and "intellectual" distance (151). Furthermore, Booth never suggested that the reader is in any way passive. On the contrary, he insists "that the reader must be made to apply himself" (*RoF* 203) and in reference to the Faulkner passage above, he has this to say:

To collaborate with the author by providing the source of an allusion or by deciphering a pun is one thing. But to collaborate with him by providing mature moral judgement is a far more exhilarating sport. In dealing with Jason [Compson], we must *help Faulkner write his work* by rising to our best, most perceptive level. (*RoF* 307-8, emphasis mine)

Looking at this, it seems to me that the gulf between models was never that wide to begin with. Particularly since Booth adds that we reap the full reward of Faulkner's irony by "calling to bear on the passage our linguistic experience, our logical and moral sense, and our past experience with bigots." Sounds an awful lot like frame theory: the basis for the entire cognitive/constructivist approach. According to Johnathan Culler, we account for or "naturalize" textual incongruities by applying our own preexisting frames of reference. This, Culler explains, is the process by which we detect irony:

Irony...is the ultimate form of recuperation and naturalization, whereby we ensure that the text says only what we want to hear. We reduce the strange or incongruous, or even attitudes with which we disagree, by calling them ironic and making them confirm rather than abuse our expectations. (184)

On the most basic level, this would explain why we don't get confused when, during a torrential downpour, a passerby says, "Nice weather we're having!" Detecting irony in literature, however, is a bit more complex. Monika Fludernik—who coined "narrativization" after Culler's "naturalization"—suggests that when "readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent, they cast about for ways and means of *recuperating* these texts as narratives—motivated by the generic markers that go with the book" (34, emphasis mine). And finally, Nünning applies the concept specifically to unreliable narration: "Critics concerned with unreliable narrators arguably *recuperate* textual inconsistencies by relating them to accepted cultural models and stereotypes" ("Unreliable" 60, emphasis mine). This recurring theme of "recuperation" implies the notion of loss: something from the text is missing, and it's incumbent upon the reader to fill the gap. This is the basis of the reader-

oriented approach to unreliable narration, the importance of which cannot be denied. The flesh-and-blood author, if not silent altogether, is clearly biased. The text itself is static and unmotivated. When confronted with incongruent, inconsistent, or otherwise puzzling textual phenomena, who, if not the reader, is in a position to work it out?

But as I've indicated, the rhetorical model was not intended to absolve the reader of responsibility. And then we have the textual data itself. It's important to remember that Booth's thesis is the rhetoric of *fiction*, not (implied) authors. His book is filled with sentiments like this: "Most of us can accept the essential poetic truth first formulated by Aristotle—that each successful imaginative work has its own life, its own soul, its own principles of being" (*RoF* 93). It seems to me that rather than arguing vigorously for encoding, Booth and his followers were more concerned with the linearity of the process: authorial agency gives rise to textual phenomena which the reader then interprets. Again, the logic is difficult to deny: the mere suggestion that "recuperation" is in order implies that there had to be a "germ" of sorts to begin with. Not that the cognitivists, for their part, have denied this either. Culler himself argues that incongruities are neither "arbitrary" nor "incoherent" and Fludernik talks about "scripts with underlying understandings about participants' goals or intentions *feeding into* the process (13, emphasis mine). Once again, Nünning is even more specific: "In addition to internal contradictions and to linguistic clues to subjectivity there are other textual signals of a narrator's unreliability, such as conflicts between story and discourse or between the narrator's representation of events and the explanations and interpretations of them that the narrator gives" ("Unreliable" 65). To this he adds, "The story undermines the discourse. We conclude by 'reading out,' between the lines, that the events and existents



could not have been ‘like that,’ and so we hold the narrator suspect.” Oops. Actually it was Chatman (*Story and Discourse* 233) who said that last part. The point I’m making is that at this stage (mid to late nineties), the competing theorists were more likeminded than they let on. It amounts to what I perceive as a sort of meta-irony: both sides, in defending the virtues of their own model of unreliable narration, left “textual clues” that seem to acknowledge a degree of deference to the other. At least that’s how I naturalize this particular incongruousness.

Meanwhile, the already dominant rhetorical model was being refined and systematized by James Phelan. In *Living to Tell about It*, he explains that the narrator performs three functions: reporter, evaluator, and interpreter, and that each of these “roles” is employed along a particular axis of communication (50). Thus, unreliable reportage occurs along the axis of facts/events/characters; unreliable evaluating (or regarding) occurs along the axis of ethics/values; and unreliable interpretation (or reading) occurs along the axis of knowledge/perception. In getting this specific, however, concrete examples become harder to isolate. Phelan himself describes the boundaries between categories as being “soft and blurry” and he acknowledges that there’s considerable overlap. For example, a narrator who is prone to “misreading” facts and events is liable to “misinterpret” them as well. Furthermore, I’ll point out that Phelan’s axis of facts/events/characters is basically analogous to what Booth had described as “intellectual distance,” and likewise, Phelan’s axis of ethics/evaluation is akin to Booth’s “moral distance,” and I suspect that Phelan would probably agree. But I wonder if his axis of knowledge/perception is a matter of quibbling. We recall that Huck Finn reports accurately that one must “wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals,” and from this we infer that

she is saying grace. Booth would argue that Huck is simply misstating a fact, whereas Phelan would argue that he's misperceiving the event—a difference that, to me, seems slight. But Phelan doesn't stop there. He tiers the degree of potential unreliability by distinguishing between misreporting and underreporting, mis-evaluating and under-evaluating and misinterpreting and under-interpreting. The difference, Nünning points out, can be thought of as the difference between distortion (which we might regard as deliberate) and falling short (which may have an unconscious component). Furthermore, in a separate paper called "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*," Phelan distinguishes between two types of unreliable narration: "bonding" and "estranging." Again, Huck Finn and Jason Compson provide perfect examples. We're endeared to the former because of his innocence reflected in his unreliability, and we're repelled by the latter, whose unreliability reveals him as loathsome.<sup>5</sup>

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On a personal note, I tend not to discuss my writing projects socially. Why be a bore? But with this one, people seem genuinely interested to hear that I've been researching something called the unreliable narrator. They seem mystified by it. The concept is harder for laypeople to grasp than I'd imagined, and providing examples is even trickier. The average Joe has not read Nabokov or Ishiguro, thus Humbert and Stevens are too obscure. People are more likely to have read *Catcher in the Rye*, though probably many years ago (and likely Salinger's craftsmanship went largely undetected). If there's one example that most people will readily know, it's *Forrest Gump*. Gump being a character

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<sup>5</sup> These distinctions will become more helpful when I begin discussing how the unreliable narrator is used for nonfiction, but for now I'm content to describe them as I see them generally: elaborations or rewordings of Booth's original concept.

in a Hollywood film relieves me of having to describe the device in literary terms; I can simply refer to the many discrepancies between the story on the screen and the discourse provided by the voiceover narration. Robert Zemeckis goes to great lengths to depict his narrator as an innocent simpleton, so when Gump describes Jenny's dad as a "loving man" who was always "kissing and touching" Jenny and her sisters, we don't even need to see the man stumbling drunkenly through the cornfield in pursuit of his daughter. We know he's a bad man because we know Gump the way we know Huck Finn. Like Huck, Gump's unreliability—the "bonding" effect—is integral to the story. Whether we diagnose a discrepancy as a "misreport" or a "misinterpretation" is of little importance; it could arguably be both without effecting how we engage with our superior knowledge. I refer to *Forrest Gump* because it's an oversimplified example of the "idiot-narrator" (Rimmon-Kenan 101). There's little debate to be had. Even if we were to read Gump's narration "straight," the incongruities are so glaring that we'd be forced to naturalize them one way or the other. If we take Gump's word that Jenny's father was a "loving man," then we'd be tasked with locating an explanation for her self-destructive behavior. Hence the problem with a model that relies so heavily on reader construction: sometimes the text just isn't compatible with multiple interpretations. But this begs the question, what constitutes unreliable narration, the scope of it?

Tamar Yacobi, whose extensive research into the strategies of naturalization placed her squarely in the cognitive/constructivist camp, developed a system of five mechanisms or "logics of resolution" that could account for textual discordancy. In no particular order, the *existential* (it's incongruous because it's otherworldly); the *functional* (the deviation is compatible with the structural whole); the *perspectival* (a perceptible gap between

author and narrator); the *genetic* (authorial slip-ups including typographical errors); and the *generic* (the oddity is compatible with the genre). Yacobi considered all five to be equally valid. According to Yacobi, authorial agency is only one possible explanation for narrative unreliability. Could just be a typo.

Not to disparage Yacobi. Her contributions are as valid as any theorist's in the field, but as Per Krogh Hansen aptly points out, Yacobi's domain is semiotics and her thesis has to do with fictional "reliability" in a much broader sense (239). I'm merely attempting to account for the unwieldiness of the argument: the Intentional Fallacy, various schools of criticism weighing in, the word "controversial" popping up frequently in my research. Controversy, as we know, makes for great copy, yet I see nothing particularly odious about a literary device, and again, I perceive the divergence between competing models to have been somewhat overblown.

For one thing, neither side ever laid claim to certainty. Booth described the current terminology regarding narrative (un)reliability, his own included, as "hopelessly inadequate," and likewise, Yacobi described her own theoretical approach as "conjecture" that is "open to adjustment, inversion, or even replacement by another hypothesis altogether" ("Authorial Rhetoric" 110). Furthermore, in creating his anthropomorphized phantom, Booth had made a strategic mistake. The implied author was somehow supposed to be an agent of the text *and* an embodiment of the structural whole. Having it serve double duty made it wobbly, forcing Chatman and others to champion an alternate term: the "inferred" author, and of course the opposition capitalized on the rift.

And Nünning, in his bid to elevate interpretive strategies over authorial agency, failed as well. His argument rested on this: “whether a narrator is called unreliable or not does not depend on the distance between the norms and values of the narrator and those of the implied author but between the distance that separates the narrator’s view of the world from the reader’s world-model and standards of normality” (“But why” 101). His go-to examples, which appear in several of his writings, are that a pederast would not find anything “wrong” with *Lolita* and that 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 McEwan’s ‘Dead as they Come’” (“Unreliable” 61). But these assertions, which were picked up and recirculated by everyone in Nünning’s camp, are completely baseless. One’s sexual proclivity—be it nymphets or department store mannequins—has no connection at all with one’s ability to detect dramatic irony. Booth agrees that the reader will “have greatest difficulty detecting irony that mocks his own beliefs or characteristics.” However he clarifies by saying, “No complex piece of irony can be read merely with tests or devices or rules” (*RoI* 81). Regardless, if we can at least agree that there *is* agency behind the work, then that implies some degree of intentionality that no peccadillo on the reader’s part is going to undo.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, though, it seems that both sides have been waving the white flag. Compare these two quotes from Nünning, published six years apart:

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<sup>6</sup> I actually looked into this: we do not recruit sexual deviants for narratological study. I’d be intrigued if we did, and quite eager to see the data, but we don’t. We all know that narrative theory is more art than science, but I think that, as scholars, we ought to be wary of hubris masquerading as logic.

I will contend that we can define unreliable narration neither as a structural nor as a semantic aspect of the textbase alone, but only by taking into account the conceptual frameworks that readers bring to a text. (“Unreliable” 60)

[W]hether a narrator is regarded as unreliable not only depends on the distance between the norms and values of the narrator and those of the text as a whole (or of the implied author) but also on the distance that separates the narrator’s view of the world from the reader’s or critic’s world-model and standards of normalcy.... (“Reconceptualizing” 95)

Though essentially making the same point twice, the difference is striking. A cognitive/constructivist talking about “norms and values” and allowing room (if only parenthetically) for the implied author? In the same paper he credits Phelan with having “developed the most systematic and useful classification of kinds of unreliability to date, while also addressing some of the most important theoretical issues regarding the problem of narrative unreliability.”<sup>7</sup> And Phelan, for his part, concedes in one of his more recent papers that when it comes to unreliable narration, the implied author is “not a major issue” (“Estranging” 9). Not quite the olive branch that Nünning seems to have extended, but still. The gap has narrowed considerably. Phelan maintained all along that unreliable narration could be located in a “tripartite structure” or “feedback loop” between the author, textual phenomena, and reader response. And finally “agreement has been reached,” Nünning states, “that ascriptions of unreliability involve the recursive

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<sup>7</sup> I should indicate that Mary Patricia Martin—who along with Phelan coauthored “The Lessons of Weymouth: Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics and *The Remains of the Day*”—is credited here as well.

relationship among the author, whether implied or not, textual phenomena, and reader response” (“Reconceptualizing” 104).

Which is essentially what Booth had said back in 1961. Every theorist since credits Booth with having coined the term “unreliable narrator,” but his contribution went far beyond that. He canonized the term with a loose definition on page 158 of his seminal work, but he returned to it frequently throughout *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, fleshing out examples, refining and re-conceptualizing as he went along. And he was humble about it. In addition to the admission of “hopeless inadequacy,” he was adamant that more work could—and should—be done. Today we have “fallible” and “untrustworthy,” “bonding” and “estranging,” “discordant,” etc. We have much clearer distinctions between benighted fools and bigots, madmen and clowns. But to this day, when it comes to unreliable narration, it’s still Booth’s shoulders upon which we all stand.

## CHAPTER 5

### SPOTTING THE MARKERS AND ESTABLISHING RELEVANCY

*Just don't be a sucker, okay, a lot of these people, these indigenous types, they got plenty of money to smoke crack and gamble and all that shit.*—Tony Soprano, clearly having bungled the word “indigent,” admonishes his daughter, Meadow, over her decision to volunteer at the South Bronx Law Center (The Sopranos 43<sup>rd</sup> episode, “The Weight”)

Both sides have always agreed that narrative unreliability is characterized by distance, the main disagreement being how to measure it. The nature of the distance has been hotly debated as well. Is it intellectual or ideological? Clearly it's both. When engaging with a Huck Finn or a Forrest Gump, the sphere is intellectual. We're in the hands of a naïf or benighted fool who, though well-meaning, is a bit slow. We collude with the author, with whom we share superior knowledge, but that's only part of the fun. The real fun is in rooting for the hero, whose adventures are wrought with obstacles and challenges and whose limited worldview is both a hindrance and a blessing. We co-adventure with this fool, trusting that the author has some sort of life lesson in store for us. When dealing with a narrator like Jason Compson, the sphere is clearly ideological. This is inherently more complex, as the critical history has shown, because now we're in the realm of “norms and values” which everyone agrees is rather vague and nearly impossible to locate. But if we put aside the “yardstick” issue, I think we can gain a clearer understanding of what's at play when an author employs a narrator whose morals are suspect.

Recall Compson's dialogue: “I give every man his due,” he says, “regardless of religion or anything else. I have nothing against jews as an individual... it's just the race.” The sheer amount of ignorance and duplicity that Faulkner packs into those two sentences



should, I would think, be enough to ting the average reader's antennae. But even if it weren't, there'd be a secondary problem: If Compson were in any way reliable, why is he so obtuse? How would a bigot (imagine one reading Faulkner) go about reconciling Compson's "norms"—which we can assume the bigot would find agreeable—with his glaring incoherence? While that question may not be altogether answerable, I believe that our familiarity with this device is greater than we think. Take Tony Soprano or Archie Bunker. Their buffoonery—ranging anywhere from the wildest misconstruing of events to the subtlest mangling of grammar—is always on display. Showrunners Norman Lear and David Chase were constantly reminding us that these are wrongheaded people; to have portrayed them as eloquent would not only have been irresponsible, but artless. Like Booth says of Compson, “We watch him while this Vice reveals himself for our contempt, our hatred, our laughter, and even—so strong is the effect of his psychological vitality—our pity” (*RoF* 307). We laugh at these idiots and on a deeper level we pity them. They violate what Chatman calls our “general cultural codes” and, thanks to our cognitive frames, we *get* that. Otherwise we'd be in the hands of “reliable” bigots and sociopaths—which is entirely possible. The following is from a well-known novel published in 1980:

I opened the door, and four Negroes came pushing into the apartment before I could stop them....My first thought was that they were robbers. Robberies of this sort had become all too common since the Cohen Act, with groups of blacks forcing their way into White homes to rob and rape, knowing that even if their victims had guns they probably would not dare use them.

This is the opening scene from *The Turner Diaries*, a novel published by William Luther Pierce, founder of the National Alliance, a now-defunct hate group. The book, published under the penname Andrew Macdonald, is notoriously credited with providing the blueprint for the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Even without access to Pierce's biographical data, it's clear that we're meant to trust Earl Turner, Pierce's racist, anti-Semitic narrator; there are no textual clues to the contrary. Even if Turner were to experience an *anagnorisis* and renounce his views, he would still be thoroughly reliable as defined by Booth. All this back and forth about the indeterminacy of norms and values, and by which "yardstick" should narrative reliability be measured—these issues, I feel, have been blown out of proportion. If the narrator is unreliable, there will be markers. No markers, no reason to assume unreliability. Granted, it may not be *that* simple, and concepts such as "norms" and "values" are problematic for sure. Split subjectivity has provided the basis for innumerable modern and postmodern works of fiction and nonfiction alike, and I would never argue that the author is obligated to render the work unambiguously. But when it comes to unreliable narration, I believe that certain theorists, eager to argue, have contributed to the discourse in a way that creates needless confusion.

Nünning and his followers argued (repeatedly) that a pederast who reads *Lolita* would find Humbert completely reliable—an example so neat that everyone ignored the logical fallacy. Following Nünning's logic, we'd have to believe that a pederast, who is not even capable of *understanding* the wrongness of the activity, would unequivocally root for Humbert without even noticing the consequences. Furthermore, if we accept Nünning's argument, then we'd have to accept that the opposite holds true: a tolerant reader would

find Pierce's narrator, Earl Turner, to be unreliable. Putting aside the literary merits of both authors, each one has gone on the record to discuss the controversies surrounding their novels. Nabokov, who'd faced accusations of treating his narrator too sympathetically, had this to say: "Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides Nymphets, in which I disagree with him."<sup>8</sup> William Pierce, aka Andrew Macdonald, can be found all over the internet, smugly espousing his racist ideology and hence the *lack* of distance between himself and his narrator.

But if you believe that narrative unreliability should be measured by the distance between the reader and narrator only, then you must believe that one's norms and values determine one's interpretive strategies, and that interpretation somehow nullifies intent. If a listener fails to pick up on your sarcasm, then does it cease to be sarcasm? This, I believe, was Nünning's folly, and the reason why the rhetorical model prevailed. If you happen to be alone in the forest when the tree falls, then congratulations, you just colluded with nature without us. But our silence doesn't equal your noise. Distance counts, but at some point we have to agree that where we stand determines what we hear, not what actually occurred.

So why is any of this relevant? With the exception of Lena Dunham's book, the most recent title I've cited thus far is four decades old, and with the possible exception of Holden Caulfield, the polemical nature of unreliable narration has generally remained within the confines of literary and narrative theory. Fiction writers will continue to face criticism about their controversial narrators, and autobiographers will always be accused of being too *unlike* their narrative personas, but considering the prevalence of social

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<sup>8</sup> From "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed Vintage Int'l, 1997, p. 315.

media, and a form of internet vigilantism known as “online shaming,” it’s arguable that understanding unreliable narration—effective encoding and strategic interpretation—has never been so relevant because the stakes have never been so high.

If you’ve never heard of Justine Sacco, that’s probably because you don’t remember her name. I’m sure she’d prefer it that way. A public relations executive at thirty, Sacco’s future seemed bright. And like a lot of millennials, she was a big fan of social media, especially Twitter. Personally I’ve never understood the appeal, but apparently a user can send a “tweet” up to 140 characters, which means that any number of Twitter’s estimated 300 million “active” users are regularly publishing their inner monologues at a neat clip—rarely if ever a good idea in my opinion. And in the case of Justine Sacco, there was one tweet in particular. Known among her 170 Twitter followers as an acerbic jokester, she’d been documenting her travels en route to South Africa for vacation when she tweeted the following: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”

I remember seeing it in the news. It was *that* newsworthy, because it was a perfect storm of events. A young white woman posts a tweet that not only appears racially and culturally insensitive, but chillingly dismissive of the millions of lives affected by this horrible disease. And then she boarded an international flight, whereupon her electronic devices were rendered inoperable. Over the next eleven hours, “has-Justine-landed-yet” became the number one trending topic on Twitter, which is no small thing. Before she’d touched down—and hence before she was aware of what was happening—she’d been fired by her employer and was being pilloried by thousands of bloodthirsty strangers. Her flight information had been publicized, and there were reports of people gathered in

pubs around the world, tracking her flight's progress like it was a sporting event. But really, it was more like a twenty-first century cyber lynching.

To date, Justine Sacco has spoken to only one journalist, a man named Jon Ronson, author of *So You've been Publicly Shamed*. Featured as a case study in Ronson's book, Sacco was able to tell her side of the story in more than 140 characters: "To me, it was so insane a comment for an American to make I thought there was no way that anyone could possibly think it was a literal statement. I know there are hateful people out there who don't like other people and are generally mean. But that's not me" (73). I believe her. Although I think that her tweet would have been problematic regardless. There was simply no way that her following, meager as it was, was going to be 100% on board with a racially-tinged AIDS joke. Even if her *irony* was interpretable, the tastelessness would've surely offended someone. Sacco's networking service of choice, Twitter, was not only the worst possible platform to employ unreliable narration, but she'd forgotten the most important thing: markers. This is fairly significant. Better to not publish material that could be construed as racially offensive on social media. That's number one. But if you simply must mock white privilege by sounding like someone steeped in it, then you'd better leave a clue—a strategically italicized word at least, an emoticon maybe. But she didn't. Thus her comment was measured by the only available yardstick: the text and everyone's gut reaction to it. Pederasty is no joking matter either, and though Nabokov may have had some explaining to do, he was never accused of *being* Humbert. Justine Sacco will forever be the actual person who said, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" If you don't believe me, just Google Justine Sacco.

## CHAPTER 6

### NICK CARRAWAY IS DISSILUSIONED, BUT RELIABLE

*The younger Nick as a “lucid reflector” in the [Henry] James manner would be an unreliable witness to events. As it is, the older Nick provides thoroughly reliable guidance.*—Wayne Booth

Google “Nick Carraway unreliable narrator” and a slew of links will appear, many in the form of blogposts or term papers uploaded by lit students at the college or graduate level. In skimming these posts and seeing the word “classic” or “textbook” unreliable narrator so frequently ascribed, one gets the sense that this attribution has been handed down rather uncritically. Nick Carraway *is* unreliable; that’s what I had always believed. But really, Fitzgerald’s curious observer, the one (un)wittingly sucked into the abyss of the American dream whilst summering with the upper crust—does he really fit the mold of the unreliable narrator?

Critics have been divided since the beginning, and there’s no simple answer. Riggan (*Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns*) mentions *The Great Gatsby* only in passing, referring to Fitzgerald’s narrator as “disillusioned” but never unreliable. Likewise, Booth—if my epigraph is any indication—doesn’t seem to believe that Carraway qualifies.

There are certain lines, or narrative utterances, in *Gatsby* that critics cite as markers for narrative unreliability; the first appears smack on page one, but I’ll get to that in a moment. Another appears at the very end of chapter three as a declarative statement made by Carraway directly to his narratee: “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (59). James Phelan, among many others, holds this up as proof positive that

Carraway doth protest too much (*NaR* 115), and Kathleen Wall's claim that "Carraway's assertion of his honesty, *after it is made several times*, becomes suspect" (19, emphasis mine). In fact, this is the *only* instance where Carraway asserts his honesty, and clipped out of context, yes—it does appear overly defensive. But I believe there's much more at play here. The full line reads:

Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this one is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.

More than a mere line, the above is a paragraph at chapter's end. Its salience, clearly, was not meant to be missed, but the full context, I argue, often is. The scene immediately preceding this line (58) is the one where Jordan Baker, driving terribly, makes a favorable miscalculation of Carraway, whom she's dating:

"[Other drivers will] keep out of my way," she insisted. "It takes two to make an accident."

"Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself?"

"I hope I never will," she answered. "I hate careless people. That's why I like you."

It's at this point that *narrating*-Nick reveals—to us, not Jordan Baker—an ongoing "tangle back home" with an unnamed woman to whom he's been "writing letters once a week and signing them: 'Love Nick.'" He admits to being less than honest with both women. Two lines later he flat out asserts his honesty to the narratee. Thus far, my argument would seem to be on life support. But we gain a fuller reading of this scene when we realize that it mirrors the one on page 177:

"Oh, and do you remember"—she added—"a conversation we had once about driving a car?"

"Why—not exactly."

“You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? Well, I met another bad driver, didn’t I? I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride.”

Juxtaposed, the two scenes represent a thematic whole, loaded with meaning. Baker, who had previously flaunted her carelessness, now laments it. Her original assessment of Carraway as “careful” was premature, and now she’s calling him a liar to his face—unnecessarily harsh, perhaps, but not far off. What’s happening is that *narrating*-Nick is admitting to us that *hero*-Nick had behaved uncommendably. Yes, he had been dishonest. But it’s important to remember that his narrative is progressing along an arc, and so is his “character.”

James Phelan describes character-narration (homodiegetic) in terms of functionality: the narrator’s job is to report, interpret, and evaluate the events for the narratee (or simply the reader) and the character’s job, in realist fiction, it to serve a mimetic function (*Living* 12). Put another way, the hero is at the mercy of the narrator, even though—regardless of whether we’re talking about first-person fiction or nonfiction—these two are the “same” person. But they exist on different ontological levels; the narrator is older, wiser, clearer, healthier, etc., and that’s presumably why we’re reading. A prime example of this would be the subgenre of creative nonfiction known as addiction or “misery” memoir. You know that joke about junkies: How can you tell when one is lying? His lips are moving.<sup>9</sup> It’s probably needless to cite an example here; if you’ve ever read one of these tomes, you realize that in virtually every scene, the “hero” is in some phase of denial. The behavior depicted is often outrageous, even heinous, and while we may hold the narrator

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<sup>9</sup> Yes, all junkies are males ☺



accountable for those actions, we don't confuse the agency. Says Phelan, "the homodiegetic narrator's retrospective perspective may drop out and the character's action may be presented for the reader's judgment.... That is, the [author] leaves the reader to infer the appropriate conclusions from the scene" (*NaR* 112).

Narrating-Nick is in a fixed temporal position, penning a memoir from his writer's desk in the Midwest. (Or if you prefer, Fitzgerald has created a fictive author named Nick Carraway, but for my argument's sake, they're one and the same.) Carraway, the writer, is not only deploying all the dialogue, but structuring his material strategically. He sets up the first scene with Baker to foreshadow the later scene, at which point the hero has progressed. Unpack the various "Nicks" temporally: hero-Nick gets complimented (albeit backhandedly) by Baker early in the novel and he remains silent—falling for her, he doesn't want to spoil his so-far, so-good image—but narrating-Nick informs *us* of his duplicity. When Baker accuses Carraway of dishonesty late in the novel, hero-Nick has already begun his *anagnorisis*—not quite the awareness level of narrating-Nick, but getting there. Narrating-nick does not assert his honesty here, when Baker calls him out—*that* would be suspect. He does it when he foreshadows, closer to the opening prologue, so we can stay attuned to the fact that the narrator is not the same person he was back in New York. In fact, Carraway's habit of *not* commenting on some of his more unflattering scenes—the process Phelan describes above—is, if anything, a sign of his reliability. Like the recovering addict documenting his most egregious behavior, we prefer that he not defend himself at every turn. A junkie, after stealing his friend's drugs, feigns bewilderment over the missing stash and proceeds to "aid" his friend in a fruitless search. We know that's twisted. We don't need the narrator's commentary.

And then we have the aforementioned line at the beginning of the novel, “I’m inclined to reserve all judgements” (1)—another oft-cited “marker” of unreliability since, as critics are quick to point out, Carraway judges other characters quite openly, beginning on the following page when he describes Gatsby as having “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn.” But as Booth reminds us, this is the “older Nick,” commenting not on his feelings toward Gatsby (who, unbeknownst to us, is dead), but on his own gullibility and guilt, of which we know nothing at this point. What’s at issue here is not narrative unreliability; it’s simply the narrator establishing an ontological distance from his younger self, which is often the basis for the tension driving first-person narration.

Thomas E. Boyle begins his essay, “Unreliable Narration in *The Great Gatsby*,” with the line, “I know you will accept my remarks in the spirit in which they are offered—arrogance.” (How reliable is that?) After referring to Carraway as “shallow, confused, hypocritical, and immoral,” he proceeds to pick apart various passages from the book, including the scene where Gatsby claims to hail from the Midwest, specifically “San Francisco.” Boyle remarks, “Nick’s response is ‘I see.’ What, in fact, does Nick see? Is our response to Gatsby’s unbelievable ignorance of geography the same as the narrator’s?” By this point Boyle (quoting Booth) has already described what he detects to be considerable “distance” between Carraway and the reader, and now he’s suggesting that “San Francisco” is meant to be an in-joke between Fitzgerald and us. This is just plain absurd. Of course Carraway, who is from the Midwest, knows the geography and that Gatsby is full of it; that’s the whole point. (The real question would be why Gatsby hadn’t worked out a better backstory.) Clearly Carraway is parceling out Gatsby’s

speciousness to us, and doing so with a bit of wit. Equally absurd is that other critics have cited this same passage as evidence of Carraway's ambivalence toward the truth. Remember, these men had just met. Who among us ever calls out a new acquaintance to his face? Particularly when said acquaintance is taking us to a fancy lunch (clearly Carraway, with Gatsby at the table, harbored no anxiety over his light wallet). And then there's Gary J. Scrimgeour, whose "Against *The Great Gatsby*" is equally effusive. Not only does he share Jordan Baker's view of Carraway at the end (as though she's at all trustworthy), but he judges Nick harshly for shaking hands with Tom—as though romantic ineptitude and avoiding social embarrassment are traits of the loathsome. Critic Kent Cartwright and others accuse Carraway of being a "better friend toward Gatsby in death than in life," and they disparage him for allowing Gatsby's grieving father to go on believing that his son had "helped build up the country" (168). What should Carraway have done? Informed the old man—at his boy's funeral, no less—that Gatsby was in fact a bootlegger and a racketeer? *Just thought you ought to know, sir.*

To argue, as some critics have, that Carraway "knows more than he tells" is meritless. There's nothing to indicate that salient events are missing or have been distorted, and surely we don't need a blow by blow of the entire summer. (Even with the tightest narratives, the ones taking place over the course of a single day, we're kindly spared every butt scratch and bathroom visit.) In the same breath, the Carraway critics argue that he "tells more than he knows"—which is to say that he lacks self-awareness and that Fitzgerald is mocking him behind his back. On the contrary, Fitzgerald fortifies his narrator with subjective musings: key insights often at the end of a paragraph, woven into

context, which serve as clues to his wisdom. Indeed, “I’m one of the few honest people that I have ever known,” could arguably qualify. Another example appears on page 104: “It is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended your own powers of adjustment.” As Dorrit Cohn explains, “[The] narrator may verbalize his or her ideas gnomically, by way of generalizing judgmental sentences that are grammatically set apart from the narrative language by being cast in the present tense” (*DN* 1). Carraway’s inclination to “reserve all judgments” is often quoted out of context. I suggest we examine the full line as well as the one that follows:

I’m inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person...

Here we have another one of Carraway’s gnostic insights, this one concerning the “abnormal mind” and its keenness for recognizing and recruiting unwitting accomplices. Narrating-Nick realizes that he’d been an easy mark: a Midwestern rube, he was seduced and manipulated, and he knows that he’d compromised his integrity. Participating slyly in Gatsby’s plan to steal Daisy from Tom—the machinations of which resulted not only in Gatsby’s death, but that of Myrtle and George Wilson as well—is clearly something that haunts Carraway (hence the writing). Scene after scene he reveals his flaws, quite openly, and self-consciousness should not be confused with unreliable narration—which, I believe, is really the mistake the “Carra-haters” make: they fail, either to understand or to acknowledge, the temporal distance between Nicks. We know that hero-Nick needs work. We also know that narrator and hero exist on different ontological levels, but they

remain on the same plane psychologically. If there's any "winking" going on between Fitzgerald and the reader, it's when the rest of them speak, not Nick. Fitzgerald mocks Gatsby for his artifice, Daisy for her vapidness, Tom for his intolerance, etc. Considering all the pettiness and moral bankruptcy displayed by the cast, Carraway is easily the most trustworthy of all.

A basic understanding of the novel's structure reveals not only that Carraway has grown, but that he's taking strides to express himself honestly. As the character-narrator of a tale in which he participates, Carraway knows the whole story from the get-go, but he's self-aware enough to realize that he must earn the reader's trust. He begins with some sage advice from his father—words that he'd been "turning over in his mind." Narrating-Nick's claim that he "reserves all judgments" signifies two things: first, it explains the passivity of hero-Nick, whom we have yet to meet, and second, it hints at the unflattering images to come. Yes, he "reserved" his judgements, as per his nature, and there were consequences for doing so. Had he not been so gutless back in New York, perhaps he could have saved some lives. And this, I believe, is the key to understanding Fitzgerald's narrator. As a "reliable" author of autobiographical prose, Carraway is prepping us for some tawdry stuff:

I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever....I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart....what foul dust floated in the wake of [Gatsby's] dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (2)

Now compare those "glimpses" with the final words of the novel:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us....So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

The opening passage serves as a prologue: a sketch of the disillusionment that Carraway has, for the most part, come to terms with. The final passage employs the same voice only less jaded, and with a hint of optimism. Everything in between is reportage and reflection: a fairly accurate simulation of a circularly-structured work of autobiographical prose. So to claim, as many have, that Carraway remains static from start to finish is to miss the point entirely.

Booth notes that “choice of the first person is sometimes unduly limiting; if the “I” has inadequate access to necessary information, the author may be led to improbabilities” (*RoF* 150). There’s one such improbability in *Gatsby*, a big one. So for those of you still determined to peg Nick Carraway as an unreliable narrator, look no further than chapter eight. Beginning on page 156, Carraway reports a scene that had taken place at Wilson’s garage—a scene that he did not witness. Fitzgerald weaves it in subtly: “Now I want to go back a little and tell what happened at the garage after we left there the night before.” From here he proceeds for several pages with detailed scenic reportage: Wilson and the “young Greek” Michaelis alone in Wilson’s garage, speculating over the death of Wilson’s wife the previous night.<sup>10</sup> This conversation leads ultimately to Gatsby’s demise, and while one could argue that Michaelis must have supplied Carraway with the information, that theory doesn’t wash. As Phelan points out: “As long as we are operating with the logic of strict mimesis, we would have to acknowledge that

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of this curious paralipsis, see chapter five of Phelan’s *Narrative as Rhetoric*.

Michaelis's account could not have been as careful, detailed, and precise as Nick's narration is" (*NaR* 108). Indeed. Even if Carraway had interviewed Michaelis and taken scrupulous notes, that still wouldn't explain such minutiae as "The hard brown beetles kept thudding against the dull light" (157) or "[Wilson's] eyes narrowed and his mouth widened slightly" (158).

But frame theory dictates that we can somehow naturalize this incongruity. Because we're aware of the unreliable narrator as a device, we could simply call Carraway's bluff. *Look, he made it all up! He's an unreliable narrator!* But there's no reason to suspect that Carraway would fabricate an entire scene, the importance of which we learn in the coming pages. And besides, there's a more plausible explanation. As Phelan explains, "By having Nick narrate the scene in his own voice as if he were there on Michaelis's shoulder, Fitzgerald both gives the narration some continuity with Nick's other reporting and invests the scene with authority" (*NaR* 109). Phelan makes a good case. We need the details in order to put the narrative pieces together—how Daisy running down Wilson's wife leads to Wilson killing Gatsby and then himself—and summarizing such a crucial scene would likely have hindered our ability to make the necessary inferences. Still, I can't help but think that Fitzgerald could have conveyed the information without violating mimesis. For instance, Carraway could have indicated that he had in fact gotten the details from Michaelis, and then maybe he could have presented his own account as an "unusually vivid dream" once he was "finally, briefly able to fall asleep." But even as I write this, I realize that I'm reaching. As Phelan points out, "One small sign of [Fitzgerald's] success is that most readers do not even register the paralipsis as anomalous" (*NaR* 109). I certainly didn't.

Fitzgerald needed the scene for narrative purposes, and placing his narrator there would've been unfeasible, so he simply put down the rule book. Of course we've seen this before. Booth reminds us of Ishmael's "momentary relaxation" whereby he "break[s] through his human limitations when the story requires" (*RoF* 160). We notice (or maybe we don't) that Melville's narrator lapses into omniscience at certain moments, at times he exits altogether. In *Living to Tell about It*, Phelan describes "telling functions," splitting the term up into "narrator functions" and "disclosure functions," the former being the information that the narrator is capable of having and the latter being the information that the author *needs* to convey. And guess where the buck stops. Says Phelan, "But of course it makes sense that disclosure functions *ultimately* trump narrator functions since the communication between [author and reader] ultimately subsumes that between narrator and narratee" (*Living* 14, emphasis his). Simply put, the limitations of Carraway's first-person narration are subordinate to Fitzgerald's need to show us, in detail, what happened that night at Wilson's Garage. It's a beautifully written scene, thus I give Fitzgerald a pass. The quality of the prose amply justifies the mimetic departure.



## CHAPTER 7

### STEVENS IS UNRELIABLE, BUT TRANSPARENT

*There is a kind of over-formality to Stevens's language...which suggests that something else is being said beneath its carefully polished surface, or at least that the narrator is straining to limit the range of discourse, to frame it in such a way that things he doesn't want the reader to see are kept out of sight.—Adam Parkes, author of Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day**

*[Stevens is] completely transparent, one of the most dependable "unreliable" narrators ever imagined: he can fool himself, but he doesn't fool us for a second.—Terrance Rafferty, critic*

One of the interesting things about Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is how flat and tedious a read it *would* be if Stevens, the narrator, were even remotely reliable. An aging English butler in postwar Europe, Stevens is so stuffy and pedantic that his sheer lack of self-awareness becomes the whole of the story's intrigue. Ishiguro is extremely precise, and he does a (mostly) masterful job of whispering the "real" story while his narrator remains the butt of a long and at times cringe-worthy joke. Stevens has built his life on mythmaking: shrouds of denial in which he has cocooned himself, thus his relationship with reality is never fully discernable. Ishiguro himself has described his narrator as "a kind of grotesque...a kind of exaggeration" ("Ishiguro in Toronto 45-46, quoted in Gehlawat 495). Indeed.

If a "classic" or "textbook" example of unreliable narration exists, *The Remains of the Day* is it. In fact, "The Lessons of Weymouth: Homodiegesis, unreliability, Ethics, and *The Remains of the Day*" by James Phelan and "*The Remains of the Day* and its challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration" by Kathleen Wall are two of the most

oft-cited papers on the subject.<sup>11</sup> It would appear that Phelan based his model, at least partially, on this book. Not only does the narrator exhibit signs of unreliable narration across all three of Phelan's axes, but across each of his subcategories as well. When Stevens confesses to *possibly* misremembering the source of a hurtful remark made to him concerning his father, we have faulty factual and/or ethical reportage with a likely bit of misinterpretation thrown in for good measure:

In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. (60)

The remark in question appears on the previous page: "These errors may be trivial in themselves, Mr. Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance." Loaded with meaning, examples like this are numerous, multifaceted, and often ambiguous. Stevens routinely mis- or underreports, mis- or under-interprets, and mis- or under-evaluates any number of facts, situations, or motives involving himself and other characters. The differences, as Phelan points out, can be slight and are subject to debate. Stevens is clearly a slave to his own fragile psyche, hence we can never really be certain of what *he* believes. In this respect, Phelan's axis of knowledge/perception, wobbly as it seems, gains some traction. Ultimately, Phelan's thesis has to do with the ethics of superior knowledge. He asks: if we attempt to disambiguate certain crucial scenes, what do our conclusions say about us as people? Do we see "foolish Brits who simply can't talk directly to each other," (*Living* 62) or do our hearts break in sympathy, or both?

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<sup>11</sup> I'll be referencing Phelan's updated version, which appears as chapter one of *Living to Tell about It*.

Kathleen Wall's focus is on Ishiguro's formalism: the means by which his narrator's unreliability is conveyed to us. Stevens is characterized by his diction; he employs a series of verbal habits to which we become accustomed. The text is rife with variations on "let me make myself clear" or "let me explain," and what becomes clear is that Stevens—consciously or unconsciously—is overcompensating. Likewise, his habit of shifting to the indefinite pronoun "one" to avoid self-attribution, or to "you" to implicate his narratee, is another thinly-veiled attempt at obfuscation. Ishiguro never lets us forget how defensive and deluded his narrator is, thus rendering much of what he says suspect. Easily spotted, these verbal clues—or "tics" as Wall calls them—are just as easily deciphered. Steven's repeated use of the word "professional" to describe his relationship with Miss Kenton betrays the very *personal* motive behind his trip to see her. Likewise, the concept of "dignity"—the sheer ubiquity of it—serves as cover for other, less palatable, emotions that cannot or will not be openly acknowledged. In fact, Stevens's inability to process his feelings is reflected structurally as well as verbally; disparities between his scenic representations and his commentary raises the larger question of when, exactly, to believe him. As David Lodge points out, "If everything [the narrator] says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction" (154-5).

One of the more successful (and subtle) devices Ishiguro employs is what Genette calls *analepsis* or flashback. The order in which Ishiguro deploys them is crucial. Whenever Stevens finds himself ruminating on one of his more troubling memories, he reflexively *corrects* himself. Unable to admit his love for Miss Kenton and his regret over losing her so many years earlier, he "digresses" into an aside having to do with staff members who,

much to his chagrin, allow romance to “distract” them from their professional duties (51). Reticent to acknowledge that Lord Darlington, to whom Stevens had devoted so many years of loyal service, was in fact a Nazi sympathizer, Stevens “drifts” into an anecdote having to do with the importance of fine silver and how, on one particularly important occasion, his superb polishing skills may have actually “made a small, but significant contribution toward the easing of relations” (136). Quite often with Stevens, the digression is actually heart of the matter, whereas the story proper is mere subterfuge. And then there’s Stevens’s faulty memory, which Ishiguro weaves in deftly. There’s a scene where Stevens reports his *suspicion* that Miss Kenton is crying in her room:

News of [her aunt’s] death had arrived some hours earlier....I made my exit and it was not until after I had done so that it occurred to me I had not actually offered my condolences....But then it occurred to me that if I were to do so, I might easily intrude on her private grief. Indeed, it was not impossible that Miss Kenton, at that very moment, and only a few feet from me, was actually crying. (176)

The scene feels sort of tangential at first. Then, 36 pages later, the thread resurfaces:

One memory in particular has preoccupied me [through] the years. It is a recollection of standing alone in the back corridor before the closed door of Miss Kenton’s parlour....I had been struck by the conviction that behind that very door, just a few yards from me, Miss Kenton was in fact crying. (212)

Then, several pages later, while revisiting the memory of Miss Kenton’s engagement and her subsequent departure from Darlington Hall, Stevens appears to have an epiphany:

And that was the moment, I am now sure, that has remained so persistently lodged in my memory [that] just a few yards away, on the other side of that door, Miss Kenton was at that moment crying. (226)

At first he had conflated the memory (or rather the suspicion) of her crying with the news of her aunt's death. Then he ponders the event abstractedly before finally situating it with the night he officially lost her to another man. And in the end we suspect that perhaps it was Stevens himself who was crying, for we'd seen this sort of ambiguity elsewhere. There's the scene where Stevens describes hearing "angry footsteps" following one of his passive-aggressive quarrels with Miss Kenton, who then accuses Stevens of "stamping" around (215-16). We can't be sure who was responsible for the commotion (probably both), but it doesn't matter. Both characters are deeply repressed, and their tendency to project their emotions onto each other is par for the course.

Other examples of incongruity between story and discourse are, in my view, less successful. On three separate occasions we infer, via the dialogue, that Stevens has been crying. We know him well enough to know that he'd never admit to grieving, let alone weeping openly, and unlike the aforementioned scene outside Miss Kenton's door, there's no ambiguity; three separate characters make the situation abundantly clear, one going so far as to offer Stevens a handkerchief (243). Knowing how determined Stevens is to remain "clothed in public" (210), we have to wonder why he'd implicate himself so clearly to his narratee. After all, Stevens—like Nick Carraway—is supposedly controlling his own narrative.

Adam Parkes, a professor of modern literature at the University of Georgia, penned a comprehensive reader's guide for Ishiguro's book. Parkes is among the critics who

applaud Ishiguro's deft use of irony: how his narrator is able to "frame [his discourse] in such a way that things he doesn't want the reader to see are kept out of sight" (31). Likewise, Elke D'hoker believes that the book "offers a subtle but neat version of narrative unreliability" (155). A smaller group of critics, Terrance Rafferty among them, find Ishiguro's technique less impressive for the simple fact that, as D'hoker points out, we're all "remarkably unanimous" in our assessment of Stevens's unreliability. There's really no other interpretation. It's almost as though the author, in having created a narrator who is so utterly unaware, is asking a bit much for realist fiction.

Kathleen Wall politely addresses the issue: "Ishiguro leaves us uneasily wondering how responsible Stevens is for communicating his grief to us by reporting that others observed his feelings. It seems to me at least *possible* that Stevens in some way acknowledges his grief precisely through the reports of others, largely because such reports will not violate his sense of dignity and decorum or will not tear the fabric that he has erected between his private and his professional selves" (28, emphasis hers). James Phelan rightly accuses Stevens of underreporting his emotions, but he defends Ishiguro on structural grounds: "*The Remains of the Day* demonstrates that character narration allows for some divergence between the roles of a character-narrator's disclosure functions and narrator functions when that divergence serves the larger purposes of the narrative" (*Living* 37). Put another way, the structural whole trumps all; if the mimetic component of the text needs to be weakened locally then so be it. Phelan attempts to fortify his defense by citing the use of "elliptical" narration: "[Stevens's] report of the other characters' dialogue indicates that he *expects his narratee to infer* that he has been crying" (*Living* 52, emphasis mine). To accept this would mean that while we're colluding with Ishiguro

behind his narrator's back, we're colluding with Stevens as well, along a different track—a stretch, I think. That Phelan would defend the novel's formal features is no surprise, but if there's one thing we know when it comes to Stevens, it's that he's not the “winking” type. In fact, he's unbecomingly of the typology at large. He isn't a pícaro or madman, neither a naïf, nor a clown, and he certainly isn't one of Rimmon-Kenan's idiots. Interestingly, D'hoker—who describes Ishiguro's technique as an example of “perfect unreliability”—includes, via footnote, a comment that seems at odds with her thesis but that I find particularly telling: “[T]he intentional self-incrimination of the narrator has to square with a certain psychological veracity. The rhetorical requirements of the technique of narrative unreliability have to be checked by the principles of mimesis” (154, note 26). Something about this narrator just doesn't ring true.

In his middling review of the novel for *The New Yorker*, Terrence Rafferty states overtly what other critics merely allude to: “[We are] in awe of the technical mastery...But how can we be truly moved when we recognize—and we can't fail to—the practiced craft with which the writer, our humble servant, has guided us?” Ishiguro's technique becomes foregrounded, in other words, which compromises the “realness” of realist fiction. From the text:

As I approached, Mr. Cardinal made an appreciative sound and slumped down into a leather armchair. I went over to him, poured a little brandy and handed it to him.

‘You know, Stevens,’ he said, ‘we've been friends for some time now, haven't we?’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘I always look forward to a little chat with you whenever I come here.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Won’t you care to join me in a little drink?’

‘That’s very kind of you, sir. But no, thank you, I won’t.’

*‘I say, Stevens, are you all right there?’*

*‘Perfectly all right, thank you, sir,’ I said with a small laugh.*

*‘Not feeling unwell, are you?’*

*‘A little tired, perhaps, but I’m perfectly fine, thank you, sir.’*

‘Well, then, you should sit down. Anyway, as I was saying. We’ve been friends for some time....’ (220)

If we cut the italicized portion, we don’t lose the thrust of the scene, which is salient regardless. Clearly, the sole reason for those four lines is to indicate that Stevens has been crying. Acknowledging Rafferty’s point, it feels like Ishiguro has the technical bases covered: we know that Stevens is both deluded *and* fastidious, so it seems (almost) reasonable that, despite exposing himself, he would include the revealing lines simply because he feels compelled to be thorough. Or else Stevens is revealing himself unconsciously, which begs the question: what is the nature of the novel? Realist fiction seeks to create the illusion that everything is mimetic, which is to say that the characters supposedly act on their own free will. Ishiguro has described the England of the novel as a “fictional landscape” not to be confused with “any actual chunk of history or real country” (“Ishiguro in Toronto” 45-6, quoted in Gehlawat 495). And if Stevens is in fact “a kind of exaggeration,” then how do we square all this with the verisimilitude that Ishiguro clearly wishes to achieve? What is the *diegetic* nature of the discourse? The scribal act is never mentioned explicitly or implicitly—the “text” never established—which gets us into the realm of latent interiority: are we reading some sort of



autobiographical monologue?<sup>12</sup> Some theorists, Phelan among them, insist that the “implied narratee” is a younger butler—an inference unsupported by the text, and one that I find odd. (In addition to the normal suspensions of disbelief, we’re supposed to imagine some sort of intergenerational butler mentoring program?) What seems clear is that Stevens’s vulnerability is of narrative importance, thus it was Ishiguro’s task to render his hero’s grief while keeping him in the dark. But I wonder: could Ishiguro have nuanced the disparity to better effect? Employing indirect speech in lieu of dialogue, he could have woven Stevens’s commentary, and thus his defensive tone, into the scene:

And then he asked me if I was “all right”—which struck me as odd. I explained that I was fine, gave a small laugh, and thanked him. I was a bit tired, perhaps noticeably, but I was composed as always.

This way, Cardinal having observed Stevens’s lack of composure becomes an afterthought in the narrator’s mind; he remembers the inquiry, but not the motivation—which might have been sufficient for us to make the necessary inference. And then on page 243, when Stevens is at peak self-awareness—“I can’t even say I made my own mistakes...what dignity is there in that?”—instead of learning via the dialogue that tears accompanied this crucial epiphany, what if Stevens (God forbid) were to open up?

It was then—why should I not admit it?—that I felt the shortness of breath, the lump in the throat. It was as though the levees in my heart had finally given way.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Cohn, “Consciousness in First-Person Texts” in *TM*. Also, there’s an issue with what Genette termed “duration.” It seems unfeasible that Stevens, whilst travelling, would have found time to compose so many polished and pedantic pages.

<sup>13</sup> Let me assure you that I know this sucks. Illustrating my point, that’s all.

By this point, the interval between story and discourse has narrowed down to what Genette calls “final convergence” (*ND* 221). A full *anagnorisis* would not have been so jarring. That Stevens would’ve humanized enough by now to admit to crying seems, to me, more feasible than *any* explanation as to why he would show his interlocutor offering him a hanky.

I’m not claiming that my ideas would have bettered Ishiguro’s novel. What I am suggesting is that the author’s strict adherence to formalism, while technically precise, fails to produce a credible simulation of autobiography. To quote Booth, “Indeed we are likely to reject simpler forms of irony, because they are too obvious—which is to say that the number excluded from the joke is too small” (*RoF* 305). That is, our decoding strategies are not amply challenged, our “pleasures of collusion” and collaboration and deciphering are seriously diminished. Ishiguro’s book is a wonderfully constructed joke. It’s just too bad that we’re all in on it.

## CHAPTER 8

### NICK FLYNN SIMULATES UNCERTAINTY IN MEMOIR

*If you asked me about my father...I'd say whatever I felt like saying, and it would all be true. I don't know him, I'd say, my mother left him shortly before I was born, or just before. But this story did not hold still for long. It wavered.*—Nick Flynn

Despite its subversive title, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, the first in a trilogy of memoirs by Nick Flynn, became a bestseller. It certainly had the makings of one.

Flynn's mother, his primary caretaker and sole source of stability, commits suicide when he's twenty-two. Directionless, he begins working at a homeless shelter at twenty-four. Then one day his father, Jonathan, whom Flynn had met only once as a child, walks into the shelter looking for a bed. "He raised his arms at the door to be searched, just like everyone else....It all took a few minutes. Nothing was said" (212). A recovering addict mines his downtrodden youth, his absent father, his suicidal mother, alcoholism on both sides of the family. That's rich material, a life tailor-made for memoir, and Flynn—a modestly successful poet at the time of publication—may well have succeeded with a conventional approach to the form. Instead he eschewed straight reportage and adherence to chronology and took a postmodern path. Rather than report and reflect on his life from the outside, Flynn attempts to replicate for the reader the experience of having lived it. (Ryan 75)

The broadest irony attributable to Flynn's book is that it's about a relationship with a man he never knew: "All my life my father had been manifest as an absence, a nonpresence, a name without a body" (24). And though he would eventually get to know his father quite well, the bulk of the action takes place during Flynn's early twenties, at which time he knew his father only vaguely as the two would "cross paths" occasionally at the shelter.

At various points in the narrative it becomes clear that Flynn had researched his subject extensively, gleaning what he could from his elderly father (himself utterly unreliable), and tracking down many of Jonathan's old friends and known associates. "Years later I track Scotty down" (86). "Jonathan will always claim to have introduced [Ray and Clare]...but this is not how they remember it" 16-17). The data Flynn gathers about his father's early to midlife is then used to reconstruct scenes that *likely* occurred in some form or another. Here Flynn imagines a scene, using what he knows about his father's disdain for honest work and blending it with an anecdote he'd heard about a botched contracting job:

They talk briefly about how to begin. The bushes need to be wrapped in tarps, pulled away from the house. The ladders laid out, ratcheted up to the eaves, the scraping begun. The scraping followed by the puttying, followed by the priming—the preparation, they agree, will take time. Scotty puts his coffee cup in the sink and pulls his paper cap over his eyes. My father reaches for the bottle of Johnnie Walker that has been centered on the table the whole time....The Scotch, Scotty will later learn, is charged to the owners as well. (89)

The details themselves, I argue, are not important. What's important is the characterization. Coincidentally, Flynn ends up dating a woman whose parents had known Jonathan personally, would take him in from time to time during his devolution. Using secondhand anecdotes as raw material and weaving them with what he knows to be his father's *modus operandi*, Flynn narrates:

No one would notice Jonathan wandering upstairs as Ray and Clare's annual New Year's party rages below. Maybe he's looking for a bathroom, maybe a little air,

a place to clear his head. All night he'd tried to down a glass of water between drinks, pace himself....He wakes up with his cheek pressed to the tile floor.

*Must've dozed off.* (149)

By his early twenties Flynn had heard rumors about Jonathan's sporadic homelessness; that Flynn winds up working at a homeless shelter in the same city seems almost too serendipitous, but there's no reason to suspect that it was anything more than a coincidence. It's the cosmic trajectory of these two men that drives the narrative: "Even before he became homeless I'd heard whispers, sensed he was circling close, that we were circling each other, like planets unmoored" (7). When Jonathan first arrives at the shelter, Flynn had already spent three years working various posts, including the "Outreach Van"—a vehicle that patrolled the city from nine PM to five AM, giving Flynn first-hand knowledge of what it was like to live on the streets. Clearly unaware of his father's actual movements or whereabouts at crucial points in the narrative, Flynn could have simply filled in gaps with viable probabilities, a series of "I imagined him curled up on a bench at the bus station," or "He could have been panhandling outside the bank," but instead Flynn fuses his personal experience together with what he'd learned about his father (namely that he was a drunk, paranoid racist and homophobe). Flynn alchemizes these referential frameworks and creates a narrator who is both him and *not* him:

[My father] awakens to a hand in his pocket, yells out. A dreadlocked man hisses, teeters back and forth into the shadow of Trinity, a stiff-legged crackhead walk. My father stands, touches his pockets, unsure what was there, what might be gone, begins to follow the crazy thief, turns and walks quickly in the other

direction. The library won't open for six more hours....He could sit in the kiosk but the crackhead will find him, waiting just out of sight for him to fall asleep again, to run his hands all over him. (201)

In each instance Flynn is narrating scenes that he clearly didn't witness. But instead of accusing him of fabricating, we accept the palpable distance Flynn has created between himself and his narrator, a gap we intuitively fill with what we perceive to be the book's overarching theme: unknowability. Hugh Ryan, whose piece on the "postmodern memoir" features *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, says, "[Flynn] is unreliable, not due to conscious omissions or overstatements, but because life is often mysterious" (81). In other words, we infer an understanding of the narrative that differs from the one offered by the narrator. We recall that the narrator acts as reporter, interpreter, and evaluator, but because Flynn composes scenes in the historical present, we get little, if any, interpretation or evaluation. What we get is a narrator who reports on facts and events as though they were *occurring*. This only adds to what Ryan calls our "conscious resistance" to the narrative—an ambivalence on our part that's meant to replicate Flynn's own (75). We know that Flynn is relying on information obtained from interview subjects decades after the fact—many of whom appear to have been drunkards or sociopaths—and we also know that opinions are subjective, memories fallible. We know that certain scenes are re-creations at best, but we don't dismiss them as outright fiction; Flynn keeps us cued to his authority by weaving in general truths, unlimited by time: "Any card with a magnetic strip will let you in, all the street guys know this, or learn quick" (3). "Cold nights the guys crowd on, and if you arrive last, if you are on the edge, you could die, roll over a few inches and you're a goner. The blower is a room of heat

with no walls” (203). By fusing these gnomic insights together with the vagaries of his youth and secondhand information, Flynn is arriving at what could arguably be greater truths. Again, Flynn could have used disclaimers. He could have peppered the text with “In all likelihood *this*” or “I imagine it like *that*.” Instead he renders unknowable scenes mimetically, and in doing so he foregrounds the thematic component of his memoir: how prevalent a role uncertainty has played in his life.

Perhaps some excerpts from another well-known memoir—another memoir, some would argue, featuring an unreliable narrator—with scenes composed in the historical present would help illustrate my point:

I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin. I lift my hand to feel my face. My front four teeth are gone, I have a hole in my cheek, my nose is broken and my eyes are swollen shut. I open them and I look around and I’m in the back of a plane and there’s no one near me. (1)

That’s how the book opens. Later the narrator sees a dentist. The problem now is that he’s a patient at a drug rehabilitation center, and as such the dentist informs him that there’ll be no anesthesia. And of course no painkillers:

The sander bounces slightly and white electric pain hits my mouth and the sander comes back and holds and pain spreads through my body from the top down and every muscle in my body flexes...my tooth fucking hurts like the point of a bayonet is being driven through it. The point of a fucking bayonet. (65)

Vivid imagery, granted, but is any of it true? Not likely. Shortly after James Frey’s infamous plug from Oprah’s couch, *A Million Little Pieces* was eviscerated by the editors

at *The Smoking Gun*. Some of the lies—a jail stint that never occurred, an actual death that Frey claimed to have been connected to—were so big and brazen that many questionable scenes were barely scrutinized. Ask yourself: could a man board a plane in that condition? Even pre-9-11, a hole in one’s cheek is bound to raise eyebrows. And no anesthesia for a root canal because the patient is in rehab? Does one learn that in dental school? How far up the pecking order at the ADA would one have to go to verify such information?

Vivian Gornick, memoirist and author of *The Situation and the Story* (in my opinion, one of the best guidebooks on life-writing we have), tells us that the autobiographical writer must “persuade the reader that the narrator is reliable. In fiction a narrator may be—and often famously is—unreliable....In nonfiction, never. In nonfiction, the reader must believe that the narrator is speaking truth.” (14) Gornick’s unequivocal stance, I believe, applies equally to both Flynn and Frey, but for very different reasons. It’s important to understand that Gornick equates reliability with truthfulness. But I’d argue that her interpretation is lacking nuance. Gornick interprets “reliability” in literature the way most of us do: the telling is done by a voice we can trust. Hence Frey’s narrator, whose dubious reportages were debunked by journalists, is untrustworthy. But I doubt that she’d feel the same way about Flynn, whose narrator deploys fictive scenes with the express purpose of simulating the experience of discovering a father—and by extension a self—he never knew. For Frey, the truth was corrupted for publishing purposes.<sup>14</sup> His “nonfiction” narrative contains lies, and thus the narrator who shares his name is, in the classical sense, unreliable. But Flynn’s narrator is unreliable in the Boothian sense:

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<sup>14</sup> I believe that Frey was caught up in a marketing whirlwind. I’ll be mounting a defense (of sorts) for his missteps in the next section.



we're meant to understand the story differently than what is presented textually. We get the sense of uncertainty, of unknowability. While Flynn diminishes our trust in him as author-narrator, he strengthens our trust in him as author-writer (Ryan 75). In attempting to replicate his personal experience for the reader, Flynn achieves, in my view, the elucidation of something greater. We believe, as Gornick insists we must, that his unreliable narrator is indeed "speaking truth."

## CHAPTER 9

### *BLACK BOY AS A CASE FOR EMOTIONAL TRUTH, PART 1*

*One could question the reliability of Wright's memory, try to discriminate between fiction and fact in the densely woven texture of the autobiography.*—Jerry W. Ward, Jr., poet and essayist

*Black fiction is often so close to black autobiography in plot and theme that a study of the latter almost calls the existence of the former into question.*—Roger Rosenblatt, writer and scholar

Pity that my copy of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*—the one I obtained through Amazon for a penny before shipping—had to be discarded. (I love those old paperbacks from the seventies. Something about the musty yellow paper makes me remember why I fell in love with books.) The pages fell out as I turned them, so I got a later edition from my local bookstore. The artwork was different. The page count was different. I learned that the first copy was a truncated edition—a publishing decision that stripped the original manuscript of “The Horror and the Glory,” a narrative shift in the form of a Part Two, reinstated posthumously for the “expurgated” edition. Also, the jacket copy on the later edition refers to the book as “a classic of American autobiography.” The early edition didn't advertise a genre. In fact, I don't think the word “autobiography” appeared anywhere on that cover, which isn't to say that Wright didn't intend for his book to be read as such, but I believe that the omission speaks to how the text has been interpreted over time. It has *become* a classic of American autobiography. Yet it's full of fiction. And Wright's narrator, “black boy,” is quite unreliable.

Let's take the oft-cited opening scene, specifically the aftermath of the beating that “black boy” received for having nearly burned his grandmother's house, and its occupants, to ashes:

I was lashed so long and hard that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away....I was lost in a fog of fear. A doctor was called—I was afterwards told—and he ordered that I be kept abed....Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. (7)

Eight years earlier Wright had published an essay called “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch,” wherein he describes a fight (apparently one of many) that took place between his “gang” of black boys and the neighboring whites:

During the retreat a broken bottle caught me behind the ear, opening a deep gash which bled profusely. The sight of blood pouring over my face completely demoralized our ranks....A kind neighbor saw me and rushed me to a doctor, who took three stiches in my neck.... [My mother] grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two....I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle....All that night I was delirious and could not sleep. Each time I closed my eyes I saw monstrous white faces suspended from the ceiling, leering at me.

If “monstrous white faces suspended from the ceiling” sounds familiar, that’s because the image bears a striking resemblance to the “huge wobbly white bags” likewise “suspended from the ceiling” in the form of cow udders, depicted eight years later in *Black Boy*.

For a writer to produce different autobiographies with overlapping material is not unusual. But as Dan Shen and Dejin Xu point out, there is only one “reality,” thus any discrepancies between the two or more works “would naturally throw into doubt the

factualness of the accounts, a problem that will not arise in the domain of fiction” (45). In other words, with fiction we have only the text itself, and the fictive world it contains, in aiding us to determine the degree of narrative (un)reliability—what Shen and Xu call “intra-textual” analysis. However, with autobiography we have additional yardsticks. We could, as with *Black Boy* and “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” employ intertextual analysis, or we could use extra-textual analysis: comparing the narrator’s account with historical information obtainable through research.<sup>15</sup> Since, as Shen and Xu claim, the autobiographical form is one of “direct telling,” whereby the author and narrator essentially collapse into one, it becomes necessary to look outside the text for markers of narrative unreliability (47). An exception to this would be what Phelan refers to as the “art of indirection,” whereby the author employs the voice of his or her “former self” to convey the action (*Living* 67). The example Phelan draws on is *Angela’s Ashes*, in which the author, Frank McCourt, employs a series of successive “Frankies” aged three to nineteen to report on their poverty-stricken upbringing in Limerick. As Phelan demonstrates, McCourt’s narrators run the gamut of unreliability—misreporting, misinterpreting, misevaluating, under-reporting, under-reading, and under-regarding—making the mobile “Frankie” a prime test case for his model.<sup>16</sup> Narrative unreliability, Phelan argues, is not only integral to the essence of McCourt’s memoir, but it serves—again—a greater truth. To paraphrase Phelan, rather than interpret the events as historically accurate, the reader’s task involves interpreting events within the context of

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<sup>15</sup> It’s hardly unusual for autobiographers to get “busted” by real world data. James Frey, for example, claimed to have spent several months in jail when in reality it was several hours. Note to aspiring memoirists: There are some very snoopy journalists out there.

<sup>16</sup> I considered using *Angela’s Ashes* for this thesis, but I couldn’t imagine bettering Phelan on that score. For a superb analysis, see chapter two of *Living to Tell about It*.

the narrative whole (*Living* 73-4). I will argue that Wright employs a similar art of indirection with *Black Boy*, but first I want to examine Shen and Xu's argument in detail. Interestingly, Shen and Xu cite Wright's *Black Boy* specifically, referring to it as a "slave narrative" (67). Of course Wright was never a slave, but clearly (and more on this later) the literary influence is evident. Shen and Xu focus on another prominent African American writer: Frederick Douglass. Using two of Douglass's autobiographies—*Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*—Shen and Xu argue that since both books cover the same time period, then scenes depicting the same events should be essentially identical, lest we have intertextual unreliability. To illustrate their point, the theorists juxtapose several "like" scenes from both books, noting any stylistic differences as well as divergences in what they call "temporal arrangement." What the latter refers to, basically, is what Genette calls narrative "duration" and its related aspects: description, descriptive pause, ellipses, etc. How, Shen and Xu ask, could the same scene be present in two separate autobiographies—once as scenery, once as summary; once as a major narrative event, once as an aside—without at least one of the narrators being unreliable? Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch" is composed of nine short vignettes, all of which reappear, in one form or another, in *Black Boy*. I'll attempt here to replicate Shen and Xu's theoretical approach by juxtaposing the "broken bottle" scene cited above against its counterpart. The following is from "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow":

During the retreat a broken bottle caught me behind the ear, opening a deep gash which bled profusely. The sight of blood pouring over my face completely

demoralized our ranks....A kind neighbor saw me and rushed me to a doctor, who took three stiches in my neck.... [My mother] grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two....I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle....All that night I was delirious and could not sleep. Each time I closed my eyes I saw monstrous white faces suspended from the ceiling, leering at me.

From *Black Boy*:

Once, in a battle with a gang of white boys, I was struck behind the ear with a piece of broken bottle; the cut was deep and bled profusely. I tried to stem the flow of blood by dabbing the cut with a rag and when my mother came from work I was forced to tell her that I was hurt, for I needed medical attention. She rushed me to a doctor who stitched my scalp; but when she took me home she beat me, telling me that I must never fight white boys again, that I might be killed by them, that she had to work and had no time to worry about my fights. Her words did not sink in, for they conflicted with the code of the streets. (83)

Since Shen and Xu apply both models of unreliable narration—rhetorical and cognitive/constructivist—in service of their argument, I’ll do likewise. I’ll start with an obvious discrepancy:

From “Ethics”: *A kind neighbor saw me and rushed me to a doctor*  
From *Black Boy*: *She [my mother] rushed me to a doctor*

Both narrators were “rushed to a doctor” by different characters. If our access were limited to one text (or if Wright had produced only one), then there’d be no discrepancy. But since we have two that don’t match, we have intertextual unreliability. Phelan might

declare unreliability along the axis of facts/events/characters for at least one of the narrators, a misreport, though I doubt it. There are no markers to indicate which narrator is wrong, plus the rhetorical model, by design, does not extend beyond a single text. Yacobi, at the very least, would apply her “genetic” mechanism to the discrepancy: the author has produced at least one textual error. Does it really matter? Some critics might argue that Wright should have been more diligent, should have consulted the earlier work while writing his autobiography to ensure that the details converged. Doubtless he *did* refer to “Ethics” while writing *Black Boy*, as comparing the texts clearly reveals:

From “Ethics”:

“Richard, I want to ask you something,” Pease began pleasantly, not looking up from his work.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Morrie came over, blocking the narrow passage between the benches. He folded his arms, staring at me solemnly.

From *Black Boy*:

“Richard, I want to ask you something,” Pease began pleasantly, not looking up from his work.

“Yes, sir.”

Reynolds came over and stood blocking the narrow passage between the benches; he folded his arms and stared at me solemnly. (189)

“Morrie” becomes “Reynolds” for some reason. A deleted dialogue attribute, some syntactical tweaks, but other than that, verbatim.

From “Ethics”:

When I went to the rear of the store, the boss and his son were washing their hands at the sink. They were chuckling. The floor was bloody, and strewn with wisps of hair and clothing. No doubt I must have appeared pretty shocked, for the

boss slapped me reassuringly on the back. “Boy, that’s what we do to niggers when they don’t want to pay their bills,” he said, laughing.

From *Black Boy*:

When I went to the rear of the store, the boss and his son were washing their hands at the sink. They looked at me and laughed uneasily. The floor was bloody, strewn with wisps of hair and clothing. My face must have reflected shock, for the boss slapped me reassuringly on the back. “Boy, that’s what we do to niggers when they don’t pay their bills,” he said. (180)

I could go on. To imagine that Wright had relied solely on his memory for both texts would be unreasonable; the similarities are evident, which makes the *differences* all the more telling. Looking back at both versions of the “broken bottle” scene, we can see that Wright was concerned not with the details per se, but with how the anecdote serves the narrative in context. The lesson differs. In the earlier version, Wright appears to be emphasizing the futility of fighting whites under Jim Crow: either they overpower you or you get beaten at home for jeopardizing what little stability black folks had. In the later version, the emphasis is not on the inevitable beating, but on the “code of the streets.” The lesson is revised: you get brutalized either way, so what’s the sense in *not* fighting? Wright’s narrator in *Black Boy*—like Wright himself—has a fuller, arguably wiser, perspective on the event.

To support their theory of autobiographical unreliability, Shen and Xu rely largely on evidence of what they call “intertextual additions” and “intertextual ellipses,” depending on the position from which they view the discrepancy. That is, among the many scenes that appear in both of the aforementioned Douglass autobiographies, the protracted one



would constitute an “addition” whereas with the truncated one would signal an “ellipses.” The theorists cite numerous textual examples, highlighting an underreported detail or new character and assigning the corresponding tag: ellipses, addition. Ultimately, I believe their insights are valid. In parsing out the differences between Douglass’s texts, Shen and Xu get to the heart of why similar scenes are likely to be skewed in separate autobiographies: writers evolve. In the ten years between books, Douglass’s status had changed, and thus his motives. He’d become “a successful orator...marked by a strong concern with general relevance as well as rhetorical effectiveness” (67). Hence he was more concerned with the literary merits of the second book. “This shift to dominance and full preparedness in the [later] narrative is most probably motivated by the image building of the now successful Douglass as well as by his desire to call on slaves to ‘stand up in [their] own defense’ in a more forceful and effective way” (71). That is, the older Douglass was cognizant of the audience he’d amassed, many of whom were ex-slaves and white abolitionists. The downtrodden tone of the earlier work would no longer suffice.

Nick Flynn completed his trilogy of memoirs in 2013 with *The Reenactments*. After *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, he’d published *The Ticking is the Bomb*, in which he’d introduced his wife, Inez. In *The Reenactments*, Inez morphs into Meg Tilly, his biographical wife. Why he assigned her a pseudonym for the second memoir and not the third is unclear. Regardless, the incongruity feels more like a personal or artistic choice than a marker for unreliability. Differences between separate autobiographical texts will always exist, lest we have the same book twice. What Shen and Xu are describing, I argue, is closer to what Vivian Gornick calls the narrator’s “angle of vision” or what

Sven Birkerts calls the authorial “lens.” According to Gornick, “what [the narrator] selects to observe and what to ignore are chosen to serve the subject; yet at the same time the way [the narrator] sees things is, to the largest degree, the thing being seen” (7). According to Birkerts, “knowing when to focus the lens and when to pull back—there is no rule book telling a writer when and how to finesse the transitions” (139). In other words, while the same scene may be salient across two separate autobiographies, the material is never going to serve both narratives in quite the same way. Booth ruminates on this very subject throughout *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, opining on “the art of choosing what to dramatize fully and what to curtail, what to summarize and what to heighten” (*RoF* 64). We could go all the way back to Aristotle, even earlier, but I don’t have the space here to unpack the ways in which a work has its own life, its own soul. Suffice it to say that these discrepancies described by Shen and Xu as intertextual unreliability are, I believe, more accurately rooted in the point of departure, or what Gornick describes as the “organizing principle” behind each work. Then there’s pacing and flow, the form an individual work finds, quite often in the editing. Like when a filmmaker, having shot many scenes from different angles, chooses certain takes for the final edit: the ones that supply narrative momentum, the ones that fit the structural whole. On that note, it’s virtually impossible to imagine the same scene being depicted precisely the same way in separate biographical films.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> There is some precedent for this. We have Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* versus Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. Also there’s a crudely made Hunter S. Thompson biopic called *Where the Buffalo Roam* that shares scenes with Terry Gilliam’s film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In both instances, the latter borrows nothing discernable from the former.

## CHAPTER 10

### BLACK BOY AS A CASE FOR EMOTIONAL TRUTH, PART 2

*If an autobiographer tells many lies, his words will eventually reveal him as one who means something other than what he says.*—Barrett J. Mandel, scholar and theorist  
*I did not know if the story was factually true or not, but it was emotionally true because I had already grown to feel that there existed men against whom I was powerless, men who could violate my life at will.*—Richard Wright

Whether or not extra-textual analysis—again, peculiar to nonfiction—serves as a yardstick for narrative (un)reliability depends largely upon how one views the concept. Like intertextual analysis, any discrepancies are external to the text: historical inaccuracies or what Shen and Xu refer to as autobiographical “revisions.” According to the theorists, “such autobiographical revisions often form ‘distortions’ of reality, and can therefore be regarded as unreliable if reality itself is taken as the yardstick” (73). Thus, if one chooses to measure the reportage against “real world” feasibility, then one could—applying the rhetorical and/or cognitive/constructivist model—declare narrative unreliability. If the “reality” presented as autobiographical truth does not jibe with reality as we know it, we could apply Yacobi’s *existential* mechanism: the discrepancies can be naturalized if we attribute them to the norms of the “represented world”—which is really just a fancy way of saying that we’re reading fiction. Or, less cynically, we could apply the *functional* mechanism, which “imposes order on the textual divergences in terms of the ends they serve” (“Interart Narrative” 714)—that is, the narrator is like Flynn’s in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*: unreliable in service of a greater truth. Applying the rhetorical model, we could cite mis- or underreporting (the narrator is lying or not telling the whole truth) or possibly mis- or under-regarding (the narrator’s ethics are lacking or weak) or some combination.

Much has been made of *Black Boy*'s opening scene, which depicts a restless, four-year-old Wright brooding over his mother's strict orders that he remain quiet while his grandmother lies ill. Dejected, he decides to play with fire, literally. Here's the set up:

The house was quiet. Behind me my brother—a year younger than I—was playing placidly upon the floor with a toy. A bird wheeled past the window and I greeted it with a glad shout. . . . I wandered listlessly about the room, trying to think of something to do, dreading the return of my mother, resentful of being neglected. The room held nothing of interest except the fire and finally I stood before the shimmering embers, fascinated by the quivering coals. An idea of a new kind of game grew and took root in my mind. Why not throw something into the fire and watch it burn? (3-4)

Ignoring his brother's protestations, "black boy" pulls some straws from a broom, lights them afire, and places them beneath the curtains. Wright provides vivid details:

Red circles were eating into the white cloth; then a fire of flames shot out. Startled, I backed away. The fire soared to the ceiling and I trembled with fright. Soon a sheet of yellow lit the room. . . . One half of the room was now ablaze. Smoke was choking me and the fire was licking my face, making me gasp. . . . Soon my mother would smell that smoke and see the fire and come and beat me. I had done something wrong, something I could not hide or deny. Yes, I would run away and never come back. (4-5)

Critics have noted the motifs: fire, hunger, fear, flight. Doubtless the scene was designed to foreshadow greater narrative themes; virtually every line can be read allegorically as well as literally. *A bird wheeled past the window and I greeted it with a glad shout. Why*

*not throw something into the fire and watch it burn? Yes, I would run away and never come back.* But did these events actually occur? Constance Webb, Michel Fabre, and Hazel Rowley, all of whom published lengthy biographies on Wright, seem to think so. Fabre, however, is the only one who cites an outside source: “The story of the fire is confirmed in a letter from Fred Hoskins to Wright, dated 1947” (534, endnote 5). But how could a letter from a distant cousin corroborate those details? We can assume, since the letter is dated two years after *Black boy*’s publication, that Hoskins had read the book. It’s likely that Wright’s depiction of the fire was the first that Hoskins had heard of it.<sup>18</sup> One would think that there’d be some way to verify—and yes, I realize this is Natchez, Mississippi circa 1912—whether or not a house had burned at that location. By Wright’s account, it would have been unlivable afterwards, yet there’s no mention of the family having to move. I’m inclined to agree with Albert Stone, who says that “The richness of dramatic detail and complexity of emotion here suggest that the episode must be in large part imagined” (126). I’d argue that we have a misreport, unreliability along the axis of facts/events, and if not, the post-beating coda certainly qualifies:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away,...I was lost in a fog of fear....My body seemed on fire and I could not sleep....Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, as I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped

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<sup>18</sup> Accessing the letter would necessitate a visit to the Richard Wright Archive at Yale, and all the red tape that would entail. I can only assume that if the letter were in fact a “confirmation,” replete with hard data, then Fabre would have included those details along with the citation.

by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid.

(7)

Again we have fear, fire, flight, and frustration bound up in images so richly symbolic that factual subordination is practically inarguable. We know that Wright borrowed the “huge wobbly white bags” from a scene he wrote years earlier for “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” The “white faces” morph into “cow udders,” yet that makes sense considering that Wright claims in the earlier story to have been cut by a broken milk bottle. Regardless, the cow image enables him to land on an oedipal note:

Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well. But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me. (7)

Here, again, I agree with Stone’s evaluation that “Such heavy rationalization clearly demands examination” (126). Factual or not, Phelan would surely declare unreliability along the axis of ethics/values. That “black boy” recklessly burned his grandmother’s house, with his whole family inside, is not only mis-regarded, but disregarded entirely. Critics and biographers, while laudatory on the whole, have described various episodes as dubious or hyperbolic. The scene depicting Uncle Hoskins driving his buggy into the Mississippi River, Webb claims, was actually a story Wright borrowed from Ralph Ellison (409, endnote 9). The game of “pop-the-whip” where Wright claims to have “hurtled headlong through space” is described by Timothy Dow Adams as “the kind of rhetoric usually reserved for a slave narrative” (82). One of the more scathing rebukes came from W. E. B. Du Bois, who reviewed *Black Boy* for the New York Herald Tribune. The opening sets the tone for the piece:

This book tells a harsh and forbidding story and makes one wonder just exactly what its relation to truth is....It probably is [autobiographical], at least in part.

But mainly it is probably intended to be fiction or fictionalized biography. At any rate the reader must regard it as creative writing rather than simply a record of life.”

One episode that I find particularly questionable is the one that follows Wright’s father having abandoned the family. There’s no money, no food. Wright’s mother, having finally found a job, tasks “black boy” with the grocery shopping. It’s a rather long scene, so I’ll truncate it considerably, italicizing my own (*initial, snarky*) thoughts in parentheses:

One evening my mother told me that thereafter I would have to do the shopping for food. (*Odd, considering he was six.*) She took me to the corner to show me the way....The next afternoon I looped the basket over my arm and went down the pavement toward the store. When I reached the corner, a gang of boys grabbed me, knocked me down, snatched the basket, took the money, and sent me running home in panic. That evening I told my mother what had happened, but she made no comment; she sat down at once, wrote another note, gave me more money (*more money?*), and sent me out to the grocery again. (*Sent him out again that night? How late was the store open?*) I crept down the steps and saw the same gang of boys playing down the street. (*How convenient.*)

“Black boy” runs home to his mother; she insists that he complete the task.

Unsurprisingly, he gets mugged again and scurries home, beaten for the second time. His mother remains stoic:

She went into the house and I waited, terrified, wondering what she was about.

Presently she returned with more money (*MORE money?!)* and another note; she also had a long heavy stick. (*Huh?*)

“Black boy” protests, his mother is stalwart. “Don’t you come into this house until you’ve gotten those groceries,” she says. To punctuate her point, she slaps her already-beaten boy across the face.

She slammed the door and I heard the key turn in the lock. (*Since when do you need a key to lock a door from the inside?*) I shook with fright. I was alone upon the dark, hostile streets and gangs were after me. (*That might be the most melodramatic, hyperbolic line in the entire book.*) I had the choice of being beaten at home or away from home....I walked slowly down the sidewalk, coming closer to the gang of boys, holding the stick tightly. I was almost upon them now. (*Two beatings in, same gang—it must be getting dark.*)

They closed in. In blind fear I let the stick fly, feeling it crack against a boy’s skull. I swung again, lamming another skull, then another. (*At six he’s “lamming” skulls with a long heavy stick.*) Realizing that they would retaliate if I let up for but a second, I fought to lay them low, to knock them cold, to kill them so that they could not strike back at me. I flayed with tears in my eyes, teeth clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow. I hit again and again, dropping the money and the grocery list. (*He was, of course, still palming the money and the grocery list.*) The boys scattered, yelling, nursing their heads, staring at me in disbelief. They had never seen such frenzy. (*I’ll bet.*) I stood panting, egging them on, taunting them to come on and fight.



*(Quite a turnaround from the meek boy who was twice beaten earlier in the evening—what time is it by now? He's six.)* When they refused, I ran after them and tore out for their homes, screaming. *(What?)* The parents of the boys rushed into the streets and threatened me, and for the first time in my life I shouted at grownups, telling them that I would give them the same if they bothered me. *(Their children beaten and bloodied, these adults were stymied, intimidated by a six-year-old wielding a long heavy stick.)* I finally found my grocery list and the money *(still there, of course)* and went to the store. On my way back I kept my stick poised for instant use, but there was not a single boy in sight. That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis. (16-18)

Clearly this is way over the top. So what are we to make of it? Would there be more critics agreeing with Du Bois if the book were published today? I return briefly now to Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, an arrest scene that serves as a major plot point, for comparison:

As I was driving up, I saw her standing out front with a few of her friends. I was staring at her and not paying attention to the road and I drove up onto a sidewalk and hit a Cop who was standing there....The Cop called for backup and I sat in the car and I stared at her and waited. The backup came and they approached the car and asked me to get out and I said you want me out, then get me out, you fucking Pigs. They opened the door, I started swinging, and they beat my ass with billy clubs and arrested me. As they hauled me away kicking and screaming, I tried to get the crowd to attack them and free me, which didn't happen....I stayed in jail that night and I was arraigned the next morning on charges of

Assault With a Deadly Weapon, Assaulting an Officer of the Law, Felony DUI, Disturbing the Peace, Resisting Arrest, Driving Without a License, Driving Without Insurance, Attempted Incitement of a Riot, Possession of a Narcotic with Intent to Distribute and Felony Mayhem. (250)

Unlike the scene from *Black Boy*, we can confirm that nothing like this ever happened. According to the police report, Frey was cited for what basically amounted to a couple of moving violations (he did roll onto a curb), and let go.<sup>19</sup> Frey was never facing three years in prison, as claimed, and he never served time in jail, as he reported both in the book and in numerous interviews. In fact, if Shen and Xu ever decided to filter Frey's book through their model, they'd be able to locate examples of extra-textual unreliability on nearly every page.

I could easily digress into the ethics of truth in memoir (I find the subject fascinating), but I don't have space here. Suffice it to say that I don't blame Frey personally for what was essentially a marketing ploy. He'd composed a manuscript featuring a foul-mouthed, drug-addicted narrator rambling in and out of the historical present. As a novel it was dead on the page, rejected (understandably) by seventeen publishers, but the same text rebranded as a memoir—however sloppily written—had potential, especially in the hands of a player like Nan Talese. Talese knows publishing. Oprah knows television. Can we really blame Frey, a first-time author, for riding that juggernaut to fifteen straight weeks on the bestseller list? It's important to remember that storytellers have been embellishing (to put it lightly) their life narratives since time immemorial. Frey's book was really the

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<sup>19</sup> *The Smoking Gun's* debunking of this episode ("A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction," *Thesmokinggun.com*, January 8, '06) is exhaustive, amusing, and better written than anything Frey has ever published. Some of the charges, including "Felony Mayhem," do not even exist.

first to undergo internet-level scrutiny, and the credulity of the form suffered irrevocably. Frey never served time. But sadly the memoir, as a form, continues to languish in what could aptly be described as “genre jail.”

Now, if this paper has been lumbering towards something resembling a thesis, I hope that it’s this: the unreliable narrator, as I see it, is a literary device employed by the author and, ideally, inferred by the reader. The desired effect is achieved when the author (yes, the “real” author) has created a perceptible gap between authorial agency and narrative discourse; the result needn’t be overly cryptic nor glaringly obvious, and this device can be employed ethically for fiction and nonfiction alike. The unreliable narrator *isn’t* when Lena Dunham tells us one thing and then changes her story; it *isn’t* when the thriller we’re reading throws us for a loop with a twist ending; it *isn’t* simply our inability to root for a narrator who has sex with a mannequin. And it’s never just a typo. No. I believe that Booth’s original description—“I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work..., unreliable when he does not”—is pretty much on the mark. Not to negate the valuable contributions made by theorists on both sides of the debate, but I think that Booth had it right with his concept of “distance.” The gap between author and narrator, the one we fill with our inference. Rather than merely consuming the story, our decoding of the text—our participation in the artistic process—is not only applicable, but indispensable.

This, I argue, is why Wright’s text represents an example of unreliable narration as a rhetorical device whereas Frey’s does not. Both authors, according to Lejeune, entered into the “implicit or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which,

attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography” (29, emphasis his). The difference is that while Frey left us no choice but to read his book “straight,” Wright peppered his text with markers. Frey’s narration is completely lacking in complexity and nuance; it’s literary fast food. Not only is Wright’s narration layered and complex, but it begs our participation; the clues woven into the text are at once subtle and unmistakable. Returning now to the opening scene’s coda, you’ll recall that I noted Wright’s description of himself as “chastened” whenever he remembered how badly his mother had beaten him. To say nothing of the fact that he’d burned his grandmother’s house down out of listlessness. Many critics have commented on the narrator’s inability to process blame or express remorse: a characteristic consistent with unreliability along the axis of ethics/values. But immediately following this “striking reversal” (Stone 126), Wright provides us with the key to understanding his entire narrative: “Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings.” That’s page seven, mind you, and the stage is set: Nothing we’re about to read can be taken at face value. As Timothy Dow Adams points out in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, “Wright creates a version of himself whose metaphor for survival and for sustenance is falsehood. But the multiple lies of the narrator, like the fibs of children trying to avoid what they see as irrational punishment, are palpably obvious. These lies are not meant to deceive; they are deliberately embarrassing in their transparency” (83). Wright’s narrator is the proverbial child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. When faced with imminent violence, a Hail Mary lie is his default reaction. For “black boy,” deception is more than a defense mechanism; it’s a survival technique, and textual examples are numerous. Sticking with scenes I’ve already cited, I’ll pinpoint

what links them thematically along with the markers for narrative unreliability that Wright deploys.

I mentioned the episode involving “pop-the-whip.” The game involves a string of boys holding hands, all of whom are tasked with holding on as the whip’s “head” runs and veers at his whimsy. Having never played the game, “black boy” is relegated to the tail end, a particularly vulnerable position. Wright’s depiction could only be interpreted as hyperbole:

The whip grew taut as human flesh and bone could bear and I felt that my arm was being torn from its socket. Suddenly my breath left me. I was swung in a small, sharp arc. The whip was now being popped and I could hold on no more; the momentum of the whip flung me off my feet into the air, like a bit of leather being flicked off a horsewhip, and I hurtled headlong through space and landed in a ditch. I rolled over, stunned, head bruised and bleeding. Aunt Addie was laughing, the first and only time I ever saw her laugh on God’s holy ground. (111)

Nice touch, the ditch. The image of Aunt Addie laughing is significant because just prior to this, “black boy” had not only threatened her with a knife (another highly questionable report), but he’d humiliated her publicly. The details are unimportant, but she had accused him of lying when he was actually telling the truth, but not the whole truth. Later he relents and tells the whole truth, but it’s too late; the partial truth is classified as a lie, punishable by violence. “Black boy” obtains the knife and eludes the beating, and in the midst of this his grandfather (gratuitously) materializes. Too weak to intervene, the Civil War veteran says, “You better watch your step, young man, or you’ll end up on the gallows.”

Recall the “grocery store gang” scene where the hero gets mugged. There’s a line of commentary that Wright deploys strategically: “I had the choice of being beaten at home or away from home.” This we can link back to some reflection from the “milk bottle fight” scene: “[My mother] beat me, telling me that I must never fight white boys again, that I might be killed by them.” We can surely connect these lines to Wright’s grandfather’s ominous warning, the subtext of which is practically on the page: *Take your beatings at home, boy, like a good Negro. Learn to stay in line or be lynched by the white man. These are your choices.* It was Wright’s wholesale rejection of this mindset that fueled the metaphorical “fire” at the heart of *Black Boy*:

It was inconceivable to me that one should surrender to what seemed wrong, and most of the people I had met seemed wrong. Ought one to surrender to authority even if one believed that that authority was wrong? If the answer was yes, then I knew that I would always be wrong, because I could never do it. Then how could one live in a world in which one’s mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything? There were no answers. (164)

Stepo notes that in writing *Black Boy*, Wright was influenced by “certain precursing tropes in Afro-American letters, tropes that reach back at least as far as the slave narratives” (134). Slave narratives, furthermore, allow for “a high degree of fictionality in the cause of abolition” (Adams 71). For slaves, the use of coded speech was essential for survival. Wright incorporates this technique as a recurring motif, signified throughout the text: “I did not know if the story was factually true or not, but it was emotionally true because I had already grown to feel that there existed men against whom I was powerless, men who could violate me at will” (73). “Though they were merely stories, I accepted

them as true because I wanted to believe them, because I hungered for a different life, for something new” (129). “That was the way things were between whites and blacks in the South; many of the most important things were never openly said; they were understated and left to seep through to one” (170). Time and again, we feel the author nudging us in the ribs, whispering behind his narrator’s back. Shen and Xu would call this “intra-textual” unreliability, but I think that’s redundant. In service of a greater truth, Wright employs the rhetorical device we call the unreliable narrator, plain and simple.

## CHAPTER 11

### CONCLUSION

*Unreliability is a central part of living.*—Hugh Ryan, author

The boy from my friend’s preschool class—the one who believed that warm sunny days were a thing of the past—has aged, surely grown accustomed to seasonal change.

Probably wouldn’t even recall his role as the benighted fool, his cute bit of unreliable narration, ephemeral. As for the coworker with the condoms, she currently works at a restaurant in Amherst. Has she discovered further evidence of her boyfriend’s infidelity?

Probably, but that she’s still in denial would be well within the bounds of formal mimeticism. Phelan would argue that she—hindered by her own lack of perceptiveness or sophistication—consistently under-reads. Or perhaps she under-regards: she simply cannot come to grips with her lingering doubt, harbored in her subconscious, betrayed time and again through her anecdotes. Surely she’s as vocal as ever, and it’s likely that her current coworkers are colluding, guiltily, with that elusive agency.

As for Justine Sacco, otherwise known as the woman who sent the “AIDS tweet,” her ironic post—her failed attempt to nudge social media in the ribs—haunts her to this day.

“It’s going to take a very long time for those Google search results to change for me,” she’s quoted as saying (Ronson 204). Indeed it will. Search engines are inherently

sociopathic, so if you’re going to be unreliable on Twitter, leave a marker. But then, your audience on social media is always going to include the lowest common denominator.

Probably best to stick to a more sophisticated platform. Like carnival barking.

Henry James called it “inconscience.” Critics prior to Booth called it “tone” or “irony” or “distance” interchangeably. We may never come to an agreement on how to describe the



unreliable narrator, let alone how to codify it. But why the initial divisiveness and controversy—the protracted battle over whether to place the yardstick between the (implied) author and the narrator or between the narrator and the reader? Certainly the amorphousness of the word, *unreliable*, had something to do with it. But the root of the conflict, I think, had more to do with the nature of narrative theory. All academic disciplines have their anomalies, their bones of contention. Controversies ensue, data is reanalyzed, new studies are initiated, theories are revised, etc. But with the formal or natural sciences, we generally don't see such a wide berth for idiosyncratic interpretation. Geologists, for example, argue over the tectonic movement of certain plates, rates of subduction, convergence, topography. But it's unlikely that there'd be a rift over the *nature* of the Farallon plate: one camp describing it as fixed and narrow while another arguing that it's wide and moving at a rate of 100mm annually. Virologists debate the likelihood of certain vector mosquitoes carrying Zika. But you'll never hear one of them say, "Well, *their* Zika may be transmitted via the *Aedes aegypti* (yellow fever), but *ours* is transmittable only through the *Aedes albopictus* (Asian tiger)!"

While prone to expounding upon and elucidating the terminology germane to their professions, scientists tend not to hijack each other's coinage and offer alternative definitions. But this sort of thing happens in narrative theory. Gérard Genette coined the term "focalization" over thirty years ago, and to this day narratologists can't agree on a meaning.<sup>20</sup> That Wayne Booth's description of an "unreliable narrator" would be appropriated and recast in various ways is hardly surprising, but then, so is the basic

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<sup>20</sup> When an omniscient narrator, who is outside the story-world, describes what a character sees, are we then granted access to that character's perspective? Or are we limited to what the narrator *tells us* the character observes? Narrative theorists argue endlessly over these issues: to whom exactly do we grant "focalizing" power?

failure of successive models to gain much traction. It was years before anyone even challenged Booth's original concept, and even then the arguments were little more than thinly-veiled amplifications or recapitulations. Greta Olson believes that we should use "fallible" and "untrustworthy" to separate the axis of facts/events from the axis of ethics/values. Dorrit Cohn would keep "unreliable" for one axis and use "discordance" for another. Phelan suggests that we "bond" with the benighted fool while we feel "estranged" from the bigot or sociopath. But none of these contributions really altered the landscape. Whether we shouldn't trust the narrator because he's slow or because he's immoral, "unreliable" is sufficient because what Booth was describing wasn't a condition; it was a device. A literary device that mirrors a human condition with which we're all familiar: our capacity for complex communication, whereby the artful manipulation of a literal message betrays the evidence of a covert one. Every time a child describes the monster under her bed, or any time we find ourselves having to placate a friend whose penchant for denial outweighs his lucidity, we experience this verbal complexity. The child (unwittingly) regales us about the innocence of youth, while the adult is (consciously or unconsciously) rationalizing or being complicit with delusion. Regardless of the discrepancy's nature—ideological or epistemological—what we hear on the surface is *unreliable*, and that's why the term stuck. But along the way, the term was hijacked and dumbed down. Lena Dunham and James Frey are writers who misled readers: Dunham presented one version of events only to retract it later while Frey fabricated events only to be outed by journalists. To describe the narrators they employed as "unreliable" is a misnomer, because neither author used the device. Merely fooling the reader, even temporarily, doesn't count.

Booth's detractors, armed as they were with reader response criticism, couldn't rattle his model all that much. Ansgar Nünning's emphasis on the reader's role in discerning a narrator's "interpretations" and "judgments" fell short of approaching a radical reconceptualization. I'd argue that Nünning's keenest contribution to the discourse was his debunking of the implied author, but I'd also argue that Booth could have simply kept that fly out of the ointment. Conceptually, the implied author never achieved much of anything, except to provide the other side with ammunition—which, in the end, helped them little. (Booth published *The Rhetoric of Fiction* over fifty years ago, and while some laypeople have at least heard of the unreliable narrator, the implied author remains confined to the scholarly archive.) No cognitive/constructivist could argue convincingly that unreliable narration should be measured by interpretive strategies alone, any more than one could reasonably argue that unless someone is present to "interpret" the noise, a tree falling in the forest is essentially silent. Eventually Nünning—and presumably everyone lagging—came around to the idea that unreliable narration involves a feedback loop between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response. Various theorists along the way have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to emphasize or deemphasize one particular aspect on the loop, and their contributions have all been helpful, if not always groundbreaking. I stand humbly on their shoulders, hoping that I've added something serviceable to the discourse.

Though we continue to debate the signs and markers endemic to unreliable narration, as well as its implications and effects on the narrative whole, we need not argue for its survival. As I write this, two presumptive nominees are gearing up for the 2016 presidential election, one of whom is not a politician but a real estate mogul/television

personality. Though cooler heads will likely prevail, I believe that as a country we've crossed a boundary. Irony is apparently the new normal. Never has there been a more pressing time in which to watch for coded speech.

Readers, like writers, operate on varying levels of sophistication. Not every reader will be able to detect unreliable narration in every case and not every writer will use the device deftly, but the closer we get to an agreement on its nature, as well as an understanding of its rhetorical effectiveness, the better off—as creators and consumers—we'll be. Because I believe that we're just scratching the surface with nonfiction. I give Lena Dunham credit for having the courage of her convictions. For her misappropriation of the unreliable narrator, I am less sympathetic, because she could have used the device to better effect. Perhaps even to great effect. She could have collapsed the “Barry” thread into one intense scene, fractured in its presentation, mimicking the effects of both the traumatic event and the ensuing memory. Disparities, for instance, between what the character-narrator is telling us and what we sense—summoning our powers of inference—actually occurred. This would have required considerable labor on Dunham's part, but the result could have been both emotionally honest and psychologically complex. It surely would have been controversial, but no more so than the existing text. What we have now is two different versions of a sexual encounter, one consensual and one not, and then Dunham *calls* herself unreliable, casting a shadow of doubt not only on the event in question, but on everything else in the memoir.

The implications for the unreliable narrator as a rhetorical tool for life-writing needs further study. Shifting away from intertextual and extra-textual incongruities, both of which I feel contribute little if anything to the codification of the device, further analysis

should focus on distance—that is, the potential for creating and establishing a perceptible gap between author and narrator. Since memoir—arguably the genre dominating contemporary autobiography—is less a task of reportage and more a process of *working through*, and since we know that subjective historical truth is fundamentally unattainable, it stands to reason that uncertainty and ambiguity can be incorporated effectively and ethically into nonfiction, in service of greater truths, conveyed via unreliable narration.

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