



The Impersonal Voice in First-Person Narrative Fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

The analyses and discussions in this article are all aimed at clarifying a question that most people don't even ask because the answer seems self-evident: "Who narrates in first-person (or what most narratologists call homodiegetic) narrative fiction?" My hypotheses, however, are (1) that in literary fiction, as opposed to oral narrative, one cannot be certain that it is the person referred to as "I" who speaks or narrates, and therefore that (2) we need to posit an impersonal voice of the narrative. We can observe this phenomenon whenever something is narrated that the "narrating-I" *cannot* possibly know, as happens in *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and other fictional narratives, some of which I'll examine later.

To develop my hypothesis and to establish the context for my proposal about the impersonal voice, I will begin with a brief review of some contemporary discussions of voice in literature. I will then proceed to use my proposal to examine passages of first-person fiction that seem difficult to explain without the concept of the impersonal voice. This examination, in turn, will lead me into a discussion of my proposal's consequences for interpretation and for our understanding of fictional worlds. Finally, I will compare my interpretations to some alternative proposals about similar textual phenomena.

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II. VOICE

The question of voice in literature itself potentially has many dimensions—psychological as well as narratological, analytic, and literary-ontological; but the most fundamental issue is whether it makes any sense at all to speak of a voice in written literature, since voice, as Andrew Gibson among others claims (640), must necessarily be phonetic and hence make a sound. The majority of the contributors to a recent issue of *New Literary History* on voice in literature acknowledge that the concept must necessarily assume metaphorical signification in connection with literature, but that this metaphorical usage hardly makes it an invalid concept. I agree with this view and will build on it in what follows.

For fictional narrative, the next crucial question involves the relationship between voice and the narrator. In her article “New Wine in Old Bottles? Voice, Focalization, and New Writing,” Monika Fludernik addresses this topic by way of a critical analysis of Genette’s distinction between the question of “who sees” and that of “who speaks.”¹ Fludernik shows how this division is based on a doubtful a priori assumption that a narrator always exists (621–22). She also convincingly argues that when theorists operate with this assumption, they are falling victim to the illusion that the text causes the reader to produce: “In terms of readers’ reactions to individual texts, the tendency to attribute stylistic features to a hypothetical narrator persona and/or a character is a simple fact. However, this fact (that readers are led by the illusionism of the narrative to impose a communicational framework on the text) does not necessitate the stipulation of a narrator persona on the theoretical level at all. After all, narratologists are then repeating readers’ interpretative moves on a theoretical level, without due consideration of the illusionism involved” (622–23). In particular Fludernik contends that it is unnecessary to presuppose a narrator where nothing indicates such a narrator: “In texts that do not display linguistic markers signalling the presence of a speaker (*I*, deictic elements, expressive markers, stylistic foregrounding), the presence of a narrator is merely implicit, ‘covert.’ Here, according to my own proposals, the insistence on the presence of a speaker constitutes an interpretative move, in which the reader concludes from the presence of a narrative discourse that someone must be narrating the story and that therefore there must be a hidden narrator (or narrative voice) in the text” (622). This is the case “here,” but the situation appears more uncertain in texts where various markers actually seem to indicate a speaker or narrator—that is, texts where “*I*, deictic elements, expressive markers, stylistic foregrounding” are actually used. Are there, then, narrators in this kind of narrative and not in the other kind? Is it a matter of two ontologically entirely different kinds of texts?²

The difficulty or hesitation that this question produces is not at all new. On the contrary, it has implicitly or explicitly arisen as a problem for every no-narrator theory since Käte Hamburger wrote *Die Logik der Dichtung* in 1957. In this work, Hamburger takes her point of departure in an at once entirely fundamental and radical distinction between epic and non-epic statements, claiming that in epic fiction there is no subject of enunciation. According to Hamburger, the sentences of the epic are not sentences that can be true or false in respect to reality but are sentences about

something that only exists by virtue of the sentences. In first-person fiction, however, Hamburger maintains that the situation is very different because such fiction is more like autobiography than like epic fiction, because the subject of enunciation in these texts narrates something that exists independently of the enunciation.

Thus, Hamburger's case adds a third element to the discussion of the relation between voice and narrator: the status and ontology of the narrated world. In her view, if there *is* a subject of enunciation, then it will narrate something that in fiction exists prior to its narration. On the other hand, if there is no subject of enunciation, then the sentences of fiction will produce the world they describe. Consequently, as Hamburger herself recognizes, there is an insurmountable difference between the ontology of the narrated world in the two cases, and, for her, only the narrated world of the first case belongs to the domain of true fiction. In this way, Hamburger concludes that fictional first-person narrative does not belong to the domain of true fiction.

Hamburger's counterintuitive conclusion frequently reappears in subsequent discussions of the status of the narrator, and a similar problem still remains unsolved in Fludernik's essay. As I noted above, Fludernik does not take up the issue of a possible similarity between texts in which the narrator is marked or uses "I" and texts in which no narrator is marked. Historically, fictional first-person narrative has always been an obvious problem for the no-narrator theories, since it seems unquestionable that first-person narrative is narrated by a personal first-person narrator. After a brief but loyal review that mentions a number of convincing characteristics of the position mainly represented by Hamburger, S.-Y. Kuroda, and Ann Banfield,³ Marie-Laure Ryan nicely summarizes the problem: "These facts may speak in favor of the no-narrator theory, but it should be kept in mind that the proposal cannot account for the case of personal fiction. Should it turn out to be the best analysis of impersonal/omniscient narration, the price to pay would be the loss of a unified model of fictional expression" (69). Ryan very clearly points out what can be regarded as the central difficulty from Hamburger onward. It has seemed impossible to make room for fictional first-person narrative in a theory that does not have room for the narrator.⁴

Although I have not encountered a single theoretical treatment that has not taken it for granted that in first-person narrative the narrator is the person referred to in the grammatical first person, one does not have to search for very long before the idea of the "narrating-I," as the enunciating subject in first-person narrative, encounters difficulties. Well-known examples are found in Marcel Proust's great first-person narrative *Remembrance of Things Past*, where the deathbed thoughts of a character other than Marcel are suddenly narrated, and in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, where the private thoughts of characters other than Ishmael are rendered. Since the narrative strategies of these texts have been discussed extensively in the aftermath of Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, I will comment on them only briefly in this essay and instead focus on some less discussed texts in a later section.

Let me consider the range of transgressions of the limits to what a narrating-I would be able to narrate. First, it is quite common to find such a quantity of details in the narrative that it would be impossible for any real person to remember. Likewise,

it is not uncommon to find a very long series of monologues, dialogues, descriptions, and recollections of previous thoughts that part ways with the model of traditional autobiography, which first-person narrative is often assumed to have as its ideal.⁵ This question of a possible “mnemonic overkill,” to use Dorrit Cohn’s phrase in her discussion of the first person’s recitation of his own previous thoughts (*TM* 162), has seldom been included in discussions of realism and the narrative situation of first-person narrative. It is as though one has granted the first-person narrator a right that would otherwise seem to belong to the epic narrator, the right of basically free access to previous thoughts, speech, and details. Finally, another nonmimetic and not at all uncommon phenomenon in first-person narrative fiction is the technique labelled by James Phelan as “redundant telling.”⁶ Phelan defines redundant telling as “a narrator’s apparently unmotivated report of information to a narratee that the narratee already possesses” (*Living*, “Introduction”).⁷ All of the features mentioned transgress a mimetic model of first-person narrative fiction in which the narrator is believed to possess the same limits, possibilities, and techniques at the disposal of an author of a traditional autobiography. As Phelan very precisely points out, the curiosity of such phenomena “includes the fact that it is very easy to read the texts without registering that there is anything unusual going on” (*Living*, “Introduction”).

Thus, on one hand, in first-person narrative fiction it is very common to find a number of features that would be highly unlikely in a nonfictional narrative and sometimes features that clearly show us that the sentences cannot possibly be narrated by a personal first-person narrator. On the other hand, it is just as significant that the protagonist in first-person narrative is often recognizable by his idiolects, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, etc., as these directly appear in the rendering of the narrative. Furthermore, in first-person narrative, one typically finds a large number of sentences that observe the limitations of a personal narrator and coincide with what the narrating-I would be able to say if that I were a nonfictional subject of enunciation.

Now, what is the relationship between the sentences whose words cannot come from the narrating-I and the far more frequent type whose speech is characterized by the idioms and knowledge-base of the protagonist? To be able to answer this question, I must briefly address a somewhat unexplored theoretical field by showing that free indirect speech can take the shape of a kind of dual voice even in first-person narrative.

III. FREE INDIRECT SPEECH IN FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE FICTION

In his book *The Dual Voice*, Roy Pascal describes how free indirect speech can generally be viewed as a merging of the voices of the narrator and the characters: “It is pre-eminently for these reasons that we hear in ‘style indirect libre’ a dual voice, which, through vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation subtly fuses the two voices of the character and the narrator” (26). This description, which, like Genette’s, involves an a priori assumption of the narrator’s existence and is therefore problematic, nevertheless provides a useful starting point.

The great majority of the descriptions of free indirect speech either question or reject the idea that free indirect speech should also be able to take place in the first-person narrator's rendering of her own previous thoughts.⁸ However, this possibility is not at all as rare as one might think. Cohn, who writes about different narrative techniques to render the content of consciousness in both third- and first-person narratives in her significantly titled book *Transparent Minds*, has a fine and concise chapter on this technique, which she refers to as "*Self-Narrated Monologue*" (166). Cohn's chapter begins with an example that should be quoted at length:

There are sometimes curious moments in autobiographical novels when the narrator makes statements about past events that are immediately belied by what happens next, or asks questions that are clearly answered on the following page of his text. Take this passage from Iris Murdoch's novel *A Severed Head* where the narrator, locked in embrace with his mistress Georgie, hears the house door open and thinks his wife Antonia is about to catch him in the act:

We stood thus for a second, paralysed. Then I pulled myself roughly out of the embrace.

It could only be Antonia. She had changed her mind about going to the country, and had decided to come and look the furniture over before our interview tomorrow.

Seconds later the narrator finds out that the intruder is not his wife after all. What happens here? The last sentence looks every bit like a narrative statement; yet it can only be the quotation of a (mistaken) thought of the moment. Despite the absence of quotation signals or the tense of direct discourse it must signify: "I thought: 'It can only be Antonia. She has changed her mind. . . .'" (166)

Cohn recognizes "It could only be Antonia" as a curious statement because the retrospective narrator must know at the time of narration that the person who opened the door is not his wife. Therefore, one might also say that when Cohn writes "Seconds later the narrator finds out," she is being a bit imprecise, in that according to Cohn's distinction between the narrating and the experiencing self (167), it must be the latter who seconds later (than the thought, not the narrative of it) discovers the mistake. This slight correction of Cohn allows us to see that free indirect speech makes possible a kind of dual voice in first-person narrative: the words and thoughts of the experiencing self, who does not narrate the narrative, may nevertheless appear and, in a sense, interfere in the presentation of the narrative.

However, as noted above, objections can be made to Pascal's use of the expression "dual voice." Most importantly, the expression seems, eo ipso, to take a narrator's voice for granted. In her book *Unspeakable Sentences*, Banfield writes that "The dual voice position denies the distinctness of sentences of pure narration" (185), and goes on to make the following point: "But what grammatical evidence of a narrator's point of view do we find? This is what is problematic in the dual voice claim. The second voice of the dual voice position is always the narrator's, never another character's. . . . But the missing premise is none other than the conclusion: if it

doesn't represent the character's, it must represent the narrator's voice" (189). Banfield warns us against inferring that a voice not belonging to a character must belong to the narrator. It is not my intention to attribute to a narrator the voice in free indirect speech that is not that of the character, but I do want to argue that free indirect speech—as the phenomenon is known in third-person narrative—can also occur in first-person fictional narrative. In first-person narrative fiction the main character has a voice with idiolects and personal characteristics, and this voice may interfere in the presentation of the narrative just as the characters' voices may interfere in the presentation of the narrative in the heterodiegetic mode. Or from another perspective, which illustrates the fact that the characters do not have ontological primacy in respect to the voice, one can say that the narrative presents the characters along with the characteristics of their respective styles.

This conclusion leads me to my proposal for acknowledging the impersonal voice of the narrative.

IV. THE IMPERSONAL VOICE OF THE NARRATIVE

In *Moby Dick* one finds sentences and long passages in which the perspective of the "narrator" Ishmael is respected, and entire chapters in which it is transgressed to a striking degree. In the chapters in which the breaks with the focalization through Ishmael are very distinct, they nevertheless take place with an ingenuity that causes them not to shock at first reading. Herman Melville's book illustrates the fact that readers very willingly accept the continuous identity of the experiencing-I and narrating-I even when the narration cannot plausibly be understood as coming from such a narrating-I. Genette explicitly mentions *Moby Dick* as belonging to the category of homodiegetic narratives with zero (or free) focalization, a highly unusual but apt categorization. After long passages in which internal focalization occurs through Ishmael, the narrative suddenly provides extended access to the thoughts of other characters. This is especially true for chapters 37–39.⁹ Chapter 40 is in the form of drama. After that we return to Ishmael in chapter 41 with the following words of assurance: "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew" (179). The very explicit transgression in these chapters and the following return to Ishmael illustrate the possibility of the presence of two voices in first-person narrative, the voice of the narrating-I and a voice that does not belong to any character.

A fine short passage from the introduction to Thomas Mann's novel *The Holy Sinner* provides one way of describing what happens in *Moby Dick*.¹⁰ Here the "narrator," *Der Geist der Erzählung* [the spirit of storytelling], comments as follows:

So spiritual is this spirit and so abstract that grammatically he can be talked of only in the third person and simply referred to as "It is he." And yet he can gather himself into a person, namely into the first person, and be incarnate in somebody who speaks in him and says: "It is me."¹¹

[So geistig ist dieser Geist und so abstrakt, daß grammatisch nur in der dritten Person von ihm die Rede sein und es lediglich heißen kann: "Er ist's."]

Und doch kann er sich auch zusammenziehen zur Person, nämlich zur ersten, und sich verkörpern in jemandem, der in dieser spricht und spricht: "Ich bin es."¹²

What is important here is that in Mann's novel the story is told by someone who in a certain sense can only be referred to in the third person, but who can also incorporate himself into, or occupy, a character and from there say "I" about this person. Exactly the same kind of incorporation seems to take place in *Moby Dick*. Expressed in the words of *The Holy Sinner*, one can say that *Der Geist der Erzählung* leaves Ishmael for a brief tour to the minds of other characters and then returns to him with the words, "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew." Of course the "concept" of a "Geist" as narrator appears far too mystical for theoretical purposes, so let me stress immediately that I aim at describing something that might easily be overlooked, but which is neither more nor less mystical than everything else fascinating in the literary narrative, and something that can be pointed out in the text. This phenomenon might appear more obvious if we rephrase the account of the narrative situation in *Moby Dick* by using Genette's vocabulary, and say that *Moby Dick* demonstrates how the focalization in first-person fiction need not be restricted to the first-person narrator but can move to other characters. In such cases we would say that the overall narration is a case of variable, internal focalization, or even, as Genette himself writes, a homodiegetic narrative with zero focalization. Alternatively, using F. K. Stanzel's terms, we might say that *Moby Dick* is a first-person novel that occasionally comes very close to having an "auktoriale Erzählsituation" [authorial narrative situation]. For much of the time the narrator's knowledge and range of insight is limited to that of Ishmael (at some later stage of his life), but at other times the narrator appears almost omniscient.

No matter what vocabulary we prefer and no matter if we use the term "narrator," the important thing is that *Moby Dick*, as well as many other first-person narrative fictions (some of which I will examine below), shows us that there need not always be an existential indexical continuity between the character referred to in the first person and the referring voice in first-person narrative fiction.

We are thus in need of a concept that designates a voice that is different from that of any single character or narrator, which can talk about the protagonist in the first person. Inspired by Blanchot's concept of the narrative voice, I introduce the concept of the impersonal voice of the narrative. This concept designates a voice that neither belongs to the narrating-I nor to the narrated-I. The proposal of an impersonal voice of the narrative emanates from the need to designate precisely the voice that can settle in different characters, and that in first-person narrative *can* produce narrative elements in which the *Erlebnisfeld* of the *Icherzähler* [knowledge frame of the narrating-I] is abandoned or in which the words cannot be produced by the narrating-I for other reasons. The impersonal voice of the narrative can move from character to character, limiting its range of insight, its vocabulary, and its point of view to that of one particular character in one passage and that of another character in the next. The impersonal voice of the narrative can say what a narrating-I cannot say, produce details that no person could remember, render the thoughts of other charac-

ters, speak when the character remains forever silent etc. It speaks, however, in the first person, both when the possibilities of the person referred to by the first-person pronoun are abandoned and when it says what this person can say.

So far I have suggested that many first-person narratives contain passages and features that the traditional descriptions of first-person narrative cannot coherently account for. I have also tried to show that, in several respects that are not usually acknowledged, first-person narrative fictions are not similar to their nonfictional counterparts. In what follows, as I further develop the consequences of my hypothesis about the impersonal voice, I will try to show that it is possible to arrive at more satisfactory readings of some puzzling first-person narratives and at a revised understanding of the ontology of the fictional world.

V. TEXTUAL EXAMPLES

In this section I will briefly comment on passages from texts from different periods. The comments are aimed at showing that the concept of the impersonal voice of the narrative offers a relatively simple and economic way of describing seemingly strange features for different first-person narratives. The selection of examples throughout this article has been guided by a wish to seek out texts that are exemplary but in no way exceptional. Therefore, I have chosen only one text from the last thirty years, when one could expect to find an elaborate play with personal pronouns and with transgressions of mimetic conventions; instead, I have selected an ancient text, a few texts from the nineteenth century, and a few from the twentieth. In my opinion, it is common to all the examples (with the possible exception of *Glamorama*) that the breaks with the expected limits of the first-person narrator are more likely to pass unnoticed by readers than to shock them, or to be experienced by readers as experiments at the limits of language.

In *Glamorama* by Bret Easton Ellis, what Victor Ward, the protagonist of this first-person novel, does *not* notice is related several times. Here is one prominent example: “‘Disarm’ by the Smashing Pumpkins starts playing on the soundtrack and the music overlaps a shot of the club I was going to open in TriBeCa and I walk into that frame, *not noticing* the black limousine parked across the street” (168 emphasis mine). In the beginning of his article “e-textuality: Authenticity after the postmodern,” David Punter quotes this very passage and demonstrates how different worlds or realms seem to merge and how this produces an uncanny effect. Punter, however, concludes his comment in the following way: “He [Victor Ward] is, after all, telling us that he is ‘noticing’ the black limousine that he is ‘not noticing’” (70). To me this seems to be an inadequate description. I do not think Victor is lying or having a split consciousness. What happens, in accordance with the proposal offered above, is that the impersonal voice of the narrative tells us what Victor does not notice. The book is written in the present tense all the way through and very often we read what Victor is thinking and noticing and sometimes what he is not noticing, even when he is all alone and there is no possible narratee present. The present tense in the book is clearly neither historical present nor interior monologue, but rather simultaneous

present or what Cohn labels “fictional present.” Cohn’s term “has the advantage of dislocating the narrated text from a temporally fixed point of origin” (106), and in this case the “*present tense* should be understood as an adeictic tense which would typically not be aligned with a speaking subject” (Fludernik 252). Thus, through long intervals Victor is obviously not telling anything to anybody and does not know everything that is told. It is impossible for the reader to naturalize the narrative and describe it in terms of communication from a character to a narratee.

In fact we can safely believe the following description of Victor’s knowledge to be fairly correct, though of course highly satirical and comical: “I don’t know anything. . . . Nothing, nada. Remember that. I . . . know . . . nothing. Never assume I know anything. Nada. Nothing. I know nothing, not a thing. Never—” (7). Moreover, this very feature of a voice that does not unambiguously belong to Victor referring to Victor in the first person, perhaps more importantly than anything else, contributes to the effect of the uncanny and is deeply connected with the theme of the double that runs through the entire novel.

This theme places *Glamorama* in a dialogic relation with *The Double* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and this very relation illuminates the relation of my proposal here to that of Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Bakhtin writes about the narrator in *The Double* (which is not a first-person novel): “we do not find a single element that exceeds the bounds of Golyadkin’s self-consciousness, not a single word or a single tone that could not have been part of his interior dialogue” (217). Regarding the double-voiced discourse of first-person narrative in general, Bakhtin describes how the voices of the protagonists, just as the voices of the protagonists in third-person narratives, are constantly fused with the voices of other persons and filled with anticipations of possible objections and replies. In short, he describes how the voice of the “I” is never pure but always composite. It is important to understand that Bakhtin’s subtle analyses of the radical dialogism of the word are in fact somewhat different from my perspective here. Nowhere does Bakhtin seem to suggest that first-person narrative is not narrated by a narrating-I. Instead, he shows how this narration is fused with fragments and intonations from other people’s speech. Consider, for example, the introduction to one of the long comments on *Notes from Underground*: “From the very first sentence the hero’s speech has already begun to cringe and break under the influence of the anticipated words of another” (227–28). Bakhtin’s account thus does not question the seemingly self-evident description that the voice in first-person narrative fiction belongs to the narrating-I, and nowhere, as far as I know, does he describe a voice uttering words that the “I” could not know, did not notice, or could not remember. In that respect, his examples do not resemble those I discuss here.

The Golden Ass by Apuleius, which is one of the very first first-person fictional narratives as such, contains a passage that is curious in a different way. To my knowledge, no critic has commented on the question of the narrator in this passage. In books 5 and 6 one finds the very elaborate story of Cupid and Psyche related by an old woman. Immediately afterwards the following passage says: “This the trifling and drunken old woman declared to the captive maiden, but I, poor ass, not standing far off, was not a little sorry in that I lacked pen and book to write so worthy a tale”

(285). The context leaves no doubt that the ass is sorry because the story, long and complex as it is, cannot possibly be remembered without the ability of writing to support memory. Furthermore, any possibility that the old woman might retell the story at some later point is destroyed by the fact that she is hanged immediately after having told the story (295). The passage makes it clear that when we “hear” the story about Cupid and Psyche there is no temporal distance and afterwards the ass cannot possibly remember it. Thus the story, as the old woman told it, is forever forgotten and lost and yet it is there in front of our eyes, where it continues to exist in this *hic et nunc*, where it is told.

Once again, according to my proposal, it is not a question of the first-person narrator lying or being untrustworthy since he renders what he cannot remember, nor is it a question of the ass making up the details missing in memory. The story comes to the reader as authoritative. What we read is the impersonal voice of the narrative narrating what the ass will not be able to remember (and that he will not be able to remember it).

My last example is of yet a different kind. It is meant to demonstrate how even stories that seem absolutely straightforward can show us that the voice of the character and the voice of the narrator need not be the same (or a changed and older version of the same) in first-person narrative fiction and that sometimes it is only *as if* a communication is taking place.

In the beginning of Sébastien Japrisot’s novel *The Lady in the Car with Glasses and a Gun* the protagonist is telling about herself and her family—or is she?: “At the Liberation, less than two years after the death of her husband, my mother jumped from a window of our town hall just after her head had been shaved. I have nothing to remember her by. If I tell this to someone one day I will add, not even a lock of her hair. If they give me a horrified look, I don’t care” (9). We, the readers, have just been told about the mother, but the first-person narrator has not yet told anyone about her. The words “I will add” [j’ajouterais] makes it clear that it is *exactly* what has just been told and not anything else or something more that the young woman, Dany Longo, will only perhaps tell in the future. The last two pages of the novel seem to explicitly reflect this curious phenomenon of a voice telling things about the young woman that she might not ever say herself, insofar as these are told in the third person and are italicized in the original French text: “*About five months later she was married . . . [to] Baptistin Laventure. Thus she became Dany Laventure, so that on the trousseau she had embroidered at the orphanage with hope and wonderful eyes, she did not even have to change her initials*” (233 italics added to the English text in accordance with the French original). The young woman is now evidently not a narrator but a narrated person. Throughout most of the novel, the impersonal voice of the narrative has focalized through the woman but now moves away from her perspective even as she remains the narrated.

In each of the cases above, our description of the narrative situation has immediate consequences for the interpretation of the text as well as for the understanding of the fictional world. I can elaborate on these consequences by comparing my analysis with the conclusions one would have to arrive at in a traditional scheme.

If, in *The Golden Ass*, the story about Cupid and Psyche was narrated to us by a

nonfictive narrator, or if we think that the narrative voice is that of the personal first-person narrator with his limitations in knowledge and memory, we could not know what the old woman really said since the narrator was not able to write it down or remember it in detail. In the fictive story, as we understand it here, the reader is requested to believe *both* that the old woman told the story exactly as we read it for thirty pages and that she cannot remember it.¹³

When, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, we are told what Bergotte is thinking on his deathbed, we would make a complete mistake by claiming that we cannot really know anything about his thoughts since the first-person narrator cannot. If we were not within the realms of fiction, the objection would be highly relevant.

In the passage quoted from Japrisot's *The Lady in the Car with Glasses and a Gun*, we saw the young woman wondering whether she would ever tell anyone what the reader had just been told. I think few readers will notice anything strange about that, and furthermore I think that this lack of surprise might well be rooted in the fact that, without reflecting upon it, we are aware that as readers we read a narrative that need not ever take place on the level of the character. Thus, in Japrisot, the young woman, Dany Longo, is not narrating in the sense that she is neither communicating to the reader nor to any kind of narratee and she has not told anyone about her mother. But we have to read the novel as if she was, and as if she had.

Changes from first- to third-person narration, as in *The Lady in the Car with Glasses and a Gun*, are normally unhesitatingly accepted by the reader. Likewise, the reader would typically not be troubled by passages where the first-person narrator tells what he or she does not know. Even the passages from *Moby Dick* will give pause to only a few readers. It is worth mentioning that exactly the same phenomena would surely leave us completely perplexed were we to hear them from a live speaker or read them in a traditional nonfictional narrative. This fact points towards two conclusions. First, if the breaks with the expected limits of the first-person narrator do not surprise the general reader, it seems to be because the reader has tacitly accepted the presence within first-person narrative fiction of a voice, knowledge, and other features of the narration that are not possessed by any person. Second, the reader in most cases correctly arrives at conclusions completely different from those he would reach if he really read the fiction as a facsimile of the autobiography,¹⁴ thus making the "I" a remembering and narrating subject of enunciation with the capabilities and limitations of a real person.

I believe I have shown that first-person narrative fiction is not as isomorphic with autobiography as one might think. In the following section I will continue by arguing that it is instead placed in closer proximity to third-person narrative than is usually acknowledged.

VI. THE CREATION OF THE FICTIONAL WORLD

In *Narrative as Rhetoric* and *Living to Tell about It*, James Phelan offers a series of striking examples of the different ways in which first-person novels or short stories can create curious phenomena regarding the communication of the narrative.

Phelan's examples include such texts as Ernest Hemingway's "My Old Man," Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Kay Cisneros's "Barbie-Q," which is the main text in Phelan's discussion of redundant telling in the introduction to *Living to Tell about It*. All these are excellent examples, and Phelan analyzes the texts and their strange features as sophisticated means of communication on different levels. Phelan defines redundant telling as the report of information already possessed by the narratee, and he goes on to explain that "the motivation for redundant telling resides in the *author's need* to communicate information to the audience, and so we might use the longer phrase *redundant telling, necessary disclosure* to describe it" (*Living*, "Introduction"). The redundancy is thus ascribed to the character narrator and the disclosure to the implied author. The character narrator and the implied author are both communicating, only to different audiences. Phelan proceeds to mention three main ways to counter this explanation that "Barbie-Q" is an instance of redundant telling, all of which are naturalizing and mimetic, and then demonstrates the theoretical shortcomings of these accounts (see *Living*, "Introduction"). One could, however, imagine a fourth and also nonmimetic explanation, not specifically regarding Cisneros's text, but regarding the kind of narration Phelan shows us taking place in this text. Phelan's analyses are placed within an elaborate communicational framework and some of my suggestions take the shape of an alternative or a supplement to Phelan's account in that they, without being mimetic, suggest an understanding within a somewhat different frame.

This alternative perhaps becomes most obvious if we turn to a discussion of the kind of disclosure that takes place in cases of paralepsis. I take my point of departure in another of Phelan's examples since it is brilliantly analyzed and very pertinent to my argument here. In a discussion of *The Great Gatsby* in *Narrative as Rhetoric*, Phelan observes that Fitzgerald does not even try to justify how the first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, is able to narrate what he could not possibly know. Phelan shows that Fitzgerald rightly was not concerned about providing any justification and that the reported scene is invested with full authority all the same (108–109). Phelan then concludes that a narrator may fluctuate between being highly unreliable, being reliable with a limited privilege, and being fully reliable and authoritative (112). One of the most important consequences is best expressed in the following sentence: "When the narratorial functions are operating independently of the character functions, then the narration will be reliable and authoritative" (112). I am in absolute agreement with this statement. I would like to add, however, that in cases where the narratorial functions are operating independently of the character functions, there is, in my opinion, no need to maintain the link between the character and the voice narrating what the character does not want to, does not need to, or cannot ever narrate. Therefore, rather than saying that the narrator may fluctuate between being reliable and unreliable, my suggestion would be to say that the impersonal voice of the narrative sometimes focalizes through and limits its range of insight, its knowledge, and its reliability to that of the protagonist, consequently narrating only what he or she could reasonably narrate. At other times, however, it is free to leave this focalization and to narrate what the character narrator need not (Cisneros), will not (Japrisot), or cannot (Ellis and Fitzgerald) narrate.

Expressed this way, the narrative situation in first-person narrative fiction closely approximates the narration in third-person narrative. In fact, if we briefly return to Hamburger, we find that the concept of an impersonal voice of the narrative simply eliminates Hamburger's distinction between narratives with and those without a subject of enunciation.

When sentences that would clearly mark the narrator as unreliable or even insane in a nonfictional narrative come to the reader as authoritative in the discussed fictional examples, it is because the narratorial functions are operating independently of the character functions, to use Phelan's expression. Or, using my own terms: it is because the sentences should not unambiguously be ascribed to (a later version of) the character but rather to the impersonal voice of the narrative. This conclusion has a further consequence of vital importance: as opposed to the sentences of autobiography but akin to those of third-person narrative, the sentences of first-person narrative fiction do not form statements about reality. Instead, they produce a fictional world that does not exist independent of these sentences.

In accordance with Hamburger's claims about the sentences of fiction, Cohn writes about nonreferential narrative: "I intend . . . to use the term *fiction* . . . in the exclusive sense of a literary nonreferential narrative. . . . The adjective *nonreferential* in the definitional phrase 'nonreferential narrative' needs to be qualified at somewhat greater length. First and foremost it signifies that a work of fiction creates the world to which it refers by referring to it" (*Distinction* 12–13). A work of fiction creates the world to which it refers by referring to it.¹⁵ This logic of fiction is paradoxical and yet completely simple, and it is this logic that should constantly be kept in mind, something that Cohn herself occasionally forgets. Thus, on the following pages of Cohn's text, the concepts are somewhat confused when she speaks of how fiction can still refer to the real world (14), but that this reference does not need to be precise or exclusive (15), and as a result the most important fact is left unmentioned: "the real world" outside the text and "the real world" as it is created in the text are by necessity not the same, and the world to which the text refers is nonetheless created in and by the reference of the text, even when the text contains characters, places, and occurrences that we know from "the real world." This conception of the text, and my objections to Cohn's conclusion, do not lead to the total autonomy of the text in respect to the real world, inasmuch as one can claim that we are only capable of understanding and knowing the universe of the text because we know a universe outside the text.

The paradox of fiction—that it refers to something that only arises when reference is made to it—seems to be intensified in first-person narrative fiction. If we convert each part of Cohn's sentence about nonreferentiality and apply it to first-person narrative fiction, we must say that "the narrating-I creates itself by referring to itself," or just as paradoxically, that "the narrating-I creates itself as the enunciator of the sentence as the sentence is enunciated."

However, it only becomes this complicated because we go along with the illusion and make the "I" the producer of the sentence. It is more correct to say that this person, like all the other elements of fiction, is created because the impersonal voice of the narrative refers to it. Third-person narrative and first-person narrative are thus

both characterized by not having a narrator who speaks *about* something, but rather an impersonal voice that creates the world to which it refers. In both cases the issue is that it is not possible to doubt the sentences of this voice inside the realm of fiction. In both cases, however, these sentences can be fused with the potentially erroneous and untrustworthy sentences of personal voices.

With this understanding of the world of fiction as a world that arises through its enunciation, regardless of whether it resembles the world outside the text, we can separate the question of representation from the question of resemblance to reality. In my description, fiction is always nonrepresentative in the precise sense that the world to which it refers is first created in the reference, and this quality is independent from the question of its resemblance to the real world.

“I, Ishmael” does not exist before the impersonal voice of the narrative says “I, Ishmael,” and this very double production, in which the “I” can be regarded at once as the creator and the creation of the sentence, is paradigmatic for first-person narrative fiction.

VII. FINAL REMARKS

In the above discussions I believe I have shown that the narrative situation in first-person narrative fiction regarding free indirect speech, reliability, and the creation of the fictional world is comparable to third-person narrative. The concept of the impersonal voice of the narrative and the raised awareness of the similarities between first- and third-person narrative fiction make it possible to better account for the fact that passages like the ones I have discussed rightly come to the reader as authoritative. In addition, the foregoing analyses should help us avoid the choice between misinterpreting transgressions of the first-person narrator’s limitations as either a proof of the narrator’s unreliability or as a mistake on behalf of the author.

Phelan’s interpretations of similar examples have the same advantage of avoiding these two misinterpretations without ignoring the curious things happening in the texts. Comparing my approach to Phelan’s, I would say that each has its own advantages. Adopting the suggestions made in this article allows us to avoid ascribing a certain incoherence to character. Thus I do not need to describe the reliability of the character narrator as fluctuating and variable. This seems especially relevant in cases where nothing else in the text suggests that a reliable character narrator should be occasionally unreliable or gives the reader reasons to believe that an otherwise unreliable narrator should momentarily be completely reliable. It seems advantageous to me that by cutting the existential link between character and narrator it is possible to coherently analyze the character *qua* character as well as coherently analyze the impersonal voice of the narrative *qua* creator of the fictional world.

The price I pay may, however, seem high to many. This three-part price consists of the fact that the concept of an impersonal voice of the narrative is far more counterintuitive than Phelan’s in regard to first-person narrative fiction that has always been described as personal narration. Second, the whole idea of a narrative voice that refers to “another person” in the first person implies that literature in such cases vio-

lates the rules of language outside literature. Finally, the theory proposed here might at first glance seem to have difficulties accounting for the fact that unreliable narration can take place in first-person narrative.

Whereas I accept the first two objections, I would like to briefly comment on the last objection. Once again, the situation in first-person narrative fiction is in that respect quite similar to that of third-person narrative. As Banfield shows for third-person narrative, sentences representing consciousness are often syntactically ambiguous (218), and readers might make mistakes if they fail to decide whether a sentence is pure narration or represents the fallible opinion of a character. The same holds true for first-person narrative. Via contextualizations and interpretations, readers have to decide whether the sentences represent the unreliable, mistaken, or hallucinated products of the person's mind or—as was the case in the examples from Apuleius and Fitzgerald—if they should believe the narration even when the person would not have been able to remember or have knowledge of the details narrated.

In true cases of unreliable narration in first-person narrative fiction, the situation can easily be accounted for as the impersonal voice of the narrative's reliable rendering of the unreliable thoughts or words of the character—just like the narrator in third-person narrative can represent the potentially mistaken thoughts of the characters (e.g., via free indirect speech).

Therefore, as stated above, the sentences of narration may in both cases be mixed with the potentially erroneous and untrustworthy sentences of the persons in the created worlds. One main difference is, of course, that in first-person narrative fiction, the impersonal voice of the narrative refers to a certain person in the first person. This person may or may not address a narrative to an audience or a narratee and may or may not be reliable.

Finally, I would like to offer a few words on the examples commented upon in this article and the validity of the proposals concerning other texts. It has not been my aim to prove that the impersonal voice of the narrative can be clearly pointed out in any given text, and I do not want to claim that all first-person narrative fictions transgress the knowledge frame of the narrating-I or in other ways differ from non-fictional texts. Least of all do I hold the opinion that the features discussed in this article make a text “better” or constitute some criteria for the quality of the text. Instead, I hope to have demonstrated three general points: (1) The *possibility* to transgress the limits of the person's voice regarding knowledge, vocabulary, memory, etc. is always present in first-person narrative fiction. (2) Transgressions of the knowledge frame of the narrating-I do in fact take place much more frequently than is usually acknowledged. (3) When such transgressions take place they should not be regarded as mistakes on behalf of the author, and it is not a matter of leaving the genre of first-person fiction but, on the contrary, a matter of utilizing a possibility fundamental to it.

With these points in mind, I regard the proposed concept as transhistorically valid. That being said, I think transgressions of the autobiographical model are de facto more frequent as well as more emphatically explored in modernist and post-modernist fiction. Empirically, the transgressions are not at all independent of periods and authors but are probably most commonly found in recent fiction, whereas

ontologically this fact should not lead us to infer that they are specific to a certain period or certain authors. Therefore, in *Moby Dick* and in the other texts analyzed, we experience something simultaneously particular and general.

In general, the “I” we find in literature is not simply a representation of an enunciating subject. Instead, the “I” is one manifestation of the impersonal voice of the narrative, and literature derives part of its power of fascination from the shifting manifestations of this voice, a voice that is usually just as distinctively present in the reading as it is difficult to determine in the analysis. In particular, the works and passages examined in this article explore, to a greater degree than has been thought possible, the possibilities of first-person narrative fiction when it departs from the rules and logic of narration as they are constituted outside fiction. The works do so by confronting the reader with unusually distinct and distinctive words of the impersonal voice of the narrative.

ENDNOTES

1. I wish to thank Monika Fludernik for valuable comments in private conversation as well as for her thorough comments to an early draft of this article.
2. Cf. Monika Fludernik, *Fictions* 443.
3. For a thorough commentary and critique of Banfield, see Fludernik, *Fictions* esp. 360–97.
4. Cf. Jahn 696.
5. Even Cohn writes, for instance, “first-person novels and autobiographies are, for the most part, look-alikes” (*Distinction* 59).
6. Phelan’s extensive comments on several aspects of this article have been very useful, and he has helped me a lot in my efforts to make my argument as clear as possible.
7. Cf. Phelan, “Redundant Telling.”
8. An exception is Cohn (in *Transparent Minds*), to whom I will return below. Most other books on the subject only mention the phenomenon in passing or not at all. Cf. Pascal 67–68, Roncador 240, Banfield 164 passim, and Kurt.
9. The examples of access to other peoples’ thoughts are numerous. Two examples are “Terrible old man! thought Starbuck with a shudder, sleeping in this gale, still thou steadfastly eyest thy purpose” (235), and “even then, Ahab, in his hidden self, raved on” (185).
10. My terminological proposal is not very original and the use of the introduction to *The Holy Sinner* is not original at all. Together they do, however, aim at a description of the narrative situation in the first-person narrative fiction that to my knowledge *is* new compared to the existing descriptions.
11. I quote from Mann, *The Holy Sinner* 5 except for the last three words, which the English translation inaccurately renders as “I am he.” Cf. the German text.
12. Mann, *Der Erwählte* 10–11.
13. Allow me to mention another, similar example, this time from *King Solomon’s Mines*, in which the three men in the diamond mine are looking at the diamonds: “A good many of these bigger ones, however, we could see by holding them up to the light, were a little yellow. . . . What we did *not* see, however, was the look of fearful malevolence that old Gagool favoured us with as she crept, crept like a snake, out of the treasure chamber” (259). The italics are from the original and emphasize the fact

that the men did *not* see what the reader has just been told that Gagool did in the room, where no other persons were present. Still, in my opinion, we should not doubt that she did and looked exactly as described.

14. Cf. Cohn, *Distinction* 30.

15. Uri Margolin writes practically the same thing in an article in *Poetics Today*: "Literary texts thus construct their unique worlds through referring to them" (520). Cf. Harshaw 232.

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