

Narrative Framing in Contemporary American Novels

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Twice-Mediated Fiction

By

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INTRODUCTION

All verbal narratives are mediated. For Franz Stanzel, the mediacy of presentation is the “generic characteristic” of narrative texts.¹ The presence of a “mediator,” a narrative agent through whom the events of story are relayed or filtered, is the defining feature of fiction which distinguishes it from other types of modern literary art, poetry and drama. Usually, mediation is effected through a narrator that can be either “dramatized” or “undramatized,”² through “a narrator who appears before the reader as an independent personality or one who withdraws so far behind the narrated events that he becomes practically invisible to the reader.”³ But as Stanzel rightly observes, “mediacy as the generic characteristic of narration is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon.”⁴ He himself points out the distinction between two types of mediators, two types of narrative agents—between a narrator and “a reflector, a character in the novel who thinks, feels, and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator.”⁵

However, the complexity of mediation in narrative texts may also result from the doubling of storytellers, as in framed stories, becoming even more complicated, when narrating delegated to two different entities is accompanied by the insertion of an additional diegetic or narrative level. Framed narratives are thus at least doubly mediated. As Jeffrey Williams points out, they “present a different operation from the typical invocation of an ‘authorial’ narrator, since they embody and contextualize the narrative performance in a discrete and whole scenario, rather than sporadically issue the narrative from a disembodied, omniscient presence.”⁶ This

duality of the embedding scenario and the embedded story corresponds to the division into diegetic and metadiegetic narratives in Gérard Genette's framework put forward in *Narrative Discourse*.⁷ In some cases, when the frame as an editor's preface is separated from the main text, Genette's term *peritext* is applicable. As he himself explains:

Within the same volume are such elements as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles or certain notes. I will give the name *peritext* to this first spatial category.⁸

Genette's category of a *peritext* and the notion of a narrative frame are brought together in Yury Lotman's concept of the *compositional frame*, its "normal (that is neutral) construction," in which the framing "is extraneous to the text"; as Lotman puts it, "Located outside the text's boundaries, the frame warns of the initiation of the text."⁹ Peritextual elements are located on the periphery of the main text. They reside "inside" the confines of a bound volume, bracketing the narrative that follows. Narrative frames as *peritexts* usually take the shape of an author's, publisher's, or editor's notes or prefaces. Their status is ambiguous. Positioned on the text's boundary, they lead into the main text. However, such peritextual notes, "consisting of a discourse produced on the subject of the text that follows or precedes it,"¹⁰ can be legitimately considered from two different perspectives, which are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. On the one hand, they are set off from the following narrative, and this distinction is suggested by the compositional layout, and sometimes also by avowedly different authorship, as in "allographic" preludes or "postludes."¹¹ Introductory notes or closing remarks are often undersigned by the historical author, and in such cases their status as the novel's *peritext* is most evident. However,

allographic prefaces and “postfaces,” allegedly written by persons other than the historical or empirical author of a particular novel, are more problematic. Marilyn Edelstein observes that

Some prefaces are “written” not by the author whose name appears on the novel’s cover but by a fictional character created by the novelist. Such “fictional prefators” usually discuss the novel much as an “author-prefator” does—commenting on its origins, composition, purpose, or meaning. Such a fictional prefator will be ontologically distinct from the narrator of the attached text.¹²

In the emerging complex game of fiction, the customarily assumed authenticity of an opening peritext is subverted, its literariness is exposed. It is no longer separate from and extraneous to the ensuing fiction. Viewed on a higher level and integrated with the main text, a peritextual note belongs to the novel—a prelude or postlude, whether authorial or allographic, serves as a narrative framing device. This scenario is at work in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, where the peritextual framing initiates and closes the main narrative, allegedly written by Poe on the basis of Pym’s memoir. Peritexts inescapably raise questions of authorship, complicating the attribution of the text to its source, involving the addressee in the tricky task of uncovering layers upon layers of mystification, and of determining the sender of the message. In Poe’s *Pym*, the authorship of the “Introductory Note” is attributed to Pym, the novel’s narrator and protagonist. The opening peritext, then, subscribes to the familiar eighteenth-century topos of veiled authorship, as for instance in Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, additionally fictionalizing its actual author, making Poe, supposedly hired by Pym, a mere transcriber

belonging to the storyworld projected by the “Introductory Note.”

Williams in *Theory and the Novel* elaborates on such framing scenarios typically occurring in novels presented to the public as memoirs or collections of letters, where he states that “typically, an editor has found or been entrusted with a packet of letters, has discovered a diary in a drawer.”¹³ According to Williams, such prefaces not only specify a source to account for the editor’s access to the presented material; as he argues, “such a framing topos invokes the code of realism to attribute a plausible means of access to implausibly recounted—usually private, otherwise inaccessible—events.”¹⁴ Edelstein encapsulates the function of this type of framing in the following way: it “precedes, initiates, and influences the reader’s experience of the subsequent narrative.”¹⁵

Narrative frames need not be located on the periphery; losing their status of peritexts, they frequently occur inside the main body of the text. It is not only their position that ceases to be marginal—they acquire significance in themselves. For Williams, narrative frames “represent the construction of a discrete and whole narrative act, a narrative of narrative performance.”¹⁶ As such they are not mere expedients, subordinated to the ensuing narrative. Williams even suggests the revision of the usual privileging of the embedded story over the perfunctory, expendable frame, arguing that “rather than being superadded to the narrative proper and external or extraneous,” an enframing scenario “forms a coherent narrative proposition on its own terms in relation to which the embedded narrative takes the position of an indirect object.”¹⁷ The issue of the relation between the frame and the inset tale is briefly discussed by Genette in *Narrative Discourse*, where he attempts to “differentiate the main types of relationships that can connect the metadiegetic narrative to the first [or diegetic] narrative, into which it is inserted.”¹⁸ He discerns

three types of this relationship, the first being “direct causality between the events of the metadiegesis and those of the diegesis, conferring on the second narrative an *explanatory* function.”¹⁹ In this causal relationship, implying also the spatio-temporal continuity between the metadiegetic and diegetic worlds, second-degree narratives “basically answer, explicitly or not, a question of the type ‘What events have led to the present situation?’”²⁰ The second type in Genette’s scheme “consists of a purely thematic relationship, therefore implying no spatio-temporal continuity between metadiegesis and diegesis”; it is a relationship of contrast or of analogy.²¹ The third type in Genette’s classification “involves no explicit relationship between the two story levels.”²² Genette argues that in such a situation “it is the act of narrating itself that fulfills a function in the diegesis,” a function of distraction or obstruction, or both at the same time.²³

This provisional scheme offered by Genette has raised many objections. William Nelles in *Frameworks: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative* dismisses Genette’s idea of the absence of any explicit relationship between the frame and the inserted story, positing that “even discontinuity or apparently gratuitous relationships may be read as thematically significant.”²⁴ He also argues that “all embedded narrative has a dramatic impact, if only that of deferring or interrupting the embedding narrative, and that all embedded narrative has a thematic function, if only one of relative contrast or analogy.”²⁵ Not only the categories proposed by Genette and their spurious differentiation have incurred criticism. The basic flaw in Genette’s scheme, in Nelles’s view, lies in its grounding and justification:

The problem that arises here is that assignment of a narrative to one of these categories is a matter of literary interpretation, not a matter of the recognition of significant structural features.²⁶

The actual shaping of framing scenarios, recurrent embedding patterns, the composition of a narrative frame—these issues have been ignored by Genette and only marginally treated by Nelles. It is Williams who has submitted the most comprehensive study of narrative frames to date. His synthetic conceptual scheme presented in his monograph *Theory and The Novel* is not only exhaustive; it possesses also remarkable explanatory power. It accounts for nearly all varieties of framing scenarios and attends to their function as well. Based on “frequency and placement,” he distinguishes three basic types of frames, calling the first one “a *preliminary, introductory, or prologue* frame,” which as he explains, “is singulative and inaugurates the narrative, depicting a relatively discrete scenario staging the act of narrative and proffering a motivating cause.”²⁷ This type is characterized by “formal asymmetry”: “it does not recur to close the embedded story, but recedes or ‘disappears’ after the beginning.”²⁸ Williams notes that introductory frames take several common forms. An *editor’s preface* describes “how the narrator received letters, a journal or diary, or other relevant documents that will be presented,” and it employs the “rhetoric of authentication” to validate the embedded narrative.²⁹ An *interview preface* “casts an oral rather than written source and therefore a dramatic scenario rather than an account of scholarly research,” ascribing to the narrator the role of a reporter recording a witness’s account, while a *confessional preface*, by contrast, “gives direct testimony.”³⁰ The fourth type of an introductory frame is an *ensemble frame*, which is markedly different from the previous three, more intimate ones and consists mostly of individual exchanges, because it stages “the interaction of a narrative *circle*, its receptiveness and complicity in the narrative delivery,” and it “depicts the public enactment of narrative.”³¹

The second general type in Williams's scheme is "a *bracketing* or *bookend frame*," which as Williams explains, "opens or introduces the story and then returns to close or conclude it in a formal if not thematic symmetry," spatially and temporally marking "the parameters of the narrative."³² It is not only its recurrence at the end that sets it apart from a prologue frame. A bracketing frame often provides the closing events of the embedded story, and in doing so, Williams argues, it "transgresses the boundary of the embedded text, so that it carries on the plot sequence, as a necessary element of its teleology."³³

The third general type is a *recurring frame*, where the framing scenario, "the invocation of a narrative situation, repeats throughout, sometimes at regular if not mechanical moments, sometimes irregularly traversing the text."³⁴ Williams points out that a recurring frame complicates the very concept of the frame, because "it loses its singular, autonomous position as opening announcement or as closing bracket."³⁵ This is the most diversified framing scenario. As Williams specifies, it takes many shapes: "a tale-telling series or competition, repeating essentially the same narrative scenario periodically by rule,"³⁶ a recurring interview frame, and multiple frames. It is also the most complex one, for in addition to "an ingrained and compulsive narrator, like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*, presenting an enframing relation that threatens to overtake the embedded plot,"³⁷ this general type also includes "a heterogeneous set of frame scenarios, as in the full text of *Wuthering Heights* or in *Frankenstein*."³⁸ This heterogeneous set combines "hybrid framing features, such as an initial storytelling scenario, testimony, direct witness, editorial ministrations (for instance, letters), confessions, dreams."³⁹

Williams emphasizes the crucial difference between a single frame and multiple frames. A single frame stresses "the

representation of the rhetorical dynamic,” what Williams calls elsewhere “the drama of reception,” by which he means “how an audience (one or more narratees) receives the story.”⁴⁰ By contrast, multiple frames “work to establish a legitimate chain of possession of the evidence of the narrative,”⁴¹ they foreground “the process of narrative gathering,”⁴² as is the case in *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein*, narrative texts with multiple levels of embedding and many narrators. In such texts the boundary between the narrative frame and the embedded story is no longer clear-cut. The “medial or liminal” role of the frame becomes “confused with the enframed content.”⁴³ Lotman, too, speaks of “complicated cases where the text and its frame are interwoven, so that each both frames and is framed.”⁴⁴

Wuthering Heights and *Frankenstein* indeed represent complex cases of framing, in which the proliferation of storytellers is paired with the multiplication of diegetic levels. In order to account for these discrete but often coincident framing maneuvers, Nelles postulates “two structurally distinct types of narrative embedding”:

“horizontal” embedding, in which texts at the same diegetic level, but narrated by different narrators, follow one another; and “vertical” embedding, in which narratives at different diegetic levels are inserted within (Bal) or stacked on top of one another (Genette).⁴⁵

A confessional frame represents vertical embedding, with the “past” actions of the protagonist-narrator forming the diegetic level in relation to which the narrative situation, the protagonist’s “present” overview of his life from the distance of time, becomes its metadiegesis. *Robinson Crusoe* amply demonstrates this model of embedding. By contrast, horizontal embedding is marked by delegating narration to a different figure on the same diegetic level, by introducing

another storyteller, for instance the primary narrator's acquaintance. The task of narrating can also be assigned to a group of characters taking turns in a tale-telling competition, the situation classically illustrated by the party of Florentines secluded from the plague in *Decameron* or by the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. However, the pilgrims' tales in relation to the enframing General Prologue in *The Canterbury Tales* display the conjunction of horizontal and vertical embedding, for the general narrator introducing the other pilgrims and their tales occupies a higher diegetic level. Nelles calls this type of embedding "deep": it occurs "with both vertical and horizontal 'movement,' when the shift in narrator is accompanied by a shift in narrative level."⁴⁶ Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, a Polish literary scholar, observes that theoretically, there is no limit to how deep embedding can be, and it is only practical considerations that set a boundary: readability and clarity of such an intricate construction.⁴⁷ As an extreme case of narrative nesting, she cites *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, which occasionally features eight levels of embedding.⁴⁸

Narrative frames are a potent literary device that can serve manifold functions. According to Nelles, an inherent function of all embedding is the invocation of what he calls, "building freely on the terminology that Roland Barthes developed for *S/Z*," the *hermeneutic code*, the "code of interpretation."⁴⁹ The hermeneutic code is activated by the presence of some enigma signaled by the layering of stories, and as Nelles remarks, this "enigma may either be resolved or disclosed within the text, or it may instead be left open or even gradually complicated."⁵⁰ Perhaps the simplest and most obvious function of narrative frames is generic identification. Quite often narrative frames advertise the genre of the ensuing story. One need only mention here authorial prefaces to Gothic romances or framing scenarios introducing ghost

stories. As Williams observes, “Frequently, fantastic or incredible stories are framed,” in order to “quell disbelief,” and “displace the question of reference.”⁵¹ However, placing supernatural events within the rationalizing bracket of editorial notes or a storytelling competition does not always result in the neutralization of threatening content. Julia Briggs in her essay on the poetics of the ghost story rightly points out that

From its beginnings, Gothic narrative had shown a tendency to proliferate, including interwoven episodes and insets, so that a story's interaction with its frame might itself contribute to the tension between natural and supernatural explanations.⁵²

Moreover, following Tzvetan Todorov, she recognizes as part of the value of an inset narrative, “the opportunity it provides to create a tension between narrative and frame by setting up contrasting moods or narratives, a sense of rocking between different conceptions of the universe, different kinds of explanation.”⁵³

Another function, and a very important one, is that of modeling the way an embedded narrative is received. Narrative frames effectively contribute to achieving a preordained effect on the audience; they shape and modify its responses. They can model the reception of an inserted story in various ways. First of all, narrative frames evoke a horizon of expectations, “positioning” or “orienting” the narratee with respect to the ensuing tale. The concept of the “horizon of expectations” in the reception of literary works has been introduced by the German scholar Hans Jauss. As Jauss himself explains, it is “constituted for the reader from out of a tradition or series of previously known works.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, in his view, “for each work a preconstituted horizon of expectations must be ready at hand [...] to orient the reader's (public's) understanding and to enable a qualifying reception.”⁵⁵

Nelles draws attention to the momentous consequences of the doubling of the narratee in literary texts relying on narrative frames. As he rightly emphasizes, every interpreter is called upon to fill the role of the narratee of the embedded narrative; as he puts it, “the text demands that we respond to—adopt or reject—the embedded audience’s reading and reaction.”⁵⁶ The personal reader in his or her reception is guided by the presented reactions of the audience listening to the inserted tale, or by the implied responses, whether of the assumed reader of the published memoir or the addressee of the letters made available to the public. The role prescribed for the individual reader by the use of narrative frames is either to mirror the narratee’s reactions or to distance himself or herself from them.

Often, narrative frames implement the strategy of “lending credibility” to the ensuing story by evoking what Williams calls the *rhetoric of verification*:

frames specify a source to account for how the narrator has access to the presented material, to naturalize what would normally be out of the realm of public discourse. Rather than the occult power of a supernarrator, such a framing topos invokes the code of realism to attribute a plausible means of access to implausibly recounted—usually private, otherwise inaccessible—events.⁵⁷

In other words, the presented material, often subversive, transgressive or downright fantastic, is somewhat “neutralized” by its inclusion within the normative matrix. However, both the avowed “naturalization” accomplished by introductory notes and their realistic pretensions are often unmasked and suspended. The fictive status of editorial prefaces is exposed, and the consequent interplay between the frame and the ensuing story involves the addressee in a complex literary game. Thus, finally, narrative embedding tackles the intricate

and elusive relation between art and life, fiction and reality, and emerges as a metafictional device.

The novels examined in the volume *Narrative Framing in Contemporary: American Novels Twice-Mediated Fiction* have been published over the course of nearly forty years, from 1968 to 2014, so the term “contemporary” is meant here in its broadest sense. The opening essay deals with *Andrew’s Brain*, the final offering by E. L. Doctorow, which came out in 2014. It is followed by the examination of Paul Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium*, a novella published in 2006. The third text under discussion, John Gardner’s “The King’s Indian,” was released in 1974. The penultimate essay attends to *Mr. X*, Peter Straub’s novel that saw print in 1999. The volume is closed by the analysis of *Expensive People*, an early work by Joyce Carol Oates that appeared in 1968.

The order in which these works are addressed in the present volume does not reflect any judgment on their merits. *Mr. X*, the novel by Peter Straub, generally classified as horror fiction, displays in its literary organization as much complexity and sophistication as any of the other novels examined in this volume, which in itself goes to show that the line drawn between “mainstream” literature and “generic” fiction is quite arbitrary. The focus of the critical inquiry, narrative framing as a major aspect of the literary organization of much contemporary American fiction, is equally well demonstrated by the design of Straub’s *Mr. X* as it is evidenced by Doctorow’s novella *Andrew’s Brain*, the text whose examination opens this volume.

In addition to their narrative structure, an important factor underlying the selection of these particular texts for the purpose of this study has been the conviction that the primary aim of any scholarly endeavor is adding to the existing state of research. Thus priority has been given to the novels that have been published recently or have been less frequently

studied, with a view to bringing them from the margin to the mainstream of academic discussion. This consideration has led to the exclusion of such exemplary texts as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* or *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which since their first appearance in print have remained firmly in the center of critical attention and inspired the profusion of commentary. Ultimately, the choice of the novels studied in this volume has been dictated by a host of related considerations: the excitement of charting an unknown territory resulting from the recent publication of *Andrew's Brain* and *Travels in the Scriptorium*, the relative critical neglect of *Mr. X*, the misconceptions regarding the recurrent frame in "The King's Indian," or the disregard of its significance in *Expensive People*.

The examined texts display one crucial unifying thread: they are doubly mediated fictions, fictions in parentheses, so to speak. These novels are distinguished by the prominent and highly functional narrative framing in their construction, but they also demonstrate a striking generic, thematic, and structural variety. Also, the bracketing devices employed in these texts serve in each case an author's individual artistic agenda. Last but not least, the examined novels display diverse framing scenarios: *Andrew's Brain* features an interview frame crossed with a confessional mode, the narrative in "The King's Indian" is interwoven with an elaborate and lively ensemble frame, *Travels in the Scriptorium* inverts the time-honored convention of the "found manuscript," a composite heterogeneous set of framing devices characterizes the design *Mr. X*, while a confessional frame is recast as memoir-writing in *Expensive People*.

The adopted line of inquiry has been determined by the conspicuous presence of narrative frames in the novels studied in this volume and their hermeneutic significance.

Close attention will be paid to the way they guide the reception of the text either by staging the interaction of the narrative circle or by envisioning the imagined responses of the recipients. Another crucial area of interest is how narrative frames blur the boundary between fiction and criticism, turning the text into commentary on the literary process, and in some cases even into its own exegesis. Framing scenarios will also be examined as means of engaging the novelistic tradition and exposing the arbitrariness of storytelling conventions. Reversals and inversions they enact will also be investigated. Frequently, owing to bracketing devices, what has been previously marked as fiction acquires a seemingly authentic status, and vice versa, what has been assumed to be real is exposed as invention, as “a crafty fabrication.” Arising self-reflexive and metafictional concerns, involving the relation between art and reality, and between literature and life, will be pursued, too. The no less vital issues of authorship, actual or fictitious, deferred or delegated, projected by narrative frames will also be considered, by addressing the relations of author figures to their works, and the questions of narrative authority and control over the text. The outline presented above, by necessity advancing general claims about the examined novels, is not to be construed as the denial of their unique artistic qualities. Their specific thematic concerns as well as the distinctive aspects of their literary organization will be duly attended to.

Notes

¹ Franz Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 4.

² Wayne C. Booth, “Distance and Point-of-View. An Essay in Classification,” in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. by Vassilis Lambropoulos et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 272.

³ Stanzel, *Narrative*, 47.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem, 5.

⁶ Jeffrey Williams, *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

⁷ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

⁸ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4-5.

⁹ Yury Lotman et al., "The Text within the Text," *PMLA*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (1994), 383.

¹⁰ Genette, *Paratexts*, 161.

¹¹ Ibidem, 178.

¹² Marilyn Edelstein, "Before the Beginning: Nabokov and the Rhetoric of the Preface," in *Narrative Beginnings. Theories and Practices*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 31.

¹³ Williams, *Theory and the Novel*, 114.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Edelstein, "Before the Beginning," 29.

¹⁶ Williams, *Theory and the Novel*, 100.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 232.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem, 233.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ William Nelles, *Frameworks: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 138.

²⁵ Nelles, *Frameworks*, 137.

²⁶ Ibidem, 135.

²⁷ Williams, *Theory and the Novel*, 120.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem, 121.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibidem, 122.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ibidem, 123.

³⁵ Ibidem.

- ³⁶ Ibidem.
- ³⁷ Ibidem, 124.
- ³⁸ Ibidem.
- ³⁹ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁰ Ibidem, 113.
- ⁴¹ Ibidem, 107.
- ⁴² Ibidem, 124.
- ⁴³ Ibidem, 125.
- ⁴⁴ Lotman, "The Text within the Text," 383.
- ⁴⁵ Nelles, *Frameworks*, 132.
- ⁴⁶ Ibidem, 139.
- ⁴⁷ Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, *Semantyka wypowiedzi poetyckiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 102.
- ⁴⁸ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁹ Nelles, *Frameworks*, 140.
- ⁵⁰ Ibidem.
- ⁵¹ Williams, *Theory and the Novel*, 114.
- ⁵² Julia Briggs, "The Ghost Story," in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 138.
- ⁵³ Ibidem.
- ⁵⁴ Hans Robert Jauss, "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature," in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 131.
- ⁵⁵ Ibidem.
- ⁵⁶ Nelles, *Frameworks*, 145.
- ⁵⁷ Williams, *Theory and the Novel*, 114.

CHAPTER ONE

THE TRAUMA OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF A TRAUMA: THE CONFSSIONAL FRAME IN E. L. DOCTOROW'S *ANDREW'S BRAIN*

Andrew's Brain is the last novel of E. L. Doctorow, published in 2014, shortly before his death. This strange valedictory offering of Doctorow stands perhaps as the author's philosophical and artistic testament, on the one hand, firmly placed in the context of the Western metaphysical tradition, and, on the other hand, critically reexamining its long-standing claims in the light of recent findings of neuroscience and genetics. In the novel, the protagonist's personal ordeal is enmeshed with the national tragedy of September 11. Its fictional characters mix with thinly disguised historical figures, such as the US president Bush junior or Donald Rumsfeld. The novel is also marked by the extensive inscription of intertexts from literature, opera, and popular culture. It draws from other modes of discourse, too: philosophy, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, genetics, and information technology. Clearly, then, *Andrew's Brain*, like much postmodernist fiction, situates itself within the vast framework of cultural repository, which Michel Foucault termed "the archive," and which he broadly defined as "the general system of the formation and transformation of statements."¹

Andrew, a middle-aged brain scientist, the first-person narrator and the protagonist of the novel, in tantalizingly

indefinite circumstances discloses the series of his misfortunes to a sympathetic interlocutor, in a series of what appear to be psychoanalytical sessions before taking on a more ominous character. Thus the narrative situation in the novel comes across as the blend of what Williams calls an “interview frame” and a “confessional preface.”² Both types, according to Williams, indicate an oral source of the story, with the confessional preface giving “direct testimony” of the events, and both ascribe the privileged and unique access to “intimate events.”³ They attribute the source of a narrative, locating it outside the public realm, thus making it more desirable and alluring. These two framing scenarios, the interview and the confession, “normalize what would otherwise be inaccessible and perhaps painful or embarrassing events.”⁴

However, the delineation of the narrative situation projected by the novel would not be complete without invoking the figure of the general narrator, for in addition to the two obvious participants in the communicative situation, the narrating agent and the recipient of his tale situated on the diegetic level, there is a metadiegetic narrator who transcribes their words and presents their exchanges to a metadiegetic narratee. Nelles argues in *Frameworks* that from the methodological point of view, the presence of the general narrator as the source of “the entire verbal structure of the work” is in fact indispensable—the general narrator not only accounts for all embedded narratives but also for characters’ speeches; as he puts it, “all narrative is entirely narrated by a narrator from beginning to end.”⁵ Drawing on Käte Hamburger’s and Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s insights, Nelles posits that the whole narrative, rather than a mere presentation of fictional events, is understood to be the representation of a telling, and calls the “agent charged with this single fictive act of narrating, in its entirety, [...] the *general narrator* of a work.”⁶ Consequently, he views all quoted dialogue in a novel

not as “direct speech spoken by characters but as spoken by the general narrator in the persona of a character.”⁷

In *Andrew’s Brain*, the only immediate sign of the presence of the general narrator, situated on the metadiegetic level, outside the parameters of the narrative situation involving Andrew and his listener, is the repetitive textual intrusion “[*thinking*],” placed in brackets and in italics, mimicking stage directions. The general narrator is effaced, and the narrative frame is dominated by the “drama of reception,” showing how the diegetic narratee receives Andrew’s story and contributes to its execution. The delivery of the narrative thus becomes a shared performance, and at times the staged exchange between the narrator and the narratee vies with the story itself. As a result, the act of telling and the thing told are equally valorized—neither is prioritized at the expense of the other.

Such arrangement represents a minor disruption of the narrative code, which is not an isolated case, however, for more inversions are in evidence in the novel. The story begins with the first-person narrator’s announcement: “I can tell you about my friend Andrew, the cognitive scientist. But it’s not pretty.”⁸ This can be seen as a “narrative advert” *à rebours*. According to Williams, narrative adverts present “the narrative-to-come in hyperbolic terms” and figure “the scene of exchange itself in terms of the allegorical topography of narrative desire and entrancement.”⁹ In other words, as he explains, an advert is “an explicit comment on narrative and its virtues and powers, and its compelling force for participants in its narrative circle.”¹⁰

In Doctorow’s novel, contrary to the established convention, the story-to-come is not presented in exaggerated terms, and the narrator’s initial declaration is not meant to lure the narratee. He does not promise him an enjoyable or entertaining story; rather, the narratee is warned about its

unpleasant content. Furthermore, the narrator ostensibly tells the story of his friend Andrew, “the cognitive scientist,” concealing the fact that he is the protagonist of his own tale, that Andrew and the narrator are one and the same person. Adopting external perspective in reporting his thoughts, Andrew analyzes himself like a detached observer. And it takes some time before the narratee realizes and then confirms the identity of the narrating agent and the story’s protagonist. Yet the shift to the third-person reporting occurs quite frequently, signaling the split into the narrating agent and the narrated figure. Whether this is a distancing technique or a way of alleviating the pain of the memory, it destabilizes the relation between the narrating self and the acting self, making it seem as if the relayed experiences concerned someone else. Also, quite unconventionally, the aim of the narrative is not disclosed; it is only much later that the true purpose of Andrew’s confession is unveiled, when he informs his interlocutor: “I’m telling you about the end of my life.”¹¹

The figure of the narratee, Andrew’s interlocutor, is highly dramatized in the novel, but only by means of his own utterances, by his disclosures as well as by his concealments. His presence is foregrounded and he plays an important role in the delivery of the narrative. The narratee is an active participant in the communicative situation; he asks questions and elicits information from the narrating agent. His conduct is quite typical at the beginning—he shows interest and wants the narrator to provide details, eager to hear more. Encouraging the narrator to “go on” with the tale, he comfortably slips into the role of a sympathetic and interested listener. The narratee uses formulaic phrases: “Yes?,” “You were saying?,” or “Yes, go on,” to prompt Andrew to speak; sometimes he prods the narrator, who has fallen silent, lost in thought. His responses are also appropriate to his role: he receives with proper surprise the revelation that Andrew and

Bush junior were “roommates at Yale,” and reacts with disbelief to the fact Andrew did a handstand in front of the president, demanding confirmation:

Then I took a deep breath and did a handstand.
A what? [...] So you actually did that?¹²

The narratee has some influence on the narrative; his attitude and interests, to some extent, determine Andrew’s narration. The storyteller responds to the needs and wishes of his audience, he satisfies the curiosity of his listener. He is also anxious to elicit his support, he wants him to accept his ideas: “You understand that, don’t you, Doc?”¹³

But the narratee assumes also the role of the guardian of the narrative. He prevents the storyteller from straying from the main narrative thread; he interrupts his digressions and goads him into resuming the story, into detailing the sequence of the events, as the following comment demonstrates: “So Martha took the baby after all?”¹⁴ Yet it must be stated that the narrating subject often appears to ignore the narratee’s efforts and instead of continuing the interrupted narrative, he persists in spinning out his fantasies and speculations. Nevertheless, the narratee demands that the narrator stick to the main line of the story and asks him to fill in the blanks, as in the following instant:

Wait a minute—what did you do then?
What?
After you found Martha gone.¹⁵

The function of the interlocutor is also to ascertain what is “true,” to draw a line between Andrew’s imaginings and objective fictional happenings, to establish the facts of the story. The narrative exchange is permeated with the narratee’s repeated attempts to distinguish events from hypothetical

scenarios. Moreover, he wants the speaker to clarify his meaning and is anxious throughout to make sure that his understanding of the story is correct. In a more sophisticated vein, the narratee interprets a deeper significance of the narrative developments; he notices and emphasizes recurring patterns in Andrew's life, as when he observes a hidden agenda behind Andrew's decision to give up his second child to his ex-wife, possibly to compensate her for the death of their first baby: "So now Martha had a baby after all, a replacement for her lost child."¹⁶

However, the narratee is not always equal to the task. Time and again his shortcomings come to light. He fails to grasp the significance of the plot of Modest Mussorgsky's opera "Boris Godunov," its relevance for Andrew's story. Furthermore, Andrew points out the limits of his interlocutor's knowledge regarding his person, emphasizing his mastery of the narrative situation: "You don't know everything about me, Doc, you're only hearing what I choose to tell you."¹⁷ Finally, the narratee's disbelief, genuine or perhaps only imputed, provokes Andrew to confront him directly and defend his reliability as a narrator: "Are you suggesting I'm making this up?"¹⁸ The credibility of Andrew's account is confirmed in the exchange opening Book IX: "So there you have some of my memory, in case you doubted me. / I didn't doubt you."¹⁹

From the examples presented so far it is evident that the narratee shows concern over the progress of the narrative. He wants the storyteller to get back on the track, to resume the exposition of the events; in brief, he strives to ensure its proper delivery. However, the narratee straddles two roles in the novel: he acts as the guardian of the narrative regulating its flow, and as an analyst figuring out his patient's problem. The latter role is first hinted at in Andrew's comment: "So, Doc, you're in trouble with your talking cure,"²⁰ where the "talking cure" is the obvious nickname of psychoanalysis.

This is the first reference to the narrative situation, revealing the circumstances of Andrew's confession: his listener is an analyst and the story is being told probably as part of the narrator's therapy.

However, there is a close connection between the two modes, confessional and therapeutic. In a confessional mode, as Dennis Foster observes, a narrator discloses "a secret knowledge to another," and this private knowledge is revealed "in a way that would allow another to understand, judge, forgive, and perhaps even to sympathize."²¹ Foster points out also the crucial similarity between confession and psychoanalysis—the latter, like the former, "transforms a feeling of alienation, of sickness, into an account of separation; it encourages one who is lost to trust his past to a listener who will make sense of it."²² The aim of psychoanalysis is to bring to light repressed emotions and experiences, which are then subject to scrutiny. Likewise, in Foster's view, "each confession appears to contain as yet unexpressed truth to be discovered by interpretation."²³

As the receiver of his confession, Andrew's interlocutor is expected to understand and forgive, or in religious terms, "to absolve the sinner." However, as a therapist, his aim is to analyze Andrew's predicament, to bring to light the roots of the problem, and perhaps help him recover from his trauma. Release from the trauma, from the isolation imposed on the traumatized subject by the original experience, cannot be effected without the subject telling of the event. The presence of the listener is indeed indispensable, since as Cathy Caruth observes, "the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another."²⁴

There is little straightforward progression in Andrew's confession; he frequently regresses and circles around the suppressed traumatic events before reluctantly and painfully coming to narrate them. At first it is hard to see a pattern, a

convergence of all the separate threads of Andrew's enunciations and speculations. Yet what holds them together is the intermingling of his personal ordeal, the loss of Briony and his individual trauma, with the national disaster. In this Doctorow's novel follows closely the conventions of historiographic metafiction, and this type of fiction, as Linda Hutcheon puts it in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, attempts to make "individual experience the source of public history as well."²⁵ The relation of an individual to the disaster is intertwined with the larger question, which many scholars after Hutcheon perceive as the central question in metafictional historiographic criticism and which Jonathan Boulter formulates in the following way: "How can the self respond ethically to the demands of history?"²⁶

Historiographic metafiction, of which *Andrew's Brain* is a prime example, investigates the very possibility of communicating history, of dealing with unbearable historical truths. Yet how can a literary text articulate the disaster? The question is answered negatively by Maurice Blanchot, for his definition of the disaster is that it is precisely something that "ruins everything, but cannot be known,"²⁷ the experience that "none can undergo," "the *written* of the disaster [...] will always be in the condition of ruin, the trace."²⁸ The impact of the disaster destroys the subject's ethical relation with history. As Boulter puts it, the disaster affects "the subject's sense of his or her interiority," and "may in fact rupture the subject's ability to stand in ethical relation to history, to the past."²⁹

Also, the image of history as the "viral, material presence"³⁰ seems quite relevant for Doctorow's novel. Under such terms, history is invasive and contagious, changing the subject from within, turning him into a "walking archive," continually inhabiting the past. Andrew, the confessing subject and a victim of history, indeed emerges as a "speaking archive," or in Boulter's terms, as a "site" where loss is