

# Essays in Narrative and Fictionality



# Essays in Narrative and Fictionality:

*Reassessing Nine  
Central Concepts*

By

Brian Richardson

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To Claudine,

We still have Paris



# CONTENTS

Preface: Narrative and Fictionality .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	xii
Chapter One.....	1
The Rebirth of the Author	
Chapter Two .....	21
Reassessing and Extending the Concept of the Implied Author	
Chapter Three .....	33
Unnatural Narrative Theory: The Poetics of Uniquely Fictional Texts	
Chapter Four.....	49
The Poetics of Lists and the Boundaries of Narrative	
Chapter Five .....	62
Linearity and Its Discontents: Narrative Form and Ideological Valence	
Chapter Six .....	73
Towards a Narratology of Drama	
Chapter Seven.....	85
Fiction versus Factuality: The Status of Historical Characters in Works of Fiction	
Chapter Eight.....	96
The Paradoxes of Literary Realism	
Chapter Nine.....	111
Multiple Implied Readers and Actual Audiences	
Conclusion: Theorizing Narrative and Fictionality Today .....	127

Appendix I: Teaching Story, Plot, Time, and Narrative Progression with <i>To the Lighthouse</i> and Other Texts.....	135
Appendix II: Definitions of Key Terms.....	148
Bibliography.....	150
Index.....	165



## PREFACE

### NARRATIVE AND FICTIONALITY

This book began as a collection of independent essays that I had published over the previous dozen years that probed several basic concepts of narrative and critical theory. These are the role of the author, the significance of the implied author, the elements of unnatural narrative theory, the role of lists in relation to narrative proper, the politics of narrative forms, the possibility of a narratology of drama, the paradoxes of realism, the case for multiple implied readers, and the nature of fictionality. In addition, I pursue the adjacent topics of multiple implied authors, the ontological status of fictional characters, and the role of actual readers.

As I began to revise the essays, a number of intersections and conjunctions emerged and a substantial amount of new material called out to be added to four of the chapters. In its current form, this book brings together several interconnected essays on narrative, the narrative transaction, and fictionality. Each essay has been thoroughly revised and updated and in many cases considerably augmented. They also allude to and reflect on each other and gesture out toward the positions I have elaborated in my other, more closely focused books.

For the most part, I attempt to expand traditional narrative theory and argue for more comprehensive positions than are generally set forth. Thus, I argue for the inclusion of actual authors and readers to the model of the narrative transaction and make the case for multiple implied authors and career implied readers. The entire project of unnatural narrative theory is to expand conceptual frameworks so they are more responsive to antimimetic characters, events, and frames. I also show how the corpus of drama, especially avant-garde and antimimetic works, can usefully refine and enhance many important narratological accounts. In other areas I try to offer a middle ground: I propose a definition of narrative that is more capacious than many though more restrained than the most lax positions; I also argue that the political implications of narrative forms are much more modest and oblique than has often been asserted. Throughout, I articulate and defend a concept of fictionality that complements and grounds the positions articulated in this book.

I start with a chapter on actual authors that offers a critical summary of the main positions taken during the last century and a half and propose some examples that can effectively refute earlier, widespread stances. I argue for a thoroughly revised conception of the significance of authors and authorial commentary, and note the theoretical challenges posed by authors of digital fiction who interact with actual readers about the meaning and import of their work. The second half of this chapter develops these ideas using examples from several works of Vladimir Nabokov as it explores the often ingenious ways in which actual authors attempt to enter into fictional texts. The second chapter examines the contested figure of the implied author. It uncovers its presence in the fiction of Henry James and the criticism of Proust, argues for multiple implied authors in some texts, elaborates the figure of the career implied author, notes the presence of implied authors in other genres including nonfiction, and defends the importance of the figure as a critical concept.

The third chapter outlines the basic theses of unnatural (i.e., antirealist) narrative theory and explores distinctive features of the paradoxical paradigm of unnatural narratives, specifically, that it both presupposes and contravenes the basic assumptions of mimetic narrative. The fourth chapter explores the boundaries of narrative and analyses the poetics of lists. It observes how lists, almost always designated as a nonnarrative discourse type, nevertheless regularly slide toward narrative proper. The fifth chapter, "Linearity and Its Discontents," focuses on the politics of narrative form. I argue against claims of any inherent ideological valence of an individual narrative form, though I do observe that when transgressive subjects are allowed a placid, happy ending, certain cultural master narratives can be upset. The sixth chapter provides an overview of a narratological analysis of drama, looking at the implications of an unnatural text like Beckett's *Endgame* for all the major categories of staged narratives: story and plot, characterization, narration, space, time, cause, reflexivity, and audience. I attempt to show what a narratology of drama can add to both the study of drama and the study of narrative. The seventh chapter discusses the representation of historical characters in fictional works. Here I argue for and attempt to test my version of a pragmatist theory of fictionality that insists on the criterion of falsifiability to determine and distinguish fictional texts. Though focused on modern drama, I also include examples from fiction and film. This chapter is followed by a companion study which assesses the paradoxical claims of literary realism, analyses their presence in several dramas, and offers a way to reconceptualize the idea.

The final chapter returns to the narrative transmission, this time focusing on the implied reader and returning to many of the subjects

broached in the first chapter. Here too I work to loosen up monolithic models and argue for multiple implied readers of several salient texts. This chapter also contains a section on the real readers of various recent types of text, including hyperfiction and fanfiction, to complete the symmetry of the book's coverage. In the conclusion, I assess some recent accounts of fictionality and return to discussing the key distinctions between fictional and nonfictional discourse by contrasting two such narratives of the 9/11 attacks on New York. An appendix outlines some methods for teaching story, plot, time, and sequence, in which I discuss conventional, modernist, and impossible plots and identify the role of masterplots. This section includes strategies for teaching works like Joyce's "The Dead" and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. A second appendix defines the terms used in this work.

A key element that ties the different parts of this book together is the unifying approach provided by my emphasis on the fictionality of fiction, that is, its fundamental difference from nonfictional narrative. This in turn leads to my interest in antirealist fiction and "unnatural narrative theory," a theory I helped to develop and which is increasingly popular among many younger narrative theorists. It avoids the mimetic bias of standard narrative theories and seeks to encompass the kinds of antirealist work typical of postmodernism. This volume is intended to provide a critical intervention into disparate yet interconnected subjects from a single capacious perspective. Another benefit of the book is allowing me to update of many of my ideas that had earlier appeared in print in various formats. It is satisfying to be able to rephrase certain formulations, extend many discussions, respond to recent commentaries, and offer additional examples. This book represents the most current and complete account of positions that I have been working on for many years, and can be considered my definitive statement on these issues.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE REBIRTH OF THE AUTHOR

#### I. The Author

Although authors have provided helpful commentary for the elucidation of their works at least as far back as Dante's letter to Can Grande, the concept of the author as a participant in the critical interpretation of texts they composed has had a difficult time over the last hundred years or so. It is also the case that the corollary question of authorial intent had been important historically; this is readily demonstrated by the imprisonment of Daniel Defoe for his tract, "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters," by officials who did not perceive its satirical intent. Much of the twentieth-century opposition to the role of the author in critical interpretation began as a response to two inflated claims of authorial puissance popular in the nineteenth century, a brief account of which should be helpful to partially explain the curious situation that ensued. The first was the Romantic exaltation of the author as a creator of genius, whose productions were the direct expression of a preeminent self. Wordsworth claimed that the poet was a man "endued [sic] with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind" (2010, 567). Percy Shelley similarly affirms that "poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds" (1954, 295) and also claims "poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (1954, 282). This is the primary position that T. S. Eliot is opposing in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He denies Wordsworth's claim that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of the poet's powerful feelings and has its origin in emotion recollected in tranquility, affirming instead: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (2010, 961).

The other extreme nineteenth century stance was that made by those fixated on an author's biography as a means of understanding literary works. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, the most insistent advocate of this position, affirmed that

So long as one has not asked an author a certain number of questions and received answers to them, though they were only whispered in confidence, one cannot be sure of having a complete grasp of him, even though these questions might seem at the furthest remove from the nature of his writings. What were his religious views? How did he react to the sight of nature? How did he conduct himself in regard to women, in regard to money? Was he rich, was he poor? (cited in Proust 1984, 99)

This kind of inquiry was part of a larger nineteenth century fascination (or obsession) with biography, as numerous life stories were constructed and debated, including those of Homer, Jesus, Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's characters. A. C. Bradley famously speculated over the time period that Hamlet was away in Wittenberg and on the number of children that Lady Macbeth had given birth to. There was even a book published on the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines. Marcel Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* was written in opposition to this extreme biographical approach and, as we will see in the next chapter, stressed the differences between the self projected in the writing and the actual man who does the living.

The rejection of excessive expressionist poetics and biographical criticism soon merged with a growing formalist paradigm for literary studies that emphasized the text to the exclusion of both the author and the reader. This became a well-established stance among the New Critics and was later codified in Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy," both published in the late 1940's. Defining intention as "the design or plan in the author's mind," they rejected it as a useful critical device (2010a, 1233). The final sentences of their essay ask a hypothetical question concerning T. S. Eliot's possible allusion to some lines by John Donne; following out the logical demands of their position, they insist that any "answer to such an inquiry [by the author] would have nothing to do with the poem 'Prufrock'; it would not be a critical inquiry" (2010a, 1246).

The rise of poststructuralism coincided with the demise of the authority of the text. Authors were still banished from the works they had created; in this arena, formalists and poststructuralists were entirely united. The poststructuralist position was most memorably articulated by Roland Barthes, whose widely approved formulation affirmed that "we know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a

variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (2010, 1324). Now it was the turn of the reader; “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author,” concluded Barthes (2010, 1326), though even his privileged kind of reader would soon be dissolved into textuality and discourse itself.

It is not difficult to postulate that, in distancing themselves from earlier positions, both formalists and poststructuralists exaggerated their own stances in order to better fit within larger general critical paradigms and to provide a greater degree of separation from their opponents. Though Barthes’ position was widely embraced, several new voices emerged that challenged different aspects of his stance. Eugen Simion, in *The Return of the Author*, offers a number of effective arguments against poststructuralist and other attacks on the concept, and cannily notes how Barthes constructed his own authorial persona in his later works (1996, 191-204). Jane Gallop makes a similar point from a very different perspective, reflecting on Barthes’ writing concerning the “friendly return of the author” in his *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Barthes 1976, 8). Gallop’s work seeks to revitalize the stale phrase “death of the author” in ways that are both theoretical and personal as she reflects on and commemorates authors she has known who are now dead (2011, 191-204; see also Simion 1996, 107-08).

Paisley Livingston, in a witty review of the Pléiade edition of Barthes’ complete works, notes the discrepancy between the theories of the writer and the publication of his works collected together only because he was their author:

The publication of a beautiful, five-volume edition of Roland Barthes’s *Oeuvres complètes* is a good thing, but if we were to rely on this theorist’s meta-hermeneutical dicta alone, it would be hard to say why. Barthes and other advocates of impersonal notions of discourse and textuality tell us there is no good reason to “privilege” the boundary and internal structure of the individual writer’s corpus. Yet Barthes, like the many critics who have trumpeted the “death of the author” theme, continued to rely on the categories of author and life-work. (1996, 436).

Other objections to this *idée reçue* were also emerging. Gayatri Spivak began to rethink the notion after a *fatwa* calling for the death of author Salman Rushdie was decreed following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1993, 217-19; see Gallop 2011, 15-17, 136-39). In another, adjacent area, the AIDS quilt, a folk text that memorialized those who had died prematurely because of the virus, was being created. Surely, insisting on the theoretical death of the author must seem both false and callous in the shadow of those, authors and others, who were literally dying. Ross Chambers, in *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author*, explores

the paradoxes of this unexpected conjunction of actual authors, poststructuralist theory, and the fact of death (1998, 1-16).

It is clearly time for a reevaluation of the role of the author in the narrative transaction. More specifically, once we correctly shun the idea of an author as a supreme or infallible commentator on his or her fiction and avoid the pitfalls of a romantic or theological notion of the author, we still have important issues to resolve. One question cuts to the center of the debate: can an author provide important information necessary to the interpretation of a text they wrote? Here, twentieth-century literature provides a number of compelling examples, one of which actually stages the hypothetical question proposed by Wimsatt and Beardsley. After Nabokov published *Pale Fire*, readers and critics tried for five years to discover the location of the crown jewels of Zembla, the fictitious kingdom described in the novel. If the author were simply just another interpreter whose comments should be either ignored or simply evaluated like those of any other critic, we would not be able to go to him and expect to find the answer to this question. But in fact this happened. Nabokov did explain precisely where they were hidden (1973, 92): in the former resort of Kobaltana, an answer which itself clarifies an otherwise pointless entry in the index to the work: “*Kobaltana*, a once fashionable mountain resort near the ruins of some old barracks and now a cold and desolate spot of difficult access and no importance but still remembered in military families and forest castles, not in the text” (1962, 310). Some readers felt somewhat foolish for not having been able to deduce the correct location, but the larger point remains—that authors can be invaluable commentators on their own works.

A more prominent example is that of James Joyce. At various times, he provided numerous exegeses explaining key aspects of the composition of *Ulysses* and he also produced two versions of his schema for the construction of the text; he also had extensive discussions with early expositors of the book such as Frank Budgen and Stuart Gilbert. To be sure, some of the statements he made are misleading or inaccurate, and the schemas are imperfect and differ from each other at points; nevertheless, Joyce’s comments on *Ulysses* remain an indispensable tool for its interpretation that no scholar or critic can do without. In this case, the author is a paramount though imperfect guide to the interpretation of this elusive and challenging work.

These issues and the corresponding need for a more accurate account of the role of the author in the narrative transaction have only been exacerbated by the digital revolution, including its proliferation of authorial tweets, Facebook and YouTube postings, and additional communications



via Tumbler, Snapchat, Instagram, and other such venues. Matthew Kirschenbaum raises significant points in his account of attending a twitter-accessible event promoting William Gibson's new novel, *The Peripheral*. Some critics had been wondering about *The Peripheral*'s relation to his earlier work, and at the event Gibson stated that the new book is in fact a sequel to his recent Blue Ant trilogy. Later at an MLA panel on *The Peripheral*, one of the speakers set forth an interpretation of the novel's ending. Gibson, who had been listening remotely to the live stream, tweeted his rejection of the speaker's postulate. Kirschenbaum wryly comments, "it's not as if all of us at the MLA hadn't dutifully read our Barthes back in graduate school. But it's one thing to autopsy the death of the author from the safety of the seminar table; it's quite another when the author (with some 157,000 Twitter followers) nixes one's take on something so basic as the affect of his novel's ending" (2015 ¶ 11). He concludes that "Authorship, in short, has become a kind of media, algorithmically tractable and traceable and disseminated and distributed across the same networks and infrastructure carrying other kinds of previously differentiated cultural production" (¶ 16).

The position that affirms the importance of the statements, including intentions, of the author is I believe a sound one for the reasons given above. We may underscore this by referring to the "crown jewels" principle exemplified by Nabokov. In my own criticism, I regularly use (after appropriate critical scrutiny) statements made by many modernist authors about their work. There is no compelling reason to continue to block the author from the interpretation of the text they have created. They can provide significant insights into their work that are not otherwise available. Of course, their statements need to be carefully evaluated and assessed: authors are notorious for mistaken, misleading, and inaccurate statements about their work. "Utilize, but scrutinize," is a good motto to guide us back to a judicious and pragmatic position on the appropriate role of the author in literary criticism and interpretation.

An additional note: it has been frequently averred that the author is itself a relatively recent Western concept, associated with the development of capitalism. Barthes writes: "The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the middle ages with English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual" (2010, 1322). To be sure, the precise status of authors has undergone changes historically as technology, law, and culture are transformed—as indicated above, we are currently in the middle of just such a change. Far from being the anonymous collective figures that such accounts propose, numerous earlier authors vigorously signaled their presence in their works in a variety of ways. We

may adduce Chaucer's opening and closing stanzas of his *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which he takes full responsibility for its contents, situates it among the work of Homer, Ovid, and Virgil, and urges future copyists not to make changes in his manuscript:

Go, litel book, go litel myn tragedie,  
 Ther god thy maker yet, er that he dye,  
 So sende might to make in som comedie!  
 But litel book, no making thou nenvye,  
 But subgit be to alle poesye;  
 And kis the steppes, wher-as thou seest pace  
 Virgile, Ovyde, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.

And for ther is so greet diversitee  
 In English and in wryting of our tonge,  
 So preye I god that noon miswryte thee,  
 Ne thee mismetre for defaute of tonge.  
 And red wher-so thou be, or elles songe,  
 That thou be understonde I god beseche!  
 But yet to purpos of my rather speche. Book 5, 1786-99

We may go further back. Ovid is quite forthright about his ambitions for his *Amores*:

Gnawing Envy, why reproach me with an indolent life:  
 and call the work of my genius idle song?  
 Is it that I don't follow the custom of the country,  
 seek the dusty reward of army life while I'm young?  
 That I don't study wordy laws,  
 or prostitute my voice in the forum?  
 The work you seek is mortal. I seek eternal fame,  
 to be sung throughout the whole world forever. Book I, Elegy 12, 1-8

Aristophanes, within his own dramas, urged the judges to award him the prize for comedy in the theater of Dionysus (see the parabasis near the middle of *The Peace*). Concerning other cultures, we observe that the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Persian poet Hafiz routinely includes his name within his poems; the concluding lines of one poem are typical of his practice:

Well, HAFIZ, Life's a riddle – give it up:  
 There is no answer to it but this cup. Ode 487, 34-35

It is safe to conclude that authors have asserted their individuality and control over their works and guided the reception of those works for millennia.

## Narrative theory

In narrative theory, it was Seymour Chatman who, in his well-known diagram, literally blocked the narrative text off from actual authors and real readers as he reframed the narrative transaction first set forth by Wayne Booth (Chatman 1980, 151). So impermeable is this boundary that he would affirm that it “makes no sense” to “hold the real Conrad responsible for the reactionary attitudes of the implied author of *The Secret Agent* or *Under Western Eyes*” (1980, 149). To confound a historical figure with a structural principle “would seriously undermine our theoretical enterprise,” he insisted. This general position is being relinquished, though it remains widespread, if rarely defended.

Recently, James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz have reaffirmed the decisive role of the author: “to the extent that you are considering the narrative as a *communicative process*, then authors, and their communicative purposes, matter: there can be no rhetoric without a rhetor.” They “account for the effects of narrative by reference to a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (Herman et al. 2012, 30; see also 29-31). Many feminist narrative theorists are deeply engaged with a number of facets of both actual authors and real readers, and rarely feel any need to bracket either off from their conceptions of the narrative transaction. As Robyn Warhol states, “the identity, experience, and socio-economic circumstances of the author [ . . . ] are important in understanding the ways that narrative participates in the politics of gender” (Herman et al. 2012, 39).

David Herman also argues for the significance of the author and attempts to refute the argument of Wimsatt and Beardsley. He characterizes “narration as a form of communicative action whose interpretation involves—indeed, requires—ascriptions of reasons for acting,” and notes that his position is thus “a manifestly intentionalist line of inquiry.” It is, he continues, “part of the nature of an action for it to be explicable through an account of how it arises from or originates in a reason (or set of reasons) that involves intentions.” He goes on to locate the source of these intentions in the author, rather than an implied author (Herman et al. 2012, 47-48).

The evocation of the actual author continues to grow in narrative theory. Richard Walsh makes a radical move in his reconceptualization of the figure of the narrator. He asserts that “the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author. There is no intermediate position” (2007, 78). Thus for him, omniscience is not “a faculty possessed by a certain class of narrators but, precisely, a quality of authorial imagination” (2007, 73).

An important point that is often neglected in many discussions of the author is the fact that it is the author who determines whether his or her narrative is fictional or nonfictional. The significance of this designation is obvious when it is absent or incorrect, as happened when James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was published without the name of the author or the information that the book was a work of fiction. Readers naturally assumed that the book was an autobiography, and that the fictional narrator was actually the book's author (see Rohy 2015, 80-87). It is also the case that, as Philippe Lejeune has elucidated, the narrator of a work of fiction is distinct from the author, whereas in nonfiction the author always is the narrator. This distinction begins to collapse in the case of autofiction, which is mostly nonfiction composed by an author, though occasionally fictionalized, presumably by a narrator. Nevertheless, we need the concepts of author and narrator to explain the ways in which they can be merged or transformed.

## II. The Author within the Fictional Text

Having established the viability of the actual authors, we may now ask a more theoretically challenging question: can an author ever enter the fictional world they have created? To center our discussion, I will focus on cases in which a character in a novel bears the name or likeness of its nonfictional creator. This situation dramatizes the fault line that separates fiction from nonfiction, a distinction more durable than many care to acknowledge yet not as unbridgeable as others would aver. We can get a sense of what is at stake in this distinction by glancing at the way Nabokov begins his afterword, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*": "After doing my impersonation of the suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one—may strike me, in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book" (1970, 313). One of the great achievements of modern narrative theory was to firmly establish a fundamental differentiation between the narrator and the author, and to ensure that the positions advocated by the one are not simplistically and erroneously predicated of the other. And this distinction is most important for the understanding of *Lolita*. But this does not mean that the two cannot be brought closely together—even in *Lolita*, as we will see.

The differentiation between the author and a fictive being who closely resembles the author was central to the theory and practice of classic modernist fiction, and it is worthwhile to review it here. In the major novels of Joyce, Proust, and others, characters are presented that are undisguised

versions of their authors' earlier selves who think thoughts and undergo events similar to those experienced by their makers. For the most part, such correspondences are essentially inconsequential, even adventitious: our interpretation of *The Shadow Line* or *Ulysses* is unaltered once we learn that the former was very close to Conrad's experience of his own first command or that the young Joyce actually had a conversation on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with John Eglington and others in the National Library in Dublin, just as Stephen Dedalus does. Or, more pointedly, readers' understanding of *Ulysses* is not likely to change even if they learn that it was not the young Joyce but rather Oliver St John Gogarty, the model for Buck Mulligan, who paid the rent for the Martello tower Joyce stayed in, whereas in the novel it is Stephen who pays the rent and Buck thereby becomes the "usurper." In these cases, the life of the author is largely mere convenient raw material that will later be casually reproduced or radically reworked in the storyworld, depending on the requirements of the progression of the fiction. If Dedalus needs to be dispossessed of his lodging, he will be, whether or not Joyce actually was. The relation then between the actual life and its recreation within a fiction is often one of inconsequential correspondences and insignificant divergences. Insofar as the author's life forms an appropriate narrative trajectory, its salient details will be retained and enhanced; insofar as those details fail to cohere, new ones will quickly be invented or imported.

Nabokov's earlier novels often require a similar separation of the fictionalized and the autobiographical self, as well as the recognition of salient points of contact. We see this in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1947), where the narrator's own life merges with the novels written by his half-brother, novels which he is trying to comprehend and save from critics who insist on—what else?—a narrow biographical reductionism. The narrator of this work, identified in the text only as "V.," has numerous features in common with Nabokov himself: they were both born in 1899 in St Petersburg, both moved to England after the Russian revolution, both attended Cambridge, and so on, and the elusive Sebastian himself may be, as Michael Wood suggests, "a picture of the writer Nabokov sometimes thought he might be. Better still, a picture of the writer many critics thought and still think Nabokov is" (2004, 33). Nevertheless, most of the correspondences between Nabokov and his creations remain partial, inessential, and largely ironic; one may not unproblematically infer anything about Nabokov from the behavior or opinions of his protagonists.

While no direct inference from his life to his fiction is authorized by the text, this does not mean that the facts of his life are entirely irrelevant to a comprehensive reading of the work. The two would oscillate in a kind

of arabesque throughout Nabokov's career; as Michael Begnal points out, "Just as V. plundered Knight's novels for his own, Nabokov looted *Sebastian Knight* for [his own autobiography,] *Speak, Memory*" (1996, 3). Like Joyce and Proust, Nabokov made a work of fiction out of materials culled from his own experience and he invented events and scenes derived from his own and others' literary texts. But Nabokov braids life and fiction together more deviously than these earlier modernist authors, since some of the divergences between fiction and fact can be read as unactualized possibilities in Nabokov's own existence. The novel not only traces out patterns of his life but also points toward the life he did not live. And there is another twist: in *Sebastian Knight*, V. goes on to experience nearly all of the events that Sebastian has written about in his novels. The result is that it embodies Nabokov's conflicted view toward this whole subject; as Andrew Field has observed, "Nabokov was both repelled and fascinated by biography, which he called psychoplagiarism" (1977, 3). José Ángel García Landa, in a masterful account of the powerful autobiographical resonances of several texts, similarly articulates an important aspect of Nabokov's oeuvre: "The works thus communicate, between the lines, elements of experience which acquire their full meaning when they are read as projections and transformations of the author's personal experience, and not merely as the experience transmitted by an 'intrinsic' reading of the work" (2005, 274). As Nabokov's writing evolved, so did his play with the boundary between fiction and autobiography, play which culminates in his last completed novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, as I will discuss below.

In what follows I will identify six rather ingenious confections or collisions of author and character, five of which appear in the work of Nabokov. I will be drawing on the pragmatic theory of fictionality, a subject that I discuss in more detail in chapter seven and in the conclusion to this book. Overall, my argument is that Nabokov's work can help us determine the ways in which an author can enter a fictional world. At the same time, his fiction clarifies the general salience of the fiction/nonfiction distinction that informs this study, as well as indicating significant gray areas where this opposition is difficult to establish and identifying those rare cases where it fails to hold.

### **A) Author/Narrator Conflation**

The author/narrator conflation, which proposes to collapse the distinction between the author of the book and the narrator of the fiction, is an interesting stratagem that is prominent among many postmodern and contemporary writers. It appears most cunningly in *Bend Sinister* (1947).

This work, like so many other novels, is divided into a preface, written by the author, and a first person fictional narrative, articulated by the work's narrator. These boundaries are customarily kept quite distinct, as in the prefaces of Henry James or Joseph Conrad, though they can be played with. Thus, in his author's note to *Nostramo* Conrad thanks José de Avellanós for being the source of much of the material recorded in the rest of the text. Avellanós, however, is a fictional being within the novel; we thus read this statement of thanks as an ironic gesture that confirms rather than problematizes the fiction/nonfiction distinction. But *Bend Sinister* provides a different kind of interpenetration that challenges the integrity of the fiction/nonfiction divide enshrined in the very division of novel and preface.

These areas are ontologically separate, with the introductory material being nonfictional, written by the author, and falsifiable in theory, while the novel proper is a work of fiction, articulated by a narrator, and not falsifiable by reference to any documents or testimony. For comparable reasons, the case of an author seeming to enter into his or her fictional work as one of its characters, as occurs in a number of Nabokovian texts, need not detain us. Professor Chateau remarks in the novel, *Pnin*, apropos of an unusual butterfly, "Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here. . . . He would have told us all about these enchanting insects" (Nabokov 1957, 128). Such intrusions are readily accounted for as fictional characters that happen to bear the same name as their authors as opposed to fictional names, just as there is a character named Chaucer in *The Canturbury Tales* who is unable to tell a good story ("The Tale of Sir Thopas"). Concerning its ontological status, any historical character, including the author, is simply another fictional character when placed within a fictional storyworld; as Marie-Laure points out, "the attribute of fictionality does not apply to individual entities, but entire semantic domains: the Napoleon of *War and Peace* is a fictional object because he belongs to a world which is fictional" (1991, 15). Within a work of fiction, an entity bearing the name of the author is not the autobiographical figure but a character, and that character may closely resemble (Marcel in the *Recherche*),<sup>1</sup> playfully mimic ("Borges" in many of his stories), or wildly diverge from its model (Chaucer). He may even be brutally murdered, as is "Michel Houellebecq" in Houellebecq's 2010 *La carte et le territoire* (*The Map and the Territory*). In these cases, the figure

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<sup>1</sup> This is also true of the early works of Henry Miller. As Wayne Booth recounts, when praised by Edmund Wilson for his skillful, ironic portrait of a particular type of American poseur idling around Paris, Miller indignantly responded: "The theme is myself, and the narrator, or the hero, as your critic puts it, is also myself. . . . If he means the narrator, then it is me" (cited in Booth 1983, 367). But the real life names and locations were altered for the book and it was marketed as fiction.

remains entirely fictional.

But something rather different occurs in *Bend Sinister*. The protagonist Krug, suffering terribly, is finally assuaged by intimations that he is merely a character in a novel, and that his impending death is thus, in the words of the author, only “a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution” (1964, xviii). For some time, Krug had sensed the presence of a superior being; in his introduction, Nabokov identifies this figure as “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (1964, xviii). That is, the author in a piece of nonfiction identifies the fiction’s vaguely perceived governing intelligence as himself. Similarly, discussing the death of his hero, Nabokov states, “Krug returns unto the bosom of his maker” (1964, xviii). Here he is not creating a fictional character called Nabokov who may or may not resemble the historical Vladimir Nabokov, but is referring directly to the person who created the fictional world. The presence sensed by the character would seem to be the same figure that identifies himself as such in the nonfictional introduction.

Here, the nonfictional paratext breaches the fiction and becomes one with it. In doing so, it points us back to an earlier such conflation noted by Genette, who refers to the “odd hybrid” of the “narrator-author of *Tom Jones*, who ‘is’ not Fielding but who nevertheless weeps once or twice for his deceased Charlotte,” Fielding’s wife, who had died some years earlier (1988, 133). For an unambiguous insertion of the actual author into the world of the fiction we may point to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, a novel that depicts the Allied firebombing of Dresden. At one point the narrator refers to an American prisoner of war in a camp in Dresden; the text reads: “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book” (1991, 125). Philippe Lejeune points out that the autobiographical contract presupposes that an actual person vouches for the fidelity of the narrative (1992, 211-13); I believe this constraint is valid in these examples. As we have noted, while authors often place a figure resembling themselves in their fictions, those remain fictional characters. But in the case of Vonnegut, a much larger and very different claim is being affirmed: the author is testifying to the accuracy of the war crime he has witnessed himself. Here, the statement has the force of the autobiographical pact and is guaranteed by the implicit signature here afforded.

## B. “Urfiction,” or Fiction and/as Nonfiction

A fascinating fusion of fiction and nonfiction is present in two of Nabokov’s shorter texts that have been published both as short stories and as autobiography. The stories, “Mademoiselle O” (1939) and “First Love”



(which was first printed under the title “Colette”), both appear in his 1958 short story collection, *Nabokov's Dozen* and in his *Collected Stories*. Both stories also appear, with slight alterations, as chapters of his autobiography, *Speak Memory* (1951, 1966 rev. ed.).<sup>2</sup> The questions immediately raised by such a practice are: what are the implications of composing a work that can be read either as one or the other mode, and what are the consequences of publishing it as both?

In *The Autobiographical Pact*, Philippe Lejeune clarifies the key differences between autobiography and first-person fiction. For Lejeune, the crucial difference is that in an autobiography, “there must be an identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*” (1982, 193), whereas in fiction written in the first person the narrator is not the same as the author. But these examples from Nabokov seem to elude this dichotomy: they are, at the same time, *both* fiction *and* nonfiction, the very opposition Lejeune set out to keep distinct.

A closer look at these curious texts is called for; we may begin by noting some admittedly minor differences between the fictional and the autobiographical versions of the text of “First Love.” The story text is slightly shorter, contains substitutions for a few words, and replaces proper names with occupations: thus, the autobiography refers to “Linderovski” (1966, 151), in his fictional incarnation, he becomes simply “my tutor.” That is, specific names unnecessary to the unfolding of the tale are replaced in the story. Additional personal and historical details, appropriate for a memoir but dispensable in a fiction, are likewise duly removed (e. g. 1966, 142-43). It should be noted that none of the changes has any effect on the status of the text as fiction or nonfiction; the changes merely make the fictional version more economical and provide the autobiographical version with a bit more factual matter.

Especially interesting are more essential divergences that underscore the differences in the two modes. Nabokov writes that his sisters angrily protested that he had incorrectly left them out of the railway trip to Biarritz (1966, 14) in the original version of the autobiography; in the revised text he obligingly indicates they were there, riding in the next car (1966, 142), but in the fictional incarnation they are absent since they are unnecessary to the work's plot: “my two small sisters had been left at home with nurses and aunts” (1995, 604). These emendations underscore the fact that in almost all cases nonfiction is falsifiable; it is always possible (if only theoretically) to identify factual errors, as Nabokov's sisters did. Fiction is not falsifiable in

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<sup>2</sup> As Nabokov remarks in the bibliographical note to *Nabokov's Dozen*, “‘Mademoiselle O’ and ‘First Love’ are (except for a change in names) true in every detail to the author's remembered life” (1995, 662).

this sense; no human can protest she was actually present at a scene in a short story. Likewise, we learn in the autobiography that “Colette” is a pseudonym and see that this name appears in the book’s index; no such qualification is needed in the story: there, the girl is simply Colette and there is no index to worry about.

I conclude that the text of “First Love,” like “Mademoiselle O,” is a rare hybrid that can be either fiction or nonfiction; that is, it obeys the rules for both modes. Depending on the author’s identification of the type and status of the text, the world depicted is either the actual world or a fictional storyworld. The figure who says “I” either is the author Nabokov or is merely a fictitious narrator, depending on the way the work is designated. Read as fiction, it cannot be falsified; read as nonfiction, it is making verifiable statements about the real world that can be corroborated or refuted.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the famous illustration employed by Gestalt psychologists, we may say that what we have here is the “duck/rabbit” of narrative. To name it, we will employ a term as unusual as the texts themselves: “urfiction.” These examples show that the syntactic theory of fictionality is inadequate: the fictional and nonfictional versions of the same events are virtually identical linguistically. By contrast, a pragmatic approach that stresses the use to which a particular text is put (that is, its designation as fiction or as nonfiction) can explain the potentially oscillating status of these unusual works.

We may affirm that fictional narratives are very different speech acts from nonfiction narratives: they are used differently, perform different functions, and require a different kind of reception. The concerned spectator who shouts out to the actor playing Othello, “Don’t believe Iago—he’s telling you a lie!” demonstrates the terms of the fiction/nonfiction distinction as well as the consequences of misapplying them. At the same time, some narratives exist that blur this distinction and remain ontologically ambiguous or indeterminable. In fact, the existence of this gray area is possible only because of the existence elsewhere of the distinctions it collapses.

Another sentence from *Speak, Memory* may also prove relevant to the debate between pragmatic and semantic theories of fictionality. Nabokov

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<sup>3</sup> Lubomir Doležel, utilizing possible-worlds semantics in his essay, “Fictional and Historical Narrative: Meeting the Postmodernist Challenge,” affirms that nonfictional worlds are marked by epistemological gaps, while fictional worlds have ontological gaps (1997, 257-61). Nabokov’s paradoxical practice here confirms Doležel’s thesis: Nabokov could have continued to invent the exploits of his characters as fictional entities, *and* he could have filled in additional historical background of the actual people involved. Once again, only the latter would have been falsifiable.

seems to be disclosing the thoughts of another when he states that the last time he saw Colette she “slipped into my brother’s hand a farewell present, a box of sugar-coated almonds, meant, I know, solely for me” (1966, 152). Taken literally, this statement is the kind that is supposed by Käte Hamburger, Dorrit Cohn, and others to be a signpost of fictionality. And there are many other such statements in this autobiography, which is structured more like a devious modernist novel rather than a conventional memoir (see Moraru 2005, 40-54). Further reflection on this text as well as more extreme examples like Edmund Morris’ notorious biography of Ronald Reagan, *Dutch*, which provides samples of Reagan’s thoughts throughout the volume, reveal instead that the presence of devices from narrative fiction does not indicate that the text is fictional: Nabokov’s book remains an autobiography, and Morris’ a biography, albeit an eccentric one. Both remain falsifiable on all other points, despite the presence of techniques that normally are only used in fiction. We can easily bracket such impossible thought transcriptions as the educated guesses of the author, or indeed denounce them as blatant fabrications, as Kate Masur does in her review of *Dutch*. The fact that they are interspersed within a nonfictional narrative does not imply that they cannot be separated back out and identified as fabrications. We may conclude with Gérard Genette that such purported linguistic indices of fictionality are not “obligatory, constant, and sufficiently exclusive that nonfiction could not possibly borrow them” (1990, 773).

### C Autofiction

It is a short step from a fictionalized memoir like *Speak, Memory* to autofiction proper, though autofiction presses harder against the fiction/nonfiction divide. The term was coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 and denotes an a substantially autobiographical narrative that is embellished with fictional inventions and techniques. Popular in France and the United States, such texts are widespread and they continue to proliferate. It allows authors to tidy up mere facts into superior narrative arrangements—much more so than typically allowed by the normal conventions of poetic license. It also allows for a high degree of deniability in especially daring or potentially damaging pieces of self-writing, such as the audacious depictions of the multitude of sexual acts and partners in Catherine Millet’s *La Vie Sexuel de Catherine M.* (2001). At times, the authors themselves can seem to be unsure of the precise status of their writing. Annie Ernaux, in her autofiction, *Passion Simple*, indicates some of the paradoxes it presents: “During all this time, I felt I was living out my passion in the manner of a

novel but now I'm not sure in which style I'm writing about it: in the style of a testimony, possibly even the sort of confidence one finds in women's magazines, a manifesto or a statement, or maybe a critical commentary" (1993, 20). Autofiction's blending of fictional and nonfictional elements does tend to confound the binary oppositions set forth by Lejeune—as he himself has admitted. At the same time, we acknowledge that these are separable in theory: we can easily imagine the author of an autofiction clarifying which passages are invented and which ones conform to the actual facts of the case.

#### D. Transparent Voices

We also need to acknowledge an important narrative strategy that may be termed “transparent voices,” in which a dubious or unreliable character narrator can readily (and, more importantly, unambiguously) articulate the ideas of the author.<sup>4</sup> In such cases, the narrator may be temporarily “evacuated” and his character dispensed with as the author speaks directly (and sometimes incongruously) through that character's mouth. Most of Nabokov's intellectually superior characters share Nabokov's contempt for popular culture, psychoanalysis, socialist realism, and American philistinism, and they sometimes express their disdain in language more reminiscent of Nabokov's nonfictional prose than the personal styles of the particular characters. Thus, the author's voice even breaks through—most implausibly—the second-rate mind of the fatuous John Ray, the otherwise fallible editor of Humbert's text in *Lolita*. Consider Ray's condescending reference to “old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of ‘real’ people beyond the ‘true’ story” (1970, 6), or the following more tongue-in-cheek intrusion: “The commentator may be excused for repeating what he has stressed in his own books and lectures, namely that ‘offensive’ is frequently but a synonym for ‘unusual’; and a great work of art is of course always original, and thus by its very nature should come as a more or less shocking surprise” (1970, 7). These sentiments are the kind frequently found in Nabokov's critical prose and are quite beyond the reach of a middlebrow psychiatrist who is much more likely to parrot various slogans of the day or blurbs for the latest book-of-the-month club selection.

It is most suggestive that Sebastian Knight is said to be fond of this practice of using otherwise unreliable narrators as authorial mouthpieces: “He had a queer habit of endowing even his most grotesque characters with

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<sup>4</sup> This practice corresponds to what James Phelan describes as “mask narration” (2005, 200-4).

this or that idea, or impression, or desire which he himself might have toyed with" (1959, 114). Because the thoughts of a narrator should not be attributed to the author does not imply that the latter cannot at times speak through the former. This practice needs to be more carefully analyzed and understood within a historical context. After all, it was not that long ago that authors were criticized for using characters and narrators as mouthpieces for their own ideas. As Woolf expressed it in her critique of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*: "We are tapped on the shoulder. We are to notice this, or take heed of that. Margaret or Helen, we are made to understand, is not speaking simply as herself; her words have another and a larger intention" (1942, 172). Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde were likewise castigated for using their characters as mere mouthpieces for their authors' ideas. We should restore this practice to our critical and theoretical lexicons. In answer to the question, how does one know when a character is articulating the views of its author, the answer is to compare the valorization of actions and ideas in a work of fiction with statements on the same subjects in nonfictional works by the same author. To take an easy case, tyrants and totalitarian regimes are regularly pilloried in Nabokov's fiction and denounced in his essays. We need not shy away from pointing out such congruities, though we need to do it with the care and nuance biographers use when determining the beliefs of their subjects and also use the sensitivity and suspicion that literary scholars can bring to the vagaries of acts of narration.

### E. Autobiography as Intertext

Another intriguing intersection of the historical author and the fiction's narrator is present in *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), which fully develops a strategy that Nabokov had toyed with in a number of earlier texts, including *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Normally, in the paratextual material at the beginning of each book, we find a list of other books "by Vladimir Nabokov"; these titles are arranged by genre in chronological order. In each of these lists, we find for example Nabokov's *Mashenka* (1926), *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), and other titles.

But as you open the first pages of *Look at the Harlequins!* you find instead a list of a dozen "Books by the Narrator."<sup>5</sup> These titles constitute a

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<sup>5</sup> This practice almost seems to parody Lejeune's comment that the author is "a personal name, the identical name accepting responsibility for a sequence of different published texts. He derives his reality from the list of his other works which is often to be found at the beginning of the book under the heading 'by the same author'" (1982, 200).

parodic version of Nabokov's *oeuvre*; the Russian works include *Tamara* (1925) and *Pawn Takes Queen* (1927), while the English volumes include *See Under Real* (1939) and *Ardis* (1970). To get the joke, here and elsewhere in the book, one must know the principal details of Nabokov's career—and not just themes and images, but also dates of publication, changes in residence, the career of his father, etc. When the narrator, Vadim Vadimich, notes that he had employed the pseudonym, V. Isirin (1974, 97), the informed reader knows this is a variation of Nabokov's actual pseudonym, V. Sirin. The novel's sudden turn to a second person address to the narrator's beloved likewise mirrors the similar turn made in the last chapter of *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov thus takes the public details of his life and work as an antecedent text to be humorously reworked in this novel more or less in the same way he uses *In Search of Lost Time* as a general framework for *Lolita*. The story of his life remains a central "pre-text" of the work, even though the mentally unstable protagonist quickly diverges at many key points from his *Doppelgänger*, the author. Maurice Couturier observes that the implicit figure of Nabokov, whose presence is felt throughout the work, emerges "as a result of the conflict between the real author and the fictional narrator, a conflict arbitrated by the reader familiar with Nabokov's life and with his earlier novels. Nabokov encourages us to practice a Sainte-Beuvean variety of criticism even as we celebrate the author's death, thus placing us in a highly paradoxical situation" (1995, 3).

An additional twist is provided when we are presented with the models or *clefs* of characters that would appear in the later works of the narrator. Referring to his lover, Iris, the narrator states: "Her cheeks and arms, without their summer tan, had the mat whiteness that I was to distribute—perhaps too generously—among the girls of my future books" (1974, 68). Such an assertion invites a look into comparable situations in Nabokov's works. There we find similar examples but a different pattern: Colette, the girl with whom the very young Nabokov enjoys his first love, has "apricot skin" (1966, 149); Annabel Leigh, the "progenitor" of Lolita, has "honey-colored skin" (1970, 13) as does her later avatar (1970, 41). Thus, Nabokov's penchant for tanned girls is inversely mirrored by the *Harlequins'* narrator's fixation on young women with pale skin. The relation is thus something like that of a photograph to its negative, with light and dark reversed. This motif in fact appears in another transposition of titles; thus Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* (originally, *Kamera Obskura*) is transmogrified into the narrator's work, *Camera Lucida, or Slaughter in the Light*. To no one's surprise, the narrator soon becomes haunted by "a dream feeling that my life was the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant, of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon,