Narratorial Memory in the Autodiegetic (First-Person) Retrospective Novel

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Summary

It has been argued that the autodiegetic (first-person) retrospective narrator is dependent on memory and so his or her vantage point is distant from the activities of the experiencing self – more distant than is, say, the vantage point of the heterodiegetic (third-person omniscient) narrator from the activities of the protagonist. In explanation, we are told that the heterodiegetic narrator is not dependent on memory.

Here there are two claims for investigation. The first concerns the role of narratorial memory in the autodiegetic retrospective novel. I argue that the assumptions of this claim are based upon a model of real-life memory and that this is an inappropriate model. Rather, narratorial memory should be thought of as an epistemological claim to revelation of the protagonist's mind. Indeed, narratorial "memory" is a fictional convention for disguising narratorial inventiveness. The second claim is a comparative one about the autodiegetic retrospective narrator and the heterodiegetic narrator. I argue, in opposition, that no one narratorial category which permits access to a character's mind can give more or less access than any other narratorial category. Access is a concept that does not permit degree, and should be distinguished from revelation of a character's mind which permits degree.

Opsomming

Daar is al beweer dat die outodiëgetiese (eerstepersoons-) retrospektiewe verteller van die geheue afhanklik is en dat sy gesigspunt gevolglik verwyder is van die handelinge van die ervarende self – verder, byvoorbeeld, as wat die gesigspunt van die heterodiëgetiese (alwetende derdepersoons-) verteller verwyder is van die handelinge van die protagonis. Ter verduideliking word aangevoer dat die heterodiëgetiese verteller nie afhanklik is van die geheue nie.

Hier is twee uitsprake wat vra om nadere ondersoek. Die eerste raak die funksie van die narratiewe geheue in die outodiëgetiese retrospektiewe roman. Ek beweer dat die aannames van hierdie veronderstelling gebaseer is op 'n model van werklike geheuewerking en dat hierdie model ontoepaslik is. Die narratiewe geheue moet eerder beskou word as 'n epistemologiese aanspraak op openbaring van die protagonis se denke. Narratiewe "geheue" is inderdaad 'n fiksionele middel om narratiewe vindingrykheid te vermom. Die tweede veronderstelling berus op 'n vergelyking tussen die outodiëgetiese retrospektiewe verteller en die heterodiëgetiese verteller. Hierteenoor stel ek dat geen enkele narratiewe kategorie meer of minder toegang bied tot die denke van 'n karakter as enige ander narratiewe kategorie nie. Toegang is 'n begrip wat nie graadverskil ken nie, en moet onderskei word van die openbaring van 'n karakter se denke wat wel graadverskil toelaat.

It has been argued that the autodiegetic (first-person) retrospective narrator is dependent on memory and so his or her vantage point is distant from the activities of the experiencing self – more distant than is, say, the vantage point of the heterodiegetic (third-person omniscient) narrator from the activities of the protagonist.[1] In explanation, we are told that the omniscient narrator is not dependent on memory.

In this article I would like to investigate the above claim – in fact suggest that there are two claims for investigation, one about the role of narratorial

memory in the autodiegetic retrospective novel, the other a comparative claim about the autodiegetic retrospective narrator and the heterodiegetic narrator. I shall discuss, initially, the claim about the autodiegetic retrospective narrator and consider its assumptions and the evidence given for it. The argument will be that these assumptions are based upon a model of memory – memory in real life – which is inappropriate for an understanding of narratorial memory.

Subsequently the comparative claim will be discussed.

1

One of the most succinct analyses of the role of memory in the autodiegetic retrospective novel has been given by Dorrit Cohn. The nub of her argument is given in the following passage:

> ... the first-person narrator has less free access to his own past psyche than the omniscient narrator of third-person fiction has to the psyches of his characters. His [the first-person narrator's] retrospection depends on ... the "telescope levelled at time" of which Proust speaks, and by which he means a "real" psychological vision conditioned by memory. This frequently prompts a first-person narrator to mention the plausibility of his cognition ... When James [sic] tells about Maisie's early childhood feelings, he does not and need not explain how he found out. When David Copperfield does the same, he refers to his source: "... I have a strong memory of my childhood ...".
>
> (Cohn 1978: 144)

Elsewhere Cohn talks of the "temporal distance that separates the narrating from the experiencing self" in first-person retrospective narration, thus bringing into play the "memory process" (Cohn 1978: 151). In this connection she cites the views of Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* who speaks of the "delayed and distanced presentation of consciousness" in first-person novels, and of Nathalie Sarraute in *The Age of Suspicion* who says as follows of Proust: "... to us it appears already as though he had observed them [subliminal conflicts] from a great distance, after they had run their course, in repose and, as it were, congealed in memory" (Cohn 1978: 154).[2] Other literary theorists also comment on the role of memory in autodiegetic retrospective narration. Thus Stanzel remarks that "recollection of the past ... is usually the starting point of the narrative process in the first-person novel ..." (Stanzel 1971: 69).[3]

Support for the argument of Cohn and others appears to come from literary sources, both non-fictional and fictional. It is perhaps true that an autodiegetic narrator in non-fiction who relates his or her memoirs, or autobiography, attempts to capture in words vanished worlds, to reproduce in the presented world of the written work a "copy" of a particular material world which existed at a particular place and time. The scene, the atmosphere, the people living in it, the earlier years of the protagonist-narrator, whether as major or as main character, or as peripheral observer – such is the material which the narrator, using all the devices of literary art, attempts to capture or

represent. The writer – or is it the autodiegetic narrator? – of letters, diaries, journals, may face the same task, as may the narrators of contemporary biography and recent history (a topic probably demanding a shift to homodiegetic narration). All non-fiction autodiegetic narrators, then, may well be dependent on memory.

Narrators in fiction often talk as if they were real people, and when they are autodiegetic retrospective narrators they talk as if they too were remembering a vanished world and telling a story about their own activities in it, or about their observations of the activities of others. In their appeal to memory, these narrators may be more explicit or less so; they may not even mention the term at all. Yet insofar as they appear in autodiegetic retrospective novels, they are, by definition, following the convention of talking from memory. David Copperfield draws attention to his reliance on memory, and so do many others, such as – some random examples – the autodiegetic narrator in Albert Camus's, *The Outsider*, who only discovers how remarkable memory may be when he is in prison. Having narrated the crucial events of his life, he discovers that "... the more I thought, the more details, half-forgotten or malobserved, floated up from memory. There seemed no end to them" (Camus 1973: 45). He concludes as follows: "... even after a single day's experience of the outside world, a man could easily live a hundred years in prison. He'd have to lay up enough memories never to be bored" (Camus 1973: 45). The autodiegetic narrator in Elie Wiesel's, *The Fifth Son*, lays even greater emphasis on his reliance on memory: in a novel which purports to bear witness to great historical events, such as the holocaust, the emphasis on memory helps create a feeling of authenticity. Hence the narrator says of himself as a child: "True I was small but I knew how to love and my memory is good" (Wiesel 1986: 28). The appeal to memory is frequently reiterated (Wiesel 1986: 35, 57, 60, 71, et al.). Since the narrator-protagonist has grown up in New York, the son of a survivor, the novel requires a sub-narrator, himself a survivor, to whose memories large sections of the novel are devoted. The survivor invents nothing; he only recounts his memories (Wiesel 1986: 73, 106, 109).

The model for Cohn's and others' analysis of the role of memory in autodiegetic retrospective narration is the real-life memory of a person. This same model serves for those autodiegetic retrospective narrators, whether in non-fiction or in fiction, who implicitly and sometimes explicitly appeal to memory in their narratives. However, the fact that real-life memory may be used as a model for narratorial memory is dependent upon a number of covert assumptions. Foremost among these is that narrator and protagonist in an autodiegetic novel together constitute a persona and resemble a person, so that the narrator in its own right be thought of as possessing personal attributes. As a consequence, it appears to be logically appropriate to compare narratorial memory with real-life memory. In non-fiction it is particularly easy to accept these assumptions, for protagonist, narrator and author all purport to share the same name, date of birth and identity documents: all three figures are not only related, but seem different aspects of the same person – or is it of the same persona? – in spite of ontological gaps

threatening to tear them asunder. So when the narrator in non-fiction remembers, such an activity seems more than merely modelled on the author remembering: it seems absolutely identical with it, narratorial and authorial memory seeming alternative descriptions of the same phenomenon, notwithstanding their ontological separation. The autodiegetic fictional narrator often imitates the guise of the non-fictional, with one important difference: the fictional narrator may be yoked to the protagonist, but both are free of the shackles of identity with the author. In other respects, however, the fictional narrator often talks as if he or she were a person, and hence the concept of narratorial remembering seems no different from, seems to be modelled on, real-life memory.

2

Analysts of non-fiction may talk of the narrator remembering, and autodiegetic retrospective narrators in novels may say the same of themselves. The latter may be justified in doing so since thereby they endorse the fiction that they are real people narrating about their lives or the lives of others. Yet it is a matter for debate whether narrators in novels are like real people, and whether the narrative of autodiegetic retrospective narrators is really based on memory. Should literary theorists take these narrators at their word, so taking their statements literally? These narrators' statements about the role of memory in the autodiegetic retrospective novel have more than one level of significance: on the one hand, overtly, they are statements about person-like narrators and their method of relating narrative; on the other hand, covertly, these statements have an epistemological dimension in which a statement is made about the narrator's claim to knowledge. Both dimensions of these statements are valid and may be useful.

Parallel to, and underlying these two dimensions of the narrator's statements about memory are two models of the autodiegetic narrator – for two models are possible, although (one may argue by extrapolation from the text) Cohn and others have, perhaps intuitively, assumed the one without having critically considered its implications, or considered the choice of model. (It should be emphasized that both models have their value in literary discussion.) One model conceives of the narrator and protagonist as constituting a persona, with the narrator in turn being conceived of as like a person – the narrator, say, being located in part of the life-span (the chronologically later part) of the persona in whose earlier life-span the protagonist is located. The vocabulary and set of concepts logically appropriate to this model approximate those of persons in real life, so that the narrator may be spoken of as having a history and a psychology. Hence one speaks of the narrator as remembering his or her past or the past lives of others.[4] The other model conceives of the narrator as a logical construct having a special link to the protagonist. This model recognizes the existence of the protagonist in the presented world and its time, and the existence of the narrator in the presentational process and its time, and stresses the gap between them.[5] Whatever the nature of the special link here, it need not be stronger than that

of the special interest and privileged access enjoyed by the heterodiegetic narrator: in omniscient narration, narrator and protagonist do not constitute one persona, nor in general is the narrator held to be person-like. It is noteworthy that Käte Hamburger observes as follows of the earlier stages of the autodiegetic narrator's self:

> The objectified self of these earlier phases is not always experienced with the same intensity as being identical with the first-person narrator, but rather more as a somewhat independent person who is only one among all the other persons in the narrative.
>
> (Hamburger 1973: 324)

Only factors relevant to its function as a narrator pertain to the existence of the narrator as logical construct: since it is not modelled on a person, the vocabulary of history and psychology is logically inappropriate to its description. Thus remarks about the narrator remembering the past have to be interpreted so as to remove anthropomorphic connotations: on this view, narratorial memory is merely a literary convention for license granted to the narrator to tell a story. The first model, then, carries an implicit analogue to the real world, an analogue which the second model does not postulate. Which model the literary theorist should choose for analysis of the autodiegetic narrator in fiction should be determined by whether narratorial memory is analogous to real-life memory (as the first model implies) or is a fiction (as the second model implies).

Does the analogy between autodiegetic retrospective narratorial memory and real-life memory hold? I would argue not, for the assumption that the narrator summons to his memory a vanished – past – presented world is a false one: the past presented world and all its events and actions do not, never did, exist, not even in the world of the novel, prior to the narrative act in presentational process time which brings the "past" presented world into being. Hence that presented world is literally less substantial than a dream, and less ontologically grounded. Like the dreamer, the narrator in fiction is the sole mediator between reader or audience and the novel's presented world, but at least the dream and its events, according to the convention of dreams, can be said in some sense to have occurred, hence existed, even if the narrator of a dream never tells anyone about it. But no presented world exists prior to the mediating narrator's narrative. Dream "memory" may come close to dream creation but narratorial "memory" is identical with narratorial creation. If the narrator of a dream be held to invent in narration rather than remember, then the ontologies of dream and of novel are very similar indeed. The world of fictional narrative is ontologically one with the world of "once upon a time" – a world evoked in the act of narrating. Where there is no narratorial "memory" there is no fictional presented world.

In contrast, the memory of events in the real world is irrelevant to their existence. If a battle took place at a certain time, a statement (judgement) to that effect is true whether or not anybody remembers that event. (A realist view recognizes that history may be re-written, but argues that it has not yet

been abandoned.) As Ryle puts it: "There is no contradiction in saying that I know when I was born . . . though I cannot recall the episode" (Ryle 1970: 258). It is because real-life events are ontologically well-grounded that memory is irrelevant to their existence; dream events are ontologically shaky, so memory is vital to their existence. Events in the presented world of the novel are non-existent but for their creation in the act of "memory". Therefore such narratorial "memory" is not memory at all but invention, and so the analogy between narratorial and real-life memory breaks down completely. The real-life model on which Cohn's argument about narratorial memory is based must be abandoned in favour of the model which implies no resemblance between narratorial and real-life memory.

Whatever the case with the reader, who is invited to participate in fictions, the literary theorist should not go along with the autodiegetic retrospective narrator's claim to be remembering, nor with an analysis which presupposes that narratorial memory is akin to real-life memory. For when autodiegetic retrospective narrators claim to remember, they are disguising in a fiction the epistemological fact that narratorial memory is narratorial invention; their claim to memory is itself a fiction. Commenting on first-person narrators, Stanzel makes a similar observation when he claims that their memory is a convention:

> Reproductive memory and productive imagination prove to be two different aspects of one and the same process. The function of memory in the first-person narrative far exceeds the ability which is conventionally attributed to memory, namely the ability to visualize and vividly present that which is past.[6]
>
> (Stanzel 1984: 215)

Stanzel also draws attention to the exclusion of authorial traces from the text:

> Naturally everything in a narrative originates with the author. In the course of objectifying and dramatizing the fictional figures, however, the author must always endeavor [sic] to break off these initial ties, to conceal them from the eyes of the reader.
>
> (Stanzel 1971: 58)

One may contend, then, that authorial inventiveness is concealed by narratorial inventiveness which, in the autodiegetic retrospective novel, is in turn concealed by narratorial memory.

If memory in first-person retrospective narration is a literary convention signifying narratorial inventiveness, why, one may wonder, should authorial inventivenesss be channelled in such a manner? A full exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, but one may suggest that narratorial appeal to memory is part of the realist convention – that is, the realist fiction – of narrative, even more so of autodiegetic retrospective novels, whereby the protagonist and other characters are presented as if they were like people in the real world, and strange countries such as Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnm-land are presented as if part of the planet and so located on a map. The narratorial appeal to memory strengthens, even underpins, the realist con-

ventions of the novel in both its presented world and its presentational process. In the presented world the appeal to memory operates on the principle that to appeal to memory is to imply that one is speaking the truth: one cannot remember what has not happened. Thus memory helps conceal imagination: certainly in autodiegetic retrospective novels, imagination and inventiveness prefer to conceal themselves in the garb of truth, of seeming reality. The aim of such concealment is to present the events of the presented world as if they were a segment of the history of the real world. Should autodiegetic retrospective narration become too non-realist, the convention of the dream as an occurrence is always available as an epistemological safety-net.

But it is not only in the presented world that narratorial memory strengthens the realist conventions of the novel: it does so in the presentational process as well. The appeal to memory here is the display of a license by the autodiegetic narrator to speak with authority of the activities of the protagonist and so legitimize the exploration of his or her inner life. The convention of the protagonist being like a real person implies that the major portion of his or her mental life is private, so that the credentials of the autodiegetic narrator have to be established – and how better than by the convention that narrator and protagonist constitute one persona, so that when the narrator "remembers", he or she may thereby have unquestioned and privileged access to the past mental life of the protagonist. Thus the appeal to narratorial memory in the presentational process is, as part of the fiction, justifiable on epistemological grounds, and it helps bring the presented world in line with the real world: the narrator is justified in claiming privileged access to the protagonist's mind as in real life the present self of a person may explore, in memory, the self of the past. Surprisingly, Norman Friedman argues that the protagonist-narrator is more limited than the witness or observer-narrator who is a character and hence homodiegetic:

> With the shift of the narrative burden from a witness to the chief character, who tells his story in the first person, a few more channels of information are given up and a few more vantage points are lost . . . The protagonist-narrator . . . is limited almost entirely to his own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.
>
> (Friedman 1975: 152)

Friedman underestimates the enormous advantage which privileged access to the protagonist's mind signifies to the autodiegetic narrator, an advantage acquired via the convention of memory, merely by virtue of the narrator supposedly forming one persona with the protagonist. In contrast, the homodiegetic witness-narrator has no access to the protagonist's mind nor to the minds of other characters, and is doomed to sparse knowledge, acquired only from the outside, of all of them.

The argument that the claim to memory of the autodiegetic retrospective narrator be regarded as a fiction, and that such a narrator is a logical construct, helps bring the conception of the autodiegetic narrator in line with that of the heterodiegetic narrator, generally thought of as disembodied and

omniscient. It is easy to think of the heterodiegetic narrator as a logical construct, but less easy to do so of the autodiegetic narrator. (The terminology of first- and third-person used of narrators suggests that they are person-like: as a consequence it seems plausible to suggest their possession of person-like attributes, including memory, rather than that they are logical constructs.) One of the aims – and consequences – of the use of Genette's terminology of hetero-, homo- and autodiegetic narrators is that these narrators are thereby depersonalized (Genette 1980: 31); to suggest that they are logical constructs and that their claim to memory is a fiction becomes correspondingly more plausible.

There may be generally no grounds for a reader to think of the autodiegetic narrator as a logical construct, but such a conception has its uses for the literary theorist. If the heterodiegetic narrator has been accepted as a literary convention, the autodiegetic narrator who appeals to memory could be accepted in the same way. Indeed, the conceptions of these narrators are not totally unrelated: Stanzel talks of the "transformation of the authorial narrator into a first-person narrator" and argues that "the first-person novel will be linked to the authorial novel in the continuous chain of novel forms" (Stanzel 1971: 60). As mentioned above, Dorrit Cohn has pointed out that whereas the autodiegetic retrospective narrator may mention memory as the source of its knowledge, the heterodiegetic narrator has no need to explain how it comes to know the mind of the protagonist or of another character (Cohn 1978: 144).[7] One may therefore argue that the autodiegetic retrospective narrator's appeal to memory is part of the epistemology, the logic, of its being an autodiegetic and a retrospective narrator.

3

Cohn's and others' analysis of the role of memory in autodiegetic narration, then, is (as claimed above) modelled on the real-life memory of a person. Yet Cohn's analysis goes beyond the role of memory, for the claim is also comparative – that autodiegetic narratorial memory gives the narrator "less free access to his own past psyche than the omniscient narrator of third-person fiction has to the psyches of his characters" (Cohn 1978: 144).

What are the criteria of one narrator having more, or having less, free access to the mind of a character than another narrator? I would argue that access may be permitted (on whatever grounds) or denied (on whatever grounds) but that *if* a narrator were to have access to a character's mind, notions of degree of access are logically inappropriate, although one narrator may reveal more than another about a character's mind. Thus the narrators in, say, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Things Fall Apart* are both heterodiegetic and both have access to their protagonists' minds, but the one reveals more about Isabel's mind than the other about Okonkwo's mind. By the same token, notions of degree of revelation of mind have nothing to do with whether a narrator is hetero- or autodiegetic. The heterodiegetic narrator may reveal more of Isabel's mind than the autodiegetic narrator in *Great*

Expectations reveals of Pip's mind, but in turn the latter reveals more than does the heterodiegetic narrator of Okonkwo's mind.

Rather, then, than claim that one narrator has more (or less) free access than another narrator to the psyche of a character, one should distinguish access to a character's mind from revelation of that mind. If a heterodiegetic narrator is omniscient it follows that such a narrator has uniform access to the mind of every character in a novel – for the narrator in *The Portrait of a Lady*, to Lord Warburton's mind just as much as to Isabel's – but may choose to reveal more or less, a great deal or nothing at all, of the mind of any particular character. Narratorial omniscience is thus more a matter of potential than of practice, more of promise than of fulfilment; one may argue that the potential of all omniscient narrators is the same, their access to all characters' minds being uniform, but their degree of revelation of characters' minds varies enormously. By the same token, all autodiegetic retrospective protagonist-narrators have uniform access to the protagonists' minds, but the degree of revelation of a protagonist's mind is susceptible to great variation.

Narratorial access or its denial to characters' minds is an epistemological fact of a novel, and the grounds for such access or its denial may be mimetic but need not be so. Thus one may argue (as mentioned above) that the autodiegetic narrator has access to the protagonist's mind, whereas the homodiegetic narrator has none; the difference is an all-or-nothing one, not a difference of degree. These are epistemological facts of a novel, and in this instance they are mimetic: in the real world each person has privileged access only to his or her own mind but not to the minds of others. If the heterodiegetic narrator has access to the mind of any one or to the minds of any number of characters, such access is also an epistemological fact about the novel, but in this instance not a mimetic one: in the real world there is no epistemological equivalent to the heterodiegetic narrator, except for the problematic one of the deity. Hence it is not surprising that Cohn derives her paradigms of omniscience from the realm of fantasy – the myth of a window placed in the breast, the fairy tale of a magic lens – and not from that of real life (Cohn 1978: 3–4). Both autodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratorship, although not exclusively epistemological concepts, certainly have epistemological implications: both terms delimit the narrator's privileged access to characters' minds. The autodiegetic narrator has access to one mind, the heterodiegetic narrator to all minds in the presented worlds of their respective novels. Yet this particular difference is, in epistemological terms, but one of headcount.[8]

These arguments imply that Cohn's contention is erroneous when she argues that "... the first-person narrator has less free access to his own past psyche than the omniscient narrator of third-person fiction has to the psyches of his characters" (Cohn 1978: 144). I contend, not that the autodiegetic narrator has more, but that no one narratorial category which permits access to a character's mind may claim more access or less access than another narratorial category.

Notes

1. Genette criticises the terms "first-person" and "third-person" narrators and instead uses other terminology (Genette 1980: 243–247). This article follows Genette's usage but since the theorists under discussion use the terminology of "person" it is retained where necessary.
2. Cohn's remarks, and those of Lubbock and Sarraute, refer to what Cohn calls "dissonant self-narration" (Cohn 1978: 145–153) in which the "narrating self" is distant in both time and degree of wisdom from the "experiencing self". In contrast, in "consonant self-narration" (Cohn 1978: 153–161), an attempt is made by the "narrating self" to identify with the "experiencing self" and record its activities. The discussion of narratorial memory is relevant to dissonant, not consonant, autodiegetic narrative.
3. Stanzel's distinction between first-person novels which approach "the narrative situation of the authorial novel" and those which approach "the narrative situation of the figural novel" (Stanzel 1971: 68–69) corresponds to Cohn's distinction between "dissonant" and "consonant self-narration".
4. Stanzel discusses first-person narrator and protagonist constituting one persona (Stanzel 1984: 212–214).
5. On "presented world" and "presentational process" see Ruthrof, 1981.
6. Stanzel's argument is quite different from that in this article.
7. In spite of Cohn's claim, there are instances, albeit rare, in which the omniscient narrator does in fact explain: thus the narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* talks in the opening chapter of memory returning to her in a dream. However, Cohn is right in pointing out that the omniscient narrator need not explain.
8. A general discussion of autodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators is beyond the scope of this article.

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