

*Section: Aesthetics*

Petr Kotatko

### **Radical Narration**

Two sources constitutive of the worlds of narrative literary works ( $W_n$ ) will be distinguished:  
/1/ propositional contents of the narrator's utterances and their imaginative fulfilment (here I adopt – with critical modifications - Bonati's elaboration of Husserl's idea of „Erfüllung“);  
/2/ the narrative performance itself: those parameters of it in which the relevant features of  $W_n$  are exhibited or demonstrated instead of being „merely“ talked about.

Narrative literary works can radically differ in the degree and manner of employment of these two sources of construing a  $W_n$ , which provides us with a possible auxiliary criterion for classifying narration types. The paper focuses on what I propose to call *radical narration*, where the role of /2/ is amplified by the fact that the very capability of the narrator's utterances to express propositional contents which could jointly constitute a coherent  $W_n$  is seriously challenged. In radical narration, the disturbances affecting this function of the narrator's performance do not serve as an indicator of her personal indisposition, but rather as a way of exhibiting the nature of the world narrated about. This requires that the following two conditions are fulfilled:

/a/ The very position from which the narration is performed, including the arsenal of narrative tools accessible to the narrator, is consequently localized within the world narrated about (this is not to be confused with the narrator's involvement in the narrated story) .

/b/ Due to the specific nature of the relevant  $W_n$ , /a/ has the effect that the narrator's utterances cannot fulfil their functions, as familiar from ordinary discourse, without serious disturbances.

As a consequence, the basic features of  $W_n$  are (to a large extent) not specified in the propositional contents expressed by narrator's utterances (and „made vivid“ by the imaginative fulfilment of these contents in Bonati's sense), but rather demonstrated in the specific ways in which expressing of the propositional contents fails or is being disturbed. A prominent example of radical narration is provided by prose by Samuel Beckett, in particular the novels of his *Trilogy*. I will contrast them with texts in which the step specified

in /a/ *would* have the consequence specified in /b/, yet this step is *not* made. This type of narration, which is (in its performance and its tools) not affected by the nature of the world narrated about, will be called *immune* (and just like in medicine, various types and degrees of immunity can be distinguished). This will be illustrated by some well-known Borges' stories. For instance, when the narrator of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* describes the consequences of the idealism of the Tlön's inhabitants for their language, science, literature etc., he does so from a position *immune* against these consequences: a text which would exhibit these consequences in its syntax, semantics and indicated literary aspirations would provide an example of *radical* narration.

The involvement of the narrator's performance and its tools in the world narrated about will *not* be presented as a necessary condition of „honest“ or aesthetically productive literary narration (on the contrary, I will point out how effective the contrast between these two levels can be). However, it can be put forward as an example of consistency lacked by certain prominent philosophical doctrines – those that fail the reflexivity test.

The phenomenon of radical narration is a challenge for certain doctrines concerning the construction of  $W_n$ . For instance, Bonati's theory presupposes, as a transcendental condition of the literary functions of narration, that the narrator's mimetic sentences are awarded "a subtle form of fundamental credence" by the reader (though "within the parenthesis of irony"): otherwise the fulfillment of their meanings by images, and hence the constitution of  $W_n$  would be blocked. Beckett's texts, mentioned above, provide evident counterexamples to this assumption, more substantial than the well-known cases of unreliable narrators. The utterances of Beckett's narrator do not even raise claim for the reader's credence, but systematically exclude it by permanent revocations, by putting into doubts the meanings of the words uttered, by destroying the referential function of the first person pronoun (and hence the literary function of *Ich-Form*) as well as by plain contradictions. This does not imply that the Husserlian idea of "Erfüllung" is not applicable here: we just have to admit kinds of fulfilment not envisaged in Bonati's theory. Instead of awarding the narrator's utterances "fundamental credence" and fulfilling their meanings with imaginative content (i.e. with images of the situations and events specified in propositional contents expressed), the reader experiences various kinds of resistance, obstacles and failures in her attempts to apply familiar interpretative schemes onto the narrator's performances. These experiences confront her with the basic features of the world in which the narrator's performances take place (cf. /a/ and /b/ above). Experiences of this kind represent a no less vivid and literarily productive

fulfilment of the narrator's utterances than the "alienation" of meanings in images, which stand in focus of Bonati's theory.

*Reference:*

*Felix Martínez-Bonati: Fictive Discourse and the Structures of Literature. Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1981.*