

RADICAL NARRATION

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ABSTRACT: The author focuses on the type of narration in which the basic features of the narrated world are *exhibited* in specific performative parameters of the narration itself (in particular in the variety of ways in which the narration fails or collapses) rather than *described* in the narrator's utterances. This presupposes that the narrative performance, including the arsenal of tools available to the narrator, is consequently localized within the narrated world. The most prominent example is found in Samuel Beckett's late prosaic work. The characteristic features of this type of narration, labelled *radical*, are then generalized in the notion of a *radically conceptual* work of art.

In this paper I want to draw a contrast between two sources constitutive of the worlds¹ of narrative literary works:

– the *propositional contents of the narrator's utterances* and their imaginative fulfilment (wherein by the term "fulfilment" I refer to Felix-Martínez Bonati's elaboration of Husserl's idea of *Erfüllung* for the theory of fiction; see Martínez-Bonati 1981);

¹ Since I will speak, for short, about "fictional worlds", I should stress in advance that in this use I do not take "fictional" and "actual" as mutually exclusive. I do not see any reason to suppose that the role played by a fictional world in the construction (and in the functioning) of a literary work excludes, in general, its being identical with the actual world. And even if it is not, it is still possible for it to share entities with the actual world as coexisting with entities construed by the author. Moreover, these overlaps (or this identity) can play a substantial role in the construction of a literary work, so that a reading which fails to recognize them may stop the work from fulfilling some of its basic literary functions for the reader.

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– the *narrative performance* itself, i.e. those parameters of it in which the relevant features of the fictional world are exhibited or demonstrated, rather than “merely” talked about.²

Narrative literary works can radically differ in the degree and manner of employing these two sources of the fictional world’s construction, and this fact provides us with an auxiliary criterion for classifying narration types. In what I propose to call *radical narration*, the role of the narrative performance itself is amplified by the fact that the very capability of the narrator’s utterances to express propositional contents which could jointly constitute a coherent fictional world 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 fictional world. This requires that the following two conditions be fulfilled:

(i) 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 which the narration is about. (This is not to be confused with the narrator’s involvement in the narrated story: it is neither

² There is another source deserving (and receiving) serious attention, namely the *interventions from the actual world* or from the reader’s picture of it, which complete the fictional worlds in various respects over and above what is explicitly said or implied in the text.

The ways in which our beliefs about the actual world can participate in the construction of fictional worlds have been thoroughly discussed and these discussions resulted in valuable enrichments of the analytical devices of literary theory: perhaps the most prominent example is the notion of *truth-in-fiction*, as defined by David Lewis. But I will not go into this exciting issue here.

necessary nor sufficient for the narration's being *radical* that it be *homodiegetic*.)

(ii) Due to the specific nature of the relevant fictional world, the fulfilment of the condition (i) has the effect that the narrator's utterances cannot fulfil their functions, familiar from ordinary discourse, without serious disturbances.

(iii) As a consequence, the basic features of the fictional world which the narration is about are (to a large extent) not specified in the propositional contents expressed by the narrator's utterances (and "made vivid" by the imaginative fulfilment of these contents), but rather demonstrated in the specific ways in which expressing the propositional contents fails or is being disturbed.

A prominent example of radical narration is provided by the prosaic work of Samuel Beckett, in particular the novels of his "Trilogy" (Beckett 1979).³ I do not know a better way of illustrating the intended function of this notion than applying it to Beckett's late prosaic texts – which is what I will attempt to do in the following paragraphs.

In a conversation with John Gruen, Beckett characterized the possible meaning of his work ("if it has any meaning at all," as he said) as follows: "I have perhaps freed myself from certain formal concepts" (Beckett 1969: 210). The problem with these "formal concepts", i.e. the principles governing the construction of literary works as they have developed in the history of Western literature, is not that they are unsuitable for literary experiments. Beckett rejects them as devices of presenting the world as an ordered whole, held together by causal links and providing space for a continuously identical subject and her

³ Honestly speaking, the power of these texts is for me *the* reason why I find the notion of radical narration worth articulating.

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meaningful action. From Beckett's position, summed up in his claim "I can't see any trace of a system anywhere" (Shenker 1956, section 2: 3; cf. Gontarski 1985: 11), it would be inconsistent, even dishonest, to use narrative devices which function in this way, i.e. which serve (according to Beckett) to create the illusion of order. The literary form acceptable for an author with such a credo must correspond to what we can experience, think and do in the situation of universal chaos.

The consequences for the position of the narrator and his narrative performance are easy to see. If there is no space for meaningful action whose unity would be guaranteed by causal relations and continuous awareness of the purpose, then there should be no space for coherent narration either, with its construction of continuous story lines and of communication between characters, with utterances matching one another in coherent dialogues. If, in the situation of universal chaos, we cannot rely on mutual coordination of our actions, and hence cannot expect to be interpreted as we have intended (and even if, from time to time, this happens to be the case, we have no chance to discover it), the question arises what are the sources of meanings that the Beckettian narrator could rely on in his utterances. In the world in which he is supposed to do his job, the linguistic conventions have no chance to be established – if we understand them, with David Lewis, as regularities in communicative behaviour fixed by a complex of common (i.e. shared and mutually reflected) beliefs and preferences of the members of a community. And if, following Davidson, we take the stand that utterance meaning results from a match between the communicative intention and the interpretation, then the

chance that utterances acquire meanings, appears (in Beckett's world) to be negligible (cf. e.g. Davidson 1986).⁴

One cannot claim that Beckett's narrator operates consequently within the borders set by this picture of the human condition, as that would lead to a total resignation on all talk. However, as readers, we recognize—or rather experience—the trickiness and fragility of his position in the numerous collapses of his attempts to say something determinate or even to tell a story. Seen from the other side, we cannot, even as readers of Beckett's texts, resign in our attempts to make sense of his sentences by applying our interpretative routines—yet it is precisely the experience of the failures of these attempts and of our sustained efforts for continuous reading that gives us access to the world narrated in Beckett's novels.

Beckett's narrator from time to time reflects and comments on the precariousness of his position. The status of these comments is, to be sure, just as tricky as the status of the famous philosophical claims which fail to satisfy the criteria of meaningfulness declared in those very claims.⁵ Admittedly,

⁴ The classical version of David Lewis's definition of convention can be found in Lewis (1983).

⁵ In the realm of philosophy, incoherence sometimes accompanies the most fundamental theoretical achievements. For instance, if we adopt the position of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, then we *must* and at the same time *cannot* think *das Ding an sich*, because the function of *Verstandesbegriffe* cannot be explained without reference to the thing in itself, while these very notions are applicable only within the sphere of possible experience (and hence not to the thing in itself). Similarly, the sentences of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* do not satisfy the criteria of meaningfulness specified in these very sentences (this collapse is reflected in the metaphor of the ladder, *Tractatus* 6.54, impressive as a literary device). Similarly, the verificationist criterion of meaningfulness of the Vienna Neopositivists disqualifies the very sentences

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precisely this fundamental incoherence is reflected and manifested in Beckett's narrator's comments in a very powerful way. For example:

I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little... (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 276)

The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forgot, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never. (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 268)

...impossible to stop, impossible to go on, but I must go on, I'll go on... (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 363).⁶

It should be clear that the situation which paralyzes the very ability to perform meaningful utterances includes, as one of its parameters, the collapse of the regulative force of rules. The Beckettian narrator reflects on this in formulations which evoke Wittgenstein's inquiries into rule-following:

And if I speak of principles, when there are none, I can't help it, there must be some somewhere. And if always doing the same thing as it were is not the same as observing the same principle. I can't help it

in which it is declared. Any such kind of ineliminable incoherence creates a fatal problem for a philosophical system, but it certainly does not discredit everything that is said within the system. Much less, then, can incoherence disqualify an artist's achievement: however, it does introduce into her work a kind of tension which deserves to be reflected by the interpreter.

⁶ In one of his dialogues Beckett puts it this way: "There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett – Duthuit 1965: 17).

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either. And then how can you know whether you are observing it or not? And how can you want to know? (*Molloy*, Beckett 1979: 43)

All this being the case, the narrator's attempts at continuous narration must necessarily collapse, often in a manner resembling the communicative defect illustrated by Moore's paradox (cf. below, n. 7). The attempts are disqualified both *in general* (by pronouncements of the type quoted above) and by various ad hoc counter-moves. Here are some examples:

– A description which presents itself as a recollection of past events is immediately afterwards classified (by the narrator) as a mere invention – with the addition that what follows will not be any different: “For I weary of these inventions and others beckon to me. But in order to blacken a few more pages may I say I spent some time at the seaside, without incident.” (*Molloy*, Beckett 1979: 63)

– The narrator classifies his own preceding utterances as a mere rhetorical exercise, whose only function is to keep the discourse going on: “And all these questions I ask myself. It is not in a spirit of curiosity. I cannot be silent. About myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. Rhetoric.” (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 269)

– The narrator evaluates his own use of words as inappropriate, and so disqualifies his previous utterance: “One of these days I'll challenge him. I'll say, I don't know, I'll think of something when the time comes. There are no days here, but I use the expression.” (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 268) Or again, the narrator declares to have no competence concerning some word he has just uttered, with the same effect: “I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it

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means. I say aporia without knowing what it means."⁷ (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 267)

– The accumulation of contradictions is presented as a matter of (narrative) method: "What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be some shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless." (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 267)

– The narrator's mind is presented as a space for interventions of other, more assertive and more efficient minds, so that the speaker of the narrative utterances vanishes and the literary function of first-person narrative collapses: "Is there a single word of mine in all I say? No, I have no voice, in this matter I have none. ... But I don't say anything, I don't know anything, these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me." (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 319) Cf. also: "But enough of this cursed first person, it is really too red a herring, I'll get out of my depth if I'm not careful." (*The Unnamable*, Beckett 1979: 315)

⁷ This corresponds to the following variation on Moore's paradox: "The cat is on the mat but I don't know what 'cat' means." Similarly one can construe Moore-like analogies for the examples mentioned above: "The cat is on the mat but this is just my invention." Or: "The cat is on the mat but take it just as a rhetorical exercise." All these sentences (when uttered) are performatively self-defeating in the same way: the speaker makes a certain move and immediately afterwards takes it back. (In the original version of Moore's paradox the speaker commits herself to certain belief, namely that the cat is on the mat, and immediately afterwards cancels this commitment by denying that she possesses that very belief.) In general, countless revocations of various kinds to be found in Beckett's text play the (destructive) role of a counter-move analogical to the one responsible for Moore's paradox.

It should be clear that the problems with the first person in Beckett's "Trilogy" (and the abandonment of the first person in later texts), as well as anything else responsible for the paralysis of the content and force of the narrator's utterances, is not a side-product of the author's linguistic experiments, but rather a result of his sustained striving for consistency. The starting point is Beckett's sensitivity to those aspects of life which are incompatible with the picture of the world as an ordered whole and as a space for meaningful behaviour. The consequence is a never-ending search for a narrative form (and hence also for a way of construing the narrator's position and his performance) which would manifest the universal chaos instead of supporting the illusion of order: "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now" (Driver 1961: 23).

No matter how sceptical Beckett himself might have been about his achievements, one can hardly deny that the novels of his "Trilogy" not only speak about the absence of order: they let us experience it in the narrator's repeated attempts at continuous narration and in their failures, in permanent revocations, in accumulating contradictions, in suspending word-meanings and the illocutionary force of narrator's utterances, in the collapses of the referential function of the first person pronouns and hence of the literary function of first-person narrative. In these parameters of the narrator's performances I as a reader recognize the contours of his situation and of the world in which it is anchored. Or to put it better, I experience this situation myself in the collapses of my sustained attempts to apply my interpretative routines and in the failures of my striving for continuous reading.

The consequent inclusion of the narrator's position and his performance into the narrated world or state of affairs is a radical move and a substantial literary achievement, provided that this

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world or state of affairs is incompatible with the commonly shared picture of the world, presupposed and ratified in everyday communication. This becomes well visible in a confrontation with cases where this move (i.e. the step specified in the condition (i) of our characteristics of radical narration) is *not* made—and in which it arguably would have had radical consequences, if it *were* made. This type of narration, which is unaffected (in its performance as well as in its tools) by the nature of the world which is narrated about, may be perhaps aptly called *immune*.⁸

For instance, the narrators of Jorge Luis Borges's stories often describe objects, events, states of affairs, and ways of acting and thinking which do not match our commonly shared picture of the world. They speak about a community with a radically idealistic worldview and form of life ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), about people with a radically different intellectual equipment ("Funes the Memorious") or with radically extended perceptual capacities ("Aleph"), to mention

⁸ Just like in medicine, various types and degrees of immunity can be distinguished. Even the narrator's utterances in the novels of Beckett's *Trilogy* are immune against the universal chaos to that extent that they have the form of sentences with determinate syntactic structure. (Their abandonment in Beckett's later texts was a step towards a higher degree of consistency.) They do not resign upon devices which presuppose causal relations, such as verbs referring to acts based on these relations, e.g. in the sentence „...I put on my trousers, my greatcoat, my hut and my boots“ (*Molloy*, Beckett 1979: 44), or compound sentences with purpose clauses; they do not resign upon mathematical calculations (see *Molloy*'s ten pages long ruminations about the possible ways in which the sixteen stones in his possession should circulate between his four pockets and about the order in which they should be picked out for sucking, in order to guarantee that all of them, and not merely a subclass of them, will regularly appear in his mouth; *Molloy*, Beckett 1979: 64–69); etc.

just a few examples. The narrator is typically construed as an intelligent, well educated, sensitive, sometimes rather complacent intellectual, describing these phenomena in *our* common way of speaking, literarily cultivated and elegant, but firmly bound to *our* intellectual and perceptual equipment. For example in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, the narrator speaks from *our own* standpoint about the consequences of the radical idealism of the inhabitants of Tlön for *their* language (for instance, substantives are replaced by verbal or adjectival constructions), for geometry and arithmetics as well as for the forms and functions of literature. It was not part of the author’s aspirations to produce a text which would *exhibit* these consequences in its syntax, semantics and indicated literary aspirations. (The result of such an attempt would be an example of *radical* narration.) On the contrary, he construed the narrator and his performances as *immune* against these consequences, as remaining outside their scope.

The contrast I have in mind can be perhaps more prominently illustrated by another well-known Borges story, “The Book of Sand”, as the difference between, on the one hand, *describing* an endless book, *speaking about the way it behaves* when we try to read it or to browse through it—and on the other hand, creating a *text which behaves that way* (an infinitely expanding text, text generating some kind of infinite regress, let us say due to some sort of self-reference). While the former is a standard literary aspiration, the latter is the most radical literary project one can be engaged in: not to describe some object or a state of affairs brought to the extreme from a standard, commonly shared position, but to *push the text itself to the extreme*, to create the text as an exemplar or product of that extreme states of affairs. This includes inducting the narrator into an *extreme position*, in which the linguistic conventions, the

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shared conceptual apparatus, the world-picture, patterns of behaviour, syllogistic figures etc., or at least some relevant parts of this arsenal, cannot provide their services to her without serious disturbances. We have *considered* the possible consequences of such a step in several Borges stories—and we have *seen* the consequences of this step powerfully *implemented* by the novels of Beckett's "Trilogy".

So much for the contrast between two kinds of narration which I propose to call *radical* and *immune*.⁹ Let me now generalize this distinction, so that it is not any more restricted to the sphere of literary fiction. Both Beckett's and Borges's literary achievements in the texts referred to above have an important parameter which deserves to be called *conceptual*, due to the way in which it challenges our conceptual apparatus or other parts of our cognitive equipment. Let me call artworks producing such an effect *strongly conceptual* (adding "strongly" in order to avoid confusions with the term *conceptual* or *conceptualism* as it is used in the fine arts).¹⁰ The *strongly conceptual work* of art can be then defined as follows:

⁹ Those radically narrative literary works which are construed as a picture of the actual world (or of some essential parameters of our life in it) deserve to be called "radically realistic", since in them the nature of the represented reality intervenes into the narrative performance itself. As I have attempted to show here, Beckett should be interpreted as a radical realist in this sense; for a detailed argument see Kořátko (2010).

¹⁰ See e.g. Lucy Lippard's statement: "Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, unpretentious, cheap and/or 'dematerialized'" (Lippard 1997: vii); or this statement on the website of The Tate Collection (Tate Glossary, Conceptual Art): "Conceptual artists do not set out to make a painting or a sculpture and then fit their ideas to that existing form. Instead they think beyond the limits of those traditional media, and then work out their concept or idea in whatever materials and whatever form is appropriate. They were thus giving the concept priority over the traditional media."

(i) It introduces its recipient into a situation which seriously challenges her conceptual apparatus or perceptual schemes or interpretative skills or patterns of behaviour: rather than providing her with an occasion to apply her cognitive or behavioral mechanisms in a routine manner, it prevents them from running their usual course, or else puts them to excessive strain, thus showing their limits.

(ii) The main (not necessarily the only) effect it aspires to is that the recipient experiences this critical situation (and, possibly, reflects upon it).

As I have said, I take both Beckett's novels and the Borges stories referred to above as fulfilling these conditions, but not in the same way: what differs is the way in which they achieve the effect characteristic for strongly conceptual artworks. Let me call the entities whose reception and interpretation has the consequences described in the condition (i) *extreme*. In Borges's story "The Book of Sand" we are, by means of a description, confronted with an endless book, which certainly is an *extreme object* in this sense: its description challenges quite efficiently the conceptual schemes in which we are accustomed to think about material objects, as well as our imagination, both visual and motoric. Similarly, in *Tlön* we face, again by means of a description, a worldview and a way of life (shared by members of a fictitious population) which radically challenges our intuitively realistic way of thinking about the world. In "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*", we find a description of a literary work which radically challenges our intuitive account

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of the text-work relation.¹¹ In all these cases, the attack on our conceptual apparatus consists in a confrontation with *extreme entities described* in the text, not in a confrontation with a *text construed as an extreme entity*. On the other hand, Beckett's *texts themselves* are powerful examples of extreme objects, equal to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and certain dada and surrealist poems.

Let me call a work of art whose bearer (be it text, sounds, formations of lines or colour stains, three-dimensional objects, situations or events) is an *extreme entity* in the sense defined above *radically conceptual*. It should be clear from these definitions that every radically conceptual artwork is *ipso facto* strongly conceptual, but not the other way round. And all pieces of radical narration are radically (and hence also strongly) conceptual literary works: but not all conceptual literary works are radically narrative (as they need not be narrative at all – see some typical dada poems).

Let me conclude by illustrating these relations by some examples I have discussed above plus a few others. The novels of Beckett's "Trilogy" or Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and all other pieces of radical narration are radically conceptual literary works (since, as I have pointed out, their texts are extreme objects in our sense): hence they are also strongly conceptual. Borges's Menard story is a strongly but not radically conceptual work, since its text is not an extreme object, but "merely" includes a representation of such an object (namely of Menard's *Quixote*). It attacks our concept of a literary work (and has inspired fundamental theoretical discussions about the text-work relation), but not in a radically conceptual way. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, analogically, attacks our concept of a

¹¹ The implications of the Menard case have been thoroughly discussed in philosophy, aesthetics and literary theory. Some contributions to this debate are collected in Kofátko – Pokorný – Sabatés (forthcoming).

work of fine art (and it has inspired some substantial theoretical revisions of it), but unlike Borges's story it is a radically, (and hence also strongly) conceptual artwork: the act of exhibiting the urinal in an art gallery (or even the mere manifestation of such an intention) makes the urinal itself an extreme object in our sense, rather than a "mere" representation of such an object.¹² John Cage's famous composition *4'33''* is a radically, and hence also strongly, conceptual artwork: it drastically converts the very scheme of our perception of a musical composition by making us to listen to a continuous silence as a piece of music. The only thing which enters into our acoustic field besides the silence are "disturbing" noises from the outside—or more precisely, it becomes unclear what is inside and what is outside the composition. Our listening then balances between two modes of perception, similarly to what happens with our vision when we look at Necker's cube. The situation which so radically challenges the accustomed way of listening to music and attacks so brutally our notion of a musical composition, is itself an extreme entity in our sense, rather than a representation of such an entity.

These are examples of what I regard as clear cases of strongly or radically conceptual works of art. Certainly there are dozens of cases which I would be unable to evaluate from this point of view, as they lie beyond my interpretative capacities—due to the limits of my intellect, sensitivity,

¹² The question arises whether in our time, with galleries full of ready-mades, we can still insist that a urinal exhibited as an artwork satisfies our characteristics of an extreme object. The reply is certainly relative with respect both to time and to persons. Perhaps we should introduce categories like "historically extreme" (referring to the role the object played at the time of its creation), "extreme with respect to common sense" (referring to the role the object plays for typical laypersons) and also "simply (or timelessly) extreme" (which would apply to the text of Beckett's *Trilogy*).

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experience and technical skills. But there may be also cases in which even the most competent interpreter would be unable to decide whether they satisfy the concepts defined above or not. Their number would show the degree of applicability of these notions, and hence their value for the interpretation of the works of art.

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