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Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction

> I am not born yet. My Uncle Carl and Brother Tate hurry along the railroad tracks on the graveled crest of the hillside which parallels Finance Street. (Wideman, *Sent For You Yesterday* 17)
>
> I walk into the frame, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street. (Ellis, *Glamorama* 168)
>
> Inside, in the warm light of contemporary domesticity, her roommate is talking long-distance to the first boy she ever kissed. She's talking while vengefully chasing their cats, the cordless phone cradled like a papoose at an interstice of ear and hand and shoulder. We can just make out the melody of her joy. We are standing outside under the window, on the front step. (Moody, "The Grid" 29)
>
> What did he even talk to them about–when they were under four eyes?–Ah, well, suddenly, as if by a flash of inspiration, I know. (Ford, *The Good Soldier* 34)

How do the narrators of the four fictional narratives quoted above know what they know? The knowledge they display is temporally, spatially, or cognitively undisclosed to them. If we assume that they project a human consciousness (and there is no evidence to the contrary), they should, for obvious epistemological reasons, either not possess the knowledge they do, or their claims to that kind of knowledge should

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be labeled unreliable and/or facetious. The latter explanation might help to account for *some* of the preposterous knowledge if we follow distinctions made by Phelan and Martin (1999) and argue that narrators may merely *report* unreliably but do not evaluate or interpret unreliably. However, there are few or no other textual signals that the narrators' reporting is not to be trusted. If we discard reliability as the default of unreliability, the most we can say is that we do not have sufficient information to judge whether the reporting is done reliably or unreliably. For Moody's and Ford's fictional narratives, as well as for most of the other texts discussed in this essay, unreliability cannot satisfyingly explain the exceptional knowledge of the first-person narrators. In Moody's "The Grid," a first-person narrator takes a moment in the present of the narrative as a starting point for unconditionally telling what will happen next, in the end coming back full swing to where the narrative began. The almost declamatory present and future tense and the circularity of the structure leave no room for unreliability because there is no indication of epistemological uncertainty or inconsistency. As regards Ford's *The Good Soldier,* the supposition that the narrator is merely schizophrenic when he claims to "suddenly . . . know" what he has no access to will not help in elucidating the aesthetic and conceptual motivation behind this statement.

How, then, can one conceptualize first-person narrators in fictional narratives whose quantitative and qualitative knowledge about events, other characters, etc., clearly exceeds what one could expect of a human consciousness and would thus make them prone to being labeled "omniscient"? If labeled so, they would meet a criterion narrative theory typically reserves for the variable or zero focalization of authorial narratives: "The knowledge of an internal focalizer . . . is restricted by definition: being part of the represented world, he cannot know everything about it" (Rimmon-Kenan 80). The models of most narrative theory do not or perhaps cannot address this phenomenon, while a substantial number of fiction writers apparently do not seem to care that the "knowledge of an internal focalizer . . . is restricted by definition" (*ibid.*). Admittedly, the phenomenon has not gone entirely unnoticed, although it has seldom been elaborated. Gérard Genette calls Marcel's narration of Bergotte's dying thoughts an illicit assumption of authorial competence (208). Manfred Jahn calls first-person omniscience "paralepsis" and defines it as an "infraction caused by saying too much; a narrator assuming a competence he/she does not properly have; typically, a first-person narrator (or a historiographer) narrating what somebody else thought, or what happened when s/he was not present" (<http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm>).

For third-person narrative situations, "omniscience" usually does not present an immediate problem beyond the term "omniscience" itself (which will be addressed below) as long as the focalization is variable or zero, since we are then close to the "omniscient" authorial narrative in which the projection of human consciousness is channeled through the various focalizers.[1] Indeed, as theorists we need not inevitably presuppose that there is a coherent unified narrator in the first place merely because as readers we tend to construct such a "thing." If we assume that just because there appears to be a narrative agent, voice, or narrator narrating the story, this figure need not in any way resemble or, by ontological fallacy, even *be* a human consciousness

or person, then first-person narrative could actually be told by a fish or demiurge without attracting too much attention. In fact, the term first-*person* tends to underline the misunderstanding of equating "narrator" with "human being." Proclamations about the death of the narrator argue exactly this: the "I" of first-person narrative is merely a signifier, a semiotic sign to which readers during the reading process attribute certain propositions and descriptions that also occur in the narrative. Nevertheless, the opposition between fictional narrator and real life person merely detracts from the real problem: even if we as theorists do not equate a first-person narrator with a human consciousness, this cannot eliminate the puzzling effects of the aforementioned phenomenon *within* the narrative, since narrative fiction even at its modern and postmodern extremes continues to project a consciousness (Fludernik, *Narratology* 311). Shrugging off any kind of narrator, specifically first-person—no matter how unusual—with the otiose remark that it need not be bound by human constraints, is unsatisfying. It downplays the fact that one of the most prominent effects of first-person narrative (and indeed of all fictional narrative) is exactly the projection of a human consciousness, and it eschews significant aspects of how we make sense of narrative fiction.

I. PARALEPTIC COMPARED TO WHAT?

The aim of the discussions and the analyses in this article is to propose a more comprehensive framework for coming to terms with, theorizing, and categorizing paraleptic narrators in first-person narrative fiction and to examine the consequences of naturalizing (Culler) and narrativizing (Fludernik) such narratives.[2] The following discussion will borrow ideas from Henrik Nielsen's essay on the impersonal voice in first-person narrative fiction, James Phelan's work on character narration, Jonathan Culler's thoughts on omniscience, Tamar Yocabi's concept of functional integration, and Brian Richardson's emphasis on the "non-natural" quality of this narration. I will also depend on Fludernik's assumption that readers, in their "attempts at making sense of texts, particularly of texts which resist easy recuperation" on the basis of widely shared experiential and cultural frames of understanding, narrativize oddities and inconsistencies (*Narratology* 46).[3] I will discuss the possibilities and limits of this narrativization based on an assumption by Phelan that there is a rhetorical and ethical component to narrative strategies in general and thus also to paralepsis in first-person fiction: To what intent would an implied author (as redefined by Phelan 45) use paralepsis? And how does paralepsis pre-figure narrativization?

The intention is not so much to obviate or supplant existing distinctions as it is to use their analytic strength in order to construct a typology of various types of paralepses that the borrowed concepts call attention to but cannot sufficiently explain, specifically what I will call "global" and "local" paralepsis. Ideally, this typology would be able to account for and shed light on the integrative design of, for example, a narrator who reliably reports, evaluates and interprets in both character and narrator functions while still parading non-natural elements.

There are several basic problems that arise with the attempt to conceptualize "omniscience" in first-person narratives: first, the term "omniscience" itself is, as Culler and others argue, of questionable usefulness because it is often over-used and under-defined; second, issues of reliability arise whenever paralepsis and/or paralipsis disrupt Grice's principles of cooperation[4]; and third, the differences between the various first-person "omniscient" narratives and narrators require a differentiated conceptualization.

In a recent article, Jonathan Culler re-emphasizes what others have pointed out before: The term "omniscience" is anything but specific, and the notion itself, owing to its theological origins, problematic. Stanzel already remarks that there are very few cases where Olympian (i.e. godlike) "omniscience" is consistently applied (170). But how can "omniscience" be defined if the analogy with divinity is not used as its constitutive analogue? As Culler argues, "the sort of thing that omniscience ought to involve" seems to be "a vast store of knowledge, in excess of what might be expressed" (23). The main problem with the term is the fact that, as he claims, it has come to denote various different qualitative and quantitative aspects of knowledge and potency.[5] Not every minor piece of unusual knowledge indicates "a narrator who knows everything, and then the critic finds herself obliged to explain why the omniscient narrator declines to tell us all the relevant things he must know" (25).[6] He repeats the recurrent claim that a narrative agent need not be human[7] (30), and that as readers "we invent a person to be the source of textual details, but since this knowledge is not that which an ordinary person could have, we must imagine this invented person to be godlike, omniscient" (28). Although Culler restricts his discussion to third-person narratives, his conclusion by implication neatly summarizes the dilemma that is the focus of this article: "Our habit of naturalizing the strange details and practices of narrative by making the consciousness of an individual their source, and then imagining a quasi divine omniscient consciousness when human consciousness cannot fill that role, generates a fantasy of omniscience, which we then find oppressive" (32). In the following, I will endorse Culler's suggestion that we abandon the term "omniscience" and will instead use the term "paralepsis" whenever referring to the phenomenon of a first-person narrator knowing and/or sensing something to which he/she should not have access by all that we as readers know about human cognition and perception.

Perhaps more immediately than third-person narrative situations, first-person narrative projects an agential human consciousness. If that consciousness shows signs of unusual knowledge or abilities that cannot be explained by inference or ignored as a slip of the author, it becomes difficult to fill in a "quasi-divine omniscient consciousness" or displace such instances on a neutral authorial voice-over. As a consequence, apart from denoting a number of different phenomena such as unusual knowledge and spatial and temporal independence of the narrative agency, paralepsis cannot be satisfyingly defined if the frame of reference is exclusively extrinsic or intrinsic to a fictional narrative. Similar to the notion of unreliability—and paraphrasing Ansgar Nünning—we have to ask, paraleptic compared to what? We have to have a framework by which to judge the various kinds of paralepsis. Nünning argues that unreliability is not a purely text-immanent but a relational and interactional

phenomenon which can adequately be described by considering text signals and the "world-knowledge," values, norms and reference frames the reader brings to the apperception of the text (Nünning, *Einführung* 23). As unreliability is foremost an epistemological and cognitive phenomenon, cognitive frames are projected onto the text (24).[8] The same is true for paralepsis. As a purely text-immanent phenomenon, paralepsis cannot be adequately explained. One could merely ascertain that a narrator possesses abilities that the other figures do not possess or are at least not shown to possess. Beyond this, little can be said without an external framework. Without knowledge of some basic cognitive and phenomenological aspects of the actual world (for example our inability to mind-read), a statement such as "she never told anyone about this" or "I step onto the street not noticing the car on the other side of the road" by a first-person narrator would not qualitatively differ from the same narrator exclaiming, "It is raining," because we would have no framework against which to judge the difference.

As a logical consequence, this does mean that once we separate humanness from the narrator, paralepsis becomes unproblematic. If we follow Fludernik in assuming that narrative is based on what she calls experientiality, "the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience' " (*Narratology* 12), then making sense of narrative demands the "projection of consciousness" (311), even if the narrative takes place in such unlikely a location as Kurt Vonnegut's Tralfamadore: The cognitive perceptual parameters of real life experience (43ff) that help us understand oral (natural) narratives also help us make sense of literary narratives (13). "[F]ictional situations are visualized in terms of re(-)cognizable real-world patterns which include the parameters of agency, perception, communicational frames, motivational explanation, and so forth" (Fludernik 312).[9] Inversely, the more the narrator appears nonhuman, the fewer the logical inconsistencies in combining paralepsis and experientiality. This is why the issue arises in character narration: A paraleptic machine or dog are arguably less surprising than a paraleptic human consciousness projected by a narrative because we may presume that the reader has no frame of reference against which to judge the experientiality of a dog or machine. A paraleptic human consciousness, however, will almost inevitably be judged according to what we as readers know from experience human beings could or should not know or be able to do under the specific circumstances of a fictional situation.

There are, of course, explanations that help to avoid or naturalize this surprise. Tamar Yacobi defines a number of "integration mechanisms" (*Fictional*) that readers may employ in order to "impose[s] order on the deviant" (*Authorial* 111): existential, generic, genetic, functional and perspectival. One way out would be to label a paraleptic first-person narrator unreliable and/or illicit, based on the anthropomorphic argument that no first-person narrator can have privileged knowledge. This is what Yacobi terms "perspectival." Whatever is beyond the capacities of a human being must thus also be beyond the capacities of a fictitious narrator. If he or she claims otherwise, the claim must be unreliable. More often than not, however, this would lead to inconsistencies wherever all other aspects of the narrative indicate that it "wants to be" reliable. In Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*, for example, roughly three hundred pages of narration without any signals of unreliability stand over and

against half a dozen sentences that reveal the apparently hetero- and extradiegetic narrator as autodiegetic. Incidentally, if we follow out the logic of perspectival integration, paralepsis is impossible for all narrators since there is no logically necessary and sufficient reason to exclude third-person narrative instances from the anthropomorphism of the argument: if all narrators are human, no narrator can be paraleptic, since this is beyond the capacities of any human being. Any narrator displaying some kind of super-human knowledge would automatically be unreliable. This assumption cannot do justice to first-person paraleptic narrative fictions.

The existential integration would relegate paralepsis to the level of the fictive world. In Yacobi's analysis of Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, this appears feasible. The narrator's cynical, wholesale damnation of the relations between men and women, while potentially seeming distorted to the reader, can be integrated on the assumption that this is just the way things are in the reality of the fictive world of the story. As Yacobi herself points out, for more unusual fictive worlds (e.g. Gregor Samsa's) this is not satisfying. The generic integration would attribute oddities to the particularities of the genre of a text—an explanation which cannot cover the diversity of the texts considered here—while the genetic integration allows for the possibility that the reason for deviances can be found in the author's temporary or permanent psychological make up; this explanation may yield interesting results for certain narratives but less so for a systemic phenomenon and none for paraleptic first-person narration. Perhaps most useful here is the suggestion that "such peculiarities serve as a pointer, if not as a key, to the work's functional design" (*Authorial* 117). "Whatever looks odd—about the characters, the ideas, the structure—can be motivated by the work's purpose, local or overall, literary or otherwise" (*Authorial* 111). More precisely, what could be the function—aesthetic, generic, etc.—of paralepsis in first-person narrative fiction? My attempt to answer this question follows the discussions of individual texts.

Yet another way to skirt the problem would be to argue that first-person paraleptic narrators belong to another world, possibly in a fantasy or science-fiction text. This, too, however, is unsatisfying, as becomes clear when one more thoroughly investigates the theoretical basis for such an argument, namely the theory of possible worlds. It derives from modal logic and provides a useful way for further categorizing fictional worlds. At the basis lies the recognition that "[f]ictional worlds do not have to conform to the structures of the actual world, just as the world of non-Euclidean geometry does not conform to the world where Euclidean geometry is valid. . . . Fictional worlds are not constrained by requirements of verisimilitude, truthfulness, or plausibility; they are shaped by historically changing aesthetic factors. . . . The history of fictional worlds of literature is the history of an art" (Doležel 19).[10]

According to this logic, there are different kinds of worlds, all of them possible, and only their confusion leads to misunderstandings. All worlds that are thinkable are possible (Doležel 281), but only our surrounding "real" world is an actual world. In addition, there are fictional worlds, complete worlds (which "allow[s] us to decide logically every conceivable statement about" them [279][11]), incomplete worlds, mythological worlds (which consist of a natural and a supernatural domain), natural worlds (in which our physical laws are valid), etc.[12] All of these possible worlds "lie

within the actual one" (Goodman quoted in Ronen 50). Specifically, "[l]iterary worlds are possible not in the sense that they can be viewed as possible alternatives to the actual state of affairs, but in the sense that they *actualize a world* which is analogous with, derivative of, or contradictory to the world we live in" (Ronen 50). "The possible construction of a fictional world has therefore nothing to do with abstract logical possibilities of occurrence. . . . [F]ictional states of affairs are actualized and actualizable in the fictional world" (51). Just like animals can speak but not fly in Orwell's parable, first-person narrators may have unusual cognition and still be placed in a fictional world that is otherwise natural.[13] An important issue in the context of this discussion is the observation that most fictional worlds are composite and semantically heterogeneous (Doležel 23).[14] As a consequence, even though first-person paraleptic narrators do not quite fit into a natural possible world, they may still be "compossible" with other entities in their fictional word because it is otherwise stable and homogeneous.[15] None of the possible fictional worlds that would seem to offer the most plausible explanation for the occurrence of first-person paraleptic narrators can be applied to the worlds of the narrative fictions discussed below—they are not fantastic: they are complete, stable, and homogenous. With the slight but significant exception of unusual knowledge, the narrators belong to a "natural" world very much like the actual one.

II. A TENTATIVE TYPOLOGY OF PARALEPTIC NARRATORS IN FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE FICTION

As I hope to show, there exists an array of different types of first-person paraleptic narrators which requires further subdivision. I will suggest five types, although not all of them are "real" cases of paralepsis and consequently will be dropped later on. However, they seem pervasive enough as to afford them the cursory attention of explaining just why they are disqualified:

(1) *Illusory* paralepsis, as the name suggests, is only pretense. In this kind of narrative, paralepsis seems to be present but delayed disclosure reveals that there are natural, realistic sources of the character narrator's unusual knowledge. These cases can be discarded for this discussion because there ultimately is no violation. Their effects would be a result of the delayed disclosure of the natural sources of the apparent paralepsis rather than an epistemological violation of narrative perspective. Cases in point would be Italo Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight* or Iris Murdoch's *The Philosopher's Pupil*.[16] These narratives not only play with the delayed disclosure of the apparently third-person narrative as actually first-person narrative, but also with the final revelation of the (realistic) source of the narrator's unusual knowledge. Although much of the unusual knowledge of the narrator in Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* is never authenticated, occasionally the sources are later revealed, which would make the narrative at least a partial case of illusory paralepsis.

(2) *Humorous* paralepsis self-reflexively and facetiously acknowledges its own impossibility, thereby diminishing its claim to epistemological sincerity (e.g. Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*). It, too, can be discarded because it gets marked as unreliable and thus the violation can be naturalized.[17]
(3) *Mnemonic* paralepsis results from what Cohn calls the "mnemonic overkill" (Cohn, *Transparent* 162) of narrators whose memory is so unconvincingly flawless (inhuman) as to allow them a thorough look back on the past (e.g. Ellen Glasgow's "The Past"). Cohn refers to this phenomenon as "dissonant self narration" (*Transparent* 145): a now lucid self turns back to his/her confused younger self (e.g. Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*). Since all first-person narrators remember pages and pages of dialogue verbatim and the distinction between what is credible or not is thus mainly based on readers' habituation to narrative trends, these cases will also be discarded.
(4) *Global* paralepsis is situated within a non-natural impossible frame (e.g. telling from the grave: Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*).[18] Paralepsis here applies mainly to the frame of the narration, rendering the narration non-natural and the paralepsis what I call "global."
(5) *Local* paralepsis is situated within a natural world but, nevertheless, is assumed by a first-person narrator in a style that suggests epistemological sincerity (e.g. Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*). The paralepsis is thus situated within a natural frame of the narration, rendering the paralepsis what I will call "local."[19]

Despite their variations, the substantial differences between the types run along one basic epistemological and experiential faultline: the degree of suspension of disbelief they require, or in other words, the degree to which they can be naturalized. One can distinguish between what I will call *natural* and *non-natural* types. The first three types (illusory, humorous, and mnemonic) can be called "natural" because paralepsis here is either convention, not meant seriously or only pretense, or it is limited to an impersonal voice separate from the character function and thus not linked to the projection of a human consciousness. The remaining two types—global and local—can be called "non-natural" because their paralepsis cannot be rationalized within a natural world. They are true *violations of mimetic epistemology*. The explanation is either beyond the known physical laws or simply not given.

There is a significant difference between the two types: in the global paralepsis, we have naturalness contained within the non-natural frame, and in the local paralepsis, we have non-naturalness contained within the natural frame. In the first type, the impossibility is heralded because the basic presupposition (e.g. telling from the grave) is "unrealistic," even if nothing in the style suggests anything else but "realism"; if the reader refuses to follow the first demand that he or she suspend disbelief, he or she might as well stop reading right there.[20] The second type, on the other hand, is perhaps more difficult to naturalize because it is situated in a basically natural and realistic world with the physical laws of the real world intact, were it not for the exception of paralepsis. The issue is thus less about the violation of physical laws (a narrator might temporarily have the ability to defy such laws) than about the

relation of the paralepsis to the broader frame of the narration (natural or non-natural): The difference between *The Lovely Bones* and *The Ice Storm* is not that there is anything fundamentally less non-natural about Moody's narrator knowing what he knows, but that Sebold makes the non-natural the founding premise of the narration, whereas Moody makes the natural the founding premise and then introduces the non-natural knowledge. Indeed, one could argue that Sebold makes it easier on the reader by simply asking us to accept one premise whereas Moody indulges in the jump from natural to non-natural knowledge.

The analytic distinction between character function and narrator function facilitates our understanding of these breaches of mimetic epistemology, for if paraleptic elements of a narrative are no longer attributed to the character function, the anthropomorphic dilemma discussed above would dissolve. Both James Phelan and Henrik Nielsen usefully distinguish between character and narrator functions, if within different terminological frames, and with different intents. Phelan identifies both disclosure functions and narrator functions as telling functions (12), as opposed to character functions, "each [of all the functions] identifying a different track of communication" (214). Both of these are distinct from the character functions, comprising more precisely their mimetic (as possible people), thematic (standing for groups or ideas, i.e. allegorical) and synthetic (artificial constructs) functions (13). In evaluating the effectiveness of these distinctions, it is important to keep in mind that Phelan takes a rhetorical approach that, among other aspects, focuses on the diverse ethical consequences of the "multilayered communications that authors of narrative offer their audiences" (5). His emphasis lies on the recognition that the particular formal arrangement of narratives affects the spectrum of emotional and ethical responses by the audience. For novels such as *The Remains of the Day* or *Lolita*, this yields an engaging rhetoric and ethics of narrative.

Nielsen's essay also provides a useful starting point. His hypothesis that "we need to posit an impersonal voice" refers to passages "whenever something is narrated that the 'narrating-I' cannot possibly know" (133). "When sentences that would clearly mark the narrator as unreliable or even insane in a nonfictional narrative come to the reader as authoritative in the discussed fictional examples, it is because the narratorial functions are operating independently of the character functions" (145).[21] In this manner, Nielsen is able to account for passages, for example in Melville's *Moby Dick*, in which substantial and extensive information is relayed which the I-narrator cannot possibly know.[22] By introducing an impersonal voice, Nielsen in fact introduces a dual voice, "the presence of two voices in first-person narrative" (138), where one belongs to the character function and the other to the narratorial function. For narratives such as *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby* this works beautifully, and the term "impersonal" not only succinctly separates the impersonal passages from those narrated by the first-"person"-narrator, but also characterizes the style.

However, some problems persist. As with any functional methodology, the analytic heuristic brings out some elements while obscuring others. Even if we bracket the tendency of readers to anthropomorphize the impersonal voice as well as the problem of clearly distinguishing the narratorial/narrator functions from the charac-

ter functions, other, more substantial difficulties remain unresolved. Nielsen himself introduces one main dilemma: "[O]n the one hand, in first-person narrative fiction it is very common to find a number of features that would be highly unlikely in a non-fictional narrative and sometimes features that clearly show us that the sentences cannot possibly be narrated by a personal first-person narrator. On the other hand, it is just as significant that the protagonist in first-person narrative is often recognizable by his idiolects, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, etc., as these directly appear in the rendering of the narrative" (136). If we take this comment seriously, then Nielsen's hypothesis does not work for texts such as Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama*, as he claims it does, because "impossible" comments here clearly carry the distinct mark of the voice of the I-narrator and thus belong to the character function: "I walk into the frame, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street" (168). To limit these often humorous or ironic comments as belonging merely to an impersonal voice misrepresents the style of Ellis' I-narrator. For passages such as quoted above, the introduction of an impersonal voice and the differentiation into character function vs. narrator function would amount to proclaiming the narrative schizophrenic in the clinical sense of the term: hearing voices. Nevertheless, the distinctions introduced by Phelan and Nielsen facilitate the discussion of where and how exactly the non-natural types of paraleptic first-person narrative fictions violate mimetic epistemology.

III. VIOLATIONS OF MIMETIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Recalling the distinction between natural and non-natural paralepsis, I will now discuss in greater detail the functions and consequences of the two types of non-natural paralepsis introduced above.

(1) Global paralepsis. These kinds of narrative fictions are built on a somewhat fantastic assumption but do not take place in a fantastic or supernatural world, at least not quite: the I-narrator is dead and speaks from the grave, has not yet been born, or has by some exceptional coincidence time-traveled into the far future (unlike Wells' time travel which presupposes a technological invention that allows for the natural world to remain intact) from where he or she is able to recount events from a position inaccessible to ordinary human beings. In most of these narratives, the story world is the "real" fictional world of the narrator while alive, whereas the grave world is not significantly thematized. Nevertheless, the basic assumption is such a breach of the known physical laws that it would seem hard to naturalize without a substantial willingness to suspend disbelief. Recent examples of speaking from beyond the grave include Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* and Plenzdorf's *Die Neuen Leiden des Jungen W.* (*The New Sufferings of Young W.*); well-known films include *American Beauty* and *Desperate Housewives*. In all cases, the narrator recounts the events that led to his or her death. In an ironic and morbid way, this amounts to a distinction between experiencing "I" and experienced, i.e. dead "I." As Olson points out with regard to Sebold's novel, such a narrator "combines hetero- and homodiegetic qualities" and "demonstrate[s] how telling a story from a given

perspective affects the nature of what is told" (140). The same effect is afforded in Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos*, although the narrator is not dead; through some coincidence, he has been enabled to witness the evolution of humanity in the course of a million years. Looking back from some unspecified vantage point, the narrator humorously relates from a future perspective a million years hence how humanity has fared. Suffice it to say, it has not fared well. For these kinds of narrative, distinguishing narrator from character function clearly makes sense. With the distancing effect of the temporal or metaphysical threshold, the I-narrator's narration shifts to what Phelan calls indirection by sharply separating the "I" as narrator from the "I" as character. In fact, it is an extreme form of autobiography, though marketing it as nonfiction would certainly invite opposition. Especially considering the premise of Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, whose brutally murdered narrator observes from heaven as her family tries to cope with her death, this narrative arrangement has formal and ethical consequences.[23] Within a homogeneous natural fictive world, she obviously could not narrate her own death. Supposing that she had survived but suffered atrocious physical violence, her narrative would be that of a seriously traumatized teenager, with the consequence of it likely being labeled unreliable.[24] By transporting her to heaven, and thus into a narrative position of alleged otherworldly serenity and peace and of privileged observation, her narrative is, paradoxically, rendered reliable, although she does voice opinions, emotions, and resentments. This is paradoxical because the entire premise is necessarily preposterous, and because that violation of mimetic epistemology, once accepted, actually enforces the mimetic and the anthropomorphic: "When I first entered heaven I thought that everyone saw what I saw. That in everyone's heaven there were soccer goalposts in the distance and lumbering women throwing shot put and javelin. That all the buildings were like suburban northeast high schools built in the 1960s" (Sebold 16). This heaven is, noticeably, this particular teenager's heaven, not a transcendental realm of transubstantiation of subjects into some higher form of being. Despite being in a non-natural setting, the narrative otherwise maintains the mimetic; the narrator's descriptions of her own death, distanced and observing, support this: "He took the hat from my mouth. 'Tell me you love me,' he said. Gently, I did. The end came anyway" (15). The "only" suspension of disbelief demanded from the reader, here and generally, pertains to the fact that these narrators breach the usually impenetrable barrier between life and death (or simply do not die).

(2) Local paralepsis. These worlds do not "allow us to decide logically every conceivable statement about it" (Doležel 280).[25] This statement is true for some of the other types discussed above as well, and it indeed appears difficult to imagine a possible fictional world in which every conceivable statement is logically decidable. The most significant difference from the other types is that these narratives take place in a natural frame (i.e. told by a first-person narrator whose paraleptic insights cannot be explained or rationalized) and are neither impossible (with the exception of the narrator's paralepsis), nor illusory, nor do they stylistically flaunt their potential unreliability. On the contrary, the narrators' unusual knowledge is unobtrusive. The narrator of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* simply precedes her narrative with "I know this woman" (3) and then continues to relate a wealth of details about her life she cannot

possibly have gathered. Compare, for example, the announcement of the narrator's pre-fetal knowledge in *Middlesex* and in John Edgar Wideman's *Sent For You Yesterday*:

> Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can't be entirely sure about any of this. (Eugenides 9)
>
> I am not born yet. My Uncle Carl and Brother Tate hurry along the railroad tracks on the graveled crest of the hillside which parallels Finance Street. (Wideman 17)

For both narratives, a distinction between character and narrator function initially appears convincing. As the narrator, the "I" may, over the course of time, have obtained information not available to the "I" as character, ignoring for the moment the fact that the "I" as character is pre-fetal and thus not present. However, while we may assume that the experienced "I" has retrospectively gained access to knowledge about events preceding its existence, it never reveals just how it gained that access. On the contrary, Eugenides' narrator on occasion states that the information could never have been relayed to anyone. Also, Wideman's narrator not only *knows* what happens before he is born but also sees—"I can see my grandmother" (20)—and hears—"I hear the door slam behind Carl" (21). The most significant difference between the two narratives is that Eugenides's paralepsis is naturalizable, while Wideman's is not. Eugenides's narration is naturalizable because he uses humor and irony to mark his narrator as unreliable and because it is presented in simple past tense, which emphasizes the distance between narrating-I and experiencing-I. Wideman, however, never relativizes the paralepsis of his narrative, and his use of the present tense enforces the impression of the narrator's dual status as a character. Taking up Yacobi's comment on functional integration, and for once trusting the teller on top of the tale, the epigraph may provide a clue: "Past lives live in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest." If the peculiarities of paralepsis indeed "serve as a pointer, if not as a key, to the work's functional design" (*Authorial* 117), then conflating past and present, character function and narrator function, only pronounces that "[p]ast lives live in us," that events preceding the narrator's birth (Uncle Carl and Brother Tate hurrying along the railroad tracks) are present in his or her mind and life, bridging temporal and metaphysical distance, violating mimetic epistemology. For such a functional design as announced in the epigraph, paralepsis is indeed an ideal narrative device.

Rick Moody offers two texts of this kind. His novel *The Ice Storm* features a first-person narrator who starts "So let me dish you this comedy about a family I knew when I was growing up. There's a part for me in this story, like there always is for a gossip, but more on that later" (3). Fairly soon, the narrator "disappears," i.e. there is no further "I" until the very end of the narrative almost three hundred pages later, while the diverse vagaries of the characters are related as if the narrative situation was that of an authorial, specifically *hetero-* and *extradiegetic* narrator.

Although the narrative situation is clear from the beginning, the narrative in no other place (except at the end) suggests and reminds the reader—stylistically, typographically or pragmatically—that it is actually a first-person narrative. There is little information on the narrator, and as soon as page four the narrative begins to reveal the actions and thoughts of characters who are alone and who for obvious reasons are unlikely ever to expose their thoughts and actions. The complexity is compounded by the fact that the narrator at the end reveals himself to be one of the main characters he has portrayed in the course of the novel. This is evidently not a case of illusory paralepsis, since the unusual knowledge the first-person narrator displays in the course of events is never disputed or relativized: they are given as the factual, expositional statements of an authorial narrator. Admittedly, there is some humorous indication of relativity: the last paragraph of the novel begins "Or that's how I remember it, anyway. Me. Paul" (279). Yet, the luxurious wealth of information could not possibly be constructed from memory, and there is no other indication that it actually is. This moves the text in the direction of the mnemonic overkill, but the stylistics are so significantly different, apart from the narrator reporting on himself in the third-person, that it produces a substantially different effect. Similar to *The Lovely Bones*, the narrator "combines hetero- and homodiegetic qualities" and "demonstrate[s] how telling a story from a given perspective affects the nature of what is told" (Olson 140). As an authorial reporter of the events, the narrator is clearly heterodiegetic, narrating through a variety of focalizers, one of which he is himself. As Paul, he is homo- and autodiegetic. His double status as character and paraleptic narrator at the end of the novel undermines the "reporter" status of the narrator function throughout the majority of the narrative, as the reliability of everything that has been told has to be reevaluated. In fact, as readers we realize that our reevaluation cannot reach closure, that on the level of the narrative, reliability cannot be decided, that the violation of mimetic epistemology coming with a first-person narrator narrating about himself and others from an authorial position is indeterminate. If we look once more for a functional design, it might serve as a clue that the novel is specifically about a weekend in the course of which outside freak events (in an epilogue, Moody himself calls them "unheimlich" [290]) and personal decisions wreak havoc on two families' lives, and generally about the 1970s, which the first chapter depicts as full of drastic upheavals in all areas of life. Put more bluntly, it is about a time which the characters experience as contradictory, making no sense and beyond the roster of received cognition.

In Moody's (very) short story "The Grid," the narrative situation is even more unusual: A first-person narrative begins in the present tense at a certain point in time from which the narrative develops along a temporal line in will-future tense; towards the end, the narrative "circles around" and returns to the beginning:

> Inside, in the warm light of contemporary domesticity, her roommate is talking long distance to the first boy she ever kissed. She's talking while vengefully chasing their cats, the cordless phone cradled like a papoose at an interstice of ear and hand and shoulder. We can just make out the melody of her joy. We are standing outside under the window, on the front step (29)

> And it's late and we have to work tomorrow and we are in our twenties and *we too* are about to kiss. . . . And then there is this awkward personal stuff . . . . (29–30)
>
> Later, for example, she will believe that her lips yielded too easily during this kiss. (30)
>
> I will be crossing Sixteenth Street myself that night. (35)
>
> [A]ll this doesn't matter for the moment and that's the way I prefer to remember it, before our lips part, with her roommate cackling in the background on the phone with the boy who first made her dance. (37)

The narrative reads like the prediction of a story teller, with the difference that it does not address a *you* but appears to make rock-bottom declarations about what will occur in the future: "Later, for example, she will believe that her lips yielded too easily" (30) or "In the bar, in fact, she will be having a first kiss" (31). Character function and narrator function could be separated for as long as it is unclear that the "I" as narrator and the "I" as character are simultaneously present—which is not long at all. The future tense and the force of the predictions might suggest someone who knows what is going to happen. The present tense is merely an illusion, because there is a narrator who looks back at events as they happened in the past but chooses to tell them in present tense. On the other hand, the title may be taken literally: the narrative unfolds a grid of how the moment of commencement in the present tense develops into various directions for different characters, who are all linked by that one moment, or in other words: in all four dimensions. If this is taken as the functional design, then how the I-narrator knows all this is once more irrelevant because everything is present in the present moment, resonating Wideman's epigraph; the effect is, as before, stunning, and could be read as a clever comment on the temporal and spatial relatedness of all human life, on the network of our communal existence, and even on the consequences of the space-time continuum.

IV. CONCLUSION

If we take up once more Tamar Yacobi's suggestion that we consider the functional design in explaining the deviances and peculiarities of narrative fiction, paralepsis in first-person narrators can then be read as a satiric comment not only on the alleged panopticism of authorial narratives but also on those critiques of these fictions that read them as panoptic (Cohn, *Transparent* 163). These narrators are the legitimate heirs of the postmodern language games and indeterminable cognitive parameters of authors such as Vonnegut, Ondaatje, and Pynchon: they break out of Bentham's panopticon of even assumed epistemic control and coherence. If epistemic unity—or its pretense—is a form of assuming discursive control, then these narratives assume an impossible control, emphasizing that it has always been illusory anyway.[26]

Systematically, these narratives might not immediately seem to concur with levels I through III of Fludernik's conception of a natural narratology. Their parading

of a partially non-human cognitive framework is incongruent with the cognitive frames readers usually bring to narratives. But as examples of the human wish to know more than one usually can and the pretense that one does (both of which common elements of natural story-telling situations), they can well be understood on level IV, that is, they can be narrativized through the "interpretative abilities by which people link unknown and unfamiliar material with what they are already familiar with, thereby rendering the unfamiliar interpretable and 'readable' . . . according to either the natural parameters of levels I and II or the cultural parameters of level III" (45–46). It might not be the least plausible explanation for the existence of paralepsis in first-person narratives and their naturalizability that it is a simple and very human desire to have one's cake and eat it, too.[27] First-person paraleptic narrators are more easily naturalized than one would initially think, possibly because the readers' capacities and anthropological need for naturalizing/narrativizing whatever is peculiar about a story is potentially unlimited. As Phelan remarks, he is "struck by the power of the interpretative habit to preserve the mimetic" (28). I tend to concur with him that "[t]hat power is not at all surprising: the mimetic component of narrative is responsible for our emotional responses to it" (*ibid.*).

ENDNOTES

I would like to thank Monika Fludernik and James Phelan for their helpful criticism and commentary.

1. Stanzel labels variable focalization "figural," which need not amount to an all-embracing superordinate consciousness but simply a summation of all perspectives. In many instances, however, on the level of the narrator function, this does amount to a knowledge exceeding that of any of the specific focalizers.

2. Fludernik emphasizes the difference between Culler's concept of *naturalization* ("concerned with the interpretation of literary texts"; *Narratology* 45) and her own *narrativization* ("exclusively concerned with narrative parameters"; 46). Both processes describe efforts on the reader's side to find a frame that explains or integrates inconsistencies and oddities in a literary text.

3. Fludernik identifies four different levels of narrativizing, with Levels I though III drawing on widely shared cognitive (basic experiential frames) and cultural (e.g. familiarity with generic conventions) parameters and with Level IV identifying the moves readers make to naturalize what is not familiar.

4. Jahn defines paralepsis and paralipsis as "instances of violations of Grice's (1975) famous principle of co-operation—the notion that speakers (narrators) are socially obliged to follow an established set of 'maxims': to give the right amount of information, to speak the truth, to speak to a purpose (tell something worth telling), to be relevant, etc. Cognitive strategies for handling alterations include (a) 'naturalizing' them so that they become acceptable data consistent (after all) with one's current frame of interpretation; (b) adapting the frame so that it allows for the alteration as an 'exception'; (c) treating it as a stylistic 'error'; (d) search for a replacement frame" (<http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm>).

5. With reference to Sternberg, Culler distinguishes between omnipotence (what the novelist says is true is true of the world he/she creates) and omniscience (unusual knowledge) (24). He then describes four different phenomena that "have provoked the ascription of omniscience" (32): narrative authority, the "telepathic translation of inner thoughts," the "playful and self-reflexive foregrounding of creative actions," and "the teasing out of intricacies in human affairs" (32).

6. This is, of course, not the only option. As Adams claims, inferential knowledge is ignored in many discussions of omniscience (9) while it could provide a "viable alternative to privileged knowledge" (9, 24f, 26f), for example in discussions of *The Great Gatsby*. This is noted, as well, by James Phelan, if within a different terminological frame (4). However, for the texts that will later be analyzed, inference cannot sufficiently explain the degree of knowledge that the narrators demonstrate.

7. Admittedly, most narratives feature a human narrator or project a human consciousness. Exceptions are narratives that project the consciousness of an animal (e.g. Paul Auster's *Timbuktu*) or some other non-human entity. However, we cannot know what such consciousness is really like, so in effect such narratives anthropomorphize the narrators to the degree that they can be understood and are thus again congruent with the conventions of projecting human consciousness.

8. For a list of signals which indicate unreliability, see Nünning, *Einführung* 27–31. His recent essay contribution to the Blackwell *Companion to Narrative Theory* marks a noteworthy shift in his position by synthesizing cognitive and rhetorical approaches. Nünning adopts Phelan's specified notion of an implied author into his framework in order to account for the fact that narratives (and their textual specifics and structures) are the product of "some sort of higher-level authorial agency" (100) with rhetorical intentions and ethical consequences.

9. For example, if the world of Tralfamadore were entirely beyond human perceptual parameters, we could not comprehend and read about it.

10. Doležel observes in modern literature a "purely literary (nonnatural) Ich-form . . . lifted from the semantic and pragmatic restrictions of subjective discourse" (156); it is "a first-person discourse with the semantic features and the performative force of the authoritative Er-form" (*ibid.*) which constitutes "a victory of convention over imitation" (157). This sounds much like the first-person paraleptic narrator under discussion in this article, but is unfortunately not elaborated. Possible worlds theories are also powerful rivals of the notion of experientiality.

11. This claim is untenable in light of Gödel's proposition that in all complex systems there are statements which cannot be decided.

12. For a glossary of possible worlds, see Doležel 279.

13. This explanation resembles Yacobi's existential mechanism.

14. They can be homogeneous (following a consistent system) or heterogeneous, uniregional (only one world) or pluriregional, stable or instable (consistency may occasionally be disrupted) (Martinez and Scheffel 127–30).

15. Compossible entities are entities "that can coexist in one and the same possible world" (Doležel 279).

16. A sub-case of this would be the *cloaked* paralepsis. In this kind of narrative, a first-person narrator is cloaked for some time in an authorial (heterodiegetic) narrative situation, which is then suddenly disclosed as from the beginning having been homo- and intradiegetic. These cases can be discarded for this discussion because there ultimately is no violation. The effects would be a result of the delayed disclosure of the first-person perspective rather than from an epistemological violation of that perspective. With reference to the Pumpernickel episode in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Stanzel points out that there are a number of instances, particularly in 19th century novels, in which auctorial narrators suddenly make statements that blur the distinction between a first-person narrative and an auctorial narrative. He attributes this to the desire to lend the auctorial narrator a physical presence and credible personality (259). For a more recent example, see Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the first part of the *New York Trilogy*.

17. Surely the most notorious of these narrators is Tristram Shandy; his verbosity constantly undercuts his reliability. A recent and more restrained example is Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*. The I-narrator is a hermaphrodite (giving an ironic twist to the idea of a dual voice) who recounts events, especially in his/her family's past, which he/she explicitly states cannot be known to him/her because they were never disclosed to anyone. This ironic flaunting of unusual knowledge certainly smacks of unreliabil-

ity, but as these statements are fairly rare and the stylistic extravagance exclusively limited to them, the overwhelming part of the narrative "reads" reliable. Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* contains an even less obtrusive example: "What did he even talk to them about—when they were under four eyes?—Ah, well, suddenly, as if by a flash of inspiration, I know" (34). Since this insight receives no further comment, it is, of course, preposterous, just like the narrator of *Middlesex* who quite affably exclaims that he/she may not know this or that but will tell it anyway. The question remains whether the quantitative inconspicuousness of the unreliability in these examples works for or against naturalization. If one ignored them as Yacobi's "genetic lapses," these narratives too would constitute "real" paralepsis and thus violations of mimetic epistemology. Also, one could imagine a reader who, for whatever reasons, might not perceive these comments as markers of unreliability, with the same consequence.

18. This kind of "metaphysical" breach could also be read as simply unreliable, with the significant difference that it is not quite as easily naturalizable.

19. In some cases, a combination of types can be found within one narrative, e.g. Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*.

20. An example: if one is unwilling to suspend disbelief in the existence of monsters and insist on their impossibility, then watching a monster movie is pointless and not scary at all because, of course, monsters do not exist.

21. In such cases literature "violates the rules of language outside literature" (147). He also points out that first-person fiction presents a problem for the no-narrator theories (135).

22. See, for example, the chapters "Nantucket" or "The Whiteness of the Whale."

23. The narrative provides detailed information about the afterlife, which is said to be what each deceased truly wants it to be.

24. I am not suggesting that trauma narratives cannot be reliable. Non-fictional ones often meet the demand for the most scrupulous authenticity while also facing the problem that a "realistic" representation of severe trauma is as often considered impossible. Fictional trauma narratives may have more leeway in their formal arrangement, but are equally challenged to circumvent exploitation of their subject.

25. The incompleteness of these narratives lies in our inability to fully decide whether to trust the unusual knowledge or not, whether this knowledge is a feature of one exceptional entity or of possible others as well, etc.

26. There are, of course, story telling traditions in which the natural and non-natural are quite suavely combined, e.g. magical realism.

27. I am tempted to argue that paralepsis is often used to deal with exceptional issues of human life and extreme experiences such as death, bliss or trauma which our "natural" and "ordinary" storytelling cannot adequately grasp. However, just as many narratives seem to derive their force from making strange the rather ordinary experiences of human life, thus pointing to an inherent, cognition-dependent strangeness in all human experience.

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