

# The Author Is a Sign: A Semiotic Perspective on the Author-Narrator Relationship

MELANIE LÖRKE

Freie Universität Berlin (Germany)

## Abstract

After poststructuralism, literary scientists, linguists, and, of course, literary semioticians have started to consider the question ‘Who is talking?’ again. Texts are seen as a part of a communicative process working according to a sender-code-receiver model. Who is the sender of a literary text? The answer would be the author. His return to the academic world has revived a discussion that had started with Plato’s *poeta vates*, became more interesting with the introduction of the narrator (Kayser), had a preliminary climax in the proclaimed death of the author (Barthes, Foucault), an intriguing turn with his comeback (Booth), and has been experiencing a new high point since the turn of the millennium. Whether his function in the process of interpretation and reception, his role in other media, or his importance for questions of race, gender, and class: the author is back. He has secured a save place in the communicative model that describes narratives as well. Apart from this pragmatic perspective, however, the author-narrator relationship has not been discussed as a semiotic relation. I attempt to present two different approaches to compensate this deficit. The author could be seen as the signified of the narrator (signifier). From this perspective a subdivision would have to look at the author-signified as a sign of a real author (signified) and an implied author (signifier); the narrator-signifier would be divided analogously into fictional narrator (signified) and focalizer (signifier). This approach will serve as a preliminary aid to translate the communication model into a sign model. The Peircean triadic sign offers a more complex basis for describing the author-narrator relation. A chain of triads that depicts the «real» author, the textual/implied author, the fictional narrator, and finally the creation of the story by the focalizer serves to demonstrate the semiotic dimension of the problem and also offers a solution to the dilemma of intentional fallacy. The author can be understood as a symbolic, indexical, and iconic sign. I will argue that the iconic quality of the author is most relevant for the narratological perspective. The problems with author concepts in the past are simply a result of failed semiosis on the part of the interpreter: the hypoiconic sign is misread as a genuine icon (which would equal its object). I hope to shed a new light on the author and his narrotological implications by introducing a semiotic perspective into the debate.

## 1. THE COMEBACK OF THE AUTHOR

### 1.1 Goals and difficulties

The author is someone who has been ignored in university seminars until recently. To speak of the author, or even worse of the Author (with a capital A) or his intention was considered a taboo, a form of rule breaking, a sign of academic feebleness or the naiveté of beginners. This is no longer so. Terms like author and intention are currently being revived. Umberto Eco is one of the most prominent voices in an academic community that has begun to break this silence by questioning the idea of infinite meanings that is strongly connected to the denial of intention. Following their tradition I would like to pursue a short study on the author and his textual counterpart of the narrator.

In order to do so, I shall to begin with a short overview of the history and concept of the author, his rise, his proclaimed death and his recent revival, and introduce new and old ways of thinking about this figure after his resurrection. Following this, I will locate the author as sign in the text with the help of the narratological idea of the author as part of a communicative situation and Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic sign model. Finally I will determine the author's relationship to the narrator in terms of similarity criteria by drawing on Peirce's concept of the iconic sign. I hope to offer a new perspective on problems such as intentional fallacy or the conflation of the real author with the narrative voice in the text.

Although my title suggests that I am adopting a semiotic perspective, my starting point and the tradition I work in is first and foremost the field of literary studies, particularly hermeneutics and narratology. The two traditions of literary studies and (literary) semiotics often remain separate but they nevertheless draw on the same classic texts and treat the same problems. Recent research on author and intention in literary studies has by and large ignored Umberto Eco's theories on the open work and the limits of interpretation. However, they refer to the same theorists, namely Foucault, Barthes, and Kristeva, and offer similar solutions, for example thinking of the implied author in terms of textual intention or reader intention. I would like to bring the two traditions together by using a traditional semiotic paradigm. What I propose is by no means a new model or a solution to the debate revolving around the narrator and the author, but it might be one step on the way to a better understanding of a long debated concept.

### 1.2 When it mattered who was speaking: a very short history of the author

As long as there have been texts and literature there have been people who produce these texts. The text as artefact requires an individual (or indeed several) to write it. In Greek times, the author was regarded with suspicion. In *Ion*, Plato, who wanted to rid the Republic of poets, develops two distinct kinds of poets: *poeta vates* and *poeta faber* (Jannidis et al., 1999a:5).<sup>[1]</sup>

[1] My overview of the history and debate of the author is taken from two studies which provide a more detailed account of the author as concept. See JANNIDIS, F., LAUER, G., MARTINEZ, M. & WINKO, S. (1999a) Rede über den Autor an die Gebildeten unter seinen Verächtern. Historische Modelle und systematische Perspektiven. IN JANNIDIS, F., LAUER, G., MARTINEZ, M. & WINKO, S. (Eds.) *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, BENNETT, A. (2005) *The Author*, London and New York, Routledge.

The *poeta vates* was not the origin of his words but only their transmitter. His inspiration came from the gods who had the muse visit the poet and tell him what to write. Strictly speaking, the first authors were gods and the first poets were not authors with original ideas. The meaning of the word author brings together the two semantic fields of originating and having authority. The author is an inventor, originator, and a ruler (See Bennett, 2005: 6-7). This god-like position of the author is indeed espoused by the gods in classical times. Of course, even though individuality seems to be a concept of the Renaissance, there was nevertheless a sense of this as the biographies written by Aristotle's students prove. Plato's second concept of the author is the *poeta faber* who has skills and knowledge of his trade. Plato rejects the second model which recalls the idea that the skills of writing and being an author can be learned (as creative writing classes at many universities also suggest).

The medieval author as *auctor* was associated with authority. Every new author used his name and his authority to legitimate his own text. Contrary to Foucault's claim that the author was not important before the eighteenth century or Barthes' assumption that the author is a modern phenomenon, there are numerous indications that contradict the medieval anonymity of the author: signatures, self-stylization in paratexts, and the naming of other authors.<sup>[2]</sup>

However, the eighteenth and nineteenth century certainly problematized the author as concept by explicitly reflecting on the question of what it means to be a poet. In addition, legal models of intellectual property and copyright, combined with new methods of production, brought forth the modern idea of the author. At the same time, Romantic theories of impersonality prefigured the modernist and postmodernist death of the author (Burke, 1995:xix). The juxtaposition of theories of impersonality (for example by T.S. Eliot) and the continued focus on writing and authorship, the continued production of autobiographies and autobiographical fiction is a modern phenomenon that is still prevailing today.

In early literary studies the author and his intention consequently played a considerable role in the interpretation of texts. The first strike against the author in literary studies to gain the most critical acclaim was William K. Wimsatt's and Monroe C. Beardsley's essay on «The Intentional Fallacy», published in 1946. In this essay they claim that the poem does not belong to the poet but to the public and that only the poem itself should be the object of interpretation (Jannidis et al., 1999b:11). Wolfgang Kayser soon followed with the call for a separation between author and narrator. The next decade, the nineteen sixties, was also an exciting time for the author. Wayne Booth added the implied author as a concept to the binary of author and narrator. This term still provokes controversial debate, but it proves useful as a construct for our model. More radical than Booth were the poststructuralist claims of the death of the author by Roland Barthes and the author as function by Michel Foucault. According to Barthes (in his essay «The Death of the Author»), the author as the transcendental signified, as the god-like authority that determines the meaning of the text, has to be abolished in favour of the reader who generates meaning in the reading process (Barthes and Heath, 1977:142-148). Foucault's

[2] There are, however, also numerous cases of anonymous works and complicated signatures. See BEIN, T. (1999) Zum 'Autor' im mittelalterlichen Literaturbetrieb und im Diskurs der germanistischen Mediävistik. IN JANNIDIS, F., LAUER, G., MARTINEZ, M. & WINKO, S. (Eds.) *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.

position is less radical. In «What is an Author», he concedes that it does matter who is speaking and that there is something that regulates discourse, something he calls the author-function (Foucault, 2003:234-271).

The poststructuralist position has influenced literary studies since the publication of these two influential essays. The editors of the 1999 collection of articles, *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, explain that in spite of the identification of the author with theoretical naiveté, the author nevertheless remains an important concept in literary studies (Jannidis et al., 1999b:3).

### 1.3 Why it matters who is speaking

This discrepancy can be explained by looking at practical examples (Jannidis et al., 1999b:18-33). There are two ways to talk about the author: as a historical person or as part of an interpretation.

The historical perspective on the author is less frequently debated position. Studies on copyright, censorship, authorship, writing and gender, and other sociological approaches can be found quite frequently. Even if the author is not the focus of a study, he or she often serves as a selective criterion. Titles such as ‘concept x in the works of author y’ are frequent. Literary histories organize their arguments around eras and authors, university seminars have the name of their author in their titles, and prominent scholars edit handbooks on authors and their works.

The concept of the author in interpretation is not widely accepted. To use a presumed intention of the author to test interpretation hypothesis or to speculate about the psychological state of an author is often frowned upon with good reason. Pursuing the line of author intention entails leaving the text as sound material for scientific research and entering the fuzzy realm of speculation and restricting infinite meaning to one right way of reading (Winko, 1999:39f). Nevertheless, the author exists, as Fotis Jannidis and Heinrich Detering show with their recent collections (Jannidis et al., 1999b, Detering, 2002).

In his essay «Zwischen Autor und Erzähler» («Between Author and Narrator»), Fotis Jannidis makes a first attempt to rehabilitate the author fully in his relationship to the narrator (Jannidis, 2002). He suggests that there are certain congruencies between author and narrator that cannot be denied. Using the implied author (a construction of the author by the reader on the basis of a specific text) he challenges the complete autonomy of the narrator as proclaimed in descriptive narratology (Jannidis, 2002:548). First, Jannidis criticizes the common communication model. I will comment more extensively on that in the next section. Then he establishes the narrator as traces in the text and argues that these traces can also be the author’s traces, particularly the use of a specific language, allusions, metaphors, and the arrangement of the text. Finally, he demonstrates his point with an analysis of the contemporary German novel *Faserland* by Christian Kracht. He shows that certain passages in the novel indicate specific author knowledge. The reader can construct this author trait from the text, but he or she can also infer that the author deviates from the narrator in certain points. If, for example, the narrator speaks excessively of clothing and brands we can presume that the author also has this knowledge. The ethical background that we share with the author, however, leads us to infer that the superficiality we attribute to the narrator in this context might not be a characteristic

of the author.<sup>[3]</sup> The reader therefore receives information about the author from the text, but also from paratexts, and contexts.

## 2. THE AUTHOR AS A SIGN

### 2.1 The conventional communication model

Jannidis' article is also an answer to an essay that claims that the narrator is not part of the text (Weimar, 1994). He is instead either a character in the story (homodiegetic narrators) or the author (heterodiegetic narrators). If the narrator is not even part of the text, the author should all the more be an entity external to the text. Is this position tenable? Let us first consider the conventional communication model as it is used in most introductory books to the analysis of literary texts. Jannidis proposes the simplified German version that has an author and a reader communicate through a text in which an implied author and an implied reader communicate with each other and a narrator and a narratee communicate with each other on the discourse level of the text. Finally, the characters in the story communicate on the story level. This communication model in its strict separation of the different levels has its deficiencies. If we understand the implied author as he is frequently understood as the overall meaning of the text, he is not somebody who communicates but something that is communicated. If we understand him as the author constructed by the reader from the text, he communicates not with an implied reader, but with real reader. A similar problem arises with the narrator, particularly when we are dealing with a covert heterodiegetic narrator that the reader has to reconstruct from the text. He is in this case not a person communicated but a sign in the text that is communicated. Before we get lost in the entanglements of an ostensibly simple model, I would like to propose to transfer the communication model into a sign model.

### 2.2. The author and narrator in a triadic sign model

If we attempt a transfer of the communication model to the sign model, Saussure's famous dyadic sign model comes to mind. The narrator could be seen as a signifier of the implied author as the overall meaning of the text. Together they could be the signifier of the real author as final signified. This would, of course, entail a total relapse not only into intentionalism but also into a structuralist perspective where a reader is not needed to determine the meaning of the text. Even if we do not agree with proclaiming the author as dead, the reader is still an important part of the process of meaning generation as Eco has shown in his studies.

A triadic model may perhaps be of more assistance to our dilemma. Let us take the semi-otic triangle as derived from Peirce's sign model with the three dimensions: representamen, object, and interpretant. Peirce defines his sign as follows:

[3] Jannidis constantly switches between author and implied author. If we understand all authors as implied authors, he adheres to the refuted ethic model by Wayne Booth that interprets the implied author as the moral intention of the text. While I do not agree with this implicit definition of the implied author, I will use the concept as defined above.

A sign or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (CP 2.228) (Peirce, 1960a)

I would like to suggest one way of using this model to take a look at our narratological components. We are dealing with a representamen in the form of specific signs of a narrator or a voice or presence in the text. Peirce distinguishes between immediate and dynamic objects. The immediate object is the object as the sign itself presents it (CP 4.536) (Peirce, 1960c). What is represented by the text as narrator (in this sense the narrator as a sign is in the text) is the immediate object in our model. Sometimes the narrator can be grasped immediately when he introduces himself as in *Moby-Dick*. At other times the voice has to be recovered from different signs in the text such as comments, changes in focalization, descriptive or reflective passages that cannot be assigned to a character in the story (Jannidis, 2002:547). The sign that is formed in the mind of the reader is the immediate interpretant or the meaning of the narrator. This interpretant generates the sign of the narrator. The text mediates between the narrator as object that is only anchored in a fictional reality and the meaning that we as readers assign to it. This means our basic triangle consists of text (narrator) representamen, immediate object (narrator as represented by the text), and immediate interpretant (narrator as understood by reader). The question remains: where is the author?

Harri Veivo writes: «Fictional texts do have a dynamic object: the writer, his or her intentions and imagination, which gave rise to the text.» (Veivo, 2001:48) Veivo immediately qualifies this assertion. Since the meaning of the text does not rest with the author, he or she cannot be the dynamic object. The author is not the dynamic object of the entire text, but of those signs pointing to the voice in the text. This author exists independently from the mind as the thoughts that created the voice in the text. He is not the physical entity of the author that we could meet on the street. The dynamic object is the thoughts of the author as they manifest themselves in the text that the reader reads as signs of a voice telling the story. Of course, the thoughts exist as independent object, but they can hardly be grasped as such. We access this author only through the immediate object which is the narrator as represented by the textual representamen. We must note that this access is very limited as we cannot know the actual thoughts of the author in any other way than through the signs he created.

On the side of the reader, the immediate interpretant is the meaning of the narrator, the first impression or the first set of possibilities we generate when we interpret the textual signs of the voice in the text. If we remember *Moby-Dick* and its narrator Ishmael who introduces himself with his name in the beginning, we follow the narrator-signs in the text. Sometimes, however, Ishmael seems to be no longer present as a logical individual. Situations are narrated at which he could not have been present yet they are told. As reader we understand that Ishmael changes his way of narrating from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic. Why can he do that? The answer lies in the implied author. There is a semiosis that allows for contradicting narrator-signs. Both the heterodiegetic and homodiegetic Ishmael are thoughts (i.e. signs) written by an author

who can be inferred from the text. The dynamic interpretant is the «actual effect» (CP 4.536) of an interpretation. The dynamic interpretant is generated when «contextual and circumstantial factors of sign interpretation and the addressee's knowledge» are taken into account (Veivo, 2001:50). Our knowledge about the entire text and our interpretation of signs that surround the narrator-signs lead us to the conclusion that there is another person involved in the narration of this story. I would like to use Booth's term implied author because it suggests a reconstruction of the textual author from the text by the reader and his context. This means that the implied author depends on the historical and cultural background of the one who generates him or her as a sign from the text. A final interpretant would probably not be possible in our model since the reader cannot know the real author.

### 3. THINKING AUTHOR AND NARRATOR TOGETHER

The narrator is a sign, the implied author is a sign, and finally the real author as his thoughts is a sign. After all, Peirce says: «Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought.» (Peirce, 1960b:189) The relationship between the immediate and dynamic interpretant as the meaning of the voice of the text depends largely on continued thought processes and interpretation of the text. Yet, we have to admit that the narrator and the implied author are also something different. The implied author knows more than the narrator, he may be more skilful, he might have a different gender or a different place in time and space.

Our way at looking at their relationship, however, shows how easily they can be conflated in the reading process. In order to keep them apart we have to think of them in a different relation. The narrator could be seen as a sign of the implied author. Again Peirce develops a triad of three functions of signs in their relation to their object. Their distinction is well known: the symbol denotes by convention, the index by cause, and the icon by similarity. If the narrator is taken as symbolic sign of the author we are indeed operating within a certain convention, such as literary studies before the idea of intentional fallacy, or the death of the author, or, in literary criticism, where the narrator is frequently identified with the author. If the narrator was an index of the author, we could understand him like a footprint which the author has left in the text because he was telling a story but could not be present himself.

I would suggest, however, that we might understand the narrator as an icon of the author. If we recall Eco's fundamental critique on icons, we know that an icon can never represent the real object in its entirety. (Eco, 2002:197ff). Just as picture of beer can never be the real beer, the narrator is never the real author. Only certain characteristics are transferred to the narrator. Jannidis points out that parts of the implied author's knowledge are transferred to the narrator as well as the arrangement of the story. Each iconic relationship between narrator and implied author differs. At times, more details are transferred than at others: attitude, style, gender, age, character. The reader does not exist in a vacuum. He often possesses knowledge about the author as the person who actually wrote the text. Information on this dynamic author is often involuntarily added to the semiosis. If we know that Melville went to sea and the narrator Ishmael goes to sea, and if the passages that are apparently not narrated by the designated narrator Ishmael are also about the sea, we can safely assume that knowledge about

the sea is something that is transferred from the author to the narrator-sign. Each fact has to be tested carefully against the text before it can be assumed to be part of the iconic narrator sign. To simply conflate narrator and implied author (or worse narrator and author) would not only be a case of intentional fallacy, it would mean that there are genuine icons. Peirce gives an illustrative example: to think that a picture is the real object is to understand the icon as being the object (CP 3.362). As Eco has shown, there are no genuine icons. Iconicity is always determined by means of selection and convention. To understand the narrator as the author would simply be a case of failed semiosis. Yet to ignore their partial similarities would equally be a case of failed semiosis.

## REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. & Heath, S. (1977): *Image, music, text*, New York, Hill and Wang.
- Bein, T. (1999): Zum 'Autor' im mittelalterlichen Literaturbetrieb und im Diskurs der germanistischen Mediävistik. In Jannidis, F., Lauer, G., Martinez, M. & Winko, S. (Eds.) *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.
- Bennett, A. (2005): *The Author*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Burke, S. (1995): *Authorship: from Plato to the postmodern; a reader*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Univ. Press.
- Detering, H. (Ed.) (2002): *Autorschaft : Positionen und Revisionen*, Stuttgart u.a., Metzler.
- Eco, U. (2002): *Einführung in die Semiotik*, München, Fink.
- Foucault, M. (2003): *Schriften zur Literatur*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- Jannidis, F. (2002): Zwischen Autor und Erzähler. In Detering, H. (Ed.) *Autorschaft. Positionen und Revisionen*. Stuttgart and Weimar, Metzler.
- Jannidis, F., Lauer, G., Martinez, M. & Winko, S. (1999a): Rede über den Autor an die Gebildeten unter seinen Verächtern. Historische Modelle und systematische Perspektiven. In Jannidis, F., Lauer, G., Martinez, M. & Winko, S. (Eds.) *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.
- (1999b): Rede über den Autor an die Gebildeten unter seinen Verächtern. Historische Modelle und systematische Perspektiven. In Jannidis, F., Lauer, G., Martinez, M. & Winko, S. (Eds.) *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.
- Peirce, C. S. (1960a): *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. Elements of Logic*, Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- (1960b): *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. Pragmatism and Pragmaticism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- (1960c): *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. The simplest Mathematics*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Veivo, H. (2001): *The Written Space*, Helsinki, Yliopistopaino.
- Weimar, K. (1994): Wo und was ist der Erzähler? *MLN*, 109, 495-506.
- Winko, S. (1999): Einführung: Autor und Intention. In Jannidis, F., Lauer, G., Martinez, M. & Winko, S. (Eds.) *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.