

# The Paraleptic Effect

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*This article examines the alleged narratological paradox of paralepsis. It is argued that the first-person narrators of Moby-Dick, À la recherche du temps perdu and The Great Gatsby (to name but three prominent examples) occasionally display an inexplicable awareness of facts that would be naturally inaccessible to them (knowledge of other people's thoughts, minute familiarity with unwitnessed events, etc.). Paralepsis, as Genette calls it, can be defined as the class of situations in which a first-person narrator seems to exercise the impossible epistemic privilege. This paper argues against the existence of genuine paraleptic events on two levels. First, it is argued that this kind of narration is rarely epistemically paradoxical. Even some of the strongest candidates for paralepsis could be naturalized (the reader can detect possible natural ways in which the narrator might have obtained the seemingly impossible information). Second, even in cases where they cannot be convincingly naturalized, 'paralepses' need not be mysterious. It is often possible to read them (as P. Dawson has done) as "authorial performances." They can be explained as instances of a specific rhetorical procedure that we have termed raconteurial narration: a mode of narration in which, for the sake of more convincing exposition, mere conjectures are offered without the usual modal phrases that indicate the speculative quality of such assertions and thus create the erroneous impression of uncanny narrative knowledge.*

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## **"Inexplicable" narratorial knowledge**

Chapter 37 of Melville's *Moby-Dick* contains Ahab's famous *madness maddened* soliloquy. Alone in his chamber, restlessly pacing to and fro, the captain of the Pequod is given to the charged rhetorical ostentations and theatrical hand gestures, affronting his own "grim, phantom futures" (Melville 164), solemnly vowing to take revenge on the white whale that bit off his leg: "I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were." (161–162) The vitriolic

soliloquy goes on through much of the chapter. However, we get the impression that something is substantially wrong with the scene the moment we are reminded that the novel itself and, consequently, this episode portraying Ahab's unattended gestures and musings uttered in the private "sacred retreat of his cabin" (118), are narrated in the first-person, by "one Ishmael" (5). Ishmael, "a simple sailor" (3) devoid of "preternatural power[s]" (119), is somehow made privy to "all the subtle demonisms of [Ahab's] life and thought" (177). Vividly and in much detail, he describes the behavior he apparently couldn't have witnessed. Here and in a few other places in the novel, Ishmael seems to authoritatively offer information he "could not [...] possess if [he] functioned exactly like [an ordinary] human being" (Alber, Skov Nielsen and Richardson 363).

*Moby-Dick* is far from being an isolated example of this "impossible kind of telling" (Petterson 76). For instance, the crucial scene in the eighth chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, the private late-night conversation between Michaelis and Wilson, is narrated by Nick Carraway. Without witnessing the actual event, Nick, as James Phelan has noted, conveys not just the general outline of this private conversation he could have been easily familiarized with (by hearing of it directly from Michaelis) but describes various details that are far too nuanced to be part of any subsequently obtained summary of the event.<sup>1</sup> It appears that Nick, a first-person witness narrator, has somehow usurped the unattainable epistemic privilege of the ubiquitous third-person surveyor. Such a procedure is bound to strike us as an "outrageous 'transgression' of the norms of realistic storytelling" (Pennacchio 24).

However, what is perhaps the most radical example of a narrator exhibiting the unaccountable "excess of knowledge" (Dawson 196) can be traced back to the famous scene of Bergotte's death in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It was Gérard Genette who drew the general attention to what he saw as the straightforward impossibility of the episode. Marcel, the narrator of the novel, while describing the death

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<sup>1</sup> Nick's description of the scene contains the "verbatim reports" (Phelan 107) of various unsubstantial conversational turns: "How long have you been married, George? Come on there, try and sit still a minute, and answer my question. [...] Come on, George, sit still—I asked you a question." (Fitzgerald 100) Nick's acute awareness of the surroundings is strangely evocative, not of a person reporting subsequently obtained pieces of information, but of the third-person narrator attentively surveying the scene: "The hard brown beetles kept thudding against the dull light, and whenever Michaelis heard a car [...] it sounded to him like the car that hadn't stopped a few hours before." (100)

of a writer he admires, suddenly offers a strange record of his final thoughts. The narrator appears to demonstrate the impossible “psychological penetration” (Edmiston 729) as he recovers in a puzzling protocol the unrecoverable content of a dying man’s mind, thus exercising the knowledge that remains “irreducible by any hypothesis to the narrator’s information, one we must indeed attribute to the ‘omniscient’ novelist” (Genette 208). Genette uses the term *paralepsis*<sup>2</sup> to describe this class of narratorial situations in which information provided by the first-person narrator “exceeds his [cognitive] capacities” (Genette 205). These “paraleptic infractions” (Dawson 201) are troubling since they seem to point out the fact that some of the most influential novels (like *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, or *À la recherche du temps perdu*) are built upon paradoxical narratorial inconsistencies.

Nonetheless, someone could reasonably argue that there is no need to overelaborate these fictional occurrences. The most suitable reaction to a first-person narrator conveying pieces of information he cannot possess would be to assume that he is simply lying. The fact that people (be they real or fictional) are capable of asserting outrageous claims hardly seems to constitute a riveting theoretical enigma. To describe such instances as epistemically puzzling appears to be unnecessarily extravagant. However, one could answer to this commonsensical objection that even a lie has to have some epistemic foundation. For example, when a witness commits perjury by claiming that the accused didn’t pull the trigger, such an assertion (though untruthful) is still based on some epistemic foundation (e.g., the assumption that the person testifying was a witness or is somehow familiar with the crime). But what happens when someone authoritatively describes the minutiae of a crime without providing any basis for his claims? Paralepses are troubling because they do not quite follow the *logic* of lying. We would be bewildered by someone “authoritatively” and “sincerely” claiming something that is neither epistemically justified nor styled as a mere conjecture. What does such a person want to achieve with such strange assertions? Something more than the supposition of narratorial dishonesty is needed to explain the paraleptic breach.

It seems that three necessary conditions must be met for any narratorial information to be deemed truly *paraleptic*. Paralepses are the class of narrative situations in which (1) a *first-person* narrator

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<sup>2</sup> “[W]e will christen [this type of alteration] *paralepsis*, since here we are [...] dealing [...] with taking up (-lepsis, from *lambano*) and giving information that should be left aside.” (Genette 195)

exercises (2) *impossible* (3) *epistemic* privilege. When confronted with a paradoxical situation, the reader will usually try to neutralize it. As Dawson puts it, “the theory of *paralepsis* functions as an interpretive vacuum, in which critics feel compelled to furnish an explanation for a character narrator’s impossible [...] knowledge” (Dawson 199). Thus, when faced with narratorial information that seems *paraleptic*, we can attempt to dissolve the *paraleptic* effect (the sense of the straightforward impossibility of the narrator’s knowledge of the event) by arguing that one of the conditions from the abovementioned definition is not actually satisfied. In other words, one could try to claim that (1) a conveyer of “*paraleptic*” information is not, in fact, a first-person narrator, or that (2) the narrator’s possession of seemingly *paraleptic* information is possible under some previously unconsidered scenarios that an honest reading of the text allows for, or that (3) the narrator’s “*paraleptic*” renditions are not genuine pieces of information (i.e., they are devoid of epistemic ambition and value), but merely represent (for example) rhetorical exercises. In the following, we’ll try to evaluate how each of these strategies works in the cases of the three canonical instances of *paralepsis* (from *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *À la recherche du temps perdu*).

### The “another voice” hypothesis

It is possible to speak of *paralepsis* only “if we still think of the first person as a narrator responsible for all words in the narrative” (Alber, Skov Nielsen and Richardson 363). We are generally untroubled by the extent of knowledge of third-person narrators since we assume that epistemic justification (“How do they know the information they convey?”) is already “inscribed” in the act of such narration. Third-person narrators seem to know things by the very convention of storytelling. The *paraleptic* effect would dissipate, the argument goes, if “we [...] posit a [third-person] voice of the narrative” (Skov Nielsen 132) whenever “substantial and extensive information is relayed which the I-narrator cannot possibly know” (Heinze 288). In such a scenario, the first-person narrators would occasionally share the narratorial authority with some covert third-person presence. For example, there is no reason to insist that Ishmael is the one describing Ahab’s private behavior in chapter 37 of *Moby-Dick* if we can attribute this rendition to some clandestine third-person narrator that occasionally intrudes on Ishmael’s witness accounts and seizes control over the

narrative. Pennacchio has argued that such unannounced shifts to the third-person narratorial perspective are not uncommon in various cinematic narratives. There is a plethora of examples of the character's narration existing simultaneously with segments that are "inconsistent with [the I-narrator's] knowledge" (Pennacchio 35). For instance, in Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot*, the protagonist is also the witness-narrator, leading us through his experiences (he begins his account by addressing an imaginary, ideal listener with "Hello friend"). However, there are still numerous scenes in the series that can hardly be part of the main character's witness narration since he could not have the direct experience of these events (for example, the murder of his childhood friend, Angela, is minutely portrayed although he was not at the scene). Pennacchio offers a similar example from Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective* (35). We are generally untroubled by the presence of this additional narratorial perspective. It seems that one could easily argue that "for narratives like *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*, this [explanation] works beautifully" (Heinze 288).

However, it is necessary to point out one specific problem: the "another voice" hypothesis works much more beautifully in (what can be termed) the *mediated* first-person narratives than in the *non-mediated* ones. For example, Benjy's chapter in *The Sound and the Fury* is obviously mediated. He is the narrator, but he is not the one recording the narration. Benjy's thoughts and words seem to be "mysteriously caught and transcribed" (Genette 230) by some "spirit of storytelling" (Skov Nielsen 138). Since the narrators like Benjy (or Quentin and Jason Compson) are not writers, the possibility of their narration depends on the existence of another "semi-omniscient," third-person agency that is covertly present in such narratives. Since the mediated renditions are not characterized by the strict unity of narration, the potential intrusion of "another voice" would not be particularly troubling.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Benjy, the narrators of *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *À la recherche du temps perdu* are *authorial*, writerly personae aiming at total control over their stories. Ishamel explicitly refers to himself as "the writer hereof" (Melville 200) and describes his narration as "an ever gathering volume" (173). Nick Carraway self-identifies as the writer of "this book" (Fitzgerald 3), continuously rereading "over what [he has] written so far" (37). Similarly, Proust's Marcel refers to

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<sup>3</sup> This seems to be the case in the fourth chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*, where the hitherto latent semi-omniscient teller completely takes hold of the narration.

himself on numerous occasions as the author of “this book” (Proust 1878, 2132, 2408, 2661). They are not merely minds conveying thoughts, voices among other voices, but writers producing and organizing authorial texts.<sup>4</sup>

There is explicit self-centredness to such written, controlled autobiographical narratives that would make a potential interference of another disembodied narratorial voice in such texts a striking incongruity. To postulate, nevertheless, some such phantom agency that occasionally wrestles authority away from these writer-narrators would strike us as a suspiciously *ad hoc* procedure of unwarrantedly “multiply[ing] possible agents” (Dawson 196) and thus violating the principle of parsimony. Two solutions still remain: either there is some implicit explanation in the texts for the “overreaching” claims of these narrators, or they are, for some reason, merely acting out the third-person (semi-omniscient) perspective.

### **“(Un)natural” explanations of uncanny narratorial knowledge**

One way to subdue the paralectic effect would be to argue that although the first-person narrator’s seemingly impossible “range of insight” (Skov Nielsen 139) is left unjustified, it could nevertheless be implicitly “justifiable” (Edmiston 740). That is, there may still be some unstated but possible scenario that would explain the narrator’s “inexplicable” knowledge. These implicit explanations of the seemingly paralectic narratorial information could be divided into two main types: they can be either (a) “unnatural”<sup>5</sup> or (b) “natural.”

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<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on Proust’s Marcel (and the same holds for Ishmael and Nick Carraway), Genette observes that he functions “as source, guarantor, and organizer of the narrative, as analyst and commentator, as stylist (as ‘writer’)” (167).

<sup>5</sup> This term has recently gained new currency due to the emergence of the so-called “unnatural narratology,” a relatively new field exclusively dealing with non-realistic/anti-mimetic fiction. “Unnatural” (a somewhat controversial term with a moralistic cadence) is now broadly used to describe any storyworld whose “laws and encyclopedias [...] differ significantly from those operating in the real world” (Von Contzen 14). In this respect, narrators who are non-human or have non-human faculties (such as cognitive or sensory superpowers) are described (for better or worse) as “unnatural.” We will use the term in this general sense.

**(A) “Unnatural” Scenarios**

One way to avoid the paradox would be to argue that paraleptic claims are the products of some “unnatural mind” (Dawson 200). If the narrator is a ghost or a deity, the paraleptic effect will not occur since it seems that the knowledge of such narrators is already justified by their “unnaturally” privileged position. If we assume, the argument runs, that Ishmael or Marcel are unnaturally gifted (for example) with telepathy (that is, that they are not ordinary human narrators), the paraleptic effect will disappear. “The more the narrator appears non-human, the fewer the logical inconsistencies in combining *paralepsis* and *experientiality*.” (Heinze 283)

However, to brush aside the paraleptic effect by attributing “unnatural” qualities to the narrator’s mind seems to be unsatisfying since, as Heinze notes, “nothing suggests” (281) that narrators like Ishmael (or Nick and Marcel, for that matter) have extraordinary, super-human abilities. On the contrary, there are various textual clues suggesting the opposite. For example, Ishmael often exhibits natural human doubts and uncertainties “touching Ahab’s deeper parts” (Melville 453). He regularly engages in speculation: “It were perhaps vain to surmise exactly why it was that [...] Ahab thus acted. It may have been [this] or [that].” (464) Regarding other people’s actions, he frequently “opine[s]” and “surmise[s]” (399). He’s fully aware of his natural cognitive restrictions: “[A]ll this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go.” (180) This also seems to be the case with Marcel and Nick.<sup>6</sup>

The main problem with this strategy is that the sense of inconsistency cannot be eliminated by any general supposition about the *unnaturalness* of the storyworld or the narrator’s mind. Even if we were to suppose that Ishmael has the gift of clairvoyance or something of the sort, the inconsistency would still remain. In that case, Ishmael’s natural human limitations and uncertainties concerning other people’s minds would suddenly become inexplicable. We would be merely shifting focus. *Paralepsis* seems to be an essentially insular phenomenon.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Marcel seems unaware of various realities a mind-reading narrator would be conscious of. Thus, he is initially uncertain whether Albertine knew Léa (see Proust 1944). Also, he cannot easily read the enigmatic “gaze” (Proust 684) of Baron de Charlus as denoting his homosexuality. He eventually becomes aware of these facts, but only through the natural process of behavioristic inferences, gossip, etc. Nick Carraway also displays natural cognitive limitations: the precise way some events have happened “eludes [him]” (Fitzgerald 80), his understanding of other people’s intentions is gradual, etc.

It is always “local.” Heinze’s distinction between *global* and *local* paralepses<sup>7</sup> thus appears unnecessary. For instance, the narrator of Sebold’s *Lovely Bones*, to offer Heinze’s example for “global” paralepsis, is a dead girl who knows more than an ordinary human being can. But this would not be an example of paralepsis since there is a manifest “unnatural” explanation for the narrator’s extensive knowledge. She is speaking from a vantage point of heaven where she is provided with special insights (her very narratorial position is “supernatural”). Paralepses are not simply phenomena that are inconsistent with the way things are in the actual world. It is not merely an “unnatural” way of telling but the seemingly inexplicable way of knowing that generates the paraleptic effect.

### (B) “Natural” Scenarios

Another way to deal with the paraleptic effect would be to argue that, on closer inspection, the text allows for “natural, realistic sources of the character narrator’s unusual knowledge” (Heinze 285). Though unstated, there still may be some “natural” explanation for extraordinary narratorial information. This strategy seems promising in substantially dissipating the paraleptic effect in the cases of the three notable examples from *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Let us start with *Moby-Dick*. The most puzzling, paraleptic feature of Ishmael’s narration, Alber et al. claim, is that his narrative occasionally “provides extended access to the thoughts of other characters” (Melville 361). However, this is *sensu stricto* inaccurate. Nowhere in the novel does Ishmael report the un verbalized, intrinsically private mental states of others. There are some cases where Ishmael *seems* to penetrate the “impenetrable Japans” (471) of other minds. For instance, in chapter 41, Ishmael observes that “in his heart, Ahab had some glimpse of this, namely: all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad” (179). But this is far from being an example of some mystifying paraleptic knowledge. He is merely reconstructing Ahab’s inner life from various behavioral hints: from his “glaring eyes” (194) and from the general familiarity with his goals and obsessions. Ishmael here acts as a “Champollion [deciphering] the Egypt of [Ahab’s] face” (339). If

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<sup>7</sup> Heinze uses the phrase “global paralepsis” for the situations in which “the entire narration is non-natural” (e.g., the narrator himself is a non-human entity), while “local paralepsis” refers to cases where an ordinary human narrator within a “natural” storyworld offers information he cannot naturally possess (Heinze 286).



someone were to say to us, “I know that he secretly loves her, even though he doesn’t show it,” we wouldn’t normally suppose that such a person is thereby declaring some inexplicable familiarity with exclusively private thoughts of an unapproachable Cartesian mind hidden behind the poker face façade. Various subtle behavioral indiscretions can betray us to a perceptive observer. We make behavioristic inferences and more or less grounded guesses about the minds of others all the time.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the striking feature of *Moby-Dick* seems to be the unusual cognitive extroversion of the characters. The novel is almost suspiciously scarce in entirely private events. Like actors soliloquizing on stage, the characters almost always verbalize their thoughts, feelings, and even streams of consciousness in audible utterances.<sup>9</sup> This is also the case with Ahab’s soliloquy in chapter 37. When something is spoken and not merely thought about in the solitude of one’s room, we cannot speak of absolute, “bulletproof” privacy. Everything uttered on a ship full of people can be known by others, in one way or another: “In thy most solitary hours, then, dost thou not fear eavesdroppers?” (Melville 460)

So, how could Ishmael be aware of Ahab’s private soliloquy (and even his accompanying hand gestures) in chapter 37? We know that the door of Ahab’s cabin is “a thin one” (Melville 503); so thin in fact that, on one occasion, Starbucks could hear him from the outside “muttering

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<sup>8</sup> Heinze seems to regard the narration in Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* as yet another example of the paraleptic telling, for the narrator “claims to ‘suddenly . . . know’ what he has no access to” (Heinze 280). But on closer inspection, it seems that nothing uncanny is taking place in the passage Heinze is referring to. The seemingly paraleptic scene could be easily “naturalized” as an inference from the knowledge of one’s routine and behavior. Here is the “controversial” excerpt: “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. For all good soldiers are sentimentalists—all good soldiers of that type.” (Ford 54) The narrator does not actually claim the possession of some inexplicable insight about the contents of private conversations between Captain Edward Ashburnham and his wife but merely offers an inferential reconstruction based on two “natural” sources: his intimate familiarity with Ashburnhams over many years and his general knowledge about the people of Ashburnham’s type.

<sup>9</sup> In chapter 29, to offer just one example, after the late-night confrontation with Ahab, Stubb is heading back to his room engaged with the following thoughts: “I was never served so before without giving a hard blow for it, muttered Stubb. [...] I don’t well know whether to go back and strike him, or [...] down here on my knees and pray for him?” (Melville 123) His thoughts are not invested with absolute mental privacy since he is “muttering” them, and thus they can be overheard. This propensity to speak one’s stream of consciousness seems to be a common occurrence in the novel.

in his sleep” (503). Furthermore, his door had “blinds inserted, in place of upper panels” (503), enabling thus some indelicate observer to peek inside. And Ishmael himself seems to be inclined toward voyeuristic behavior. In chapter 34, he observes Ahab presiding “over his own private dinner table” (144) by peeping “through the cabin sky-light” (145). For every seemingly paralectic information offered by Ishmael, we can uncover a “natural” explanation rendering it possible. There seem to be no real paraleses in *Moby-Dick* (if they are the cases of fully inexplicable narratorial knowledge). The possibility of some “natural” explanation of the narratorial information (however far-fetched) is always left open in Ishmael’s narration.

The same seems to be true in the case of *The Great Gatsby*. Not a single piece of information Nick Carraway reports is *sensu stricto* unavailable to him. When he describes the unwitnessed dialogue between Michaelis and Wilson in a strangely intricate manner, he could be merely reproducing Michaelis’ over-elaborated testimony after Gatsby’s murder and Wilson’s suicide. Anything witnessed by someone, no matter how insignificant or trivial, could circulate as information. Phelan is right when he suggests that, in the case of *The Great Gatsby*, there is no violation of “the conventions of mimesis” (Phelan 110). There is a “natural” explanation for Nick’s narratorial information. Thus, it is not, properly speaking, paralectic.

But how to account for what is perhaps the strongest exemplar of paralectic narration: namely, Marcel’s report of Bergotte’s final thoughts in *À la recherche du temps perdu*? Genette argues that the scene “present[s] a physical impossibility,” the narratorial information that (unlike Carraway’s rendition of the Wilson-Michaelis exchange) could not “in point of fact have been reported to Marcel since no one—for a very good reason—could have knowledge of [it]” (Genette 208). Marcel’s familiarity with Bergotte’s “deathbed” thoughts seems utterly inexplicable. To use Genette’s phrasing, this is “one paraleipsis to end all paraleses” (208).

But even here, in this “impossible” rendition, there seems to be some mimetic, “natural” way out, however narrow it may appear. Bergotte dies not in the private enclosure of his chamber but in a public venue, surrounded by people, while attending an exhibition of Dutch painting. Before being struck with apoplexy, he attentively observes Vermeer’s *View of Delft*. “‘That is how I ought to have written,’ he said [disait-il]” (Proust 1974). A verb denoting utterance, not merely inner thoughts (*dire*; to say, to tell), is employed here to describe Bergotte’s final cognitive engagement. “‘All the same,’ he said to himself [se disait-

il]. [...] While doing so, he sank down upon a circular divan [...] and [...] told himself [se dit]: ‘It is just an ordinary indigestion.’ [...] Visitors and attendants came hurrying to his assistance. He was dead.” (Proust 1975) Thus, the sense of utter privacy is dissolved. Whatever is whispered, grimaced, murmured, said (as to oneself) in a room full of “visitors and attendants” can become an object of gossipy disseminations, of “so many indiscretions” that are typical for “Proustian universe” (Genette 207).

Almost any seemingly paraleptic occurrence can be “naturalized” in one way or another. To conceive an utterly private event that cannot be possibly known to others seems harder than one would initially suppose since “the boundary between perceptual possibility and impossibility is often nebulous” (Edmiston 740). If we describe *paralepsis* in strong terms of epistemic impossibility and inexplicability (and this was the common way to define it<sup>10</sup>), then all these well-known examples of *paralepsis* would not be, strictly speaking, *paraleptic*. If there is (even a weak) explanation or justification for the narrator’s puzzling knowledge, there is no reason to speak of epistemic paradox. The weak justification would only constitute a case for narratorial unreliability (which is not paradoxical).<sup>11</sup>

## Raconteural narration

Even when *paralepsis* (as the epistemic paradox) is dissolved, its effect may still linger. These narratorial situations seem (still) to be somewhat troubling, not so much for *epistemic* reasons (“How could these narrators possibly know the *impossible* information they convey?”) but primarily for *rhetorical* ones (“Why do they convey the information in such a strange manner?”). It was never an exclusively epistemic issue

<sup>10</sup> Edmiston, for example, describes *paralepsis* as the “type of infraction in which the narrating self says more than he could possibly know” (Edmiston 741). Similarly, Nünlist and de Jong define it in terms of epistemic impossibility, as the situation in which the narrator “know[s] more than he properly can” (Nünlist and de Jong 170). Caroline Rody characterizes *paralepsis* as “impossible” and “logically infeasible” information (qtd. in Dawson 215).

<sup>11</sup> Some narrative situations could be described as *ersatz* *paralepses*. Such seemingly overreaching claims are not really *paraleptic* (although they appear to be) because they are explicitly devoid of epistemic value. They are not information but imagination. For example, the narrator of Moody’s *The Ice Storm* seems to be familiar with other people’s thoughts, only to admit later on, as Dawson notes, that he’s only “the imaginer of all these consciousnesses” (Dawson 206).

to begin with. We are not perplexed so much by the possibility of, e.g., Nick Carraway's indirect knowledge of various subtle (even minuscule) details of the conversation between Wilson and Michaelis (for there are conceivable "natural" ways for Nick to know them). What troubles us in his narration is the surprising "reduction of speech to event" (Genette 170). Namely, the sense of anomaly is raised not by information *per se*, but by its strange rendition that suggests direct, "point-blank" observation (when the possibility of such observation is often explicitly excluded). The problem is that "paraleptic" narrators offer descriptions that are frequently styled neither as mere speculations nor as accounts based on the (elaborated) testimonies of others but function as direct, confident, momentary eye-witness experiences. Paul Dawson has offered an influential explanation for this procedure: what was termed *paralepsis* is "best understood not as a quality of [...] narratorial knowledge, but as a specific rhetorical performance of narrative authority" (Dawson 212).

What does this mean? Narrators such as Ishmael, Nick, or Marcel are not "fictional autobiographers" (Pennacchio 24): they are, as Pennacchio observes drawing upon Dawson, "authors" using "the novel [not the autobiography] as the model genre for the act of telling" (32). Simply put, they are not so much reporting events as "creating a story" (32).<sup>12</sup> So, the question of knowledge is otiose here. Ultimately, *paralepsis* is "the artifice of fiction" (Dawson 210), the name for the class of situations in which the narrator, caught up in the act of telling, assumes a certain novelistic persona that allows him to *move beyond* his actual experiences. The narrator's conjectures, dim guesses, and vague hints of events are designed as direct, confident telling for the sake of narrative dynamics, vividness, and persuasiveness.

It seems that this "novelistic" perspective enables the narrator to offer stability to his often-fragmented experiences, to endow them with a stable "genre identity." To make a coherent (auto)biography (in which events are interconnected) often means to produce a story about oneself, to fictionalize one's experiences to some degree in order

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<sup>12</sup> This explanation works especially well in the cases of *Moby-Dick* and *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In Proust's novel, as Morton P. Levitt notes, "Marcel's presumed autobiography turns inevitably—for Marcel is above all an artist—into a fiction" (qtd. in Dawson 197). Similarly in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael compares himself to Cervantes and his narratorial technique to that of a novelist: "If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; [...] bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! [...] Thou who didst clothe with doubly hammered leaves of finest gold, the stumped and paupered arm of old Cervantes." (Melville 113)

to make human life “more readable (*lisible*)” (Ricoeur 73). This is the point famously made by Ricoeur: to present one’s life as a tight-knit sequence of events (as a meaningful narrative) is to construct “the sort of dynamic identity proper to the plot” (77). The events of “my life” thus become the story I tell to myself or others, a story that borrows from the stable genre of the classic novel in which every event contributes to some final denouement. This “interconnectedness of life” (77) is rarely the case outside the fiction for, as Käte Hamburger notes, “[r]eality itself merely is. It does not mean. Only the non-real has the power to convert the real into sense, into meaning” (Hamburger 231). Thus, in the case of *Moby-Dick*, it comes as no surprise that Ishmael, the narrator, borrows from various genres of fiction in order to create “the durable character of an individual” (Ricoeur 77), particularly of Ahab. What is, for example, Ahab’s melancholic address to the decapitated head of a whale in chapter 70 but an evocation of Hamlet’s “Alas, poor Yorick” speech, a peculiar Shakespearian pastiche, a narratorial strategy of endowing Ahab’s actions with the identity of revenge tragedy? To ask whether this address is an authentic, mimetic report of an actual event witnessed by Ishmael thus seems to be meritless.

Furthermore, what is termed “paralepsis” is nothing but a rhetorical procedure often employed not only in novelistic storytelling but also in various conversational situations. While retelling an event, a particularly dynamic and charged interlocutor (a speaker usually described as *a raconteur*) will sometimes add various details to the story for the narrative effect. For example, he will render non-dialogic bits of information in the form of imagined, artificial dialogue (this often happens when one is recounting events in an *anecdotal* manner) in order to achieve dramatic or comic impact or even suspense.<sup>13</sup> This procedure, which we can (for the present purposes) term *raconteurial narration*,

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<sup>13</sup> This is something that Ishmael does, e.g., in chapter 90, when he recounts an incident, presumably known to him from the newspapers or some such instance, of some mariners of Dover who, having caught a whale, were forced to surrender it to the Lord Warden. Ishmael anecdotally renders the episode through imaginary, made-up dialogue between the sailors and the Lord Warden’s representative: “Hands off! This fish, my masters, is a Fast-Fish. I seize it as the Lord Warden’s.’ Upon this the poor mariners [...] knowing not what to say, fall to vigorously scratching their heads all round. [...] At length one of them [...] made bold to speak, ‘Please, sir, who is the Lord Warden?’ ‘The Duke.’ ‘But the duke had nothing to do with taking this fish?’ ‘It is his.’” (Melville 389) This is merely a specimen of Ishmael’s *raconteurship* that no reader or listener is troubled with. Nothing is puzzling here. He is simply translating general information into the dynamic form of imaginary dialogue in order to achieve a more captivating effect on his listeners.

is often used, as a rhetorical strategy, in vivid and engaging forms of telling, not only in novels but also in sermons,<sup>14</sup> historiographical renditions, comedies, etc. Such a procedure (of enhancing the rendition of events with imagined dialogues and soliloquies) is never, in the strict sense, troubling to the readers. We recognize it for what it is.<sup>15</sup> Engaging and compelling storytellers (and such are Ishmael, Marcel, and Nick) will often resort to this rhetorical strategy. In such cases, we usually accept the focal part of the narration as authentic, without subscribing to the literal veracity of all the dialogic details. We usually read Ahab's soliloquies in *Moby-Dick* as conveying something true about his "monomaniacal" personality without simultaneously assuming that they are perplexing *verbatim* renditions of Ahab's utterances preserved in Ishmael's hyperthymestic memory. That is, these are raconteurial reconstructions roughly based on the data Ishmael could have gathered in some "natural" way. To treat them as literal reports that are to be taken at face value would amount to misunderstanding an easily identifiable rhetorical procedure that is an integral part of almost all captivating narrations (in fiction or otherwise).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> In *Moby-Dick*, Fr. Mapple retells the biblical story of Jonah by "inventing dialogue" in which, "in anachronistically everyday terms" (Gallagher 14), mariners from ancient Joppa whisper to one another: "'Jack, he's robbed a widow;' or 'Joe, do you mark him; he's a bigamist;' or, 'Harry lad, I guess he's the adulterer that broke jail in old Gomorrah, or belike, one of the missing murderers from Sodom.'" (Melville 42) We are not troubled by the extent of Fr. Mapple's rendition of an unwitnessed event, for we are aware that his sermon offers just a rhetorical simulation of dialogue for the sake of more engaging storytelling.

<sup>15</sup> Phelan is right when he claims that "most readers do not even register" parables as "anomalous" (Phelan 109). We almost intuitively identify it as the rhetorical exercise of raconteurial narration. Nick, e.g., is offering the information (he could easily possess) cloaked in the form of artificial dialogue and presumed ambiance for the sake of narrative effect.

<sup>16</sup> Ishmael occasionally asserts that some of his accounts are to be taken as literally true. However, there is often a certain ludicrous quality to such claims. In chapter 54, to offer just one example, while telling the Town-Ho story to his comrades in Lima, Ishmael melodramatically asks for the "largest sized" Gospel to be procured with a "venerable priest" (Melville 252) so that he can solemnly make a sworn oath. The reader can easily recognize fictional devices Ishmael employs in constructing his renditions of events (like the Shakespearian pastiche, dramatic dialogic exchanges, revenge tragedy *topoi*, etc.), but at the same time, Ishmael resorts to the affirmations of literal, "documentary" truth in his narration. However, this procedure is not genuinely puzzling since it could be claimed that, in fictional discourse, such affirmations of the story's veracity are frequently just another "signpost" of fictionalization, "that is, the narrative device that [ironically] suggests the fictionality of the text" (Bell and Ryan 16). One can recall (for example) Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*, in which the fictional

## Conclusion

What Genette termed “paralepsis” was usually defined as the narratological paradox of the first person narrator “disclosing knowledge [he] could not possess” (Alber, Skov Nielsen and Richardson 363). If we take “N” to denote the “narrator” and “C” any “character” of the novel,<sup>17</sup> the paradox can be expressed in the following form:

$$(N > C) \wedge (N = C).$$

The conjunctive proposition asserts something contradictory: the narrator (N) knows more than any character of the novel (C) could know<sup>18</sup> and, simultaneously, the narrator is one of the characters. The narrator of *Moby-Dick* (and this is, *mutatis mutandis*, also true of *The Great Gatsby*, and *À la recherche du temps perdu*) occasionally seems to know more than is strictly possible for any of the characters to know (e.g., various unwitnessed private events, thoughts of others, discreet soliloquies, etc.) and, at the same time, we know that the narrator is Ishmael, “one of the crew” (Melville, 172). The problem is that if the propositions “N > C” and “N = C” are both true, the contradictory conclusion will necessarily ensue: “N > N.” The standard way of dismantling this contradiction would be to argue that, in the case of any particular “paraleptic” situation, either “N > C” or “N = C” is not actually realized.

(1) What we have termed *another voice hypothesis* is a strategy of attacking “N = C.” If we somehow assume that “N ≠ C” is true, the paradox will evaporate. Perhaps, Ishmael is not the sole narrator, and there could very well be another (semi)omniscient third-person narratorial presence (which cannot be identified with any of the characters) narrating some sections of the novel. However, this is, as we have argued, a weak solution to the paradox in the cases of the three novels we are dealing with, since the narrators like Ishmael, Marcel, and Nick Carraway are not merely conveyors of events, but authors exercising writerly authority. To suppose that there is some clandestine narratorial voice intruding on these controlled, authorial written testimonies would strike us as a clear-cut narrative incongruity and unwarranted multiplication of narratorial agents.

(2) On the other hand, there seem to be two ways of arguing against the proposition “N > C” in these three particular “paraleptic” scenarios.

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author-historian Diedrich Knickerbocker, while presenting the readers with an incredible story about supernatural events, provides the alleged sworn court testimonies and pledges of authenticity.

<sup>17</sup> A somewhat similar notation was employed in Edmiston 741.

<sup>18</sup> This is usually the case with the third-person narrators.

(2.1) One would be to claim that “N>C” does not stand if the character-narrator is somehow “unnaturally” gifted. For example, if we assume that Marcel is clairvoyant, his knowledge of Bergotte’s final thoughts would not be epistemically paradoxical. This strategy could be termed *the “unnatural” explanation*. However, the text itself does not provide sufficient grounds for such an extravagant supposition, and this kind of explanation would merely be the evasion of the problem. If Marcel is a telepathic narrator, then his “natural” human doubts regarding other people’s intentions would suddenly become puzzling and in need of explanation.

(2.2) A more promising way of refuting the clause “N>C” would be to argue that, on closer inspection, N claims nothing that C cannot “naturally” know. That is, there is a possible *implicit “natural” explanation* for any “paraleptic” piece of information the narrator offers. If there is some (however unlikely, but still possible) way for C to know something, we can no longer speak of epistemic *impossibility*. We have argued that the line dividing private mental contents and observable behavior is not as clear and well-charted as it may initially appear. Even without telepathic abilities, what is *possible* to know about others (through eavesdropping, unintentional behavioral disclosures, through other people’s elaborated witness accounts, etc.) is highly “elastic” (Phelan 110). This strategy seems to work in the cases of the three paraleptic examples that we have reviewed.

(3) There is also a third way of dismantling the paradox. Following Dawson, this procedure can be described as *a rhetorical explanation*. One could simply argue that the operator “>” in “N>C” does not designate epistemic inequality (“N *knows more* than C”) but merely a locutory fact (“N *says more* than C could know”). In such a case, both propositions (“N>C” and “N=C”) could be simultaneously true. To say more than one could know is hardly troubling *per se* since it constitutes an ordinary feature of human behavior (for example, when we say to someone who is in distress: “Everything is going to be all right”). There are numerous rhetorical circumstances in which even the proposition “N>N” (if “>” is understood as a rhetorical operator) does not raise the sense of paradox. For instance, when recounting an episode in the raconteur mode, some particularly engaged narrators tend to “translate” an indirectly obtained information into a more engaging form of dialogue, or to simply “imaginatively reconstruct”<sup>19</sup> someone’s unwitnessed behavior. Strictly speaking, they are saying more than they

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Dawson 209.



know, but we understand that they are not offering literal, mimetic reports. This seems to be the case, e.g., in Plato's *Symposium*,<sup>20</sup> a text in which speeches and dialogic exchanges between the participants of the banquet are reported by Apollodorus, a man who was absent from the event. We are not troubled by Apollodorus' rendition of various minute details (just as we are not troubled by Nick's report in the eighth chapter of *The Great Gatsby*), for we understand that such a delivery is merely a rhetorical enhancement of some secondhand information. There's no need to understand Nick's (or Ishmael's or Marcel's) elaborated renditions as expressions of their direct knowledge of events. In some cases, we tend to offer our conjectures as descriptions for the sake of rhetorical persuasiveness or effect. The modal expressions pointing out the speculative quality of such renditions (like "perhaps," "it could/may be," "possibly," etc.) are not explicitly stated but are, nevertheless, latent. What is omitted but could be implicitly read in, e.g., Nick's rendition of the conversation between Michaelis and Wilson is: "It probably went something like this..." There's nothing particularly paradoxical here, for the very art of storytelling seems to be generally related to this rhetorical strategy.

There seems to be no conceivable "paraleptic" situation that cannot be "naturalized" in one of these three ways. For any specific case of the first-person narrator's "impossible" knowledge, either there are valid reasons (1) to presume an additional narratorial presence or (2) to claim the existence of some implicit epistemic justification for the narrator's seemingly "impossible" cognizance or (3) to read the narrator's account not as literal, mimetic report of actual events, but as some type of covert fictionalization. The paradox of paraleptic narration seems to be a pseudo-problem, both epistemically and narratologically.

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<sup>20</sup> The same is true for *Theaetetus*. See Genette 236.

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## Učinek paralepse

Ključne besede: naratologija / paralepsa / pripovedna epistemologija / *Moby-Dick* / *À la recherche du temps perdu* / *The Great Gatsby*

V članku preučujeva domnevni naratološki paradoks paralepse. Mogoče je trditi, da (prvoosebni) pripovedovalci *Moby-Dicka*, *À la recherche du temps perdu* in *Velikega Gatsbyja* (če navedemo zgolj tri vidne primere) občasno izkažejo nepojasnjeno zavedanje dejstev, ki bi morala biti po naravni poti nedostopna (prepoznavanje misli drugih ljudi, podrobna seznanjenost z dogodki, ki jim niso bili priča itd.). Paralepso, kot jo je poimenoval Genette, lahko opredelimo kot situacijo, v kateri se zdi, da ima prvoosebni pripovedovalec poseben epistemični privilegij. Članek argumentira stališče proti obstoju paraleptičnih dogodkov na dveh ravneh. Prvič, trdi, da je tovrstna naracija le redko epistemično paradoksalna, saj bi bilo mogoče naturalizirati celo nekatere najbolj izrazite kandidate za paralepso (bralec ali bralka lahko zaznata možne naravne načine, po katerih bi pripovedovalec ali pripovedovalka utegnili pridobiti na videz nemogoče informacije). Drugič, tudi ko paraleptičnih primerov ni mogoče prepričljivo naturalizirati, ti niso nujno begajoči. Pogosto jih lahko beremo kot avtorske »uprizoritve« (po vzoru P. Dawsona) in pojasnimo kot primere posebnega retoričnega postopka, ki smo ga poimenovali »raconteurska« pripoved: pripovedovanje s podajanjem domnev, zaradi večje prepričljivosti brez običajnih modalnih besednih zvez, ki bi opozarjale na špekulativnost takšnih trditev – s čimer nastaja napačen vtis o nenavadnem pripovedovalskem znanju.

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