

I Know Who I Am: Self-Constitution and the Unreliable Narrator

Timothy Kent Anderson

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Maya Sonenberg

David Bosworth

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Timothy Kent Anderson

University of Washington

Abstract

This essay explores the unreliable narrator in 20th and 21st century American and English literature, the current scholarship surrounding unreliable narration, and theories of self-constitution and self-presentation as a means of understanding the relationship between author and narrator.

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Timothy Kent Anderson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Associate Professor Maya Sonenberg

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Some time ago I found myself in a bar on Seattle’s Capitol Hill, meeting friends after a literary event we were all glad to have escaped. The bar was called the “Unicorn,” and it featured white-and-red striped decor, grotesque paintings framed in gold filigree, irreverently-named cocktails, and a collection of patrons who seemed to have stepped right out from its very walls. It was here, waiting in line for something cheap and strong, that I met the polyamorist, friend-of-a-friend, wearing a purple suit and green shirt, just the kind of thing I’d imagine someone with a highly-relative ethical system would wear.

The subject inevitably turned to what we “do.” His answer consisted of a list of names (at least three Amandas—two of them sharing the same birthday) and I suppose my answer was that I write short stories, something I always admit with a sense of dread and which I would rather not reveal—if only I could come up with an acceptable lie that wouldn’t betray me within two sentences of its having been said. Writers have very few allies these days, if indeed they have ever had any, probably because everyone is a writer in some fashion and because it appears to be a very luxurious kind of occupation. A PhD student once told me, “It’s so cute that you think what you do isn’t political,” as if it hadn’t occurred to me that while I am “being creative” in a university MFA program, others are committing genocide, or dying without basic human dignities, or—most seriously of all—writing their dissertations. Somehow I am removed from this struggle, so the story goes, instead of being mired in it; somehow I have deluded myself into thinking that I can choose to prance outside my own false consciousness, and that the passcode to this paradise is the declaration, charged with the extant fury, “I am a writer.” As I met the watery eyes of my new acquaintance, it occurred to me that maybe an immanent weariness—of the injustice of our politics *and* our loves—is something both writers and polyamorists share.

For a long time I have been interested in “unreliable narration”—a means of telling a story as modal as the Phrygian scale. As with any musical score, unreliable narration begins at a certain reference point which subsequently identifies and so defines it: the extent to which a speaker may accurately represent himself in his own story. I have become less and less convinced, for example, that the hero in the story of myself is still who he says he is or that the story he is telling is true; I have leaned so far into doubt as to find myself nodding, when engaged on this topic in a booth at the “Unicorn,” that *all* narrators are unreliable because all *people* are unreliable. (After making this pronouncement the polyamorist removed his glasses, causing his eyes to look like two small dots, blinking as though he’d just washed up on the banks of life. He wiped the glasses with the tails of his green shirt, nodded towards the bar, and said, “See that girl over there? She *hates* me.”)

Given what we know about the fallibility of memory, it does seem true that every first-person narrator is at the very least potentially unreliable the moment he begins to tell his story, particularly if he is narrating events that have occurred in the past or which have elapsed over a great deal of time. In what I find to be a wonderfully perverse irony, the same temporal distance that gives credibility say, to the essayist or memoirist’s account of himself strips the unreliable narrator of his—if only because it puts more pressure on him to remember and relate events accurately, i.e., without a tendency to doctor “the truth” to better serve his needs. And what person is most capable of this? I’ve always felt a great degree of suspicion about the personal essayist.

But while a speaker who appears reasonably credible will often distort what might be called “objective truth,” he is usually aware of having done so. How often in our daily discourse do we hedge arguments with “the-way-I-see-it” and “I-may-be-wrong-but...”? Even beginning a

sentence with the words “I remember” conveys a biased but generally-understood subjectivity, the humbled vision of oneself that is the true focus of the personal essay. And if it is part of the unreliable narrator’s agenda to appear like a credible speaker, he will often use these tactics himself! The greatest liars never seem to tell a lie at all.

So what distinguishes the one speaker from the other? The credible from the fraudulent? It could be said that I am asking what kinds of persons we consider unreliable. Or I may be asking how we come to *understand* that these persons are unreliable. Or I may be asking how we know what “unreliability” is in the first place. As it turns out, all three questions are worth answering, and have been more or less, although not usually within the context of the fictional unreliable narrator.

The polyamorist’s notion that there are only unreliable people in this world strikes me as immediately false; however, I might not have a ready answer as to why I feel this way. Maybe by the end of this essay the reason will be clear. For now, I can only offer a tentative clue: Believing all human beings are unreliable is a reading strategy, and one which requires little accountability on the part of the reader. It is as if reliability were a moral commandment that none of us could fulfill. But if this were the case, we wouldn’t know what the concept was to begin with—it would strike us as an incredibly silly utopia where our friends more often than not seemed to care for us, where our loved ones more often than not proved loyal; if this weren’t too far of a stretch, we might imagine a world where our appliances kept running for more than six months. In the middle of this thought experiment we might ask why we don’t live in that world as opposed to the one in which we have found ourselves. Maybe it’s because we receive some comfort in being reliably disappointed.

More likely is that we know something called reliability exists but are unable to meet its call. So we fabricate another world, a fantasy world, where the rebarbative voice of duty—of universal laws and their necessity—is muffled but never fully silenced. Then we become unreliable narrators of ourselves, and as we attempt to form our identities anew our every utterances speak to the unknown hidden just within our purview. We cannot be good because we cannot be whole. We can only throw up our hands in feigned remorse. At least until one of us does something very, seriously bad.

No, we have a stake in being reliable because we have a stake in being unified. And this is the lesson of the unreliable narrator—or so I will try to argue in what follows.

The Unreliable Personality

The joke about unreliable narrators is that there is still a great degree of discrepancy among narrative theorists as to what they are. One of the earliest critics to describe the technique, and the one widely credited with coining the term “unreliable narrator,” is Wayne Booth, who to my reading still has the best description of what an “unreliable personality” might be. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth argues that an unreliable narrator suffers from what Henry James defines as “insonscience”: he is fundamentally mistaken about himself, he is one who believes he possesses qualities which he is revealed to lack or to lack qualities he is revealed to possess. On the surface this appears to be a fine definition, as it encompasses a wide range of possible narrators without being too restrictive. Narrators with false impressions of themselves or their

abilities, who protest too much, who are attempting to “prove” something to a perceived audience or to themselves, all of these kinds of speakers fall nicely under Booth’s explanation; it also gives him room for varying degrees of intentionality (liars and gleeful manipulators vs., for example, children too young to be able to describe what is occurring around them) and of deviation from the readers’ morals or sense of taste. As the most basic definition possible, Booth’s idea also allows for a more coterminous view of established literary types than other critics who, in their attempts to describe unreliable narration throughout literary history, have made certain distinctions among different narrators that to their own admittance appear somewhat arbitrary at times.

William Riggan is one such critic. In his book, *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns*, Riggan argues that the unreliable first-person narrator arrived when the traditional figures mentioned in the title of his book were first given voices to narrate their own tales. The first type, the *picaro*, descends from the *picaresque* novels of the late 17th century—though according to Riggan his ancestors go back even further to Greek and Roman adventure tales and their inheritors: pranksters disillusioned with the lofty artifice of the medieval romance. One can easily imagine the *picaro* jabbing the ribs of another pilgrim in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, just to get in a quick joke about the knight’s tale being sorely overcooked. English renderings of the word “*picaro*” are varied but generally all describe a rogue or scoundrel who tells an adventurous tale, complete with vulgar and occasionally acerbic humor, moral sermonizing doubling as social satire, and a narrative form demonstrating a chaotic vision of the world as opposed to the “ordered and unified world of romance.” The *picaro* is an “unheroic” figure—the anti-hero of the 17th century—often a thief motivated by his own hunger and who hails from the lowest social and economic spheres; though he fights against the circumstances determined to

make him a criminal, he never quite finds himself able to transcend the sensual decadence that goads him on and which he sets out to dismantle. Throughout his life the *picaro* witnesses the rise and fall of fortune, the duplicity of those who mean well and the successes of those who don't; with cultivated skill he adopts an entire host of masks and disguises which, because of the shame he feels about his origins, are never fully inhabitable. As a result, the *picaro* usually narrates his tale from the end of his career, prompted by dissatisfaction to reimagine the events in his life that actually occurred. Yet the person in this tale whose life seems as though it were a bawdy, adventurous romp cannot escape the marked contrast between this image and the despondent or faux-reformed narrator who tells it from a removed point in time (Riggan, 34-38).

“I believe in the philosophy of rock ‘n’ roll,” says the narrator of Thom Jones’ story “Wipeout.” This narrator, with the comically mismatched name “Herbie,” immediately conjures the bravado of Riggan’s *picaro*. Herbie’s misadventures are crimes of love, not petty theft, though his attitude and the position from which he tells his story are truly of a despairing individual whose womanizing has proved to be at best a pyrrhic victory. Notable in Jones’ story are elements of oral narration, for example, switches from past to present tense where the *picaro* “falls back into” the story he tells in order to relive its glory and, more tellingly, the feelings he has for Simone, the woman he uses and then abandons when she informs him of her pregnancy. Herbie constantly addresses a “you”—either a rhetorical audience or a perceived listener that is actually Herbie himself—which furthers his own reimagining by giving him the illusion of narrating a consistent and persuasive tale. But at the end of his story, Herbie spills the truth:

I had really gotten to like her, I mean like you like a friend—you just like them for what they are, and yet I couldn’t help feeling that she was testing me for weakness, that she was setting me up most

diabolically to break my heart...But this was all fever, paranoia, and psychological projection. Actually she was faithful and true and she loved me and I loved her and what got me was that I acted mechanically. I reverted to form. It wasn't really me talking when she said she was pregnant and I told her to pack her up her shit and get the fuck out of my life.

("Wipeout" 97)

The elements of the picaresque novel and its hero, here transformed into our modern-day womanizer, are in full form during this crisis point of Herbie's tale. Not only are his attempts to share his very real inferiorities quickly dismissed as "fever, paranoia, and psychological projection," but the rhetorical potency of his story begins to waiver as the truth of his present situation comes to bear, almost without his knowledge, on the actions which in all likelihood he seriously regrets. This passage demonstrates the discrepancy between the Herbie who narrates his story and the image of himself that he depends upon, that of the cool and collected rock 'n' roll quoting, Kant reading, Italian-suit-wearing play-boy. It really *wasn't* Herbie who said those things to Simone—it couldn't be; admitting so would require Herbie to remove the mask worn even in the act of telling. Admitting his own identity in the story he narrates would reconcile him with himself. It may not excuse his actions on a moral or ethical level, but such recognitions do imply a sense of unity between his past and present selves. For now his true face is concealed behind a mask even as he looks at himself through the retrospective lens.

Both the clown and the *picaro* have, according to Riggan, crossover between one another, though while the *picaro* may be attempting to reconcile his past and present selves (and failing), the clown's enterprise is more directly creative: he is a re-packager of conflict, both internal and external. The clown's mask enables him to say whatever he may like and to aestheticize what he

says through any means possible, most often through the guise of charm and humor. He may appear to be a simple fellow trying to tell a silly tale, or he may remain cloaked in the sinister garments of the classic “fool”—the original “truth-teller” whose words pierce with venomous accuracy even when delivered in the semblance of doggerel. Riggan traces the clown’s origins as far back as the sixth century B.C., when it was common practice to collect all kinds of deformed or “defective” human beings for the ruling body’s amusement—the more grotesque and aberrant in form the better—as well as to the “clown king” of religious and fertility festivals, where a townsman would dress in ridiculous garb and speak nonsense for nothing more than the belief that it would bring his town good luck (Riggan 81).

But in modern literature the clown is not so well-intentioned. There is a kind of suffering in the clown unimaginable to the *picaro*, because in many cases the clown’s own ridiculous presentation obscures a seriously troubled figure unable to *step out* of the mask he’s created for himself. The wit and splendor of Humbert Humbert’s voice in *Lolita* can only transform Dolores into Lo, an otherwise dull girl into a fetishized hypothetical person. Most importantly, it is the Lolita transformed through Humbert’s act that is at all *accessible for him*—the “real” Dolores, the kidnapped and abused pre-teen, remains fixed outside his grasp, escaping him at every turn, denying him, cursing him, serving as the only counterpoint to the character presented by Humbert’s creative spell-casting.

Another famous novel departs only in scope from the clown-figure’s origins as a court oddity: Par Lagerkvist’s incredible work, *The Dwarf*. The novel, set in a feudal Italy where city-states go to war so often they no longer remember what first sparked their conflict, appears to be the notes jotted down in solitude by the eponymous title character. The narrator of this novel is indeed an *actual* dwarf:

I am twenty-six inches tall, shapely and well proportioned, my head perhaps a trifle too large. My hair is not black like the others' but reddish, very stiff and thick, drawn back from the temples and the broad but not especially lofty brow. My face is beardless, but otherwise just like that of other men. My eyebrows meet. My bodily strength is considerable, particularly if I am annoyed. When the wrestling match was arranged between Jehoshaphat and myself I forced him onto his back after twenty minutes and strangled him. Since then I have been the only dwarf at this court.

Most dwarfs are buffoons. They have to make jokes and play trick to make their masters and guests laugh. I have never demeaned myself to anything like that. Nobody has even suggested that I should. My very appearance forbids such a use of me. My cast of countenance is unsuited to ridiculous pranks. And I never laugh. I am no buffoon. I am a dwarf and nothing but a dwarf.

(The Dwarf 5)

Lagerkvist manages to convey in the first opening lines of his novel the central dilemma near the heart of the clown—the ineluctable joke of one's own identity. Here the narrator makes his case—to a diary no less, to an audience of himself—and attempts to describe himself in opposition to the values his culture places on him. The emerging figure read through his sanctimonious tone betrays one who is very dearly afraid of being the very thing he is: a clown for others' amusement. Neither his propensity for violence nor his proclaimed seriousness escape this fear. Neither through treachery nor through his own self-loathing does the dwarf manage to be more than a mere afterthought to the Prince; and when he assassinates the Prince's rivals with poisoned wine, though he believes he is acting out the coded desires of his lord, the

dwarf is really performing his deeply repressed hatred for the very masters that control him. The dwarf suffers from a sense of self-importance that is undercut by his own figure—the buffoon of the court whose very existence is a reminder of the mother who “turned away from [him] with disgust when she saw what she had borne” (Lagerkvist 15).

At times the dwarf’s musings engage with the tradition of the “sage fool,” the “insane” jester who somehow speaks with an uncanny clairvoyance. When pondering the Princess’s love affairs with the amorous Don Ricardo, the dwarf remarks, “Love is something which dies and when dead it rots and becomes soil for new love. Then the dead love continues its secret life in the living one, and thus there is no death in love” (23). Such a passage, tinged with the cynicism of one who has only been unloved, nonetheless conveys one of the most cutting truths about human weakness that I have ever read. The dwarf, as a physical manifestation of the Prince’s own evil, reveals whatever folly and moral failures he can about those around him, and often persuasively so. But even in his most lucid moments he speaks from such a paltry capacity for empathy that his whatever wisdom he could be said to have appears on some level empty or inseparable from his own inferiority. This clown is a joke who feigns to high-importance, a puppet who dares to be an agent, the instrument of a misinterpreted justice, and the loyal servant to a Prince who, at the end of the novel, is so horrified by the dwarf’s actions that he locks him away in the dungeon. That the dwarf changes not a bit throughout the entire process, that he never turns his gaze on himself (to do so would be to recognize how his own self-loathing maligns his judgment, both inward and outward) are important to what I will discuss later on. A change has taken place in the secondary characters and in the narrator’s circumstances, but his character remains the same. He is as unaware of what his evil actions have wrought as he was in the beginning. The laughter echoes through the stone hallways of his prison.

Though there are commonalities between all four of the “unreliable personalities” defined by Riggan, the last two—the madman and the naïf—are in direct communication with one another, as they seem to be inversely related. In a larger sense they define the terms of “unreliable narration” most clearly, while the *picaro* and the clown appear to move in and out of categories—for instance, some clownish narrators are more like naïfs in their innocence; some *picaros*, depending on their circumstances, begin to look more like madmen. The madman narrator is perhaps the best-known unreliable speaker because his frantic, anxiety-ridden voice is so easy to “read” through, his plight such a well-worn trope in narrative conventions. The naïf, on the other hand, is perhaps the rarest. But both types of speaker are concerned with the individual’s moral sense in relationship to the society in which he lives.

The naïf, Riggan argues, shares with the clown, *picaro*, and madman only one major quality: the tale a naïve narrator recounts is usually in some ways charged with a social critique, usually intended to be understood by a reader through an inferred interpretation of dramatic events that may or may not be accurately depicted by the narrator. Naïve narrators, children, sometimes the feeble-minded, and sometimes well-intentioned but gullible narrators are, unlike the *picaro*, lacking in the kinds of experience which would give them reason to reimagine the events in their stories. In effect they are speaking about events that they misunderstand and it works *to their credit*; while the other types of unreliable speakers’ social condemnation and moral sermonizing rebounds upon their own heads and demonstrates the narrators to be just as contemptable as the society they lambast, the naïf escapes the scourges of his own devices by passing blindly through. Usually the naïve narrator works as a foil to a *truly lamentable* societal condition, such as the institutionalized racism of Huckleberry Finn’s world. Here the narrator of

the tale barely perceives the cost to society and the individual that racism presents, and he doesn't set about ranting or planning a kind of self-incriminating personal war—he simply can't adopt the point of view around him due to his innate goodness, and fails to recognize his own crisis of conscience *to his good fortune*. Riggan describes it this way:

[Huck] thus has serious misgivings about himself...for not heeding his conscience and social dictates, both of which demand that he turn Jim over; and in the climactic passage of the work (Chap. 31), as Huck again seriously considers betraying Jim (this time even writing, but never sending, a letter to Miss Watson), he makes his famous decision not to do so, with the equally famous resolution, "All right, then, I'll *go* to Hell," fully believing that in following the leanings of his heart over those of his conscience he is indeed choosing the path of eternal damnation. That he was *not* is evident in the text's consistent portrayal of him as a positive character...that he was *not*, for critics and readers, is evident in the near-unanimous praise of Huck's human decency.

(Riggan 156)

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is, according to Riggan, a work that demonstrates the victory of a "sound heart over [a] deformed conscience." Huck himself embodies the social critique the work as a whole aims to make instead of being "positioned" in such a way as to imply that critique through the unfavorable dramatic irony that the other three types of unreliable speakers generally fall into. Some might ask whether Huck's goodness has grown larger through the lens of history, and whether his mistaken choice to do "bad"—which in fact modern readers see is truly a choice to do "good"—had quite the same unanimous approval at the time it was written, if this sort of pondering is at all relevant or useful. I would contend that the social mores

of the society *under critique* certainly play a role in how the reading public receives a satire like *Huckleberry Finn*, now or then, and this will become a more pressing question in the latter sections of this essay.

I cannot emphasize how much weight the figure of the madman carries in any discussion of unreliable narration. In some sense the technique exists primarily to investigate the “maddening” of an individual by some perceived—or real—torture, which is most often a stand-in or metaphor for the societal ills critiqued by the work as a whole. The madman is often betrayed in the very opening passages of his tale, as is the case with many of the most famous literary lunatics, including Edgar Allen Poe’s narrator from “The Tell-Tale Heart,” whose neurotic thought processes Poe captures from the very first sentence: “True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?” (Poe 493). Here the narrator’s voice works against his own rhetorical bent, and the more he insists that he isn’t losing his mind, the more the reader has reason to doubt his every word.

“Neurosis,” Riggan writes, “is presented as the literary analogue of a sociopolitical malaise afflicting a given society in general and certain segments of that society in particular” (Riggan 128), meaning that what is driving the unreliable madman deep into torment is not usually an *actual* mental illness, but an illness that embodies the author’s anagogical vision; that is, guilt and shame in Poe’s “Tell-tale Heart,” social inferiority at the heart of Dostoevsky’s *Notes From Underground*, a deep spiritual emptiness in Daniel Orozco’s story “I Run Every Day.” In nearly every tale narrated by a madman, the speaker finds himself in an increasingly pathologic state of self-imposed alienation; his strained efforts to be “non-conformist” or “individualistic” only convey his profound inability to make appropriate human contact or navigate human relationships with any tact. Other characters in the madman’s story exist only as

“objects of love, hatred, revenge, persecution, admiration, oppression, or emulation” (Riggan 142)—they become the objects through which the narrator’s true psychology is revealed to the reader, otherwise all reference points between sanity and the narrator’s conjured ravings breaks down as he retreats further and further into the trap of his own creation.

As is a common motif in other of Orozco’s stories, the narrator of “I Run Every Day” is known only by a nickname: “I used to be the newest guy until Ruben was hired. But they still call me the New Guy. Some kind of joke, I guess” (Orozco 44). Like in “The Bridge,” where a novice bridge-painter’s young age earns him the nickname “Baby,” the New Guy can’t escape being type-cast by the other workers at his job. He’s the one who hasn’t yet found his place. He doesn’t fit in, no one knows where to put him. But he’s been there long enough that it’s off-putting—more so than is at first noticeable—that he can’t find common ground with those around him.

Many of Orozco’s stories explore the hazards of being new on the job. “The Bridge” is just one other example, and it follows Baby as he witnesses a young woman jump to her death from the very bridge he is painting. In “Orientation,” Orozco’s most well-known and anthologized story, an office-worker leads an unnamed rookie around the jobsite, explaining the very real hazards that come along with this particular employment. Clarissa Snow, the central character in “Temporary Stories,” is her temp agency’s “best girl”—and she effectively makes a living working first-days, staying just long enough to achieve some mastery, some intimacy with her coworkers, before being herded off to another site and another new task. Especially in the last of these stories, Orozco portrays the working world as one where strict boundaries control what can and cannot be said, done, or known, even as opportunities to cross these boundaries—befriending the members of the Claims Unit, for instance, or speaking to the wrong person about

another co-worker's bathroom habits—parade themselves at nearly every turn. There is devilish temptation in these stories, and they come at the greatest possible risk: unemployment.

Yet in “I Run Every Day” Orozco offers a slightly altered vision of the workplace, one that does less to stifle a creative, well-lived life than it does to cover over a spiritually empty and meaningless one. Though the New Guy is unable to connect with his fellow workers at the school supply warehouse, he claims to have made peace with his loneliness, he claims to know “the difference between what he does for a paycheck and what really matters in this life” (45). This life is filled with routine; he takes care of the house that was passed to him by his parents, and he trims the bushes and cuts the lawn, which the neighbors seem to appreciate. He changes the oil in his car every three months, washes it every other week, as he was instructed by his father who owned the car before him. Nearly all of the objects the New Guy mentions owning have been given to him, or he has come into their possession following his parents' death. His only living relative, an older brother who lives in Alaska working for the EPA, hasn't visited him in longer than the New Guy cares to disclose. The brothers make empty gestures towards meeting, but they never set a date. “Fine,” the narrator says, “come down whenever” (48).

Early on readers are asked to make a choice, one that determines how the story takes shape as an experience. How do we interpret the unsaid feelings between the New Guy and his brother? Do we trust how he describes his work life? If not, do we trust his account of himself? Our first choice as readers, whether we are aware of it or not, has to do with whether we will believe the New Guy's perspective of the world. And we look primarily for similarity: Does the narrator share our values? Does this story participate in a particular genre we have seen before? Do his actions and motivations convey basic goodwill towards those around him? I would argue that “I Run Every Day” plays off of two narrative tropes in our collective consciousness: the

figure of the “alienated hero” and the “coming-of-age” tale. Orozco’s story inverts both of these patterns, but their inversion is also the *experience of the story*. For all intents and purposes, “I Run Every Day” does begin as a trustworthy tale, narrated by troubled yet linguistically stable character. And who isn’t troubled to some degree? Who hasn’t felt outcast at work, toiling among people whose only common point of reference is the toil itself? Who hasn’t skipped lunch after watching the middle-manager of Qdoba suck chipotle mayo off his fingers moments before returning to the grill, where rows of chicken thighs the color of Agent Orange sizzle in the heat?

It seems like every week that I receive an email from a UW administrator I have never met, speaking to me from some graduate program I’ve never been a part of, advising me to make the best of my graduate studies by remembering to practice “self-care.” Meditate, the email says (I do); avoid spiraling, negative thoughts (how?); treat yourself, go on a walk, eat a nice meal, pet your favorite dog.

Exercise, the email instructs. Go for a run.

At least in the first two-thirds of the story, the working world described in “I Run Every Day” is corollary to the one we all know—our narrator, who finds himself beleaguered by the ironies of his job (“...I slack off at work because my foreman tells me to” [45]) and a sense of having zero direction, takes up running as an outlet—a decision most readers would agree is admirable—and slowly begins to bring order into his life. His coworkers, all of them obese and unhealthy, many smokers, chide him about losing weight, but also recognize how his choices seem to have improved the quality of his life. Dot from Receiving, the one person the New Guy admits to liking, even tells him that he “seemed calmer, settled somehow, like [he’d] made a decision [he] was comfortable with” (46).

The rhetoric of the first part of the story—which is also the rhetoric of its narrator—works by positioning the reader’s sympathies with the New Guy in contrast to his coworkers—Mack, the foreman who tells him to work *less* hard; Dave, who continues to smoke even after having a tumor removed; Ruben, who humiliates the narrator for being a virgin—in comparison, the New Guy comes off as someone with purpose, kind even, and it doesn’t hurt that he can quote Rilke. Unlike the “madmen” in Riggan’s analysis, “I Run Every Day” appears to be the story of one who is effectively combating his own “maddening.” When Ruben slides a box of doughnuts across the table at work one day, saying that the New Guy needs to “fuck every doughnut before attempting real pussy” (47), readers may believe that it is his coworker, not the narrator, whose vision of the world is skewed. And the New Guy does what many people would do after such an incident: he eats lunch alone from then on. Were it not for the tension created in the space between his actions and his controlled, unemotional speaking style, readers might be tempted to think that the New Guy is something more like Riggan’s naïf. His self-isolation and sense of having been persecuted, which drive him further and further into an alienated bubble and which become more troubling as the story continues, first occur almost without our noticing. This is because the retreats of this narrator are subtle—he eats his lunch alone and he runs, neither of which are objectively pathological.

April, the “new girl,” destabilizes the story that the New Guy tells of himself, and ultimately she reveals that he has erroneously convinced himself of several lies, namely that he has misconstrued her as yet another persecutor, one-and-the-same with Ruben, Mack, and Dave, and that the statement the New Guy repeats several times throughout the story, first on page 45 and again on page 49, actually should be read as its ironic opposite. “I know who I am,” he says—and if at first readers could understand this sentiment as a summary of his

accomplishments, April's antagonistic presence in the story lends it a dual meaning: he repeats what he is *trying* to believe about himself. He doesn't know himself at all.

On page 52, the New Guy recounts a story to Dot from Receiving. "Here's something about me," he says. He tells her that he'd been running around the lake when a woman fell into step alongside him. The two ran together, and he reflects on her economy of motion, how "everything about her was contained and effortless and perfect." She runs four laps with him, thanks him, and then departs. He never sees her again. Dot tells him to let the story go, and to let his feelings about the woman go with it. "If [everyone] just left each other alone," she says, "there'd be less disappointment in this world."

Coming immediately before the story's climactic date-rape scene, this brief section creates an insight into the character's unspoken desires—running, which for him is a solitary pursuit that corroborates his unattached lifestyle, opens up the possibility of a life that can be shared. *He* can be something which can be shared. If—and Dot reinforces this point—if he's willing to risk "everything [he's] got for something [he] may never have" (53).

It's unclear if the New Guy himself even knows what it is he has to risk, but readers can surmise that it is his fragile identity, which depends upon isolation for any sense of boundary or constitution. In a sense, this is the "madness" at the heart of "I Run Every Day"; it has little to do with a social critique (although one could argue the story suggests a link between sexual violence in our culture and a lack of identity). Rather it seems as though the madness comes from within the individual, that it is the outcome of an identity refusing to assimilate. And in many novels and stories with unreliable madmen for narrators, the presented world isn't worth reconciling, but in "I Run Every Day," the world that supposedly "maddens" the New Guy

comes off looking quaint, as if the ribald jokes of his coworkers—as if the meaninglessness of the job itself—have taken on some kind of charm.

Unlike typical “Rigganian” madmen, who are characterized by a neurotic overabundance, the New Guy’s madness is one of containment and control; it is the madness of a rapist, a psychology dramatized as an obsession with one’s own sanctity—if he can only exist, can only know himself when he is set apart from the world, what does he do when this furious desire is threatened? What does he do with the furious desires in himself that run contrary to the purpose of sanctity? When April kisses him in his car, just moments before he assaults her, the New Guy confesses:

“...she said my name and kissed me on the mouth. I admit that I let her. I let her because I’ve never heard my name said the way she was saying it, and because it’s been a long time since anybody’s touched me...I let myself get all caught up in it, in this feeling that you’re part of a world with other people in it, and that you matter because somebody else seems to think you do” (56).

The story’s climax brings the recognizable “coming of age” tale to a perverse and unexpected conclusion. It reverses the likeable “anti-hero” trope, where the renegade protagonist, though rough around the edges, is typically revealed to have a heart of gold. There’s no gold heart beating in the New Guy; what makes the way he describes the rape scene so chilling is that he mistakes April’s advances for threats, her touches as efforts to merge with or subsume him. (“Who was she to say we were alike? There’s *nothing* of her in me” [57]). And he mistakes his own brutal and violent actions as appropriate responses.

Most chilling of all is that by the story's end, it isn't clear whether the New Guy even recognizes that what he did was wrong. It isn't that he finds some rationale for excusing his actions. It isn't that he is lying about what really happened. One might begin to wonder why it is he even bothered to narrate his story, what his purposes were, what vision of himself he is trying to sell. If this was an attempted confession, he didn't do a very good job.

It is more like the New Guy simply lacks an understanding about himself that the reader presumably shares. So often, when we hear of awful crimes, especially violent ones, we ask ourselves *who is capable of this?* which turns out to be the wrong question entirely. A better question has less to do with what a person is capable of than it does with what he or she *isn't* capable of—for the New Guy, the list is long: appropriate sexual contact, meaningful interpersonal relationships, a fluid interpretation of boundaries and, of course, any sense of self.

Still, it is hard not to read the final pages of "I Run Every Day" as a kind of self-torture, where the New Guy, proud of a new routine, runs all day in the mountains until he can barely walk. When he stumbles down into the city people get out of their cars to ask if he's okay. He says, "They think there's something wrong because sometimes I can't stop laughing (58)." It is as though his "runner's high," a euphoria which marks the closest he gets to the neuroticism of an Edgar Allan Poe narrator, veils a despair he will never be able to acknowledge.

The Politics of Interpretation

So far I have been writing as if my perspective on the stories above, especially Orozco's, is compatible with those of other readers. I have even been using the word "readers" to imply how

I think an ideal reader would react in response to any of the texts, i.e. how I think readers *ought* to react. But even this small conceit reveals a problem, one having to do with what Peter Rabinowitz defines in his book *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* as a distinction between actual and authorial audiences. Actual audiences are the flesh-and-blood readers of literary works. They come across the text, read it, and respond in any number of ways. The authorial audience, in contrast, is the audience perceived by the author to be the focus of the work's rhetorical or aesthetic effects. An author cannot begin to write, as Rabinowitz argues, "without making assumptions about the readers' beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. As a result, authors are forced to guess; they design their books rhetorically for a more or less specific *hypothetical* audience... (Rabinowitz 21)." Rabinowitz goes on to claim that whether they are made consciously or not, all artistic choices are "based on these assumptions...and to a certain extent, artistic success depends...on the degree to which the actual and authorial audience overlap" (21).

(To illustrate this point I'll depart just briefly from what has in the last few pages appeared to be anything like a formal argument. I must confess that in the case of "I Run Every Day," I function as an ideal reader, as the story came to me at a time when I was primed for its content. Like the New Guy, I worked a pointless job rolling burritos at a Qdoba in the Palouse Empire Mall. My coworkers included felons, drug dealers, and college students who always quit after a month or two. My boss, a sour-faced man who reminded us constantly that this was only his *side job*, stole freely from the deposit wallet, and once remarked that a certain female employee would be "good enough if you put a bag on her head first." But in the afternoons after work I would go running, sometimes far enough that I would exit the town and find myself on

empty roads travelling between the vast, perfectly yellow canola fields. And like the narrator of “I Run Every Day,” I felt the long miles of solitude change me, and that change generally had to do with order and containment. Perhaps I had a little too much discipline then, too.

Occasionally you meet a character in a story and that character turns out to be you, and in my case I was certainly horrified at the person I could potentially be, created in the pages of Orozco’s story. It spoke to me on a level few stories have since. The autumn after I first read “I Run Every Day” I quit my job and went to college.

This somewhat drab story has little to do with Rabinowitz’s claim other than that it illustrates how an actual audience member (me) came across a text with a particular rhetorical intention, and how my own subjectivity, over which Orozco has no control (I hope), allowed me to more or less become an authorial audience. In a way, it was simply dumb luck.)

Putting aside Rabinowitz’s notion that authors “guess” about the values of their intended audiences, which doesn’t seem to give certain authors as much credit as they’re due, I think what is most pertinent in this example to any study of unreliable narration is how an author can be said to write with the values of an intended audience in mind while simultaneously narrating a story through a character who wildly departs from those values.

For example, I can imagine a reader who comes away from Orozco’s story thinking that it is a tale about a man who gets away with rape. I can imagine a reader claiming that the story glorifies sexual violence, uses a female character as a plot-point, and never expresses judgment through the actual narrative drama of the story, as if this were a necessity. And I could imagine a reader who will tie these “artistic failures” to the moral character of the author, Daniel Orozco. I could imagine a reader who interprets the story as a Freudian allegory, or as Marxist critique of

alienated laborers; I can imagine a reader, the most sophisticated sort of them all, who will complain that the story fails because its politics aren't clear.

I interpret the falling action of "I Run Every Day," when the narrator describes how April takes a smoke break on the dock and watches him while he eats his lunch in his car, as an image of the author's own judgment, that he has sided with April, who acts as the only witness to the New Guy's moral decay. After all, the only two people who understand what the narrator has done are April and the author. Within the realm of the story, only April.

But we are locked inside the consciousness of someone who knows nothing about what he's told us; and this is the primary difficulty of the form, and the reason why reader interpretation is so varied: how does the author communicate *around* the character, and how does the reader see the author there? (This may be another question for another time, but why does this entire reading strategy seem like an argument for "intelligent design"?)

While Wayne Booth's quick and dirty definition allows us to glimpse the central self-deception in an unreliable narrator, and while Riggan's four categories do much to establish the technique's tradition and literary precedent, neither critic is absolutely clear about how an unreliable narrator is *revealed to the reader through the course of the drama*. In what proved to be a highly controversial claim among narrative theorists, Booth stated that, "for lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (Booth 158-59).

The existence of an "implied author"—a flesh and blood *human being*—present somehow behind, through, or on the periphery of the narrator's tale, has left a certain bad taste in the mouth of many literary critics who have taken issue with Booth's unreliable narrator

theorem, particularly his argument for how the author fashions the tale around the character and signals to the reader the revelation of opposites upon which the total effect of the story depends. How exactly is the character revealed to be mistaken? How does the reader understand when this reversal has taken place? Most critics of Booth state that his analysis doesn't take into account cultural changes in *readers* as well as writers, changes linked to a growing skepticism about what we can know, about how much trust we place in the narrators who represent our times, and an overriding concern about the plausibility of our being deceived by anyone and everything at any given moment.

In her essay, "Unreliable Narration and the Historical Variability of Values and Norms," Vera Nunning argues that because a text itself cannot determine what meaning it may hold for a reader, classifying the unreliable narrator doesn't depend solely upon a close analysis of the text, but on an analysis of the reader's values, for example, whether the story diverges from the reader's model of the world, and what the reader considers "normal," "natural," or "good." The unreliable narrator, according to Nunning, is one who is marked by deviation from social norms, themselves contingent and ever changing, and embedded within the reading practices of any given time period. In accordance we may find ourselves—like a jealous boyfriend, like Othello—reading unreliability into a narrator who was intended to be sincere, as is the case with one book Nunning cites, Oliver Goldsmith's sentimental novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the narrator of this novel was thought to be reliable, but later into the twentieth century, the majority of critics began to read behind this narrator's speech the irony and unintentional slips that are the hallmarks unreliable narration. Now *The Vicar of Wakefield* appears to be interpreted in such a way as would seem bizarre to the populace who first read it. At least one critic concedes that such a practice seems "problematic."

Still another critic, Theresa Heyd, critiques both Nunning and Booth, and further demonstrates the difficult position unreliable narration holds in literary criticism. By Heyd's account, Booth's theory, with its text-dependent and ahistorical tendencies, overlooks the role reader interpretation and cultural shifts play in determining the meaning of the text; but by this same token, Heyd argues that Nunning's theory suffers from the pitfalls of its roots in cultural studies: Nunning disregards the textual cues placed into a fiction, presumably by an author, that convey to readers the technique of unreliable narration at work, and her theory seems to lapse into a dubious relativism, as if she can only shrug her shoulders in response to these "texts" which have slid, like primordial ooze, out from between two rocks and into her hands. What is normal to one reader may be abnormal to another, and while this phenomenon is by no means false, it explains the particulars of unreliable narration about as well as it would hold up in a court of law.

Heyd frames her own ideas of unreliability within a context of communication theory, where the author and reader form a secret agreement with the unreliable narrator serving as a clueless interloper, a communicative pact resembling the telling glances two people might give one another when in the presence of a mutual acquaintance they both dislike. Furthermore, Heyd argues that the first-person narrator implicitly makes a "high commitment" to this same pact of cooperation merely by "claiming the floor to himself"—a commitment to speak with clarity and honesty about his story—but the unreliable narrator, for one reason or another, "deviates from this communicative level-zero," and through unintentional slips or dramatic violations of social norms, this narrator reveals his unreliability to the reader (Heyd 225).

Three theories: Booth's which presents in no specific terms the specter of "implied author"; Nunning's, which removes the specter of "implied author" from the equation

completely; and Heyd's, which attempts to marry the earlier perspectives around a theory of communication which, to my eyes at least, comes close to touching the same sorts of problems described by Rabinowitz. Nunning's theory in particular is of interest to me now, as I move into the final arguments of this essay, because it posits a theory of unreliability where no intentional transgression of readers' values takes place; effectively, the *text* itself transgresses—usually because it expresses a moral or cultural judgment that has fallen out of style.

An example. In one of the last scenes in Richard Yates' story "A Natural Girl," just after Susan Andrews has told her father that she is just visiting for the day and won't be staying long—news that disappoints him immensely—the text suddenly becomes ambiguous as to whether it is expressing his thoughts or the judgment of its implied author:

Girls. Would they always drive you crazy? Would their smiles of rejection always drop you into despair and their smiles of welcome lead only into new, worse, more terrible ways of breaking your heart?...Oh, dear Christ, how in the whole of a lifetime can anybody understand girls?
(Yates 217)

Such sentiment, while clearly tied to the perspective of Edward Andrews, also seems to be elbowing its readers in the ribs, asking them to join in on the joke. And while a good majority of the authorial audience probably *could* join in on the joke at the time when it was written, at *this* present point in time such an opinion comes across to this *actual* audience member as somewhat patronizing. Of course, part of the irony in "A Natural Girl" is that Susan Andrews' actions are all fairly reasonable and straightforward—it is the men in her life who can't seem to understand her rationale. Yet it is through their eyes that readers primarily encounter her, and it is with the

men that the story seems to side, with their wounds and unmet longings, while Susan remains somewhat under-developed as a character. But this passage merely dates the story by Richard Yates; it brings attention to some of our cultural attitudes, particularly about gender, that have shifted since the time the story was written. It doesn't necessarily call into question the authority of the story's narrator.

Something quite interesting happens when the authorial intent is leached out of any discussion of unreliable narration, which is that a story in this mode loses its capacity as a satire. A satire works under the assumption that any thesis will undermine itself, that it will veer round to its opposite either through tone and sarcasm or by taking itself to its most logical extreme or, as is of interest to us, through the dramatization of transgression. Satire is also inherently political in that it presupposes a conflicted and often violent power relation between the thesis and its anti-thesis. But if there is no author, no figure from whom the rhetorical purpose of a satire generates, how can it be said to have come into existence? Did the text create itself in order to overthrow an ideology? It seems to me like any "modest proposal" must be *proposed*.

The phenomenon Nunning describes, while fascinating and somewhat useful, isn't precisely unreliable narration. It seems to me that she's interested in texts which express a deviation from a moral standard because the moral standards *have changed*. But an unreliable narrator is one who deviates from a moral standard that is unlikely to change, ever. And his deviation from the moral standard, his transgression which suddenly catapults readers into uncomfortable irony, is meant to be *read with irony*, as a thesis which tears itself apart.

I know this is tantamount to saying that I believe there are certain moral standards that aren't relative. Very well. That *is* what I believe.

I suggest, as a closing thought experiment, that we reimagine unreliable narration in another way: as two distinct acts of what philosophers call “self-constitution,” defined by J. David Velleman as a “capacity...to define or invent or create oneself” (*Self to Self*, 203). For Velleman, such an exercise seems, at first, like a magic trick without the magician: either the rabbit pulls itself out of a hat, or the hat makes it appear like rabbit is being pulled out of it. In Velleman’s view, which he articulates throughout several essays, the self is comprised of many selves which arise, like scripts, in order to respond to certain life-situations. We present ourselves daily, like improvisational actors of who we think we are, and this process is also how we know who we think we are: we know by the acting (*How We Get Along*, 13). Like acting, self-constitution might appear like a duplicitous activity, particularly if the self we create is a salesman of some kind. And what would this salesman be selling? This is an important question for later.

Self-constitution is best thought of as a continuous act of creation by the human organism—and a necessity: without it we would have no “self” or selves with which to experience the world. According to Christine Korsgaard, there is also a moral imperative in self-constitution: a person who is good at creating himself is a good person (Korsgaard 26). Korsgaard likens self-creation to a familiar Aristotelian metaphor: building a house. A house is comprised of various materials—brick, lumber, iron, vinyl, drywall, etc—but it is also comprised of structural elements—walls, windows, doorways, roofs. The materials may differ, but the extent to which a house is a house depends upon how well it fulfills its basic structural purpose of providing shelter. For houses that are poorly-constituted, Korsgaard uses the word “defective”: a house built without a roof is a *defective* house, and similarly, “*defective* actions are ones that fail to constitute their agents as unified authors of their agents” (32).

Unity, then, is the ultimate goal of self-constitution, though it differs in how it appears for the philosophers I have cited. For Velleman, any one presented self is incomplete—only the total collection of selves, from the most visible to the most mundane, provides a full picture; for Korsgaard, however, there appears to be more of a central, controlling self we constitute again and again.

But for both philosophers the stakes are high, for if any self I create now conflicts with any other, I am suddenly divided. I am no longer a unified agent, in Korsgaard's view, but am floundering, not only as a person but as a *moral* person. Because for her, as well as for Velleman to some extent, acting ethically or with moral value is necessary for us to constitute ourselves well. She sums up her argument this way:

...the way to make yourself into a particular person, who can interact well with herself and others, is to be consistent and unified and whole—to have integrity. And if you constitute yourself well, if you are good at being a person, then you'll be a good person.
(Korsgaard 214)

We might ask then how an unreliable narrator constitutes himself. His story is an attempt, on the one hand, to create himself—to some degree always successful if the writing is good. But on the other hand, the self he presents or creates tries to sell him to himself, understandable when you consider how divided the narrator is from the person the *reader* meets on the page.

An unreliable narrator cannot create himself well—and by this I don't mean that he can't tell a good story, he often can—but he can't create a self that is unified by the story he tells. His moral failings—his transgressions across a societal standard of what is “good”—are the same as his failings of self-constitution. If he were whole and could act with integrity, he simply

wouldn't perform actions that would speak otherwise. But perhaps his greatest problem of all is that when he does perform actions that divide him, when he experiences the dissonance of "falling apart," he can't re-constitute himself again afterwards. He remains unaware of his own divided selves. He can't even learn how to be whole.

And that is how it should be, because the unreliable narrator is a stark reminder of what it means to fail at creating one-self. And because, if he does the job well, the author's clear understanding of human weakness, his empathetic gaze, his sense of the values of his culture, will guide him as he engages in creating *himself with success*. The ironic opposite of the unreliable narrator is the author.

Post-Script: Here's Something About Me.

In the beginning of my second year as a graduate student, I was elected by a tribunal of my peers to deliver the introductions at our bi-monthly MFA reading series. We meet at a well-regarded establishment called the Hugo House, in Seattle's Capitol Hill, and though attendance isn't always great there are occasionally people of literary noteworthiness in the audience, in front of whom I do my little song-and-dance, trying to squeeze laughter out of a humorless crowd. It is nerve-wracking work, which is probably why no one else in my program wanted to do it, and even on a good day I come down from the microphone feeling like I must have offended half of

the room in order to keep the other half from falling asleep in their chairs. And there are academic types there—people for whom the nervous, mispronunciation of a name counts as an ideological sin. And sometimes no one laughs. And sometimes I catch a glimpse of myself, feeding off the laughter when a joke hits the mark, and feel the urge to vomit.

But it isn't really the joking or the showmanship or the urge to impress that gets to me. It's the sincerity. Whenever I have occasion to introduce someone I'm very close to, be it one of my colleagues or a professor who has meant a great deal to me, I agonize over what is appropriate, what is funny, what is fine to utter in a room full of people, just to air my true, heartfelt emotions. As an entertainment strategy it's not the best, because sentimentality runs on an inverse axis to crowd-engagement and self-reported sensations of interest. But it also sort of feels wrong not to, at least until I'm up there, blathering on. Then the person I think I am becomes eclipsed by the person talking, and I don't know any longer if what I'm saying is true. And if it was true before, speaking it—particularly in front of a crowd—makes it less so. Or so I fear, when afterwards I am unable to meet anyone's eyes.

To combat this shame, I've taken to wearing an outfit: black slacks and shoes, a white button-down short-sleeve shirt, a small black notebook in the left-hand breast pocket. I look like a Mormon missionary, and it is only in this goofy get-up, with its protective charm of irony, that I am able to say anything without doubting who I am. Thank god, I think, that I don't have to introduce *myself*.

Because who knows if the story I would tell of myself is true or untrue? It isn't my story to tell.

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