

“Where the Nightmares End and Real-  
Life Begins”:  
Radical Unreliability in  
*Sydney Bridge Upside Down*

by  
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## *Abstract*

The unreliable narrator is one of the most contested concepts in narrative theory. While critical debates have been heated, they have tended to foreground that the problem of the unreliable narrator is epistemological rather than ontological: it is agreed that narrators can be unreliable in their accounts, but not how the unreliable narrator ought to be defined, nor even how readers can be expected in all certainty to find a narration unreliable. As the wider critical discourse has looked to tighten its collective understanding of what constitutes unreliability and how readers understand and negotiate unreliable narration, previously divided views have begun to be reconciled on the understanding that, rather than deferring to either an implied author or reader, textual signals themselves might be better understood as the most fundamental markers of unreliability. Consequently, taxonomies of unreliable narration based on exacting textual evidence have been developed and are now widely held as indispensable.

This thesis argues that while such taxonomies do indeed bring greater interpretive clarity to instances of unreliable narration, they also risk the assumption that with the right critical apparatus in place, even the most challenging unreliable narrators can, in the end, be reliably read. Countering the assumption are rare but telling examples of narrators whose reliability the reader might have reason to suspect, but whose unreliability cannot be reliably or precisely ascertained. With recourse to David Ballantyne's *Sydney Bridge Upside Down*, this thesis proposes new terminological distinctions to account for instances of such radical unreliability: namely the 'unsecured narrator', whose account is therefore an 'insecure narration'.

Ballantyne's novel, published in 1968, has not received sustained critical attention to date, though it has been acclaimed by a small number of influential critics and writers in Ballantyne's native New Zealand. This thesis argues that the novel's long history of neglect is tied to the complexities of its radically unreliable narration. With social realism the dominant mode in New Zealand

literature from the 1930s to the 60s, the obligation of the writer to accurately render – and critique – local conditions with mimetic accuracy was considered paramount. Even those critics to have argued the novel's importance often maintain, largely or in part, a social realist view of the book's significance. Doing so, however, fundamentally elides the complexity of the novel's narrative machinery and to deeply ironic ends: for, this thesis argues, *Sydney Bridge Upside Down* deploys its insecure narration as a complaint against the limits of social realism practised in New Zealand. Its unsecured narrator, Harry Baird, slyly overhauls realist reference points with overtly Gothic markers and cunning temporal dislocations to thus turn social realism's desire for social critique back on itself via radical unreliability.

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# Contents

Introduction	6
Unreliability in <i>Sydney Bridge Upside Down</i>	10
Argument, structure & progression	15
 Chapter One: Unreliable Narrators & Reliable Readers	 20
Introduction	20
From the implied author to the inferring reader	21
Conjoining rhetorical and cognitivist strategies	33
Towards taxonomies of character narration	43
“Reliably Reading the Unreliable Stevens”	49
Ramifications	57
Insecure narration	63
 Chapter Two: Fallible or Untrustworthy?	 69
Introduction	69
Fallible & untrustworthy	71
Janet & Caroline	78
Janet	80
Caroline	91
Morality & convention	106
 Chapter Three: Insecure Narration	 114
Introduction	114
Susan	116
Reliable underreport?	125
Towards insecure narration	137
Radical unreliability	140

Chapter Four: The Gothic Challenge to Social Realism	157
Introduction	157
Reading on the synthetic level	158
<i>Sydney Bridge</i> & local Gothic	163
Gothic challenges to social realism	179
Conclusion	198
Works Cited	201

## Introduction

This thesis presents a study that was begun shortly after the republication, in 2010, of New Zealand writer David Ballantyne's 1968 novel, *Sydney Bridge Upside Down*. These days, the reputation of Ballantyne (1924-86) largely rests upon this novel in particular — he had five others and a collection of short stories published in his lifetime — and with the novel's curious history of acclaim and neglect.<sup>1</sup> Patrick Evans has long sounded it as the great New Zealand novel (De Goldi x), while others to have championed it over the years include Frank Sargeson and C. K. Stead. And yet despite the regard from such local literary heavyweights, the novel has spent most of the time since its original publication off the critical radar. Evans, as Kate De Goldi further notes, has also called *Sydney Bridge* New Zealand's great "unread" novel (emphasis original, x), a claim De Goldi's own observations seem to confirm: "In a sort of faithful, and hopeful, ongoing test of Evans' long-ago claim, I check it out quite regularly, ask people — book groups, librarians, teachers, other writers — if they've ever read it, if they've even heard of it: nope" (xii). Erin Mercer spots that the novel received only two reviews upon original publication — one in the *New Zealand Herald* and the other in the *Listener* — and, more notably, that it was overlooked for review by both *Landfall* and *Islands* (397). Since then, Evans and Lawrence Jones have both given the novel canonical treatment, the former in his *Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (1990), and the latter in two editions of *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991, 1998). But while

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the span of Ballantyne's career seems marked equally by 'acclaim and neglect'. Ballantyne's first novel, *The Cunninghams* (1948), received mixed reviews but has since been accorded canonical importance for critics such as Evans and Jones. *The Last Pioneer* (1963) was met with little enthusiasm — "rather a leaden affair" in Stead's view ("Whimsical" 123) — while the collection, *And the Glory*, similarly failed to make any impact. Stead considers *A Friend of the Family* (1966) a "breakthrough" but one that "passed largely unnoticed", and argues that both *Sydney Bridge* and *The Talkback Man* (1978) were seriously and unfairly underrated by local reviewers ("Whimsical" 122). Ballantyne's final novel, *The Penfriend* (1980), received little attention. Reid notes of the last two novels in particular that they were rather regarded as "lightweight" pieces (188). For Stead, the fault lay with the reviewers: "It seemed clear that the reviewer [in the *New Zealand Listener*] had enjoyed [*The Talkback Man*] and that it had left her disposed to recommend it. But could anything enjoyable be *good*? Like so many of our reviewers she was ill-equipped for the job and much too busy to do any background reading" (emphasis original, "Whimsical" 125).

the point of these critical surveys might be to confirm literary canonicity as much as to contest and update it, they are not wholly given over to the kind of thoroughgoing critique of individual works on whom their revisions confer such critical – even canonical – importance. This thesis, then, represents an overdue critical interrogation of a New Zealand novel which has been both long respected but critically under-examined.

In that sense, this is a thesis about the place of *Sydney Bridge Upside Down* in relation to local literary criticism. Certainly part of my interest here is to consider why the novel – one of the most deceptively sophisticated and absorbing of any produced in New Zealand – has spent so long in the critical wilderness of its own literary environs. But the case I present here is not a matter of petitioning for the novel's readmission into the 'grand narrative' of New Zealand literary history so often laid down in canonical accounts presented by critics such as Evans and Jones. On the one hand, Evans and Jones in particular consider the novel to represent one of the most important achievements of what they see as a crucial turning point between provincial and post-provincial modes in New Zealand literature. And yet, on the other hand, if the novel seems to slide so easily into the canonical account, then the question of the novel's long critical neglect – and its lack of virtually any readership at all for many decades – is left even more conspicuously unaddressed.

Evans had given this some thought; as De Goldi summarises:

Evans had a characteristically provocative theory about David Ballantyne's critical neglect and lost readership. Ballantyne, he argued, had never attained a recognisable public persona, any public persona for that matter – and since this had become an almost essential condition of literary success, it was his, and the book's, burden. He contrasted memorably Ballantyne's lack of serious attention with the reverence accorded Janet Frame and her work, insisting that Ballantyne, too, was a writer of 'considerable skill and coherence of vision'. But Ballantyne presented a picture of his country that was, forty years ago at least, unpalatable to his



potential readership: a dark unredemptive vision challenging some of our most clung-to mythologies. (xiii)

I suggest here, however, that perhaps “some of our most clung-to mythologies” include, where literary culture is concerned, an insistence that local literary products bear some obligation to faithfully depict New Zealand in all its authentic New Zealandness. As Mercer observes, realism – in particular critical or social realism – had been established as the dominant mode in New Zealand fiction from the 1930s through to the 60s, largely thanks to a group of influential critics who argued for local writers to engage “the rhetoric of the real” (394).<sup>2</sup> Underlying both Evans’s and Jones’s arguments for *Sydney Bridge*’s importance is a joint allegiance to essentially realist depictions of New Zealand subject matter, whether those conform to provincial or post-provincial modes.

But it was exactly the novel’s realist element which Dennis McEldowney, reviewing *Sydney Bridge* in the *Listener*, struggled to reconcile within its troubled narrator’s account:

nothing is quite what it seems; there is an undertow of dread. Would such an affectionate outgoing boy...? Even if...? Or is one not to take all his reminiscences at face value; is the line between realism and romance not to be drawn precisely where he seems to draw it? And if so...? (Ellipses original, Reid 166)

Unable to trace with certainty the lines drawn between “realism and romance” by the novel’s narrator, an “affectionate outgoing boy” called Harry Baird, McEldowney’s hermeneutical confusion springs from the complexities of Harry’s seemingly unreliable narration. With the most influential critics in New

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<sup>2</sup> Writes Mercer: “In 1949, Sargeson argued that one of the characteristics of good writing is that it is ‘truthful above all things’ (1983b: 25) and he commended Dan Davin’s *Roads from Home* (1949) for the fact that ‘something very like New Zealand is to be found in astonishing abundance inside the covers of this novel’ (1983c: 37). In a talk delivered at the 1951 New Zealand Writer’s Conference and then published in *The Press*, H. Winton Rhodes declared, ‘The job of the New Zealand writer is to reveal New Zealand to New Zealanders’ (quoted in Murray, 1994: 124). At the same conference, and in an essay developed from his talk, Robert Chapman argued that writers should utilize realism of such accuracy that a genuine vision of society and its problems might be revealed to the reader (1953: 26-58). In 1952, Bill Pearson insisted ‘we need an art to expose ourselves to ourselves, see ourselves in a perspective of place and time’ (1974:12), and throughout the 1950s and 1960s he was to repeatedly discuss fiction in light of its ability to convey something authentic about New Zealand, criticizing stories and novels that ‘don’t seem to add up to a recreation of New Zealand’ and that fail to ‘convey the “feel” of New Zealand’ (1974: 45; 40)” (394-95).

Zealand busily concerned with establishing a national literature predicated on social realist lines – that is, with establishing a literature driven by a mimetic fidelity to place in order to turn that faithful depiction towards the ends of social critique – it is thus hardly surprising that *Sydney Bridge* with its perplexing narrative uncertainties and divagations, amounting to a sly undermining of the going realist concern, could not be easily woven into the dominant critical approaches in force on the local front. And, if falling outside the concerns of local literary criticism, at least of the time, then we might look to other critical fields by which to better account for the book. McEldowney himself offers a clue to where these critical fields might be found when he implicitly questions Harry's reliability.

This thesis argues that Harry's account offers a complex example of unreliable narration that advances our understanding of how unreliability works, challenging some of the critical assumptions to have emerged in the area in recent decades, and redirecting critical analysis to more fundamentally consider the dynamics of unreliability. Harry's unreliability seems clear, and yet untangling his account to understand 'what really happened' hovers tantalisingly beyond reach. The reader cannot safely say whether Harry has lied deliberately or if he has misled his audience for reasons beyond his control – or perhaps that he has somehow, by turns, done both. Many critical accounts of unreliable narration are chiefly concerned to explicate exactly how it is the reader 'knows' the narrator is unreliable, but with this concern comes an implicit assumption that taxonomical approaches to the complex signals of unreliability should, therefore, safely recuperate the 'reliable' version of the unreliable narrator's warped account. Harry's unreliability suggests that a more radical form of unreliability is the one that refuses such safe interpretive resolutions. In response, I will introduce and theorise another variant of unreliability, what I call 'insecure narration', in an attempt to account for narrators who deploy clear signals of unreliability but to radically ambiguous effect. In these cases, the narrator's unreliability is presented with such

complexity that the reader cannot tell what kind of unreliable narrator they have encountered.

This thesis, then, reconciles three major and distinct points of interest. It contributes to a significant topic of international debate within narratology, both as a survey and a critique of the complex history of terminological and structural distinctions to have organised how we think about unreliable narration. I then extend the discussion to refine our theoretical understanding of an aspect of unreliability sometimes acknowledged but (like Ballantyne's own novel) often overlooked: the possibility of the unreliable narrator whose unreliability cannot, strictly, be told. Hence the first topic of my interest signals the second: the book itself, which has been, to-date, critically under-read. Reconsidering *Sydney Bridge* in light of the theoretical debates to have shaped our understanding of unreliability, I argue that the novel's fundamental interest lies in relation to such discourse. But if this seems to involve lifting the novel from its local context and dropping it into another one altogether, the novel, of course, does not simply cut its ties to its own historical and cultural background. Rather – and this constitutes the third strand of interest for this thesis – holding the novel's achievements to be more transparently narratological than cultural allows us to reconsider not only the status of a sophisticated but under-regarded local novel, but to then consider how this helps us better understand the critical dimensions of New Zealand literary practice, not only mid-century, but as it has developed in the decades since.

### **Unreliability in Sydney Bridge Upside Down**

Before I offer a summary of the structure and progression of this thesis, I give a few general thoughts which have strongly shaped my engagement with Harry Baird's unreliability, as will be seen throughout the discussion to come. Harry's narration – compelling, twisted and evasive – achieves arguably its most disturbing effect over the novel's final few pages; as De Goldi confides, "The last chapter remains as mysterious and seductive as ever. I have spent hours anatomising that epilogue. And every time I have anticipated and dreaded the

final two sentences, knowing they will break my heart" (xii). Certainly the final two chapters register a dramatic shift in tone, tailored to match the full force of the novel's final move: for the reader has to entertain the radically destabilising possibility that Harry has narrated the whole story from the position of a deranged adult. But as remarkable as the novel's denouement may be for readers tantalised by and denied access to any narrative closure, the book's opening sequence parades similar narrative qualities. While Harry's final words imply the murder of his former teacher, Mr Dalloway, pushed by Harry himself from "the fifteenth floor of a city tower" (278), the book opens with Harry's recall of the afternoon long before when he pushed his friend Dibs Kelly over a cliff, apparently to fatal effect. Thus the book ends as it begins: with the oblique, portentous suggestion that Harry has pushed a hapless victim to his death.

While the novel's opening act clearly anticipates its closing one, it is not simply the fall of Dibs Kelly but Harry's narrative treatment of the event which so foreshadows the book's sinister close – not only are the events themselves (Dibs's fall and Dalloway's likely death) concordant with one another, but both are narrated in the same tone of disquieting equivocation. Throughout the first chapter Harry conspicuously elides exactly what became of Dibs that afternoon; much later on, although he indirectly implies that he has killed Dalloway, his confession, however strongly insinuated, is ultimately withheld. On one level the indeterminacy of Harry's narration invites the reader to speculate on what really happened, first to Dibs, then to Dalloway. But whatever the balance of probabilities might suggest the 'right' readings to be, such narrative ambiguities point to a deeper level of narrative significance altogether and one which underpins the whole novel: left to the reader to decide what to make of Harry's repeated indirections, the frequency of his apparent duplicity as narrator is not only fundamental to the reader's judgement of his character but also to the novel's narrative method and literary effects. It is in just this way that the reliability (or otherwise) of a first-person narrator is a matter of twofold significance.

First, the reliability of a character narrator may be understood as another attribute of that fictional character. On this level, a narrator's reliability exists for the reader in the same way that all the details of the fictional world exist. Whether a narrator is reliable or unreliable – that is, whether the reader is likely to find a given narrator generally truthful or untruthful, infallible or fallible – can be approached as simply another character trait, as another detail drawn in keeping with the rest of the imagined world which surrounds it. The personality quirks of various characters are often seen as a store of thematic and interpretive significance in themselves: just as Romeo's hot-headedness might speak to Shakespeare's theme of doomed love, for instance, Harry Baird's tendency to lies and half-truths poignantly lights up Ballantyne's broader theme of domestic social breakdown. But secondly, the narrator's degree of trustworthiness can be distinguished from other character attributes in one obvious and peculiarly theoretical respect: the account of the character narrator not only occurs within the world imagined, as an act of narration expressed in the universe of the fiction, but represents the imagined domain as well. For fictions with only one narrator, her or his account simultaneously creates a fictional realm in its entirety and provides the sum total of the text's discursive machinery. The reliability of character narrators thus becomes a topic of significant narratological interest because such narration both emphasises and complicates the relationship between the referential capacities of a text and its theoretical ones.

The opening paragraph of James Phelan's introduction to character narration anatomises and maintains the essential duality of the topic along these lines:

Character narration, it will surprise no one to hear, is an art of indirection: an author communicates to her audience by means of the character narrator's communication to a narratee. The art consists in the author's ability to make the single text function effectively for its two audiences (the narrator's and the author's, or to use the technical terms, the narratee and the authorial audience) and its two purposes (author's and character narrator's) while also combining in one figure (the "I") the roles of both

narrator and character. Even when the “I” who is the author appears to be identical with the “I” who is the narrator – in, for example, much autobiographical narrative – that “I” will sometimes speak from the perspective of her former self, thereby making the communication shift from the direct to the indirect. (*Living* 1)

All character narration is a matter of indirection, in Phelan’s terms, because fiction shows up the degree to which a single text can seem to represent the interests of multiple subject positions. While all language fails to stand in directly for the experience it is often supposed to represent, the inevitable illusion of a ‘space’ between the agent narrating and the experience narrated is charged with ironic purpose when it is occupied by a character narrator who is not only made up but potentially fallible as well.

While unreliable narration, as a unique strain of character narration, is a matter of special interpretive and theoretical significance, most character narrators could be found unreliable to an extent: if fictional narrators are expected to narrate events from a recognisably human perspective, then it seems natural that the experience of the world they present reflects the complex partiality of the individual. For William Riggan, “because the narrator sits before us as a human being – albeit a fictionalized one – we naturally react to him in varying degrees in human terms and not just as a disembodied voice providing us with information” (20). Here, Riggan is, in essence, bearing out Wayne C. Booth’s idea that “No narrator or central intelligence or observer is *simply* convincing: he is convincingly decent or mean, brilliant or stupid, informed, ignorant or muddled” (emphasis original, *Fiction* 273). Both Riggan and Booth, then, allow unreliability into the critical picture as one of the effects of the real world resemblance upon which much fiction depends. But achieving those effects then brings into play a more intricate set of negotiations and strategies on the part of the reader-critic which are highly theoretical and particular: as Ansgar F. Nünning summarises, the richness of unreliable narration for literary studies has to do with its position “at the interface of aesthetics and ethics as well as of description and interpretation, [combining] important theoretical and interpretive enquiries”. Specifically, because the most

“intriguing theoretical problems” raised by unreliable narration surround “the vexed question of whether or not we need the implied author and the equally intricate question of how readers negotiate textual inconsistencies and ambiguities”, then “any decision about a narrator’s (un)reliability [carries] far-reaching interpretive consequences” (“Reconceptualizing” 90).

Throughout *Sydney Bridge*, while the reader is first challenged to consider the reliability of Harry’s account, the reach of the interpretive consequences then extends far beyond settling on a version of its events which would offer the reader a straightforward sense of narrative closure. As De Goldi implicitly suggests in her introduction, the novel not only invites rereading but also confounds it, tantalising the audience with its narrative divulgations, yet only to avert full disclosure in the end:

I have read *Sydney Bridge* a number of times since that first fervid immersion, and each time it has been equally powerful, but subtly different – because of course I am different, and because a great book always accommodates revisiting and new insights. Most recently, it seemed more sinister and somehow much sadder than I can ever remember, but I marvelled all over again at Ballantyne’s restraint and control, at the quietly brilliant way he wrong-foots the reader. This is a novel of suppressions and elisions. You must pay attention to what is not on the page. It is after all, and amongst much else, a thriller, and much of the story’s impact comes from the reader’s growing anxiety around exactly what is happening and who is responsible for the ‘terrible things’.

The last chapter remains as mysterious and seductive as ever. I have spent hours anatomising that epilogue. (xii)

Most relevant to my interest here is how firmly De Goldi underlines the novel’s vital lack of closure – for her the very substance of the novel consists of “suppressions and elisions”. Moments of truth do occur for Harry – towards the end of the book, for instance, when he witnesses Caroline and Buster having sex in the ruins of the killing works, and when he eventually realises that his mother has abandoned her own family for a life in the city with Dalloway. Ultimately though, the novel trumps any obligation to narrative certainty with a commitment to cultivating the apprehension of the reader. If,

for De Goldi, “much of the novel’s impact comes from the reader’s growing anxiety”, then “the quietly brilliant way [Ballantyne] wrong-foots the reader,” is arguably the most integral value of the book; Harry’s disquieting incertitude is carried all the way through to the novel’s sinister denouement, where the last chapter (all of 43 words long) obdurately – but also emblematically – “remains as mysterious and seductive as ever”. The challenges that a reader is likely to encounter with Harry’s narration so strongly underline the contingencies at play whenever a reader negotiates a character narrator’s indirections that those narrative challenges are themselves, I argue, the novel’s most fundamental interest – hence the richness of the novel in terms of the narratological enquiry concerned with theorising unreliable narration.

### *Argument, structure & progression*

In the first chapter I discuss the critical field concerned with unreliability, though, as my discussion shows, this represents an open-ended arena of debate. Since Booth’s initiating notions of what constitutes unreliability, the figure of the implied author has become an especially contentious component in formulations of unreliability. For Booth, the reader must share the values and norms of the implied author, in order to understand that an unreliable narrator’s account is not to be read at face value, but is instead an ‘ironic’ channel of communication – both implied author and reader understand the text to convey a deeper meaning than the speaker is aware exists. Some of Booth’s detractors, such as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Tamar Yacobi, have pointed out that understanding exactly what the implied author’s values and norms really are can be harder to infer than Booth assumes; while others, such as Nünning, point to the notoriously ill-defined concept of the implied author itself: is it an extension of the real-life author, a textual construct, or a narrating agent inferred instead by the reader? The upshot of the arguments for and against the implied author in respect of its involvement in ascertaining unreliability has seen the reconciliation of previously opposed strategies. Rhetorical narratologists, such as Phelan, have reached an important point of



agreement with their cognitive/constructivist-inclined adversaries such as Nünning: whatever the implied author or implied reader is taken to be, ascriptions of unreliability must ultimately rest with analysis of the textual markers of unreliability themselves. Out of this conjoined engagement, taxonomical systems of unreliability have been developed, replacing Booth's reliance on an implied author figure. Taxonomies such as Phelan's encourage greater attention to parsing discrete instances of an unreliable narrator's account, and are thus well-equipped to more finely read even the most challenging unreliable accounts. And yet the taxonomical approach risks the assumption that all unreliable narration can then be 'reliably' reconstructed. I close the first chapter of the thesis by making the case to consider instances of more radical unreliability, what I call 'insecure narration', in which even the narrator's exact variants of unreliability remain out of interpretive reach.

In the second chapter I look more closely at the ramifications of Phelan's taxonomy, in particular the commonly held view that Phelan broadly distinguishes between instances of narration where narrators report wrongly on the one hand, and where they report insufficiently on the other. Greta Olson does much to disambiguate Booth's interchangeable use of the terms 'fallible' and 'untrustworthy' to describe distinct kinds of unreliability, and makes worthwhile claims that these divisions can be applied to Phelan's taxonomy. But, I argue, while Olson's distinction makes sense – fallibility and untrustworthiness are naturally opposed values – her insistence that fallibility and untrustworthiness must be mutually exclusive categories cannot be maintained. Harry Baird himself offers a multifaceted unreliability conjoining both kinds, and often in the same narrating instances. I offer readings of Harry's narration to do with his mother, Janet, and his cousin, Caroline, to show how this is so, and then apply these to expose some of the assumptions underpinning Olson's terminological distinctions. The division which Olson looks to draw rests on a difference between the epistemological status of the unreliable narrator and their moral or ethical makeup. Fallible narrators are limited epistemologically: they are limited because the truth is beyond their

means of knowing. Untrustworthy narrators, on the other hand, are ethically deficient: such narrators are, more dubiously, unreliable by disposition and intend to mislead. But categorising unreliable narrators this way shuts down the possibilities for more complex instances of unreliable narration, undermining both Phelan's terms and Susan Lanser's view that complex narrations cannot be resolved by maintaining such categorical discriminations. And yet because Olson's distinctions draw so heavily on Phelan's, her argument illustrates part of the risk attached to the taxonomical approach; for such taxonomies seem to encourage the view that unreliability, if read with sufficient critical rigour and exacting judgement, ought to be reliably resolved – or, to anticipate terms I will develop later, 'secured'. That is, readers should be left with no doubt as to what kind of unreliability they are dealing with. Thus Harry Baird, a liar who doesn't know the truth, directly challenges Olson's approach, marking its limitations, and encouraging us to apply Phelan's taxonomy with a more open-ended nuance to account for forms of unreliability like Harry's.

In the third chapter I argue that Harry is what I propose to be an 'unsecured narrator' – an unreliable narrator of an 'insecure narration'. While Harry is no doubt unreliable, his narration around the deaths of Susan Prosser and Wiggins the butcher is notoriously difficult to disambiguate. The reader has good reason to suspect that Harry is culpable in both fatalities and yet the closer one reads for evidence one way or another in respect of his guilt, the further firm interpretations seem to recede. As the reader looks increasingly to the textual markers of Harry's unreliability, the suspicion grows that the narration itself includes red herrings – signals of Harry's unreliability designed to deceive, and thus the reader is redirected to deeper considerations: first, what Phelan calls the 'synthetic' dimension of the text begins to be foregrounded against the mimetic. By 'synthetic' Phelan means those aspects of the narrative which seem as if authorially designed and hence by which the reader understands the whole text to operate as an artificial construct. Second, if the synthetic dimensions of the text put in play the possibility that Harry's

unreliability might be beyond reach, then our critical interest is redirected from trying to 'resolve' Harry's unreliability one way or the other, to a deeper understanding of the mechanics of unreliability instead. The fundamental concern of the novel – it would seem, at least in a narrative sense – is precisely to keep the exact nature of Harry's unreliability out of hermeneutical reach. The end of the novel supports the case even more stridently: with Harry narrating the last two chapters from years later, and in a state of psychological perturbation, the reader is suddenly forced to reckon with mutually exclusive interpretive options. Has Harry concocted his whole backstory? Or is his unreliability due to his evident mental disintegration? Alternatively, can we justify reading the novel as two distinct accounts in order to make plausible sense of his seemingly divided unreliability? Because the reader cannot decide, I argue, Harry's narration thus remains insecure, and Harry himself is an unsecured narrator.

I conclude the study by considering how such radical unreliability might be read in the wider context of New Zealand literature. How might Ballantyne's under-read novel, now understood to contain more fundamentally complex dimensions than have previously been explored, prompt us to reconsider that critical landscape? Given the predominance of social realist approaches to local fiction when *Sydney Bridge* first appeared, it is easy to see how a novel proclaiming such radical unreliability would seem to sit naturally opposed to a canonically-secure national literature largely realist in its outlook. If social realism – certainly as practised and understood in New Zealand at the time<sup>3</sup> – demanded that local reality be rendered with scrupulous accuracy in order to critique 'the New Zealand condition', then *Sydney Bridge* holds a distinct and separable set of concerns. I canvas critical regard for the novel – such as it is, in light of the novel's own critical marginalisation – and in particular survey Stead, Evans and Jones: critics whose own allegiances are

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular Pearson's "Fretful Sleepers", and Chapman's "Fiction and the Social Pattern", both of which call for New Zealand writers of fiction to orient their interest in explicitly social concerns, as both critique and commitment, but thereby necessitating a commitment to realism as well.

largely reflective of the dominant realist approach, and yet who show considerable concern to place the novel in relation to a national literature. But in making this survey another distinct strand in New Zealand literary criticism comes to light. In the decades since the original publication of *Sydney Bridge*, the emergence of a local Gothic has begun to draw increasing critical attention. Notably, Timothy Jones posits that even the most canonically secure social realism – the short stories of Sargeson – can be reread as local Gothic literature. It is here that the full dimensions of the novel's synthetic markers come into their own. Now understanding Harry's backstory as a narrative within a narrative, and one which pitches his unreliability into radical doubt, we can apprehend that the whole novel comprises a Gothic backstory but one narrated as if from within a social realist present. I parse the novel's Gothic elements to make the claim that not only is Harry a radically unreliable narrator, but one whose tendencies to Gothic turns mount a sly but forceful complaint with the limits of local social realism itself.

## Chapter One:

### *Unreliable Narrators & Reliable Readers*

#### Introduction

The notion of the implied author has been central to debates about how we recognise unreliable narration since Booth first introduced the concept in the early 1960s. Although *Sydney Bridge Upside Down* doesn't require us to radically refigure the implied author in light of these arguments, the critical debate has given rise to a range of other distinctions which are fundamental to understanding our engagement with Harry Baird's unreliability. I begin by mapping the shift from Booth's original conception of the implied author, understood as an extension of the living author, whose norms and values both embody and are embodied by the narrative, to more recent constructions of the concept which, critical of Booth, suggest an implied author is better thought of as an authorial entity inferred by the reader.

I argue that the debate about the implied author has resulted in an agreement between critically-divided camps, that finding the locus of unreliability means first reading the text as finely as possible to understand how unreliability is signalled as a purely textual property. I then show how this point of critical agreement has given rise to taxonomical understandings of unreliability. Arguably such taxonomies have now replaced Booth's original concept as the definitional baseline. In particular I explore Phelan's six-part taxonomy, which allows us to resolve – or 'reliably read' – the unreliable accounts of even the most complex unreliable narrators – narrators whose modes and kinds of unreliability are changeable, often reflecting complicated psychological states in flux.

To conclude the chapter, however, I suggest that Phelan's taxonomy is so precise that it presents a potential pitfall for critics who assume that all unreliable narration can be so neatly resolved. I argue instead that while tightly-wrought taxonomies of unreliability (such as Phelan's) provide critical

frameworks which yield more sophisticated readings of unreliable narration, they also allow for a new category of unreliability altogether. What I call radically unreliable narrations, like *The Turn of the Screw* and *Sydney Bridge*, are narratives whose narrators' unreliability is clear, and yet accounting precisely for the exact contours of their unreliability is left permanently out of reach. Approaching these kinds of unreliable narrations with taxonomical distinctions in mind shows some of the assumptions written into earlier accounts of unreliability – for instance, that for every unreliable narrator's account there must be, of logical necessity, a reliable counterpoint which savvy readers can reconstruct, whether from, or in spite of, the narrator's misdirections. By denying such interpretive resolutions, such radically unreliable narrators – what I will go on to theorise as 'unsecured narrators' – install unreliability itself as a fundamental textual principle and direct our deepest critical engagement to the mechanics of unreliability itself.

#### *From the implied author to the inferring reader*

While Booth first coined the term 'unreliable narrator' in his landmark work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), by now the most basic definitions of unreliable narration are well-rehearsed. And yet, although a critical concept that, in Nünning's words, is "considered to be among the basic and indispensable categories of textual analysis," the unreliable narrator is also – and as Nünning's own interest in the field shows – one of the most highly contested in narrative theory ("Reconceptualizing" 89-90). Booth's oft-quoted purpose with *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was to consider "the rhetorical resources available to the writer of [fiction] as he tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader" (xiii). Describing the degrees and orders of distance – from identification to deeply held moral objection – that seem to organise the relationships between author, narrator, characters and reader, Booth declared that "For practical criticism probably the most important of these kinds of distance is that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator" (158).

As the subsequent output of practical criticism in narrative theory demonstrates, Booth's words now seem little short of prophetic; since *The Rhetoric of Fiction* appeared, numerous studies in narratology show that Booth's propositions on narrative unreliability have been widely endorsed, sharply contested and equally thereafter defended and refined.

And yet despite the debate, Nünning is right to observe that Booth's formulation of unreliable narration has come to seem as if canonically enshrined: "[comparing] definitions provided in standard narratological works, in scholarly articles, and in glossaries of literary terms shows that the great majority of narratologists have followed Booth, providing almost identical definitions of the unreliable narrator" ("Reconceptualizing" 89). Booth's position, to call "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" (emphasis original, *Fiction* 158-59), is critically inscribed: for instance, almost thirty years later, in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987), the unreliable narrator is defined as one "whose norms and behavior are not in accordance with the implied author's norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgments, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author; [or] a narrator the reliability of whose account is undermined by various features of that account" (101).

What Nünning finds most contentious in the description proposed by Booth and maintained by Prince is that defining the unreliable narrator depends on defining the so-called 'implied author': "Despite the good job Prince does in summarizing the *communis opinio*," writes Nünning, "this definition is marred by vagueness, because the only yardstick it offers for gauging a narrator's unreliability is the implied author, whose status and norms are more difficult to ascertain than one might think" ("Reconceptualizing" 91; see also "But" 86, and "Unreliable" 55). Nünning has good grounds to question the status of the implied author and yet he perhaps overstates his case against Prince: of the three determinations proposed only two invoke Booth's recourse to an implied author. The third definition hints, if

somewhat indistinctly, that unreliability might be detected as textual phenomena.

Despite Nünning's misgivings, Prince's full, three-pronged definition indicates the divide to have organised the critical field since Booth's original formulation appeared.<sup>4</sup> The implied author has featured prominently in theories and accounts of unreliable narration but not exclusively so, and not without considerable critical contention. Booth's widely-dispersed definition may have held general sway for many years, but as Phelan notes, within the field itself, "narrative theorists have debated the utility of the concept of the implied author almost from the day that Booth introduced it" (*Living* 38). Recent descriptions of unreliable narration have often reflected the critical pushback against Booth's perceived theoretical shortcomings, offering alternative and convincingly argued means of handling unreliable narration without necessary recourse to an implied author (see, for instance, Shen, "Unreliability"). Others have retained the implied author as an important element in figuring unreliable narration but in remodelled forms. Most pertinently to my interest, whether the implied author is kept in or out of the critical equation, one general upshot of the debate has been to look to the text itself as the essential determinant in detecting unreliable narration. Hence I begin by charting the historical interrogation of the implied author as a locus of unreliability to articulate and justify how textual signals in and of themselves have increasingly come to be regarded as source indicators of unreliability.

The concept of an abstracted authorial entity held only to account for and by the workings of a single text is not Booth's own or unique invention.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that as recently as 2005 Booth continued to defend his original concept ("Why Bother"), and that critics such as Lanser remain unconvinced ("Implied").

<sup>5</sup> A similar concept is prevalent, for instance, in the work of the Russian formalists of the 1920s. Literary critic Yuri Tynjanov used the term "literary personality" as early as 1927 to describe the abstract presence of the author as implied by the text; similarly, in 1926, the linguist Viktor Vinogradov began to formulate the idea of an "author image", a concept which was later (in the 1970s) more fully developed and defined to describe "the concentrated embodiment of the consciousness of the work" (Schmid, "Implied Author"). Czech structuralists were active alongside their Russian counterparts, Jan Mukařovský in 1937 deciding that the author of a work could only be thought of as an "abstract subject"; and while the work itself indicated this subject, the subject itself must never be confused with the specific individual who wrote the work (Schmid, "Implied Author"). Schmid credits Booth with the



Nevertheless, the narratological surveys and introductions which, Nünning observes, have tended to consecrate Booth's definition of unreliable narration have also established, with similar currency, his idea of implied authorship. This is hardly surprising, given the co-determinacy of the terms in Booth's reckoning. Despite the canonising forces of historical reception, however, many have also taken issue with what they find to be troubling contingencies at play in Booth's definition of unreliable narration, and – again hardly surprising – those contingencies coalesce in particular around the role, efficacy and definition of the implied author.

Among the strongest of the dissenting voices was Tamar Yacobi, who, twenty years after Booth, saw “the importance of the problem of reliability in narrative and in literature as a whole”, but found too that the question was “(predictably) as complex and (unfortunately) as ill-defined as it is important” (“Fictional” 113). Around the same time Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan reckoned similarly, contending in particular that “the values (or ‘norms’) of the implied author are notoriously difficult to arrive at” (101). For Booth, an unreliable narrator “is himself the butt of the ironic point”, with “The author and the reader ... secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting” (*Fiction* 304). And yet as Rimmon-Kenan justly observed, there are “cases where both unreliability and irony could be attributed to the narrator” (103). In other fictional texts detecting the presence or extent of unreliability is notoriously difficult, with some – Rimmon-Kenan offers *The Turn of the Screw* – leaving it virtually impossible, “putting the reader in a position of constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives” (103). But this must leave the implied author's norms beyond reach. And if the norms of the implied author of a given text cannot be apprehended and yet unreliability remains a reasonable possibility, then Booth's definition of unreliable narration seems defective: the implied author

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introduction of the concept to Western narratology and notes too its necessary proximity to Booth's formulations of narrative distance and unreliable narration (“Implied Author”).

concept is rendered suspect as a universally reliable determinant of unreliability.

One possibility might be that, in some cases, narrative uncertainty itself – expressed as a kind of formal paradox – could then count as the ‘authorial norm’. In narratives like *The Turn of the Screw* – and, as I will go on to argue, *Sydney Bridge* – perhaps the point is precisely to induce a sense of unease in the reader, an unease cultivated not simply through a portrait of a character on one psychological brink or another, but through a novel which feels, itself, psychologically divided. But for that, the norms and values of the implied author must apply to more than just social and moral standards. Implied authorial norms and values must extend to aesthetic and formalist values as well.

As far as authorial norms go, Booth generally ignores formal characteristics of works, focussing instead on the ironic distance between narrators, authors and readers measured by the “various kinds of involvement or detachment” falling within the “broad range of moral judgment”. That is, the reader and implied author collude to judge the character narrator on a range of human values, from approval to contempt, or from mild amusement to curiosity (*Fiction* 158). With literary judgements contingent on ‘human values’, morality itself is brought into uncomfortable proximity with the formal values of the text. As Kathleen Wall rightly observes, Booth’s “focus on [the] norms and values [of the implied author] works to establish a morally tinged irony as a central element of unreliable narration” (“Challenges” 20-21). But if moral, then how are the formal, textual indicators of unreliability to be regarded critically, and if such indicators are installed – perhaps by literary convention – as implied authorial norms, is the writer then held up as a kind of “aesthetic arbiter”, a role which Wall is right to point out, “many modern and postmodern writers would quickly eschew” (“Challenges” 20)?

Booth’s problem, therefore, is one of “conflicting objectives” (Kindt & Müller 49). As Booth developed his thesis that fictional narratives are a form of rhetoric, he needed to carry through on his conviction that “the author’s

judgment is always present" (*Fiction* 20). And yet he was obliged to remain primarily concerned with the work itself in formulating the interpretive gesture—especially in light of the intentional and affective fallacies which the New Criticism had established as "heresies of interpretation" and to which he broadly subscribed (Kindt & Müller 50). Given both the critical scepticism for authorial intentionality, and his thesis that fictional narrative techniques could be better understood if seen as finely honed instruments of rhetoric, it is hardly surprising that Booth worked hard to fashion an alternative authorial entity to suit his purpose.

The implied author Booth developed in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* was an extension or a distillation of the actual person who wrote the fiction, a consciously and purposively "'implied' version of himself" (70); but Booth also contended that

the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which this implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form. (73-74)

It is here that Nünning finds the fatal "lack of clarity and theoretical incoherence" of Booth's conception:

Structural narratologists have pointed out that it is a contradiction in terms to define the implied author as the structure of the text's norms and thus to conflate it with the text as a whole, while also casting it in the role of the addresser in the communication model of narrative. They have argued that an entity cannot be both a distinct agent in the sequence of narrative transmission and the text itself; furthermore, if the implied author is equivalent to the whole text, and if his or her counterpart the implied reader is also presumed to be a textual function, then the implied author is equivalent to or a subsumption of the implied reader. ("Reconceptualizing" 92)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Though Schmid credits Booth with directly introducing the implied reader in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, as part of the same conceptual move which delivered the implied author ("Implied Reader"), Booth

While Booth's definition of unreliable narration has broadly persisted, many of its adherents have sought to tighten its terms in the face of such theoretical quandaries. In *Coming to Terms* (1990), Seymour Chatman succinctly rationalised the implied author, neatly tracing the logic of Booth's model but also suggesting its limitations to indicate how the definition might begin to be overhauled. Writes Chatman:

Without the implied author, narratology and literary criticism lose an important distinction. The test case here is the possibility of unreliable or "discrepant" narration. The narrator alone tells or shows the text, and if we cannot accept his account, we must infer that it belongs to someone (or something) else. If all meanings—implicit as well as explicit—are the products of the text's activity, and if this activity always presupposes agency, then we have to posit some such text principle or agent as the implied author. Thus, it is the implied authors of Ford Madox Ford's *Good Soldier*, of Ring Lardner's "Haircut," and of all the other "suspicious"

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himself only incorporated the phrase in the afterword to the second edition in 1983, by which time he was able to draw on the work of Wolfgang Iser, the pioneer of 1970s reception theory, and whose book, *The Implied Reader*, had appeared in translation in 1974, two years after its original publication in German. What Booth had called the "postulated reader", in 1961, he later referred to on occasion as the "implied reader", in keeping with Iser's terminology and suggesting the terms were so compatible as to be used interchangeably. Rudolf E. Kuenzli discerningly observed, however, that Iser's "notion of the 'implied reader' can be regarded as a *development* of Booth's concept of the 'implied author.'" (emphasis added, "Interview: Wolfgang Iser" 57), while Booth himself, in a notable exchange with Iser in 1980, admitted that he hadn't completely understood for himself what Iser meant with his still recently-coined term ("Interview" 67). Staunchly committed to a phenomenological approach to literary theory, Iser's next step was to more finely interrogate the reading process itself and thereby formalise the 'implied reader' concept. Iser's stated aim, to describe the "dynamic process" by which literature produces meaning through the "*convergence* of text and reader" (emphasis added, *Reader* 275-76), surely bears somewhat on Booth's goal, to consider "the author's means of controlling the reader" (*Fiction* xiii), but does so by balancing, rather than strictly opposing Booth's formulations, considering the rhetorical argument from the subject position of the reader. Writes Iser: "[Booth's] transformation of the reader into the image created by the author, does not take place through rhetoric alone. The reader has to be stimulated into certain activities, which may be guided by rhetorical signposts, but which lead to a process that is not merely rhetorical. Rhetoric, if it is to be successful, needs a clearly formulated purpose, but ... it can only rouse the expectations necessary for its efficacy if it is not set out in words. The reader must be made to feel for himself the new meaning of the novel" (*Reader* 30). The "radical enquiry", then, which Iser sets for himself, is to find and uncover no less than a "rhetoric of reading" (*Reader* 30). In this, Iser clearly anticipates not only cognitivist/constructivist critics of unreliable narration, such as Yacobi and Nünning, who argue explicitly that unreliability in narrators be allowed to vary from reader to reader, but also the conjoining of rhetorical and cognitivist/constructivist strategies in better apprehending the place of real readers in theories of implied readership, and how these bear on theories of unreliable narration—see pp. 31-43.

novels and stories in Booth's "gallery" who are the sources of the "true" stories. (*Coming* 90)

Chatman seems to commit the cardinal sin according to Nünning, who abhors those "Critics who argue that a narrator's unreliability is to be gauged in comparison to the norms of the implied author". For Nünning, such critics merely "shift the burden of determination onto a critical passepartout that is itself notoriously ill-defined" ("Reconceptualizing" 91). There are strong grounds to Nünning's view, but Chatman at least recognises the need to tighten Booth's definition; he avoids defining the implied author as a persona but articulates instead a communication model of unreliable character narration which creates the space for a hypothetically-drawn implied author.

For Booth, the implied author is necessarily an extension of the flesh and blood author: while the novelist "can seldom afford to pour his untransformed biases into his work", ultimately the work depends on, and carries the traces of, "the author's individuality" (*Fiction* 70). Chatman prefers to adumbrate the space in which the implied author is taken to be in force, suggesting a conceptual entity deduced by measuring the dimensions and dynamics of textual interpretation. He describes a literary effect that comprises first, the detection of unreliability; second, the existence of a reliable set of meanings recoverable from the text; and third, the extrapolation that, since text denotes agency of some kind, those meanings must be recoverable by recourse to "someone (or something)" other than the unreliable narrator. If we consider the 'someone or something' of Chatman's formulation, we can see too that we need not hold in mind an author figure as such, but, as he calls it, a "text principle". In doing so he reduces the moral problem by suggesting that 'authorial norms' might be seen as the norms implied by the text itself. So although Chatman defends the implied author, he also overhauls its terms in a way that speaks to one of Nünning's particular concerns. By holding that the implied author is extrapolated from the text *after* the detection of unreliability, he suggests that the implied author, though still the source of the text's norms and values, is nevertheless found through the interpretive act of the reader as they engage

with the text rather than how they imagine the author as a persona. Chatman thus begins to address Nünning's discontent with conventional theories of unreliable narration which "leave unclear how the narrator's unreliability is apprehended in the reading process" ("Reconceptualizing" 92).

Wall similarly maintains the concept of an implied author but points to some of the limits of Booth's formulation. In Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Wall finds a novel which "questions the concept of an ironic distance between the mistaken, benighted, biased, or dishonest narrator and the implied author, who, in most models, is seen to communicate with the reader entirely behind the narrator's back" ("Challenges" 18). Wall makes a compelling case, through her close reading of Ishiguro's narrator, Stevens the butler, "to formulate new paradigms of unreliability for the narrator whose split subjectivity, rather than moral blindness or intellectual bias, gives rise to unreliable narration" ("Challenges" 23). And yet the implied author remains in force throughout her discussion nonetheless:

Stevens's recognition, at the end of the novel, that in order to salvage some sense of dignity from his life he has had to create interpretations that do not quite square with events, and his attempt to recognize and resolve his illusions, mitigates the ironic effect of the narration and closes the distance between the implied author and the narrator, between the narrator and the implied reader. As we view Stevens stretching to offer the most searching and honest interpretation of events, that pleasure which Booth believes the audience derives from the irony, from having figured out "what really happened," is diminished.

Indeed, the novel may be seen to be *about* Stevens's attempts to grapple with his unreliable memories and interpretations and the havoc that his dishonesty has played on his life. The issue of unreliability thus saturates both form and content, making this novel an ideal vehicle for exploring, more methodically and in more detail, how narrative unreliability is communicated and what devices the implied author has at his disposal for constructing two contradictory voices that we hear simultaneously. (Emphasis original, "Challenges" 23)

Thus, as Wall clings somewhat to the implied author she also makes a case to radically reduce its value, at least in the moral terms of Booth's prescription. In her hands, the ironic effects of Stevens's narration are mitigated, the ironic distance narrowed, and the pleasure of the audience itself refined, as its attention is turned from trying to reorder a series of misreported events to the finer exercise of gauging how well – which is to say, how searchingly, how honestly – their narrator has handled memory and interpretation. Effectively, then, Wall reads *Remains of the Day* as a novel which takes the reader closer to a fuller range of narrative and literary effects than those which, falling on Booth's broad scale of moral judgements, "too frequently imply an ironic distance that is inherently critical, [with] the implied author and implied reader silently nudging one another in the ribs at the folly and delusion of the narrator" ("Challenges" 21).

For Nünning, Wall produces "arguably [one] of the best critiques of classical theories of unreliable narration to date", and yet, frustratingly, "hold[s] on to the implied author as though he or she, or rather it, was the only possible way of accounting for unreliable narration" ("Reconceptualizing" 91). Wall's reading of *Remains of the Day* does cleave to Booth's traditional wisdom in places, but it also shows what critical departures from it might look like as well. In a subtle refiguring of Boothian irony, Wall writes that "there is a distance between what the narrator says and what the whole structure shaped by the implied author 'means,' which produces structural irony" ("Challenges" 21). In doing so Wall chimes with Nünning's concern for "*how* a narrator's unreliability is actually determined by the reader" (emphasis added, "Reconceptualizing" 93); she observes that while

definitions of unreliability have focused on the distance between the 'norms and values' of the author and those articulated by the narrator's words or behaviour, early work on unreliable narration left it unclear *how* those distances were apprehended by the reader. (Emphasis added, "Challenges" 18)

Wall challenges Chatman in particular over his suggestion that detecting narrative unreliability is simply a matter of locating discrepancies between

story and discourse. In post-Boothian fashion, Chatman, in *Story and Discourse* (1978), had argued that “In ‘unreliable narration’ the narrator’s account is at odds with the implied reader’s surmises about the story’s real intentions”, and thus that “The story undermines the discourse”. For Chatman

We conclude, by “reading out,” between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been “like that,” and so we hold the narrator suspect. Unreliable narration is thus an ironic form. ... The implied reader senses a discrepancy between a reasonable reconstruction of the story and the account given by the narrator. Two sets of norms conflict, and the covert set, once recognized, must win. The implied author has established a secret communication with the implied reader. (*Story* 233)

Wall argues instead that “sometimes the discourse itself offers clues to narrators’ unreliability, their verbal tics giving us some indication of preoccupations that render their narration problematic” (“Challenges” 19). As she understands, very often “the verbal indicators of mental habits that lead to unreliability are located *within* the discourse” (emphasis added, 20). While questioning the concept of Booth’s implied author if it means we revert to moral judgements to determine unreliability, Wall implicitly encourages scrutinising the text itself to more finely apprehend how the signals of unreliability work as formal features.

In *Coming to Terms*, twelve years on from *Story and Discourse*, Chatman continued to refine his notion of the implied author. Still following a broadly rhetorical agenda, and ostensibly offering “a defense of the ‘implied author’ against various kinds of attack” (3), Chatman reflected that “the question of what the text means (not just what it ‘says’) varies radically from reader to reader, from interpretive community to interpretive community”. From this point of view “we might better speak of the ‘inferred’ than of the ‘implied’ author” (77).<sup>7</sup> With a sniff of triumphalism Nünning calls out Chatman for

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<sup>7</sup> Chatman’s notion of an implied reader, then, develops similarly; if, in *Story and Discourse*, his implied reader resonates strongly with Booth’s notion of the “postulated reader” of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, then his (Chatman’s) refinement from an implied to an inferred author in *Coming to Terms*, based on the radically wide-ranging interpretations which real readers may bring to bear in interpretation, resonates more strongly with Iser’s implied reader—that is, the reader “as a heuristic concept” (“Interview” 71), by which critics can profitably understand and work with the “graded range of relationships between



laying down a “redefinition [of the implied author] masquerading as a defense” (“Reconceptualizing” 92). Nonetheless Chatman’s reformulation sits altogether closer to the terms which Nünning himself prefers. Nünning rightly points out that while “the concept of the implied author ... creates the illusion [of] a purely textual phenomenon ... it is obvious from many of the definitions that the implied author is a construct established by the reader on the basis of the whole structure of a text” (“Reconceptualizing” 91). Indeed, Rimmon-Kenan had already admitted as much, deciding that “the implied author must be seen as a construct inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text”. As she writes, “speaking of the implied author as a construct based on the text seems to [her] far safer than imagining it as a personified ‘consciousness’ or ‘second self’” (*Narrative Fictions* 87).<sup>8</sup>

And yet as we have seen, Nünning finds important points of agreement with his rhetorically-minded counterparts, who have themselves drifted closer to Nünning’s view. Like Nünning, Phelan apprehends that “Booth sometimes represents the implied author as an external agent who constructs the text and at others as a functional equivalent of the text” (*Living* 39). Both sides effectively agree that this makes Booth’s definition of the implied author essentially contradictory and hence, as Phelan observes, now “most narratologists who

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the real reader and his role” (70). While Booth’s postulated reader is one whose values can be, in general, easily assumed by a real reader, Iser revels in the complications which such models of reader identification also suggest: “Even if he [the real reader] is absorbed in the role, his preferences, dispositions and attitudes will still govern his relationship to what the role offers him” (70). For Iser, reading produces a split between the real self and the reading self which in turn creates the experience, in the reading subject, of “a contrapuntally structured personality” (*The Act of Reading* 156). See also p 26n6.

<sup>8</sup> Mieke Bal puts the ‘danger’ more explicitly, arguing from a structuralist position. Bal suggests the implied author is less a critical tool than a sleight of hand serving dubious rhetorical strategies whereby critical readings which are partial, particular and contingent may be installed as whole, universal and definitive. Gaston Franssen neatly summarises Bal’s line of thinking: “under the guise of an ‘objective’ reading, the interpreter simply makes us believe that he or she is summing up the meanings that are supposed to be intrinsic to the [text], and that these would give us an idea of the intention of the implied author” (“Good Intentions” 92). Hence, for Bal, the danger is double-sided: “The concept [of the implied author] allowed projections of meanings by the critics to be unproblematically attributed to the author, thus, literally, *authorizing* interpretations while obscuring the hand that makes them—the critic’s” (emphasis original, *Travelling Concepts* 271). It follows that Bal finds no place for the implied author in narratology since if it first allows intentionality back into the critical frame and second rules out alternative interpretations, then it is, by definition, outside the bounds of the narrative system, the description of which narratology takes as its objective (*Narratology* 18).

follow Booth seek to make the implied author a textual function rather than an independent agent" (*Living* 40). Faced with mutually exclusive alternatives, Chatman, for instance, installs the implied author (and the implied reader) as agents implied within the text, but as textual agents only, distinct from the real author and real reader (*Story* 151). Thus, narratologists of Booth's rhetorical persuasion have acknowledged the logical weakness in Booth's definition and thereafter looked to strengthen one component of Booth's definition while quietly laying the other aside. The implied author then is still a useful tool for readers negotiating unreliable accounts, but only insofar as it may be inferred from the text. If this ameliorates somewhat Nünning's concern for theories of unreliable narration which overlook *how* readers recognise and attribute unreliability, it must also redirect us to pay greater attention to the text itself, allowing the full complexity of textual signifiers of unreliability to come into view. Unreliability may be thus regarded as a textual phenomenon and hence the mechanics of unreliability themselves more finely accounted for.

### *Conjoining rhetorical and cognitivist strategies*

The discussion so far has sought to trace a notable and far-reaching shift in the critical field: from the widespread usage of Booth's understanding of unreliable narration, contingent on an implied author with whom the reader colludes to make the speaker the object of derisive irony, to post-Boothian advances where theoretical refinements of implied authorship both underline some of the missteps of Booth's theory and amend it in ways which bring it closer to critics opposed to Booth's formulation. By weighing the respective contentions of critics drawn on here, we can see an increasing tendency to look ever more closely at the workings of textual phenomena, to re-examine how the machinery of the text itself is critically approached with an aim to better understand what unreliability is, how it works at a mechanical level, and how readers recognise it.

Nünning frames the wider debate over the involvement of the implied author in unreliable narration according to a broad division between rhetorical

approaches to the problem on one side, and cognitive/constructivist approaches on the other ("Reconceptualizing" 89). Dan Shen usefully elucidates the critical division between the two approaches:

The first group, which far exceeds the second in number, treats unreliability as a textual property encoded by the implied author for the implied reader to decode; this group adopts a rhetorical approach. By contrast, the second group, which favors a constructivist/cognitive approach, focuses on the interpretive process and regards unreliability as being dependent on actual readers' divergent readings for its very existence. ("Unreliability")

And yet although critics discussing unreliability essentially fall into one of two groups, Shen recognises "a certain degree of overlap between them" ("Unreliability"). Consolidating the overlap, Nünning (from the cognitive side) has made significant advances in recent times, "realigning the relation between the cognitive and the rhetorical approaches" ("Reconceptualizing" 90).

Nünning proceeds on the understanding that

If the rhetorical approach with its emphasis on the recursive relations among (implied) author, textual phenomena or signals, and reader response encompasses the cognitive narratologist's emphasis just on reader and text, then the cognitive approach can nevertheless provide more finely nuanced tools for recognizing an unreliable narrator. ("Reconceptualizing" 104)

Nünning calls for "a more subtle and systematic account of the clues to unreliable narration, including more sophisticated analyses of the interplay between textual data and interpretive choices" ("Reconceptualizing" 105). This is effectively a call to continue working along the same trajectory as has become increasingly apparent (and productive) over the last 30 years, for both cognitive narratologists like Nünning and rhetorical ones like Phelan.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Shen's overview portrays just how complex the negotiation between rhetorical and cognitivist/constructivist strategies has been in recent years, but also how productive, and in spite of fundamentally divided opinions on reading strategies in particular. On those strategies, it is interesting to note how closely the negotiation between rhetorical and cognitivist/constructivist positions vis-à-vis implied versus real readers resembles that between Booth and Iser in respect of the postulated or implied reader, see also pp. 26n6, 31n7.

Since the 1990s Nünning has wanted to reframe the entire question of unreliability in terms that help us better understand “the mechanisms that stand behind the impression that a narrator is of questionable reliability” (“But” 87). In part he meant making fuller use of the cognitive narratologist’s toolbox, to more precisely articulate how the reader apprehends the psychological particularities of the narrator with recourse to dramatic irony – irony, that is, generated from “the discrepancy between the intentions and value system of the narrator and the foreknowledge and norms of the reader” (“But” 87-88). Unreliable narration becomes an example of dramatic irony since it contrasts the narrator’s view of whatever fictional world he or she inhabits against “the divergent state of affairs which the reader can grasp”; thereafter “The reader interprets what the narrator and/or the text says in two quite different contexts” (“But” 87). Hence, “Unreliable narrators are those whose perspective is in contradiction to the value and norm system of the whole text or to that of the reader” (“But” 87). Unreliable narration remains a function of irony, as it was for Booth, but the ironic loop of the rhetorical approach has been radically redirected.<sup>10</sup> First, the implied author has been replaced with ‘the whole text’ as an indicator of norms and values; and second, even the whole text itself only counts as one possible authority on norms and values – the other being the reader. Thus, not only is the reader newly empowered (as both an individual and a culturally embedded decoder of text) but so too the text, itself now suggested to be a source of multiple meanings because a site of many possible interpretations.<sup>11</sup>

Nünning’s critical move here looks like a power grab for cognitive narratology, and yet replacing the implied author with ‘the whole text’ as a source of norms and values allows a point of reconciliation between rhetorical

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<sup>10</sup> In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, for example, Booth makes clear his case that “dealing with irony shows us the sense in which our court of appeal is still a conception of the author: when we are pushed about any ‘obvious interpretation’ we finally want to be able to say, ‘It is inconceivable that the author could have put these words together in this order without having intended this precise ironic stroke’” (11-12).

<sup>11</sup> See also pp. 26n6, 31n7, 34n9.

and cognitive modes.<sup>12</sup> Nünning is acutely aware that “Proponents of rhetorical approaches to narrative have taken cognitive narratologists to task for throwing out the textual baby with the bathwater of the implied author”; and that rhetorical narratologists “have criticized the cognitive theory of unreliable narration for overstating the role of the reader at the expense of the author’s agency and the textual signals of unreliability” (“Reconceptualizing” 99). Phelan, for instance, argues persuasively that radical cognitive and constructivist notions of unreliability that are completely given over to accounting for variations between different readers overlook the many constraints imposed not only by texts and reading conventions, but, through logical extension, by the designers of the texts themselves, their (implied) authors. Phelan’s prime contention is thus that Nünning’s case for constructivist reading does not invalidate the case for rhetorical reading (*Living* 48). In turn, Nünning admits that, as Phelan believes, “The interpretive move to read textual inconsistencies as a signal of unreliability after all does not make much hermeneutic sense if it does not proceed from the assumption that someone designed the inconsistency as a signal of unreliability” (“Reconceptualizing” 99). The point where Nünning and Phelan meet, then, is at the text itself as the bearer of textual inconsistencies. More specifically, it is in the shared (often contested) critical space where the interface of the text is combed for deliberately planted signals of unreliability.

The relationship here between cognitivists and rhetoricians is delicate but negotiable. With finely honed and conjoined readings of both fiction and theory, Phelan manages not merely to find the middle ground between critically divided camps but earns the right, even in Nünning’s view, to reinstall the implied author of Booth’s imagining as an extension of the living author. Phelan’s redefinition carries an exacting judgement, considering the

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<sup>12</sup> As Shen suggests, the reconciliation between rhetorical and cognitive approaches can be seen directly in what she calls Nünning’s “shifting position” (“Unreliability”). Nünning’s earlier opposition to the rhetorical strategy is marked by arguments against the implied author (“Deconstructing and Reconstructing”, “Unreliable, Compared to What?”), but Nünning’s problem is ameliorated when the text itself is held as an ‘indicator’ of unreliability, rather than an ‘arbiter’ of norms and values as the rhetorically implied author might seem to suggest.

implied author not as an arbiter of moral norms in the manner of Booth, but as a conscious construction of the flesh-and-blood author, invented with and for the construction of the *particular* fictional text ("Reconceptualizing" 99). In Phelan's own words: "*the implied author is a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of the particular text*" (emphasis original, *Living* 45). The implied author in Phelan's formulation is simultaneously "a construction *by* and a partial representation *of* the real author (emphasis added, "Reconceptualizing" 99). As Phelan and Nünning both note, the model avoids the downfalls of other conceptions – from Booth's conflations of text and author, to Chatman's and Rimmon-Kenan's explorations of the implied author as textual phenomena, to the reader-inferred author derived from cognitive narratology (*Living* 45, "Reconceptualizing" 99). Yet it navigates these earlier definitions as well, in a sense, therefore, descending from each.

From the other side of the critical divide, as Nünning installs the whole text as a baseline for establishing norms and values he encourages greater attention be paid to the detailed workings of textual phenomena. This meets head-on the broad rhetorical allegation that cognitive theory subordinates textual signalling to reader response. He details a number of "definable textual inconsistencies which function as clues to unreliability", including those between story and discourse, but also discrepancies between utterance and action, and between the narrator's representation of events and his or her explanations and interpretations of them ("But" 96). Following Wall ("Challenges"), Nünning also observes that the verbal habits or stylistic peculiarities of unreliable narrators play a part in determining a narrator's reliability or otherwise. For instance, pragmatic indicators of unreliability include an excess of either speaker-oriented or addressee-oriented expressions: compulsive monologists often turn out to be egotists and hence unreliable, while it is hard to read a narrator's constant addressing of the narratee as anything other than desperate self-justification – clearly the case, as Nünning

rightly observes, with Ishiguro's butler Stevens ("But" 97). Following in part Monika Fludernik's thorough linguistic categorisation of expressivity and subjectivity (*Fictions* 227-79), Nünning notes "the close link between subjectivity on the one hand and the effect called unreliability on the other" ("But" 97).

Shen, who advances cognitive concerns, also recognises a syntactic relationship between subjectivity and unreliability, noting "The potential unreliability inherent in free indirect thought as a mode in itself" ("Unreliability and Characterization" 302). A host of other syntactic and lexical features can signal unreliability: from exclamations, interjections, hesitations and unmotivated repetitions, to evaluative modifiers, expressive intensifiers and adjectives expressing the narrator's attitude. Unreliability can be signalled where texts are narrated by different characters with competing or inconsistent versions of, or ethical viewpoints on, the same events or characters. Or characters may directly and indirectly refer to their own cognitive limitations through their choice of words and phrases. As Nünning writes of Dowell, "the obtuse and gullible narrator" of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*:

His repeated use of such words as 'think' or 'guess' and, even more, his acknowledged ignorance, indicate a very weak degree of certitude, something that is underlined by the phrase "I don't know", arguably the most prominent leitmotif in the novel. The fact that Dowell, just like many other unreliable narrators, repeatedly admits that he doesn't remember exactly what happened serves to underline that he is anything but a reliable reporter. ("But" 97)

Rimmon-Kenan had earlier advocated defining unreliability by specifying how the reader recognises unreliability through textual markers:

A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect. There can, of course, be different degrees of unreliability. But how can the reader know whether he is supposed to trust or distrust the narrator's account? What indications does the text give him one way or the other? Signs of

*unreliability* are perhaps easier to specify, and reliability can then be negatively defined by their absence. (Emphasis original, 100)

Rimmon-Kenan downplays recognising unreliable narration with recourse to an implied author. Instead, textual analysis is prolonged. Linger on the definable indicators of unreliability begins to parse the Boothian definition in something of the manner which Nünning (later) advocates, suggesting crucial distinctions between the textual signals of unreliability and their recognition by the discerning reader.

Similarly, Wall's exacting observation that unreliability sometimes inheres in the discourse itself – meaning that unreliability is not only generated from a conflict between story and discourse – prefigures aspects of Nünning's argument that looking more finely to the whole text negates the need for the implied author. While much of Wall's thinking strongly derives from the rhetorical tradition, much she proposes is compatible with Nünning's cognitive approach and his constructivist sympathies. Sceptical of Booth's notion of ironic distance marking the transmission space between mistaken narrator, implied author, and knowing reader, Wall criticises Chatman for embracing the same model and thus conceiving of unreliable narration in terms which are altogether too narrow to fully account for the complexities of unreliability:

While definitions of unreliability have focused on the distance between the "norms and values" of the author and those articulated by the narrator's words or behavior, early work on unreliable narration left it unclear how those distances were apprehended by the reader. Chatman, for instance, suggests a kind of intuitive process of "reading between the lines" which is based on his perception that the narrator's unreliability is largely a matter of misreporting *events* ... (Emphasis original, "Challenges" 18)

Wall hints at an important limitation written into Chatman's definition as he offered it in the late 1970s: if unreliability is only locatable when events are misreported, then discourse itself is short-changed in a critical sense, and other types of unreliability – such as those arising from mistaken values or limited knowledge – are subordinated to minor or outlier status, deviations from the critical norm.



Chatman's perception that unreliable narration occurs on the axis of events also leaves out of the critical equation psychological elements. Such elements are themselves both evident in the makeup of character narrators and bear directly on how the reader interprets their narratives. For Wall, then — here showing strong cognitive sympathies — those factors are arguably more fascinating in both human and literary terms:

while the author controls the discourse, how much can the narrator say without being "aware" of the way in which one element of his or her narration calls another element into question? What are the limits of the unreflective, inaccurate narrator? Can we make an absolute distinction between unconscious "slips" or giveaways and conscious declarations?

These questions are brought into play by our recognition that human subjectivity is not entirely coherent; that it is indeed a sight [*sic*] of conflict; that, like unreliable narrators, we frequently "lie" to ourselves, and — with just a shadow of awareness — avoid facts that might undermine the coherence or the purpose of narratives we construct about our lives. ("Challenges" 21)

If the wellspring of unreliability lies in the inchoate subjectivity of the narrator, then first: "discursive indicators of preoccupations that are strong enough to colour the narration might be one of the most readily available signals that the narrator is unreliable — a signal that does not demand the complex cross-referencing that diegetic inconsistencies, for example, require"; and second: "As [many] examples suggest, the narrator's unreliability is frequently manifested in a conflict between the narrator's presentation of scene and his or her interpretive summaries or commentaries, ... signaled by the linguistic habits that indicate how those interpretations might be colored" ("Challenges" 20).

Wall's dismantling of Chatman's over-reliance on "the telling conflict ... between story and discourse" also unpicks, therefore, his confident assertion that, for unreliable narration to occur, the implied author must necessarily achieve a secret communication with the reader ("Challenges" 18-19). Nünning attacks precisely the same notions in Chatman's discussion — first that unreliability means 'reading between the lines', and second that the irony

transpires 'behind the narrator's back'. Like Wall, Nünning suggests the critical slackness can be tightened with closer attention to the workings of the text:

standard theories of unreliable narration are methodologically unsatisfactory because they either leave unclear how the narrator's unreliability is apprehended or they provide only metaphorical and vague explanations of it. The metaphors that Chatman uses in order to explain how the reader detects the narrator's unreliability are a case in point. He resorts to what is arguably one of the two most popular metaphors in this context, that of 'reading between the lines'. Chatman (1978: 233) argues that readers "conclude, by 'reading out,' between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been 'like that,' and so we hold the narrator suspect". Leaving aside that the repeated use of inverted commas in definitions is not particularly reassuring, one might just note that such observations fail to shed much light on how a narrator's unreliability is apprehended in the reading process.

The second metaphor that critics continually employ in order to account for unreliable narration is that something is going on 'behind the narrator's back'. Chatman (1978: 233), for instance, suggests that the implied author establishes "a secret communication with the implied reader". Riggan (1981: 13) not only uses almost exactly the same phrase but he also says quite unequivocally that "the presence of the implied author's hand is always discernible behind the narrator's back" (77). He does not, however, bother to enlighten the uninitiated as to how the hand of the omnipresent implied author behind the narrator's back may in fact be discerned. ("But" 89-90)

Nünning justly takes Chatman to task for resorting – unthinkingly in Nünning's view – to foggy metaphors which obscure rather than clarify understanding. Of course, for Nünning, the same fogginess beclouds the "very elusive and opaque notion" of the implied author in the first place ("Reconceptualizing" 91). Nünning's disdain for the 'popular metaphors' undergirding much post-Boothian thinking locates quite precisely the critical softness he finds in definitions of unreliable narration which default to the implied author. And yet Nünning recognises the rhetorical justification of the implied author for how it could tighten standards of interpretation by deferring

to an authorial consciousness which would, therefore, keep “a check on the potentially boundless relativism of interpretation” (“Reconceptualizing” 92). But for Nünning, Chatman’s tabling of “unreliable or ‘discrepant’ narration” as the “test case” which confirms the necessity of the implied author goes too far. Chatman argues, apparently quite cogently, that “If all meanings – implicit as well as explicit – are the products of the text’s activity, and if this activity always presupposes agency, then we have to posit some such text principle or agent as the implied author” (emphasis added, *Coming* 90).<sup>13</sup> Cognitive narratologists would argue strongly against the justness of Chatman’s double-jointed conditional clause: not *all* meanings are necessarily the products of the text’s activity in a way that presupposes authorial agency. Vera Nünning, for instance, makes a strong case that perceptions of unreliability within a given text can develop and alter radically over time as both readers’ cultural norms and literary conventions change, hence fundamentally altering interpretation and thus literary ‘meaning’ (“Historical”).

Nonetheless, (Ansgar) Nünning approves of clamping down on unchecked subjectivities in the interpretive domain and therefore validates part of the rhetorical desire for an interpretive arbiter. Furthermore, some aspects of the rhetorical methods which Nünning so deplores as slack forms of literary criticism nonetheless illuminate – or demonstrate a deeper compatibility with – his own cognitive and constructivist ideals. Rightly severe on those rhetorical metaphors which conjure authorial hands signalling behind the backs of unwitting narrators to implied readers, his preferred notion, that readers interpret the surface of the text by bringing to bear their own cultural norms, nevertheless describes a hermeneutical manoeuvre which bears marked similarities to a reader unpacking what might be contained ‘between the lines’. Nünning holds that readers infer from the text ‘meanings’ which are not, strictly, those contained or expressed linguistically, but are culturally embedded as – for instance – biases, assumptions, norms and values, as well as aptitude with literary conventions. Nünning doesn’t so much do away with the

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<sup>13</sup> See also p 27.

idea of ‘reading between the lines’ but his own model – perhaps unwittingly – accounts reasonably well for what that metaphor seems to imply. As Shen observes: “when constructivist and cognitivist critics, including Yacobi, proceed with analysis of narratorial unreliability, they themselves often take recourse to the methods of the rhetorical approach” (“Unreliability”).<sup>14</sup> The crucial point, then, is to recognise when a hermeneutic strategy is applying rhetorical force or allowing cognitive engagement. Often both are present in the course of the same critical interrogation, so if we understand the difference, we better understand the ramifications of theoretical positions and claims, and the virtually endless variations of applications which might be made of them, from culturally embedded and individuated readers.

### *Towards taxonomies of character narration*

Whereas Nünning was once right to regard Booth’s definition of unreliable narration as if critically canonised, Booth’s model no longer holds such definitive sway given the troubling conception of his implied author. If an implied author whose norms and values – implicitly moral in Booth’s reckoning – have to be shared by the reader, the reader is then made into an accomplice to the implied author’s ironical purpose. Cognitive narratologists are right to suggest that this shuts down interpretive options while it ignores variations between individual readers’ own cultural norms and values. And yet, as we have seen, even among the dissenting voices, very often the notion has remained that unreliable narration, involving a deviation between the norms of the reader and the mistaken narrator, was found, of necessity, in deference to an implied author.

Part of the critical upshot has been to synthesise rhetorical and cognitivist positions by paying finer attention to how unreliability is signalled

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Yacobi’s “Authorial Rhetoric, Narratorial (Un)Reliability, Divergent Readings: Tolstoy’s ‘Kreutzer Sonata’”, and, especially, “Package Deals in Fictional Narrative: The Case of the Narrator’s (Un-)Reliability”, where she draws on McKay (“Formal Analysis of Communicative Processes”), whose scheme shows similarities with the rhetorical approach. Indeed, Shen shows similar recourse (“Why Contextual and Formal Narratologies Need Each Other”; “Implied Author, Authorial Audience, and Context: Form and History in Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory”).

since, as Nünning observes, “most theorists agree [that] a broad range of definable signals provides clues to gauging a narrator’s unreliability” and that among those definable signals are “textual data” (“Reconceptualizing” 105). At the point of reconciliation between rhetorical and cognitive strategies, then, sits the text itself. And if we have seen an increasing tendency on both sides to more finely examine textual indicators of unreliability, recent turns have shown that unreliability as a textual property has also begun to be more finely taxonomized, arguably replacing – certainly challenging – Booth’s model as the most dominant critical account.

Notably, Shen, summarising and explicating the most essential critical moves in the field till 2013, offers an overarching definition of unreliable narration which holds more taxonomical refinement than rhetorical flair: a narrator is, respectively, unreliable or untrustworthy if that narrator “misreports, -interprets or -evaluates, or if she/he underreports, -interprets or -evaluates” (“Unreliability”). Shen’s description is precise, practicable and seemingly clear-cut. But her broad distinction between the narrator who is merely ‘unreliable’ and the one who is more dubiously ‘untrustworthy’ is then underscored by a range of further distinctions, indicating the kinds of complexity arising from a taxonomical approach. And yet that complexity is itself part of the crucial advantage which, it seems to me, is gained from reading unreliability as a series of taxonomical distinctions.

Plainly a finely-honed taxonomy of unreliability offers distinctions between different kinds of unreliability, thereby allowing us to more precisely describe how we have been led to our interpretive judgement, by the (implied) author, as we reconstruct events or read through the discourse to resolve the unreliable narrator’s account. But I want to argue further that taxonomies of unreliability must also acquit themselves by elucidating even those ambiguous narratives such as *Turn of the Screw* or *Sydney Bridge* – novels whose uncertainties to do with narrative unreliability put firm resolutions of unreliability permanently beyond reach. Indeed, in light of the wider debate over unreliability, such novels make just the point that unreliability itself

communicates far more fundamentally literary values than simply to lead readers to deeper ethical observations than unreliable narrators are able to make, nor even to set readers the task of reconstructing ‘what really happened’ in the events behind the unreliable narrator’s warped account. Rather, it is precisely by putting such verdicts beyond reach, yet offering unreliable accounts all the same, that novels such as these might lead the reader to more deeply consider the mechanics of unreliability itself.

In making her distinctions between kinds of unreliability Shen follows the dividing lines laid down by Phelan, who identifies essentially the same six kinds of unreliability: misreporting, misreading, and misevaluating (what he also calls misregarding); and underreporting, underreading, and underregarding (Phelan & Martin 95, *Living* 51).<sup>15</sup> Although Shen’s summarising slightly alters Phelan’s terminology, the divisions she prescribes are, in effect, the same. Following Phelan (*Living* 34-37, 49-53), Shen believes the fundamental distinction between the ‘mis-’ and ‘under-’ categories to be “the basic contrast between being wrong and being insufficient” (“Unreliability”). As far as those insufficiencies go, however, underreporting is a damning form of unreliability if the reader has good reason to suspect the narrator’s motives for doing so – if, for instance, that narrator is later found to have been culpable in a crime or another’s misfortune. On the other hand, a narrator could have strong ethical reasons for choosing to underreport, as in cases where a narrator’s disclosure could implicate another character unfavourably and if the narrator deems this to be at odds with a greater good. In this case, however, the instance of underreporting itself would then direct the authorial audience’s

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<sup>15</sup> “The Lessons of ‘Weymouth’: Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics, and *The Remains of the Day*”, co-authored by Phelan and Patricia Martin, is to a large extent an earlier, more succinct version of Phelan’s chapter concerning *The Remains of the Day* in *Living to Tell about It*, widely quoted and referred to throughout this discussion. The later, book version, however, explicitly notes the input of Martin in two sections of discussion, comprising roughly the final third; the first two-thirds of the discussion is authored as Phelan’s own. Since it is here that Phelan offers his six types of unreliability, and since this taxonomy is the same as that of the earlier, co-authored essay, while many critics refer to Phelan and Martin’s six types of unreliability, it is entirely just to simply refer to the six types of unreliability as Phelan’s, as I have chosen to do here, for clarity and ease of discussion.

attention to whether or not the unreliable narrator had made a sound ethical evaluation to begin with.

But it is for just these reasons that Phelan proposes his distinctions between different kinds of unreliability at all. Phelan's taxonomy is drawn along three discrete axes, each corresponding to what he sees as the three main roles of a narrator: reporting, reading (what Shen calls interpreting), and regarding (also called evaluating). Hence, for Phelan: "unreliable reporting occurs along the axis of characters, facts, and events; unreliable reading (or interpreting) occurs along the axis of knowledge and perception; and unreliable regarding (or evaluating) occurs along the axis of ethics and evaluation" (*Living* 50). Phelan thus develops aspects of the approach inherited from Booth – who left the axis of knowledge and perception relatively underexplored ("Unreliability") – and demonstrates too just how narrow Chatman's preoccupation with the story-discourse discrepancy really is, for it can only show up unreliability on the axis of characters, facts and events ("Challenges" 18-20, "Unreliability"). Phelan's taxonomy, which first appeared in an article co-authored with Martin, in 1999, coincides with Fludernik's view that unreliability could be usefully held to comprise three categories: "factual contradiction, lack of objectivity, and incompatibility of worldview (ideological unreliability)" ("Defining" 75). Fludernik's categories clearly map onto Phelan's tripartite axes of fact, perception, and ethics. Given that Fludernik's chapter appeared in the same year as Phelan and Martin's article, her note that "Nobody has so far tried to properly outline a *comprehensive classification* of the various *types* of unreliability" (emphasis original, 73) feels ironic, but her categorisations of unreliability also add weight to the claims that Phelan's taxonomy represents.

The crucial upshot of Phelan's multiaxial taxonomy is that different types of unreliability can interact or coincide with others within the same narrating subject (*Living* 50-51). Sometimes different kinds of unreliability can be seen to have a causal relationship. For example, Phelan finds that if a character misreports on a matter of fact the misrepresentation is "typically"

founded on what he calls that character's "lack of knowledge or mistaken values" (*Living* 51). That is, the character cannot report accurately if she doesn't know the facts or if she holds a value system which precludes her from reliably reporting. Thus, the cause of misreporting (unreliability on the axis of character, fact or event) most often points to or rests upon unreliability on either – or both – of the other two axes as well: the axis of knowledge and perception, and/or the axis of ethics and evaluation. Shen summarises similarly, finding that "misreporting may be a result of the narrator's insufficient knowledge or mistaken values", and hence that misreporting should "therefore ... concur with misinterpreting or misevaluating" ("Unreliability"). But Shen is also right to note that "the narrator may be reliable in one way and unreliable in another", offering the theoretical example of the narrator who reports events accurately but misinterprets or misevaluates them, or both ("Unreliability"). Susan Lanser had already posited similarly – as early as 1981 – that "a narrator may be quite trustworthy in reporting events but not competent in interpreting them, or may confuse certain facts but have a good understanding of their implications" (*Narrative* 171). Phelan observes – with recourse to a detailed study on the character of Ishiguro's Stevens – first that "a given narrator can be unreliable in different ways at different points in his or her narration", and second that "a narrator can also be unreliable in more than one way at any one point in his narration, ... indeed, misreporting will usually be accompanied by another kind of unreliability" (*Living* 52-53, Phelan and Martin 96).

Just as Phelan has more recently advanced three discrete axes of deviation to detect and measure degrees and kinds of narrative unreliability, Lanser had earlier proposed three axes along which to measure "mimetic authority" – that is, the authority that "the text *itself* generates through skillful construction" (emphasis added, 90). Lanser's three axes are honesty, reliability and narrative skill, each of which have their polar opposite in, respectively, dissimulation, unreliability and narrative incompetence (171). In practice, Lanser's axes do not directly correspond with Phelan's. But far more pointedly,



Phelan teases out Lanser's discrete 'axis of reliability' into three further strands. Lanser's other two axes, honesty and narrative competence, could be similarly explicated, or, as she allows, new axes could be added. However, in looking to avoid the "needless proliferation of categories", she argues "that each of these [axes] may encompass more than one form of competence or reliability" (171-72). This is important for it means that the system she proposes, though tightly wrought, is also adaptable: it is highly structured in itself but may be flexible in its applications. Hence, in cases where a narrator changes (perhaps towards greater honesty or reliability, perhaps away) throughout the course of their narration, or when it becomes "almost impossible to speak with certainty of either a reliable or unreliable voice", it might be "most accurate to indicate two (or theoretically any number of) simultaneous states along these axes" (172). Indeed, it is "precisely for situations like these that [she stresses] the importance of a system that does not betray the plural possibilities of texts themselves" (172). As she summarises, "Complexities such as [a changeable narrator] or dual voice cannot be resolved by forcing a categorization upon the text, nor can the text be fully appreciated and understood without allowing the pluralities to surface" (172). Hence, the structure of Lanser's system strongly prefigures Phelan's.

In turn, Phelan summarises his own taxonomy of narrative unreliability in terms compatible with Lanser's: "In sum," he writes,

I propose my taxonomy not as a new set of tools for an aging Procrustes but rather as a heuristic device designed to sharpen our perceptions of individual acts of unreliable narration. At the same time, recognizing these different kinds of unreliability allows us to move away from the common assumption that reliability and unreliability are a binary pair, that once any unreliability is detected all the narration is suspect, and, instead, to recognize that narrators exist along a wide spectrum from reliability to unreliability with some totally reliable on all axes, some totally unreliable on all, some intermittently unreliable on all, and some unreliable on one or two axes and not on others. (*Living* 53)

For both Lanser and Phelan, then, the systems and taxonomies which may be developed to help clarify the workings of storytelling phenomena like honesty and reliability in narrative texts must strike a balance between precision and practical applicability – noticeably both critics adopt and modify spectra and axes tailored to their discrete critical purposes, but part of that is to bear in mind the unique and sometimes surprising variations in form which narrative texts are likely to deliver.

### *“Reliably Reading the Unreliable Stevens”*

Phelan’s reading of *Remains of the Day* is an exacting demonstration of both what his taxonomy entails as a critical method and how it accounts for even the most challenging of unreliable narratives. Indeed, Phelan’s reading seems to answer Wall’s call for “new paradigms of unreliability”, when she remarked of that novel’s narrator that it is more his “split subjectivity, rather than moral blindness or intellectual bias, [that] gives rise to unreliable narration” (“Challenges” 23).<sup>16</sup> I offer an account of Phelan’s reading now; first to show its rich exactitude in dealing with complex unreliable narration by closely examining the narrator’s entwined roles as reporter, perceiver and evaluator; but second, and as will become increasingly important as this discussion continues, to consider some of the pointed ramifications in applying Phelan’s method to an extreme example of complex unreliable narration – *Sydney Bridge Upside Down*. Phelan offers a model of interpreting unreliability that grounds my own reading of the novel, but it also indicates some of the limitations which the category I propose as ‘insecure narration’ seeks to redress.

Stevens narrates the story of his own heartbreak without ever seeming to understand as much of his situation as the reader of his account: “Ishiguro’s audience,” writes Phelan, “infers a great deal more from Stevens’s narration than he [Stevens] is aware that he is communicating” (*Living* 33). At the end of the novel the reader witnesses Stevens – whose inner, emotional life has been subdued by his duty to professional service – arrive at a kind of self-knowledge

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<sup>16</sup> See p. 28.

which lends a qualified optimism to the possibilities of self-improvement available. On the last page of the novel he resolves to more properly regard the importance of personal relationships – crucially, in terms that recognise not only his own shortcomings as a person but in what they have cost him as opportunities lost: “Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at this whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in – particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth” (258). Stevens’s ultimate realisation that his life has been poorer for a lack of human warmth amounts to his purpose for narrating the tale.

At the same time, and in a way that Stevens himself is unaware of, his self-knowledge is limited and hence transmits another, distinct purpose to readers of the novel. This is what Phelan means when he identifies “Ishiguro’s audience”, implying an authorial audience different to the internal one which Stevens addresses as he narrates his story.<sup>17</sup> Effectively Phelan reads Stevens’s purpose as a kind of fable orchestrated by the author and designed to express a set of values wider or beyond those of the narrator himself. So when Stevens suggests, towards the end of his account, that looking back with regret can serve no good purpose – “After all, what can we ever gain in forever looking back and blaming ourselves if our lives have not turned out quite as we might have wished?” (256) – Phelan believes that Ishiguro is with his narrator to an extent but pushing him towards a higher authorial purpose as well.

For Phelan, Stevens’s newfound knowledge stops short of the insight which Ishiguro conveys to the authorial audience properly attuned to the all the working dimensions of the text. Even so, Phelan has to be read carefully to properly find where the line between narratorial and authorial purpose is drawn. First of all, Phelan finds Stevens’s remark that “in bantering lies the key to human warmth” an overestimation. Specifically, Stevens is unreliable because he underregards: “Bantering can convey warmth,” writes Phelan, “but it does not equal the warmth generated by the intimate and frank disclosure of

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<sup>17</sup> See also pp.12-13.

thoughts and feelings among people who trust each other” (64). Perhaps this is unfair to Stevens, who doesn’t necessarily suggest that bantering can be understood as the sum total of emotional exchange – rather, Stevens seems to imply that, as a ‘key’ to human warmth, banter might make something of a parlour through which one may pass on the way to inhabiting the fuller, more richly and privately cultivated spaces of human feeling. Phelan’s point is that “Ishiguro shows Stevens trying to build on his new self-knowledge without showing him as an unrealistically transformed character” (65). By the end of the novel Stevens may be more open to deeper, more emotional human engagement, but he hasn’t extirpated his emotional repression completely. And indeed, there is a hard irony in the novel’s very closing sentiment in which Stevens’s resolution to more enthusiastically apply himself to the art of repartee is underwritten by a desire that he please his employer in doing so – that is, he justifies his decision for personal improvement, in the end, with recourse to the very authority against which he dashed his chances of achieving personal happiness in the first place. Arguably Stevens misevaluates, but because his unreliability on other axes conveys a human sincerity – such as when he resolves to take up the art of banter – his misevaluation does not damn him in the eye of the reader. For readers to get the irony – as Booth reminds us – both Ishiguro and his audience must be on the same wavelength and together they must be (if only slightly in this case) on another wavelength to Stevens.<sup>18</sup>

This extra wavelength of understanding allows Phelan to speculate further, then, on the values which Ishiguro and his ideal, or ‘authorial’, readers must hold but which must be denied in their fullest sense to Stevens:

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<sup>18</sup> This raises an important point about how Phelan holds ‘the reader’ in mind of his “conception of narrative as rhetoric”. It is worth quoting Phelan’s justification at length: “this conception of the recursive relationship among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response entails the possibility of shared readings among different flesh-and-blood readers. The author designs the textual phenomena for a hypothetical audience (what I call the authorial audience), and the individual rhetorical reader seeks to become part of that audience. ... Rhetorical reading acknowledges that individual readers will find some authorial audiences easier to enter than others, and it stops short of ever declaring any one reading as definitive and fixed for all time” (*Living* 19). Phelan’s authorial reader, then, conjoins aspects of Booth’s authorially postulated reader, Iser’s phenomenologically implied reader, and the concerns of cognitivist/constructivist critics of Nünning’s persuasion. See also pp. 26n6, 31n7, 34n9.

Ishiguro's communications to us, by contrast with Stevens's, are themselves a generous offer to share human warmth. Although the veil of fiction and the filter of Stevens mean that Ishiguro is not engaging in discreet disclosure about himself, he is, nevertheless, sharing his concerns about lives not lived, sacrifices made for the wrong reasons, whole dreams irredeemably lost. (65)

Contrasting the depth and sincerity of Ishiguro's and Stevens's communications to us in this way, however, is potentially misleading. Phelan suggests that Ishiguro's "concerns about lives not lived, sacrifices made for the wrong reasons, whole dreams irredeemably lost" are not fully understood by the unfortunate Stevens – he who "still has much to learn about the sharing of human emotion" (64). This is a fair assessment but it is important not to lose sight of what is shared here between author, narrator and reader. Ishiguro might have a fuller understanding than Stevens of those values – and it's that fuller understanding which allows the irony – but Stevens's newfound curiosity with bantering belongs to the same order of value as Ishiguro's concern that lives ought to be lived to their fullest. Whether or not he completes his transition, Stevens is on the way to acquiring the same understanding which Ishiguro holds for the reader in this respect.

Nonetheless, to the reader of the novel, Stevens's insight is necessarily limited because he can never see outside the bounds of the fictional world that contains him, his actions, and his thought. As a character within a novel, he is no more than a textual assembly of attributes after all. Outside the fictional world of the novel, however, Ishiguro and his readers are connected by their shared access to the realm of speculation which is set aside to ponder thematic and interpretive significance. Here, more novelistic concerns come into their own, and even supersede the humanist wisdom which seems so hard-won by Stevens and so confidently assumed by Ishiguro. When Stevens says there's no point looking back on one's own mistakes to lament the past, Ishiguro the novelist no doubt agrees, nudging Stevens to look ahead with optimism, to embrace the remains of his day with open-mindedness, warmth and generosity, and thereby redeem some of what he passed up in the previous chapters of his

life. But the deeper, more permanent concern of the novel has to do with much more than lives not lived properly and emotional sacrifice in the name of duty – at the heart of the novel lies a compelling, vital consideration of how narrative itself shapes and is shaped by an individual's complicated relationship to their own innermost values, to their own history, and to the values of those around them. In this sense Stevens is the puppet at the end of the strings who feels the pull this way and that of the forces that move him, but without objectively understanding them in the way we do as we read the fiction he inhabits.

This, then, is Stevens's ironic purpose – the one which Ishiguro has decided upon for him, the one which we see and Stevens doesn't. The real division between narratorial and authorial insight is thus marked by the different perspective of each towards the machinery of narrative. Stevens doesn't mean to be an ironically-limited narrator, but that is, of course, exactly what Ishiguro intends for him to be. Hence, *Remains of the Day* is most fundamentally concerned with ironic, or unreliable, narration itself. As Phelan concludes in the end, it is a novel that ultimately "implies a deep trust in our ability to read the disclosures behind [Stevens's] many strategies of indirection – and, in the key moment of the narrative, to fend for ourselves" (65).

Phelan's argument partly rests on and partly suggests the finely-honed intuition which writers must have of their audience's interpretive capacities if their authorial message is to be recognised. So although *Remains of the Day* is often regarded as a masterpiece of unreliable narration,<sup>19</sup> to render this effect palpable the values on which Ishiguro relies must be, in a sense, reliable in themselves: Ishiguro depends on an audience with whom he shares a cultural understanding. As we, the authorial audience, interpret the symbolic order of *Remains of the Day* we bring to bear our knowledge of highly acculturated narratives; many who read Stevens's story are no doubt reminded of a familiar

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<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Wall, "Challenges"; but also David Lodge, *Art of Fiction*, pp. 154-57; Amit Marcus, "Discourse of Self-Deception"; and Greta Olson, "Reconsidering".

set of values which involve personal sacrifice for higher duty, whether that duty is civic, moral, familial, societal or idealistically bounded in some other way. Phelan himself would call this “a cultural narrative”; that is, a trope with “a sufficiently wide circulation so that we can legitimately say that its author, rather than being a clearly identified individual, is a larger collective entity, perhaps a whole society or at least some significant subgroup of society” (8). For Stevens’s behaviour to be understood and interpreted in the way Ishiguro desires needs the writer and the reader to share some perspective on a common cultural ground.

At the same time, however, the cultural narrative channelled through *Remains of the Day* accounts for avenues of meaning which may be discovered and explored within the world of the novel as well. Like Stevens’s nascent appreciation for the art of banter, the wider cultural narrative of personal sacrifice in the name of duty offers a kind of knowledge which Stevens himself could access if he were alert to it and open to embracing its possibilities. As it happens, this is basically what transpires – as he philosophically resigns himself to having lost his chance at love with Miss Kenton and finds himself making small talk with a stranger on the pier instead, Stevens realises what simple but profound joy one might take in living each day with optimism underwritten by compassion for self and others. Therein lies Stevens’s chance at redemption.

Hence, the values which Ishiguro calls on to impart his authorial message – the values that he counts on his readers being able to recognise – are reliable in ways that signal two distinct but connected levels of comprehensibility. First, Ishiguro relies on the reader’s recognition of the cultural narrative that carries the story of an individual’s private sacrifice borne of commitment to that individual’s sense of a higher good. This is the trope to which Stevens’s story conforms and whose contours Stevens can observe and plumb to an extent – even though the novel also projects that its ideal readers will hold a deeper emotional maturity than Stevens. But partly readers pick up on the cultural narrative because they also know that, as Phelan puts it,

“Cultural narratives typically become formulas that underlie specific narratives” (8). If Ishiguro is able to write with such readers in mind then he is counting on readers sophisticated enough to accurately interpret degrees of narrative unreliability as well – these will be readers who are able to corroborate, from their own reading experience, that character narration is, indeed, as Phelan says, an art of indirection.

Finally, from outside the novel looking in on all this, still another perspective is available. As Phelan expertly makes clear, Stevens misreads many of the situations around him because of his tendency to repress his feelings and prioritise his dedication to service instead (*Living* 32-38, 51-65). But to the reader cognisant of not only the cultural narrative in which the emotionally limited Stevens is caught up, but the ends to which cultural narratives are often put when framed by the norms of fiction as well, then the unreliability of Stevens is encountered almost as if a matter of conventional necessity: the cultural narrative of personal sacrifice is so intertwined with Stevens’s obvious repression that it’s no surprise when Stevens proves to be the kind of suspect narrator who deceives even himself. Although he cannot see it himself, Stevens’s own unreliability forms part of a dynamic literary convention which has been carefully and critically articulated in the study of English literature for many decades. At this point the cultural narrative seems to have been appropriated to serve a peculiarly literary purpose: Stevens’s situation is incorporated into a complex trope whose dimensions are continually being explored and mapped in literary scholarship as well as creative works. At this point, then, we may also say that, in cases like Stevens the butler, the unreliable narrator is very much a function of a reliable reader.

If *Remains of the Day* exemplifies a particular kind of unreliable narration – that of the self-deceiving and misreading first-person narrator – then Phelan’s reading of Stevens’s unreliability demonstrates the corresponding reader reliability required to comprehend the multivalent signals of the text and consolidate their working with thorough and just critical interpretation. Phelan interprets narrative content and infers authorial meaning



but maintains distinctions between them by paying scrupulous attention to the textual machinery of the novel, thereby setting out to advance fuller understanding of the theoretical dimensions suggested by the text. Furthermore, although Phelan embodies the kind of critically reliable reader implied by the novel, other readings aren't necessarily foreclosed; while his interpretation is supported by meticulous textual evidence and theoretical expertise, the narratological dimensions with which he is concerned are complex, offering multiple avenues of interpretation. The rhetorical approach favoured by Phelan means that if other, differing but equally supportable readings of the same text are to be had, then they must be taken into account, not only for the novels on which they focus to be understood more fully, but for the wider relevant theoretical insights to be sharpened a little more, for the thin edge of the narratological wedge to be driven a little further.

And yet Phelan's figuring of character narration – as, essentially, an act of indirection by which the author communicates to a reader, *alongside* the narrator's internal communication to a narratee, rather than simply behind that narrator's back – raises fundamental questions to do with theoretical engagements with unreliable narration itself. Phelan's exacting reading of Stevens's unreliability raises the concern that if unreliable narration can be so reliably read, then even the most complex narrators might begin to be conventionally inscribed. Installing any unreliable narrator as an exemplar of unreliable narration risks installing particular instances of unreliability, however complex, as reliably understood modes of narration. So while both Wall and Phelan offer compelling and sophisticated readings of Stevens's unreliability that admirably advance the theoretical discussion of unreliable narration, their success – and Ishiguro's – is delicately balanced.

I would suggest that herein lies what must be one of the main difficulties associated with defining or theorising unreliable narration at all: for an unreliable narrator must be allowed to inhabit categories of unreliability in highly complex ways – perhaps in themselves unreliable, as if in “permanent oscillation” to insert Rimmon-Kenan's words – for such categorisations to avoid

undermining the very indeterminacy or ambiguity which underlies the notion of unreliability itself.

### Ramifications

There can be little doubt, as I hope my reading shows, that the terms of Phelan's taxonomy have taken hold and with good reason. Deployed by Shen as definitive, they are also applied in Greta Olson's reading of unreliability which takes up the essential difference between Phelan's 'under' and 'mis' categories to argue that unreliable narrators are either fallible or untrustworthy. And yet her discussion, I argue, also shows how easily Phelan's taxonomy can be misapplied. Because Olson bisects unreliability into categories which are not only distinct but mutually exclusive, she risks re-inscribing the same thinking which underlies the notion that Phelan explicitly warns against, "that reliability and unreliability are a binary pair" (*Living* 53).

Nonetheless Olson does make some valuable ground, as Shen notes ("Unreliability"). Olson picks up "[Booth's] implicit differentiation between fallible and untrustworthy narrators", demonstrating the different kinds of unreliability he envisages: "Notably, he uses the words 'unreliable,' 'untrustworthy,' 'inconscience' (unconscious), and 'fallible' to describe the narrators he wants to characterize" (emphasis original, 96). Parsing his usage further, she finds that, in Booth's terms,

'Unreliable' and 'untrustworthy' suggest that the narrator deviates from the general normative standards implicit in the text. ... [And that] By contrast, 'inconscience' and 'fallible' imply that the narrator makes mistakes about how she perceives herself or her fictional world. The first terms concern the narrator's qualities as a person and the second her ability to perceive and report accurately. (Emphasis original, 96)

Olson furnishes her reading of "Booth's implicit distinction between fallible narrators and untrustworthy ones" by noting other theorists to have similarly differentiated between forms of unreliability, most notably: Lanser (*Narrative*), Dorrit Cohn ("Discordant"), Phelan and Martin ("Lessons"), and Fludernik ("Defining").

In particular Olson neatly observes that Phelan's six types of unreliability, divisible into two broad groups constituting wrongness and insufficiency, map onto the general parsing of untrustworthy from fallible narrators respectively: "The first three types of [Phelan's] unreliability are grouped together on the basis of how the reader responds to them, namely by replacing the narrator's story with a less contradictory account of fictional events, and the second three on the reader's need to amplify on the narrator's incomplete tale" (100). In the vein of Nünning's proposed synthesis between rhetorical and cognitivist/constructivist methods, she notes that while Nünning also describes "a separation between fallible and unreliable narrators and considers adopting this differentiation", elsewhere "he argues that this distinction fails to clear up the problems of imprecision inherent in Booth's definition and its usage" (106n16).

Adding further grist to her synthesising mill, she could have picked up on the terms of Lanser's differentiations of unreliability to justify a general sense that fallibility and untrustworthiness tend not to occupy the one narrating consciousness. Lanser looks to *The Sound and the Fury* and finds compelling case studies in Benjy and Jason: Benjy's "capacity to reconstruct a sequential narrative is limited and [his] ability to interpret events is more limited still", and yet he proves to be "reliable in his intuitions about people and in his responses to beauty and truth." On the other hand, Jason "is morally and psychologically untrustworthy even though he is a relatively competent reporter of external events" (*Narrative* 171). Jason's personality may be rendered by Faulkner according to quite different values and quirks of character than Benjy's, and yet their separate narrations bear out the same deep structural point that Shen, Phelan and Lanser all support: characters' modes of unreliability may be contingent on reliability of other kinds, and, equally, reliability of one sort doesn't guarantee reliability elsewhere. What Olson would add is that Benjy is a fallible narrator and Jason an untrustworthy one.

Hence, Olson follows Lanser by moving towards categorising instances of unreliable narration in ways that agree with Phelan's taxonomy – Lanser

with her structurally and systematically compatible axes of values, Olson with her strongly post-Boothian tendencies. But Lanser's system is considerably more open when catering for radical doubt in the ascription of unreliability: when a narrator's degree of reliability deepens or even alters during her narration, or when it is "almost impossible to speak with certainty of either a reliable or unreliable voice", it could be "most accurate to indicate two (or theoretically any number of) simultaneous states along these axes" (172). In the face of complex narration, Lanser remains opposed to stringent categorisations of unreliability, putting her into a far more congenial relationship with Phelan who iterates the point of his taxonomy to bring us closer to the complexities of individual texts (*Living* 53).

Olson shies away from just these possibilities. The most striking instance is offered on the brink of her conclusion:

To my mind, the separation of narrators into untrustworthy or fallible applies for all narrators traditionally labelled unreliable. ... However, it is also possible for narrators to move from being fallible to being untrustworthy in the course of a narration. Nonetheless, I suspect that readers will, like Booth, prefer making more straightforward attributions of fallibility or untrustworthiness. (104)

Remarkably Olson retreats at precisely the height of narratological interest: rather than try to chart what a narrator who shifts modes of unreliability might look like, Olson appeals not just to Booth but to a mere suspicion of readers' fancies, deciding that a "more straightforward" attribution of fallibility or untrustworthiness is preferable.

Her retreat from the point of critical engagement is firmly underlined in her very final thought, and in terms which are apposite to my claim that not all unreliable narrators will yield a stable reading of their unreliability:

As in cases of irony, the narrated utterance must be turned over and reinterpreted. A gap opens between the literal and the implied; when the reader detects unreliability, she enters the gap successfully. Textual signals help her decide whether the narrator is fallible or untrustworthy. The decision allows the reader to predict whether the narrator is likely to

always misreport or is prevented by circumstances from telling the tale straight. The reader can then assume a strategy by which she can make different types of unreliable narration comprehensible and render fallible and untrustworthy narrators reliable in their unreliability. (105)

Despite the care with which she reads her critical forebears, such as Booth, and the forcefulness with which she more deeply articulates distinctions running through the engagements of others, such as Phelan and Nünning, in the end Olson seems more inclined to achieving a kind of critical elegance and closure than with thoroughly accounting for the critical ramifications of her own thinking.

If we apply more critical pressure to her reasoning, we might find the soft spot nestled in the terms of her premise that textual signals help the reader decide if the reader is fallible or untrustworthy. Her premise is accurate, but Olson wavers in her next step. Olson argues that because the reader decides upon the narrator's fallibility or untrustworthiness based upon the reception and analysis of textual signalling, the reader can then "predict whether the narrator is likely to always misreport or is prevented by circumstances from telling the tale straight" (105). This is plausible but in no way definitive. No doubt many critics and readers will be able to supply an array of examples bearing out just this order of engagement, but doing so doesn't ordain that all engagement fall in with this configuration, a configuration which is not only particular but also, by definition of its own terms, partial. The reader can only predict what is *likely* to happen—allowing narrators who will buck those expectations as theoretical possibilities, and, if theoretical possibilities, then almost certainly roaming at large in practice as well.

The certitudes of Olson's thinking thus indicated, others appear in their wake. For instance, allowing a reader to "assume a strategy by which she can make different types of unreliable narration comprehensible and render fallible and untrustworthy narrators reliable in their unreliability" (105), in turn assumes that unreliable narrators can *only* be fallible or untrustworthy. Olson's bisection of unreliability into *either* fallibility or untrustworthiness now begins to seem not simply an anatomisation of unreliability but a troubling paring

down as well, the possibility becoming more distinct that some instances of unreliable narration mightn't fall this way or that according to the terms of her treatment and hence undermine her categorisations or defy them completely. This possibility turns the corner into likelihood in the seemingly critical equation of her conclusion and its confident assertion that unreliability can, of necessity, be reliably read. In response I suggest that Olson's view implies an assumption on her part, that because (as she convincingly argues) unreliability may be reliably read according to her method, then (and here she falters) her method must hold for all instances of unreliability.

The assumption rests upon how she defines unreliability itself. Initially she looks to have solid grounds for bifurcating unreliability into either fallible or untrustworthy narration: "Supporting [her] thesis is Phelan's statement in a recent defense of the need for an implied author in accounts of unreliability: 'Narrators ... can be unreliable in two different ways, either by falling short or by distorting. Narration that falls short is reliable up to a point; narration that distorts is simply unreliable' ('Can Readers' 6)" (104). But this doesn't take into account Phelan's whole position which, as this thesis stresses, is more finely nuanced than mere categorisation.

Although Phelan 'reliably' reads Stevens — he even calls one section of his treatment "Reliably Reading the Unreliable Stevens" (*Living* 32-38)) — his claims on taxonomies of unreliability are checked by his commitment to better understand the dynamics of individual texts working upon readers of the rhetorical persuasion, hence carefully navigating his way around those critical absolutes which shut down rather than open the field of debate. By paying the fullest and most exacting detail he can to the intricacies of Stevens's narration, Phelan looks to develop and advance approaches to unreliability not simply beyond Olson's reckoning but actually — if subtly — opposed on critical principle. To reiterate one of Phelan's most important points:

recognizing ... different kinds of unreliability allows us to move away from the common assumption that reliability and unreliability are a binary pair, that once unreliability is detected all the narration is suspect, and, instead,

to recognize that narrators exist along a wide spectrum from reliability to unreliability with some totally reliable on all axes, some totally unreliable on all, some intermittently unreliable on all, and some unreliable on one or two axes and not on others. (*Living* 53)

While Olson regards highly the nuance of Phelan's position – and hence that undergirding Lanser's as well – in practice, she veers dangerously back towards essentially a binary categorisation within the terms of unreliability itself. The binary she prescribes shuts down her chances of properly encountering the changeable unreliable narrator, the narrator whose mode of unreliability alters.

I point to Olson's reading primarily because while her argument does make telling distinctions between fallibility and untrustworthiness, there is a third sense of unreliability which her formulation leaves out but which the taxonomies proposed by Phelan and Lanser are equipped to accommodate. Defining 'unreliability', the OED gives "The state or fact of being unreliable". Per 'unreliable' the OED gives "Not reliable; that cannot or should not be relied on", and per 'reliable' gives "1. That may be relied on. a. Of a person, information, etc.: able to be trusted; in which reliance or confidence may be placed; trustworthy, safe, sure" (OED). Triangulating and extrapolating from these senses, then, we can justly infer that if the state or fact of reliability constitutes the state or fact of being 'trustworthy', 'safe', or 'sure', then of a person – and here bearing in mind applied to character narrators – 'unreliability' can rightly constitute the state or fact of being 'untrustworthy', 'unsafe', or 'unsure'. It follows that all critical accounts, such as Olson's, which offer 'untrustworthy' as a partial definition of 'unreliability', are on firm etymological footing. It is also safe to map the usage of 'fallibility' in narratological definitions of unreliability onto the state or fact of being 'unsure', since the OED, defining 'sure', gives "11. ... b. Of a sign or signal: giving trustworthy indication; able to be relied on; *infallible*, *unmistakeable*" (emphasis added). Untrustworthiness and fallibility are hence sound departure points to advance narratological understanding of unreliability. But the third clear dimension to the wider sense of the word, the state or fact of being unsafe, goes

unremarked upon in narratological accounts. I ask then, how might that sense of the state of unreliability, the state of being unsafe – of being in danger or in jeopardy, of insecurity, of unsafety – be applied to the case of unreliable narration? What might it uncover, in a narratological sense, and might it bring another layer of understanding to how we negotiate problems arising from our dealings with unreliable narrators?

### *Insecure narration*

Although this is ground yet to be properly charted, there are enough suggestions on the critical record pointing to both the importance and the difficulty of treating the third kind of unreliability I propose. It is worth revisiting in more detail, for instance, Rimmon-Kenan's regard for just one of the uncertainties she spies arising from Booth's formulation of unreliable narration:

Many texts make it difficult to decide whether the narrator is reliable or unreliable, and if unreliable – to what extent. Some texts – which may be called ambiguous narratives – make such a decision impossible, putting the reader in a position of constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives. The governess in James's *The Turn of the Screw*, to take the most famous example, can be seen as a reliable narrator telling the story of two haunted children, but she can also be considered an unreliable, neurotic narrator, unwittingly reporting her own hallucinations. (103)

While the narration itself is ambiguous, the insecurity – the 'unsafety' – is redirected to the reader who cannot 'safely' decide which version of unreliability is presented by the text. It is not merely that the reader cannot decide upon the mode of unreliability, if this implies that there is a stable interpretation which would reveal itself were the reader to bring the 'correct' reading to the text. It is not that the reader *cannot necessarily* decide, but rather that they *necessarily cannot* decide. As Rimmon-Kenan rightly observes, then – and here importing Olson's terms to foreground what is at stake in the hermeneutical situation – the decision between whether to ascribe fallibility or



untrustworthiness to the unreliable narrator is impossible: “the reader [is] in a position of constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives” (103).

Other critics to help us understand what is at stake in the topic of changing unreliability include Paul McCormick and Dorrit Cohn. Although Cohn’s widely noted study of the framing of consciousness in fiction, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978), is not concerned with reliability as such, her work has been nonetheless influential in accounts of unreliability.<sup>20</sup> McCormick summarises his interest in respect of the distinctions Cohn provides as the starting point for his own query into unreliable narration thus:

... Cohn devotes the fourth chapter [of *Transparent Minds*] to the techniques of retrospective character (‘figural’) narration. In that chapter, she makes a valuable distinction between ‘consonant’ narrators, who morally and intellectually identify with their former selves, and ‘dissonant’ narrators, who claim moral and intellectual distance from their former selves by offering a contrasting and supposedly superior set of values, judgments, beliefs, or actions ... Dissonance is a measure of the moral and cognitive

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<sup>20</sup> Cohn’s short article “Discordant Narration” (2000) is also a substantial and direct contribution to the critical field concerned with unreliable narration. There, she addresses “the need to distinguish between two different kinds of unreliable fictional narration: a factual kind of unreliability that is attributed to a mis- or dis-informed narrator, unwilling or unable to tell what ‘actually’ happened ... and an ideological kind that is attributed to a narrator who is biased or confused, inducing one to look, behind the story he or she tells, for a different meaning from the one he himself or she herself provides”. Distinct from unreliable narration as such, Cohn hence proposes the term ‘discordant narration’ to apply to the second of her nominated kinds of unreliability, that of ideological unreliability, which she “intends to signify the possibility for the reader to experience a teller as normatively inappropriate for the story he or she tells” (307). An important discussion, nonetheless many of its terms are not merely familiar and already well set, but have been substantially challenged and hence their critical force reduced. For instance, her discussion relies on an ironic model of unreliable narration dependent on an implied author and a knowing reader: “[Discordant narration] suggests the reader’s sense that the *author* intends his or her work to be understood differently from the way the *narrator* understands it: in a way that can only be discovered by reading the work against the grain of the narrator’s discourse, providing it with a meaning that, though not explicitly spelled out, is silently signalled to the reader behind the narrator’s back” (emphasis original, 307). Hence, I subscribe to the thoughts of Shen, who critiques thus: “In terms of intentionally encoded fictional unreliability, even along the axis of facts, there is still an implicit clash between the narrator’s discourse and the implied author’s discourse. This calls into question Cohn’s distinction between ‘unreliable narration’ and ‘discordant narration’ (2000: 307), the former only concerning the axis of facts and the latter, by contrast, having to do with the axis of values, a kind that involves a discordance between narrator and author. But as regards the factual unreliability that sets in behind the clash between story facts and discourse presentation, we still have ‘discordant narration,’ since there is also a gap between the ‘mis-’ or ‘disinformed narrator’ and the accurately or adequately informed (implied) author whose norms constitute a standard by which narrational unreliability can be judged along any axis by the rhetorical critic” (“Unreliability”).

distance that the narrating-I takes from the experiencing-I: the greater the distance, the more dissonant the narration. By the same logic, if such a narrating-I ever closes the distance between those two I's to claim some kinship or continuity with a former self, then an exception arises in the pattern of dissonance. These exceptions are properly peripheral to Cohn's study, but I will focus on them here and call them *claims of stable identity* (or CSI). (Emphasis original, 317-18)

For McCormick, a claim of stable identity, as an exception from a narrator's dissonance, "deserves special attention from readers looking for inconsistencies in the discourse for the purpose of judging (un)reliability" (319).

And yet the overall continuity of the work itself remains intact, in both Cohn's and McCormick's reckoning, despite the fact that "Dissonant narrators, by definition, frame their experiencing- and narrating-identities as temporally discontinuous" (319). As Cohn sees it: "even when a narrator becomes a 'different person' from the self he describes in his story, his two selves still remain yoked by the first-person pronoun" (*Transparent* 144). This means that McCormick uses the same principle of continuity as Cohn, thus preserving the possibility that even with temporal dislocations between experiencing and narrating selves, a stable interpretation of the text remains available to be uncovered. But that not only requires the right reading strategy be brought to bear, but also assumes a consistent narratorial consciousness, even though that consciousness might engage different modes of unreliability, as Phelan demonstrates of Stevens. Shen is thus right to note that McCormick figures as one of those critics to have demonstrated that "Just as a person's view may change in the course of real life, the degree of a narrator's (un)reliability may vary at different stages of the narration" ("Unreliability"). What is crucial to my interest here is to note further how Shen carefully leaves untouched – and therefore open – the more radical possibility that unreliable narrators may not only change degrees of unreliability but also switch between kinds of unreliability so dramatically that the narratorial discourse itself renders reliable readings of unreliability necessarily unattainable.

By contrast, Olson's view of unreliable narrators, neatly divisible into the two broad categories of fallible and untrustworthy, works on the assumption that, in ascertaining precisely what kind of unreliability is at play, we can both produce and rely on a settled, reliable version of story events against which we measure and ascribe unreliability. It seems logical to assume that if a narrator is unreliable – whether factually, knowledgably or ethically – then there must be a reliable version somewhere, a 'truthful' line of events or a justly found ethical position to counter (and implicitly 'correct') that which has been unreliably narrated. But although finding the counterpoint of reliability can be a demanding exercise, it can also reward for its complexity, as Wall demonstrates in her treatment of *Remains of the Day*:

Ishiguro's novel, by both facilitating and frustrating the process of figuring out "what really happened" not only refocuses the reader's attention on the narrator's mental processes, but deconstructs the notion of truth, and consequently questions both "reliable" and "unreliable" narration and the distinctions we make between them. (22-23)

In the end, as Wall and Phelan establish, there *is* both a stable version of events and an ethical reading in response to Stevens's narration which the authorial reader of *Remains of the Day* is able to safely construct and thereby infer what might be regarded as the 'truth-value' of the narrative.<sup>21</sup> Wall again: "Indeed, the novel may be seen to be *about* Stevens's attempts to grapple with his unreliable memories and interpretations and the havoc that his dishonesty

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<sup>21</sup> By 'truth-value' I am here subscribing to the Aristotelean sense of the 'truth' expressed in narrative, that the structure of fictions themselves might better inform our sense of how we order, and thereby evaluate, the world around us. See Aristotle, "Plot", *The Poetics*; and, for a Neo-Aristotelean perspective, Booth, who explains: "If 'virtue' covers every kind of genuine strength or power, and if a person's ethos is the total range of his or her virtues, then ethical criticism will be any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and societies, or how the ethos of any story affects or is affected by the ethos—the collection of virtues—of any given reader. Obviously this means that a critic will be doing ethical criticism just as much when praising a story or poem for 'raising our aesthetic sensibilities' or 'increasing our sensitivity' as when attacking decadence, sexism, or racism. Even a work that has seemed to most readers a manifesto for art-for-art's-sake—Oscar Wilde's essay 'The Decay of Lying,' for example—will be taken as ethical criticism if we can discern in it a program for improving us in any way or a judgment that some works may debase us. 'Lying,' Wilde says, 'the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art' ... Many have naturally read this and similar statements throughout Wilde's work as disparaging all ethical concern. But it takes no very deep reading to discover that Wilde's aim is to create a better kind of person—the kind who will look at the world and at art in a superior way and conduct life accordingly" (*The Company We Keep* 11).

has played on his life" (emphasis original, 23). As a result, "The novel also asks us to formulate new paradigms of unreliability for the narrator whose split subjectivity, rather than the moral blindness or intellectual bias gives rise to unreliable narration" (23). As Wall puts it, drawing on Chris Weedon's formulation in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987):

The standard definitions of an unreliable narrator presuppose a *reliable* counterpart who is the "rational, self-present subject of humanism," who occupies a world in which language is a transparent medium that is capable of reflecting a "real" world (Weedon 41). But if "subjectivity ... is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon 33), then we are forced to think about the issue of unreliable narration as a matter of degree rather than as the moral aberration of more traditional definitions. I am suggesting, in short, that changes in how subjectivity is viewed will inevitably be reflected in the way reliable or unreliable narration is presented. (Emphasis and ellipsis original, 21-22)

Of crucial interest to me here is to note the connection which Wall makes between split subjectivities in narrators and the need for new paradigms of unreliability to be formulated in response. In this sense, the notion of an unreliable narrator whose own mental state is a matter, for the reader, of negotiating radical doubt strikes a terminological resonance with the description I propose of a third, permanently and necessarily unstable kind of unreliability. For if narrators who seem poised in a state of mental precariousness through discursive textual features alone render firm ascriptions of fallibility or untrustworthiness impossible for the authorial reader, then the nuance of holding such narration to be 'unsafe', or – my preferred term – 'insecure' might be used in respect of both the narrators themselves and what is at stake for the critical method as a result. If this risks inscribing a typological distinction – that narrators who might be mentally insecure will always be regarded as insecure narrators – then the proper weight needs to be given to the necessary impossibility of finding the exact nature of their unreliability in the first place. Rather than describe such narrators as

insecure, it is more accurate to describe their narrations as such. The narrators themselves are unable to be 'secured' by one category of unreliability or another, while their narrations, thwarting the critical apparatus designed to yield reliable readings of unreliability, remain 'insecure'. For both terminological clarity and critical efficacy, we might better think, then, of 'insecure narration' and 'unsecured narrators'.

Unsecured unreliability might well occur in narrators who may be thought of as mad, but the point rests on the example Rimmon-Kenan makes of *The Turn of the Screw*: whether or not the governess is mad, bad or haunted, the deeper point for interpretation is that the usual strategies do not render reliable readings of her unreliability. Instead, the reader is left in a "constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives" (103). Reminiscent of *Turn of the Screw*, *Sydney Bridge* is an unreliably narrated novel whose intricacies necessitate – to borrow Wall's apposite phrase – "new paradigms of unreliability" to be formulated. Hence I argue in the following chapters that unsecured unreliability is a peculiar kind of unreliability which ultimately – certainly in a critical sense and at least raising the possibility of a metafictional one as well – takes aim at reliable readings of unreliable narration itself.

## *Chapter Two:*

### *Fallible or Untrustworthy?*

#### *Introduction*

The bifurcated model of unreliability – that narrators may report wrongly or insufficiently, that they may be either fallible or untrustworthy – has been widely established, but the more complex ramifications of the division have only begun to be explored. Harry's unreliability – what I propose in the following chapter to be understood as an 'insecure narration' – comprises both fallibility and untrustworthiness. In Harry's case, these seemingly opposed tendencies amount to an unreliability that is necessarily unknowable; that is, to an unreliability which cannot be reliably read in the way that many unreliable narrations can be, but instead leaves the reader in a state of perpetual hermeneutical uncertainty. But if we are to account properly for Harry's unreliability, we must first parse the fallible aspects of his narration from the untrustworthy ones before considering how the two, taken together, produce an insecure narration. Because instances of fallible and untrustworthy narration in Harry's account are, much of the time, clearly present and distinguishable, then for much of the novel it seems that we *can* reliably read Harry as a conventionally unreliable narrator, depending on which terms, familiar from critical accounts, we bring to bear. In this chapter I read Harry's fallibility alongside his untrustworthiness to more closely register the complications arising from his conjoined unreliability.

I begin with a closer examination of fallible and untrustworthy narration in Olson's terms, but drawing on Phelan as well, to find that Olson's own formulation does not support the hard distinction she looks to draw between fallibility and untrustworthiness. Looking to separate fallible narrators from untrustworthy ones, Olson's terms suggest that she sees a fundamental difference between narrators who are limited on the epistemological plane, and those whose unreliability points to a questionable moral compass. Such a

divide is familiar from the accounts of Booth and Riggan, but more problematic for other critics such as Wall who, as we have seen, calls for clearer and more complex critical accounts of unreliability that do not come to rest on moral judgements.<sup>22</sup> Harry narrates both naively and deceptively, thus challenging Olson's mutually exclusive demarcation between epistemological limitations and ethical deficiencies. Harry's fallibility springs from his naivety, but his example complicates naive narration too, if, as Olson and Riggan would have us believe, such fallible narrators are, by definition, trustworthy narrators as well.

I read Harry's narration by drawing on both Olson's and Phelan's terms. I hold their respective distinctions against one other, noting where the formulations themselves overlap and where they diverge, with recourse to Harry's narration concerning Janet and Caroline – both examples that show entwined instances of fallible and untrustworthy narration in unique and complex ways. A close reading of Harry's narration to do with his mother, Janet, shows that he is clearly naïve. While the reader infers that Janet is having an affair with Harry's teacher, Mr Dalloway, Harry himself notes the signs but misunderstands them due to his naïve limitations. And yet towards the novel's close he reveals via a narrative flashback that he has known of his mother's affair with Dalloway all along. The reader cannot easily tell whether his prior knowledge is a repressed memory – thus re-inscribing his fallibility – or whether he has knowingly elided such information to that point, and is therefore untrustworthy, complicating his previously narrated naivety. Harry's narration in respect of Caroline is similarly complex: though, again, no doubt naïve in his reading of Caroline, his obsession for her leads him to self-deceptions which cast him as untrustworthy as well.

Harry's narration, I argue, both practically illustrates Olson's limitations and shows that Phelan's approach allows a more complex understanding of unreliability. Thus I argue that although Olson looks to apply terms deriving from Phelan, her model risks re-inscribing the limits of more conventionally

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<sup>22</sup> See p. 25.

held notions of unreliability. Such notions categorise unreliable narrators themselves rather than help to clearly explicate discrete instances of unreliability in their narrations. While Olson's categorisations are formulated with recourse to how people think and behave in the real world (as do Booth and Riggan), categorising unreliable narrators accordingly limits rather than opens the terms of the debate around unreliability. As Lanser reminds us: "Complexities such as [a changeable narrator] or dual voice cannot be resolved by forcing a categorization upon the text, nor can the text be fully appreciated and understood without allowing the pluralities to surface" (172). In respect of the critical structure proposed by Olson, Harry's narration proves Lanser's point.

I conclude then that the epistemological-moral divide, which Olson's engagement both rests upon and looks to uphold, not only leads to categorical assignments of unreliability, but that such categorisations point to the major shortcoming of her formulation in practice. While her strict categorisations cannot allow for a narrator like Harry whose precise locus of unreliability is, in the end, impossible to ascertain, ironically the terms on which she bases her account – Phelan's – allow us to account more precisely for just such radically unreliable narrators.

### *Fallible & untrustworthy*

While Booth tends to use the terms 'fallible', 'untrustworthy', 'unreliable' and 'unconscious' interchangeably, Olson disambiguates his terminology to more exactly distinguish between untrustworthy and fallible unreliability.<sup>23</sup>

Olson's thinking falls in line with a number of other critics and theorists to note Phelan's distinction between unreliability predicated on insufficiency on the one hand and that predicated on wrongness on the other. For Olson, untrustworthy narrators are unreliable by disposition, whereas fallible ones are limited by circumstance: "fallible narrators do not reliably report on narrative

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<sup>23</sup> See p. 56.



events because they are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased" (101-02).

This is no doubt a useful distinction in many respects. "Fallible narrators' perceptions", writes Olson, "can be impaired because they are children with limited education or experience, as in *Huckleberry Finn*; or, as in the case of Marlow from *Lord Jim*, their reports can seem insufficient because their sources of information are biased and incomplete" (101). As she goes on, Olson – increasingly resonant with Phelan – identifies fallibility not in the unreliable reportage of fact, character or event, but in how those facts, characters or events are misunderstood on the axis of knowledge and perception and thereby seem unreliable.

Borrowing on the insights of social psychology, Olson holds that "readers regard the mistakes of fallible narrators as being *situationally motivated*. That is, external circumstances appear to cause the narrator's misperceptions rather than inherent characteristics" (emphasis original, 102). If fallibility is circumstantial in this way then it makes sense that fallible narration exists on a spectrum. Some narrators will prove highly fallible and others less so, depending on the nature of the circumstances which impede understanding and jeopardise reliability. It is no surprise when Olson identifies *Huckleberry Finn* as "a highly fallible narrator" (102). As she explains:

Although Huck is smart as a whip and eminently likable, his perceptions are nonetheless mistaken because of his age, his superstitions, and his simply not knowing pertinent facts, as well as his yet literal understanding of the shallow moral norms he has been exposed to by Miss Watson and her ilk. (102)

Broadly speaking, Huck's naivety accounts for his unreliability, and not only for Olson. Booth (*Rhetoric of Irony* 141), Riggan (144-57) and Phelan ("Estranging" 229) also find Huck's unreliability to rest upon his essential naivety. By the same measure Harry is also likely to score highly as a fallible narrator. Incognisant of much of the adult world he nonetheless observes first-hand, Harry's perceptions, like Huck's, are often misguided on account of his

age, his ignorance on points of fact, and his mishandling of complex information on the ethical plane.

At the other end of Olson's spectrum falls a narrator like Marlow from *Lord Jim*, a slightly or marginally fallible narrator whose account seems "insufficient because [his] sources of information are biased and incomplete" (101). Like Huck, Marlow is limited as a narrator by external circumstances rather than motivated by disposition to mislead, but the conditions which impede Marlow's account seem less entrenched, less insurmountable, than those which impede naive narrators like Huck. Huck is restricted by his own ignorance which rests upon his natural naivety, whereas Marlow is limited by his insufficient access to information and his dealings with others whose own reliability is questionable. Under different circumstances one can imagine both Huck and Marlow narrating completely and reliably (as Olson points out (103)), but when imagining how those respective circumstances would need to be different, it is easier to conceive of an immediate change in Marlow's circumstances than Huck's.

Hence, greater and lesser impediments to reliable reading result in different degrees of unreliability. Although Huck gives the overall impression of high fallibility, Olson observes that Huck is, on occasion, fallible to a lesser extent (102). This makes sense since, for Olson, Huck's naivety comprises both the limitation of his age – a natural impediment which leads to high fallibility – and his "simply not knowing pertinent facts" (102) – a more coincidental impediment which, in Marlow's case, leads to lesser fallibility. Allowing that the one narrator can shift along the spectrum of fallibility in this way means that deciding whether particular narrators are, overall, highly fallible or, on balance, only marginally so, must involve an exacting series of judgements taking into account the whole of the narration.

Complicating Olson's degrees of fallibility further is that such narrators may be unreliable not only "because they are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased" (101). She has already cited "biased" sources of information to account for Marlow's fallibility, but here she explicitly consigns

“biased” narrators as fallible ones. And yet nowhere does she explain how biased narrators differ in their fallibility from those who are naïve, like Huck, or those whose access to all the pertinent facts is limited, like Marlow. Indeed, Olson offers no definition of what constitutes “biased” at all. However, given her view that “the separation of narrators into untrustworthy or fallible applies to all narrators traditionally labeled unreliable” (105), we must assume that a biased narrator is not “*dispositionally* unreliable” (emphasis original, 102), since that would make an untrustworthy narrator. The OED defines ‘biased’ thus: “*Unfairly* prejudiced for or against someone or something” (emphasis added). But it is through the notion of fairness that such ‘dispositional unreliability’ is brought into play. Because ‘bias’ is understood to be the “Inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair”, and if an inclination means “A person’s natural tendency or urge to act or feel in a particular way; a *disposition*” (emphasis added, OED), then Olson has slipped in her terminological distinctions. If we can triangulate in this way to hold that a biased narrator is one unfair by disposition then, in Olson’s terms, they must be untrustworthy too.

This slippage might suggest that the divide Olson draws between fallibility and untrustworthiness casts unreliable narrators whose limitations are epistemological on one side, and those whose unreliability rests on their inclination to variations of unfairness on the other. If by ‘unfair’ we are ourselves inclined to read ‘unethical’, our judgement is confirmed when Olson reckons that “Readers justify the failings of fallible narrators ... on the basis of circumstances that impede them rather than on their intellectual or *ethical deficiencies*” (emphasis added, 102). Because she draws lines of mutual exclusivity between fallibility and untrustworthiness, then fallible narrators are those whose unreliability does *not* rest on their ethical deficiencies, while those whose unreliability *does* must be untrustworthy.

Olson holds that “the speaker of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ will serve as an example of a highly untrustworthy narrator”, given that “To make sense of [his] narration the reader will be quick to attribute mental

instability and untrustworthiness to its source. The narrator", continues Olson, "will be diagnosed with pathological untrustworthiness, and the reader will choose the therapeutic strategy of reading against the grain" (103). On the scale of lesser untrustworthiness comes a narrator like Daniel Defoe's titular Moll Flanders, a "marginally unreliable" narrator for how she

alternately styles herself as a victim, a fallen sinner, and an ambassador of morality. She makes the weakness of others – the mother's vanity, the maid's amorousness, the devil's prompting – responsible for her crime and not herself. Clearly, Moll's narrative demands that the reader undertake several interpretive moves to make sense of her contradictions. Repeated episodes of moral equivocation like this one invite the reader to attribute untrustworthiness to Moll as a constant behavioral trait. (103-04)

So, for Olson, the mentally unstable narrator counts as highly untrustworthy while the narrator who morally equivocates is less untrustworthy.

But this doesn't fit with the distinctions which Olson wants to draw between fallibility and untrustworthiness as a difference between epistemological limitations and ethical deficiencies. If we find narrators untrustworthy in Olson's terms, we must rule out the possibility that their unreliability springs from impediments beyond their control, and instead assign an ethical deficiency. But here Olson's terms falter. If Poe's speaker's unreliability is, in effect, an expression of the pathological, then it holds more as an example, or rather as a variant, of fallible narration, far more than it exemplifies untrustworthiness. If mentally ill, the speaker must be unreliable for reasons beyond his control, hence fallible, and even if that fallibility leads him to purposively deceive. Olson's mutually exclusive division looks precarious.

Olson's categorisations become similarly shaky when she decides that for lesser cases of untrustworthiness, "readers are required to do more 'detective' work to determine whether a narrator is trustworthy or not" (104). This seems to confuse cause and effect. Further, having put the detective work into her own reading, Olson then makes the case for Moll's untrustworthiness to be virtually beyond doubt. She points to Moll's alternate and contradictory

self-stylings – victim, sinner, moral ambassador – and her willingness to blame others – the mother, the maid, the devil – for her crime (104). Olson concludes that such “Repeated episodes of moral equivocation ... invite the reader to attribute untrustworthiness to Moll as a constant behavioral trait” (104). How a narrator can constantly show the outward signs of untrustworthiness and yet remain only marginally untrustworthy is counterintuitive. Surely the higher Moll’s contradictions and moral equivocations are piled, the greater her untrustworthiness.

Olson doesn’t make clear why a narrator whose untrustworthiness is harder to pick should be only marginally untrustworthy. Were a narrator gifted with rhetorical genius the detective work required of the reader to prove unreliability could very well point to an extraordinarily high degree of untrustworthiness. If narrators motivated by self-interest are untrustworthy, then silver-tongued narrators who go to extraordinary lengths to hide untrustworthiness would seem more untrustworthy rather than less. Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert bounds to mind. While few would doubt that Humbert is not to be trusted – that he is, indeed, highly unreliable on Phelan’s axis of ethics and evaluation – accounting for every turn of his highly unreliable narration is notoriously difficult, and probably well beyond the limits or the patience of most casual readers.<sup>24</sup> Having said that, there is no reason to rule out that, in some instances, more detective work might be required to read even marginal untrustworthiness. Olson appeals to Fludernik (“Defining”) to say readers may remain justly “divided about how to characterize the storyteller” (104) in cases of marginal untrustworthiness. But critics may remain divided on any number of narrators, not just marginally untrustworthy ones.

Nonetheless, Olson’s discussion remains pertinent if we are to better fathom the complexities of unreliability. Although the divisions she prescribes are predicated significantly on Phelan’s terms, her argument also shows how easily those terms can be misapplied. Phelan himself “emphasize[s] some important points about [his taxonomy’s] possible uses and abuses” (*Living* 52).

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<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Phelan, “Estranging”.

Olson demonstrates both, but also that the dividing line between them is fine. Phelan's summary of the practicalities and pitfalls is worth quoting at length:

As the illustrations from *The Remains of the Day* indicate, a given narrator can be unreliable in different ways at different points in his or her narration. As we have also seen, a narrator can also be reliable in more than one way at any one point in his narration, and indeed, misreporting will usually be accompanied by another kind of unreliability. Furthermore, even where the unreliability initially seems to be of one kind (located along only one axis), once the authorial audience makes inferences about the relation between the narrator's unreliability and his or her character, the unreliability is likely to reveal itself as multifaceted. Finally, in many cases the border between types, especially the one between two types identified by the same root (e.g., misreporting and underreporting) will be soft and blurry rather than hard and firm. ... recognizing these different kinds of unreliability allows us to move away from the common assumption that reliability and unreliability are a binary pair, that once any unreliability is detected all the narration is suspect, and, instead, to recognize that narrators exist along a wide spectrum from reliability to unreliability with some totally reliable on all axes, some totally unreliable on all, and some intermittently unreliable on all, and some unreliable on one or two axes and not on others. (*Living* 52-53)

As touched on earlier,<sup>25</sup> Phelan navigates tricky territory here because on the one hand he offers a taxonomy designed to account for the different ways a narrator can be unreliable, but on the other he warns against hard distinctions in making attributions of unreliability. For all that he allows – even encourages – that the line between different types of unreliability can be thought of as diffuse rather than definite, by drawing lines at all he risks necessarily delimiting the field. Hence he offers his kinds of unreliability as a set of interpretive tools by which instances of narration themselves might be more complexly read rather than categorise narrators accordingly.

Olson, however, shows this to be a slippery slope, for categorisation rather than interpretation is exactly how she applies Phelan's taxonomy in

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<sup>25</sup> See pp. 47 and 60.

making her ultimate distinction between fallible and untrustworthy narrators. But if Olson's terms can be so systematically undone then why proceed to interrogate Harry's narration along the lines she proposes, to point out that fallibility and untrustworthiness are not necessarily opposed, are not, of necessity, mutually exclusive alternatives? First, because approaches deriving from the rhetorical perspective remain entrenched in the kinds of categorical divisions which Olson proposes; second, and in light of this, *Sydney Bridge* offers, like *Remains of the Day*, an exercise in unreliable narration that asks criticism itself, in Wall's phrasing, "to formulate new paradigms of unreliability" ("Challenges" 23). And, despite Olson's sometimes implausible simplifications, fallibility and untrustworthiness remain nonetheless such naturally opposed values (hence the underlying basis of Olson's partition) that to find them both so prevalent in the habits of the one narrating agent demands serious attention. It is precisely because Harry, as a narrator, engages such seemingly opposed expressions of unreliability – fallibility and untrustworthiness – that his account redirects our fascination with his unreliability from mere reconstruction of 'what really happened', to a deeper engagement whereby we find a more radical unreliability, unable to decide even on whether he has lied to us or if he is capable of accessing the truth at all. Concordant with the terms of Phelan by which we ascribe unreliability, Harry's account puts forward nonetheless that, even as we read in those terms, sometimes reliably reading unreliability is beyond reach.

### Janet & Caroline

Throughout the remainder of this chapter I examine Harry's narration in respect of two of the three most important female presences in the novel, Janet and Caroline.<sup>26</sup> But I also consider more deeply the ramifications of Olson's morally-tinged distinction between her different camps of unreliability: Harry's unreliability not only demonstrates the divide is untenable, but suggests further that the sense of ethical or moral certainty which Olson relies on – that

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<sup>26</sup> I attend to the third, Susan, in the following chapter.

narrators will, in effect, be 'good or bad' – announces the limits of her view of unreliability itself: that unreliability can always be reliably read.

The action of the novel is driven by a series of accumulating threats which Harry clearly misperceives and mistakenly acts upon, but Harry's role as narrator is deceptively complex. Initially he seems typically naive: his age and lack of worldly knowledge prevent him from making out the contours of his wider situation as clearly as the authorial audience. The authorial reader is likely to suspect straight away that the absence of his mother, Janet, who is away on holiday, is directly related to some background trauma which is beyond Harry's ability to fully recognise and reflect on, while the arrival of his cousin, Caroline, a *de facto* mother figure for Harry in some measure (109), underlines the extent of Harry's naive limitations in a couple of ways. First, he becomes sexually involved with her but lacks the sophistication, distance or maturity to understand his conflicted feelings: by turns he is both willing and profoundly uncomfortable, and at bottom the relationship is abusive; second, his obsession with Caroline blinds him to all else and leads him to misread multiple situations with dire consequences. In this sense Harry is an innocent: he is, directly, a victim of both domestic, familial breakdown and sexual exploitation. Harry is thus a highly fallible narrator because he is impeded by circumstances beyond his control, such as the natural naivety of youth. Although he often reports factually, he is unreliable as a reader of more complex human conditions.

And yet entwined with his naivety are complex signals of untrustworthiness. With respect to Janet, Harry reveals towards the end of his account that he knew of her and Dalloway's affair before she left for the city, thus casting his earlier naivety into doubt. As far as Caroline is concerned, Harry's bias for her leads him to untrustworthy narration, since he clearly deceives himself as he tries to justify her behaviour, thus showing self-deception sprung from what looks like prejudice. But in doing so Harry does not jettison his naïve regard for Caroline, complicating Olson's claim that fallible narrators may develop into untrustworthy ones, since her system holds



that narrators can be either fallible or untrustworthy, but not both at the same time.

### Janet

The first signs of Harry's limitations as a naïve narrator are quick to surface. He opens his account of the summer a week after Janet has left for the city. The action begins on a cliff-top with a physical fight between Harry and Dibs. When the boys reach a deadlock they talk and Dibs reveals he has heard Janet crying. Harry admits he has heard her too but does not comment at length. His reflection is cut short because his attention is diverted by his greater interest in narrating the immediate events of his story:

I was going to say I'd never heard my mother crying the way Dibs had been crying, nor did I think she would agree with Mrs Kelly about liking a good cry. My mother was different from Mrs Kelly. My mother did her crying in secret.

I didn't say this, though, because Dibs humped me suddenly and I had to let go of him. He'd hurt me, I staggered. He followed up fast and knocked me down. (3)

Harry immediately presents himself as a child narrator whose seeing and telling is bound by his limited perspective on the world. Events are narrated as they happen in real time, as if from the perspective of the child both participant and observer in and of the events he narrates. Harry offers only limited reflection on those events – unmodified by reflections from the advanced position of the adult he later becomes, Harry's only reflection here, for instance, is conveyed through his report of what he had been about to say had Dibs not humped him. Harry is limited as a narrator to reflections in the present tense and hence restricted by the conditions we might willingly associate with childhood naivety.

Riggan rightly observes the same principle when noting the temporal limits imposed upon Huck's narration:

Huck is still a mere youth at the time of the writing of the story ... He is therefore practically the same twelve-year-old at the time of narration as he

was during the course of his journey down the Mississippi, scarcely old enough to be able to provide mature, reliable reflection on what he narrates or to offer more than a straightforward record of facts and observations almost completely unglossed by deeper understanding and interpretation. (148)

Riggan identifies Huck's naivety by anticipating Phelan's distinction between narration on the axis of fact, character and event, and narration on the axis of knowledge and perception. The naïve narrator may be reliable on the former but limited on the latter. Harry's limited reflection on events conveys a similar impression of worldly ignorance. And yet even within the action-driven opening passages of the novel, Harry's limited reflection, carried in his report of what he had been about to say to Dibs, points to the precarious knowledge which the children hold of an adult world that is, to them, complicated and mysterious.

What does Harry mean when he says that Janet "did her crying in secret"? Almost certainly this truncated aside is the most striking of Harry's disclosures from his account of the fight with Dibs. Our access to the context and the meaning of Janet's crying is limited precisely because our own view is limited by the terms of Harry's disclosure. Because we are denied access to such contextual information and because this information must be conveyed on the axis of knowledge and perception, then we suspect Harry will be limited or unreliable as a reader of events. At the same time, for Harry to offer this singular reflection at all must be significant – meaningful precisely because of the limitations it indicates; if it convinces the reader, it does so as the genuinely felt recall of a character whose sincerity is contingent upon the kind of naivety typical of childhood. And if Harry is limited by his naivety then he is likely to miss altogether important facts, events or aspects of character that are too finely registered, or that sit too obliquely for a naïve narrator to observe. Equally, the facts, events or aspects of character that are reported by Harry must be plainly significant in some way, even though he lacks the perception or wisdom to reflect deeply on them. Harry's disclosures will thus be telling in an ironic sense: his report will imply rather than carry the meaning usually delivered via

perception and evaluation. Adopting the rhetorical view, it is up to the authorial reader to infer what might be absent from the text because deeper reflection and evaluation is unavailable from a naively limited narrator.

When Harry discloses that he has heard or seen Janet crying in secret, the reader can't help but consider the possibilities of deeper significance waiting to come into view. Partly this is because we can suppose a child who not only pays witness to a parent's undisclosed anguish but reports it is likely to have experienced, even if unknowingly, an event whose significance and influence is potentially far-reaching as an emotional encounter. Reading Harry's disclosure this way speaks to an interpretive strategy by which many readers tend to regard characters as they do real people, applying patterns seen in real life to fictional scenarios. But Harry's disclosure also signals a deeper, more exclusively literary significance, and part of the reader's inference that Harry has made a telling aside is based on prior experience with conventional markers of ironically limited and naive narration.

This kind of interpretation sits at what Phelan calls the synthetic level. Distinguishable from responses on the mimetic level and the thematic level, where readers engage – respectively – with the capacity of fiction to imitate reality and to rehearse the ideational, responses on the synthetic level

involve an audience's interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs. The synthetic component is always present because any character is constructed and has a specific role to play within the larger construction of the narrative ... . (*Living* 20)

Narrative conventions must constitute part of the synthetic component of the text, since, for Phelan, genres and conventions are design elements in the text:

texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways, ... those designs are conveyed through the language, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them, and ... reader responses are a function, guide, and test of how designs are created through textual and intertextual phenomena. (*Living* 18)

Holding that meaning is contingent on both textual and intertextual phenomena doesn't sanction a host of subjective readings to be imposed upon the text, but rather allows that synthetic conventions and genres can be understood as both a set of rules for writers engineering the walls of their fictions (even if those rules are subverted), and as a set of coordinates by which readers can negotiate the text and thereby formulate their interpretations. But it must also mean that readers who navigate a text with an idea of genres and conventions in mind will read with expectations based on what the rules of those genres and conventions are, by common and critical consensus, usually held to be—even if the reader finds those rules to have been subverted.

So if unreliability is regarded as a convention, readers can gauge Harry's reliability not only according to how they might expect people to behave (engaging with the text at the mimetic level), but also according to how they understand the relevant conventions to work (engaging at the synthetic level). Having read Harry's account of the fight on the cliff-top with Dibs and finding signs of fallibility implied by his naively limited narration, they will read on with literary expectations in mind, looking for conventional signs that confirm their suspicions about Harry's account.

A few pages after Harry's disclosure that Janet "[does] her crying in secret", Harry's unreliability is subtly but distinctly underlined when he cheerfully maintains—in keeping with the happiness and optimism of what seem to be endless summer holidays—that because he and Cal "had good fun when [their] mother was away", they "didn't mind if she took her time about coming back" (5). But Harry's understated, at ease and laidback tone jars with what the reader has already begun to extrapolate from Harry's hints about Janet a few pages before. If the reader notes an inconsistency of this kind and then looks for ways to account for the discrepancy, they are reading along the lines which Booth proposes to underlie how we recognise and determine unreliability. For Booth, the reader will, of necessity, "reject the literal meaning" if "unable to escape recognizing either some incongruity among the words or between the words and something else [the reader] knows" (*Irony* 10). The tone

of Harry's later reflection is incongruous with the timbre of his earlier observation since his buoyant and relaxed attitude towards his mother's absence feels inconsistent with the impression of an unhappy wife and mother which Harry's prior remarks suggest. Harry's earlier impression thus undermines the later statement at the factual level: one or the other can't be accepted without modification.

In Booth's terms we must then set about reconstructing the meaning which the text itself appears to have withheld from us but that, when correctly inferred and applied, reinstates the harmony and cohesion of the text as a consistently and purposively conceived site of authorial meaning. If we have taken from Harry's account of the fight on the cliff-top that he may be a fallible narrator – one whose limited knowledge is likely to cause errors of perception – and if we suspect too that Janet's crying is indicative of a deeper stress well beyond Harry's grasp, then our reading of Harry's sunny optimism, where he jovially talks of the advantages of his mother's absence, will be tempered by our deeper judgement: we will not read Harry's statement – "We had good fun when our mother was away. We didn't mind if she took her time about coming back" – at face value but find some way to connect it to the earlier disclosure and reconstruct the whole meaning of Harry's words. To do so we might choose to read a more complex connotation into Harry's statement: if he doesn't mind that his mother takes her time to return, perhaps it is not simply that her delay signals to Harry more carefree days of summer holidays with one less authority figure around, but that he has already started to register, somewhere he doesn't fully understand if not fully expressed, the traumatic effects of his mother's apparently fragile mental or emotional state.

Later Harry asks Frank about their plans to paint the house while Janet is away, "in case he had a hint, *or a warning*, of when she'd be back" (emphasis added, 5). It is possible that Harry is being ironic here, even as a narrator who largely narrates from the naive perspective of his childhood present (or at least appears to, at this stage). Perhaps Harry means to overstate his mother's pending arrival as a melodramatic harbinger that will surely spell the end of

summer holidays. But the word 'warning' cannot easily be unhitched from the more nuanced connotations of adult trauma, and Harry's limited but potentially troubled exposure to it, carried by the earlier disclosure that his mother cries in secret. Further, if we have read an unwitting expression of anxiety somewhere beneath the surface of Harry's outwardly casual and upbeat talk about the fun he and Cal have in their mother's absence, then the separate disclosures taken together either suggest that Harry is hiding something, or they reiterate that he is unable to properly reflect on the full complexity of his situation. Or they could imply both.

From the first few pages alone there is little doubt that Harry is a naively limited narrator, unable to more deeply reflect on what he narrates because of his natural limitations, and hence highly fallible. But while Harry's affirmation that he enjoys his mother's absence might appear to indicate naivety, his utterance is also marked by an artlessness that could signify a bald attempt to conceal – whether from himself or his narratee – deeper, more profoundly uncomfortable truths. So Harry might show a tendency towards untrustworthy narration at some level but this may be contingent on his fallibility.

All three variations of Phelan's insufficient narration are in the frame here, but they require careful negotiation. When Harry divulges that Janet cries in secret he could be underregarding since he implies the hidden trauma her crying connotes but stops short of saying so. Later his claim to "[have] good fun when [their] mother was away" seems to naively underread the situation which his earlier report suggests. But then the combination of underregarding and underreading are potentially at odds, suggesting the possibility that Harry may have earlier underreported. Does he know more than he reports of Janet's crying in secret? If Dibs hadn't re-entered the fray just as Harry was about to speak, what further information might he have shared? Hence, although what Olson assumes to be consistent markers of fallibility all duly appear, they coalesce in Harry's narration to admit the possibility of untrustworthiness as well.

Later we might have even clearer reason to infer that Harry has underreported earlier, when he recounts in full how he learned of Janet's affair with Dalloway. His later narration shows him to be the classically naïve narrator of Booth's, Riggan's and Olson's imagining: he seems to accurately report, but reveals himself to be hopelessly out of touch with the full significance of the events he observes:

one day after school my mother called Cal and me down from the passion-fruit shed and said she wanted us to go across to the store. She stood on the back porch to tell me this, and she handed me some money and told me what to get, and when I asked Cal as we went up the side-path why he had stayed behind the tank-stand while our mother was talking he said it was because Mr Dalloway was in the kitchen and was probably telling her about him not being able to do his sums today. I said she didn't seem to be upset when she was telling me what to get at the store, in fact she had the pink cheeks she usually got when she was pleased with something somebody told her or when she was excited. Cal said he hoped I was right, he said he could think of no other reason why Mr Dalloway should call. ... I said we could go to the beach and have a swim as soon as we had got the things from the store – What things? I couldn't remember what she had told me to get. I asked Cal what she'd said, but he said he hadn't heard. He tried naming a few things, like butter and eggs and jam and sugar but I still could not remember. I said it was no use, I would have to go back and ask her. Luckily, we had only reached the river crossing when I realised I had forgotten, it would have been terrible if I got to the store and then found I didn't know what to ask for. Cal said he would wait for me. I said I'd run home and run back, it wouldn't take long. But it took a bit longer than I expected it to. This was because the back door was locked when I got home, which was pretty unusual; I had to wait for my mother to open it. I had to knock several times before she opened it. 'What are *you* doing back here?' she asked, and her face was angry and red. She kept the door nearly shut, but I saw she was wearing her dressing-gown, and that was pretty unusual for this time of the day. I said I had forgotten what she had asked me to get from the store. 'Oh, three pounds of flour and two packets of cigarettes, never mind the other things,' she said. Then she must have guessed that I had seen her dressing-gown and her bare feet, because she said: 'I'm

having a shower while you kids are away. There's no privacy with you two running in and out. Anyway, three pounds of flour and two packets of cigarettes. Will you remember now?' I said I would, and she closed the door. No need for her to be so crabby, I thought as I ran back down the road. No need for her to have a shower so late; if we got in her way so much, she should have her shower earlier. I told Cal this and he agreed that she shouldn't have been crabby. If she was having a shower, he said, Mr Dalloway must have gone. Must have, I said. Then I thought it was funny I hadn't seen him on the road when I went back. I decided he must have popped along to see Mrs Kelly about Dibs; Dibs had been having trouble with his spelling lately. And I thought no more about my mother taking so long to open the door. (233-34)

In this passage Janet's affair with Dalloway is as obvious to the reader as it is opaque to Harry. While Harry can observe the signs he cannot interpret them. He reads Janet's pink cheeks as a sign of excitement but cannot read the sexual connotation which the reader infers. The boys are puzzled by Dalloway's appearance underlining the adult nature of his visit, arcane to observant but unwitting children, while Janet's behaviour and appearance when Harry returns – irritated to be disturbed in her bare feet and dressing-gown from behind a locked door, pointedly defensive of her private space from the intrusions of her son – are plain markers of her clandestine affair. The extent to which Harry misreads all this – because he cannot do otherwise – is complete, in the eyes of the authorial reader, when Harry cannot fathom why he wouldn't have seen Dalloway on the road if the teacher had left his house. While Harry can only assume in his naivety that Dalloway has made another house visit, to address the crisis of Dibs' inability to spell, the reader is being instructed by the implied author to imagine Dalloway in the other direction, back into Janet's bedroom.

Throughout the novel the reader has been given a host of cues alluding to the probable contours of Janet's true relationship with Dalloway. In the first pages of the book Dalloway's absence for the summer is subtly triangulated with Janet's holiday in the city through the unknowing banter and ribbing between Harry and Dibs (1-3); a few pages later Frank's anxiety about



Dalloway surfaces for the first time, Harry's father visibly upset when the boy assumes the teacher has taken his holiday in the city as well (5-6). Wiggins drops by one evening to deliver meat and, *en route* to laying his lust for Caroline in plain view, taunts Frank with the knowledge that not only does Dalloway lead a chequered private life but he is indeed taking his holidays in the city (45-46). Frank's apprehension isn't helped when Caroline seems to recall hearing the name Dalloway in another context, but one she can't recall, apparently leaving open the possibility to Frank that it is a name she has heard from her aunt Janet (47-48). Later, when Susan is intent on stirring up Harry, she too subtly connects Janet's holiday with Dalloway's absence, which, as Janet's turns out to be, is permanent:

'By the way,' I said, 'have you heard any more about Mr Dalloway?'  
'I have no idea what his plans are,' she said.  
'You still reckon he's not coming back?' I asked.  
'It's not what I *reckon*,' she said. 'It's what I understand to be true.'  
'And he won't be here next term?'  
'So I understand.'  
'Why won't he?'  
'I haven't the faintest idea,' she said. 'I imagine it's because he prefers the city.'  
'I wonder why?' I said, acting stupid so that she could go on thinking she was clever.  
'Why what?'  
'Why he would prefer the city.'  
'You know who to ask about that,' she said. 'I don't know the city.'  
I guessed she meant Caroline. I said: 'I'll ask her.'  
'How often do you write to her?' she asked. When I stared, she added: 'Your mother. ...'. (Emphases original, 85)

Again, Harry reports reliably but does not reflect on Susan's sly insinuation linking Janet to Dalloway. This might be because his attention is focused on Caroline, and on guarding his involvement with her from both Susan and his mother, but it also shows, therefore, his limitation to reflect on

the subtler and fuller dimensions of the events at play around him but beyond his grasp. Hence the irony: it is Harry's own account that continually links Janet to Dalloway yet he does not speculate in the way that his report will have the authorial reader speculate on Janet's probable relationship with Dalloway. With Janet away and Harry mainly narrating events immediately before him, his inability to read things beyond his view is literal, while the reader fills in the gaps in Harry's narration on the axis of perception and judgement. Janet's physical absence is thus reflected in the limits of Harry's narration. Throughout the novel she is a presence evoked through hearsay which her son is privy to, but upon which he withholds reflection.

There is, then, a compelling aesthetic richness in Harry's recall of the afternoon he interrupted Janet with Dalloway for how she at last appears to us fully rendered as a living, breathing embodiment of a character. Till then, whenever the affair has been obliquely cued or foreshadowed, indeed whenever Janet herself has been mentioned, she has been meaningfully ushered aside, kept pointedly offstage. It has always been through the reports of others, whether ominously intoned to Harry in conversation or overheard in the conversations just beyond him, that Harry receives the impressions which add up to an incriminating profile of Janet and which he thereby casts before us. When the moment of truth does come for Harry, his characteristic modes of unreliability come into their own for the reader alive to the aesthetic sensibility of the narrative's design: here is the moment of truth, the narrative machinery seems to implore, for here is the moment when Janet appears before us to speak for the first time. When she does, she opens up the ironic gap between authorial reader and naively limited narrator: while we have all our suspicions confirmed, Harry himself cannot register the trauma of the sudden revelation because he does not understand its full dimensions.

But Harry's later recollection complicates how we read his earlier unreliability. The reader has to calibrate Harry's climactic revelations with his prior account. Squaring the two is all the more difficult for the temporal dislocations at work between them. Harry reveals his mother's affair towards

the end of the narrative, but this is, of course, a flashback, since it details events which transpired before Janet's departure for the city. And yet accounting for precisely when Harry narrates the flashback itself is beyond firm explanation. It occurs during a complex spell of narration in the thirteenth chapter when Harry offers up a slew of memories interspersed with a fractured account in which he seems to reencounter the environs of Calliope Bay by way of a dream. This indicates a time in advance of the events of the summer, but how far in advance is impossible to say. As if this wasn't complicated enough, Harry further reveals that he saw Janet's affair unfold more directly before his eyes:

I saw my mother kissing Mr Dalloway ... I saw her kissing him. ... I saw them from the tank-stand. I saw them through the kitchen window. He had his hands on both sides of her head, his fingers in her hair, and he was kissing her. I saw them through the window. I was on the tank-stand. They were kissing in our kitchen. I couldn't watch. I jumped from the tank-stand and ran out to the road ... (236)

One possibility is that, couched in the framing consciousness of a dream, Harry is narrating a repressed memory. But again Harry's limitations as a self-reflecting narrator seem to stop him from directly addressing the nature of his own account. He offers no clue to the reader on a conscious level – we can only infer the possibility that he narrates from a dream and that the memories he offers might, therefore, be traces of experiences rising to the surface of a troubled consciousness rather than consciously delivered to us as part of his purposively thought-out and deliberately ordered narrative. And, if the possibility is open-ended, then the problem of quantifying Harry's unreliability remains. For without a wider frame of reference which directs us towards how we might safely reconstruct his (or rather, the novel's) elaborate misdirections, then we only have alternative possibilities of interpretation – an exclusive, settled interpretation remains out of bounds. If we cannot be sure how and when to place Harry's troubled and revelatory account, then his memory of Janet and Dalloway might mark his earlier narrative to that point as a deeply untrustworthy underreport, his prior innocence feigned to some degree. Harry's narration concerning Janet thus entwines innocence with self-

deception, but also leaves open the question of which kind of unreliability limits his account – fallibility or untrustworthiness.

### Caroline

The first attribution of unreliability that the authorial audience is able to put to Harry is that he begins as a clearly fallible narrator and, if so, then prone to both greater and lesser instances of fallibility, since his misperceptions may be predicated on either his natural naivety or upon his limited access to information, even if that limited access arises in part from his naivety.

Furthermore, Olson's terms not only allow that Harry's fallibility may prove to be of greater or lesser degrees but that he may evolve into an untrustworthy narrator as well. In the end, when it is revealed that Harry does have prior knowledge of Janet's affair with Dalloway, we might attribute something like Olson's prescribed turn from fallibility into untrustworthiness, but because we cannot be sure how we are meant to factor Harry's later recollection against his prior narrative, we can only forward this as a possibility.

But it is exactly here that Phelan's taxonomy comes into its own in ways that counter the approach underlying Olson's terms of engagement. Although Olson wants to parse fallible narrators from trustworthy ones in absolutist fashion, Harry's narration shows why that arrangement cannot be happily maintained, especially if we treat his disclosures discretely, as per Phelan's taxonomy which reminds us to apply the tools of interpretation not to find definitively what kind of unreliability best fits any given unreliable narrator, but to better account for their narrative complexities (*Living* 53). Broadly it seems that Harry's fallibility consistently rests upon his naivety, and therefore commends him to the category of the highly fallible. But, just as Harry's fallibility is complicated in respect of Janet by his later recollection, accounting for Harry's unreliability in respect of Caroline is similarly challenging because his fallibility blends into untrustworthy narration as well. Although he behaves and perceives naively in respect of Caroline, Harry's naivety is complicated by what we might justifiably read as his bias for her.

In these cases his unreliability resonates with Olson's terms but outside the details of her discussion. Although Olson holds that biased narrators are fallible, she does not examine what constitutes bias nor offer a clue to how readers recognise a biased narrator. On the other hand, we have reasonable grounds to read bias as untrustworthy rather than fallible narration, since bias may be understood as a dispositional inclination rather than an external impediment or epistemological limitation.<sup>27</sup> And yet even if we can rearrange the terms this way, Harry's bias for Caroline nonetheless seems contingent on his naivety. Harry shows a clear prejudice for Caroline by putting himself at her disposal in ways that are, by turns, innocent, naïve and boyish, and by others far darker. He is open to her sexually exploitative treatment of him, though he is naturally confused by it and repressively traumatised as well. Thus conflicted, he does resist and reject some of her advances. Most plainly though, Harry obsessively chases her affections throughout much of the novel and takes it upon himself – naively – to be her protector. This offers a chance for some of Olson's categorisations to be rethought in terms closer to Phelan's conception of multifaceted unreliability. Conceivably, as a boy on the earliest tides of pubescent change, Harry's bias for Caroline arises from his particular naivety. It is, therefore, natural, and hence Harry's unreliability in respect of Caroline is, to some degree, beyond his control. If he misreads Caroline – as he does – then this is an extension of, or contingent upon, his naivety. And yet because it leads him to self-deception as well, his bias steers him to untrustworthy narration. But if bias steers him to untrustworthy narration, then bias seems a marker of untrustworthiness in and of itself. With Harry's lack of knowledge leading him to self-deception, we can begin to see that Olson's distinction between epistemological limitations and ethical deficiencies cannot be universally maintained.

Although Harry's age during the summer whose events he recounts is not disclosed we can infer that he is on the threshold of pubescent change. Caroline's arrival marks a sudden sexual awakening in Harry. He may be naïve

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<sup>27</sup> See pp. 72-73.

and therefore limited by his lack of experience, but he is at least able to indicate the break he feels with prior childhood experience when he sees Caroline for the first time: "I saw her five minutes after the *Emma Cranwell* tied up. This beautiful girl in a yellow dress appeared on the deck near the gangway ... After my first thought – that she was beautiful – I thought she was chubby, but quickly decided this was because I was comparing her with skinny Susan Prosser" (33). Harry's early disclosures show that he is aware of the new terrain he finds himself somewhat helplessly embarking upon. Even if he is unable to fully reflect on the experience, Harry reports reliably on the factual level, though his report is marked by a recognisably naïve vocabulary:

Why did she seem beautiful? Because, for instance, her skin was smooth and sort of creamy, and she had no rashes or pimples or scars, and her hair was also smooth and sort of creamy or buttery-looking, and her nose was straight and small and without any bumps or veins, and when she smiled her teeth looked very white, not crooked and not green, and her eyes were good because they were clear and blue, they were eyes you could stare at and see right through. Next time I was close enough, I thought, I would look hard at her eyes and see right through them. Of course she was not as chubby as I'd first imagined; she simply wasn't skinny, that was all. Or nearly all. Like, when I thought of Susan Prosser's I thought of tits; when I thought of Caroline's I thought of breasts. I felt sort of polite when I thought of anything to do with Caroline. I did not feel polite when I thought of Susan or of the girls who came to our school from back-country places. (39)

Harry's language is direct, unvarnished and sincerely targeted at capturing the newness of his experience. His speech is marked by a naivety which does not imply unreliable reportage in this case, but which, on the contrary, speaks to his genuineness: Harry's syntax, for instance, shows the hesitancy of one unaccustomed to reporting of this kind. Caroline's skin and hair are both "sort of creamy", implying that previously he has not thought deeply on the virtues of a beautiful young woman's skin or hair and that he lacks any more precise descriptors for beauty of this kind. Similarly, Caroline's clear blue eyes are simply "good", while his desire to stare at them and "see

right through” implies an instinctive, natural curiosity which signifies the first brush of what eventually develops into more mature sexual desire. Harry is reflecting, as far as he is able, to account for his experience, and his reflection is sincere because it also reflects the natural limitations of a naive narrator. Hence, although Harry’s naivety is still in plain view, he reports reliably nonetheless because he does not go beyond his limits to unreliably perceive or judge, or to ethically misevaluate.

In other instances Harry’s account of Caroline is sincere but his misperception is obvious. When he attempts to square Caroline’s behaviour on the axis of knowledge and perception we can spot the naïve blunders which both guide, and are reflected in, Harry’s thinking:

Her way of kissing sort of took you by surprise. You could see what she meant to do and you had time to turn your head if you wanted to, but you couldn’t move, and suddenly she was kissing you. This, I decided, must be a city habit we would just have to get used to, unless there was a rule saying how often you needed to kiss before you moved to some other way of showing you were pleased, like shaking hands maybe. I noticed the second time how very close she came when she kissed, her body was right up against you; it was as if she had to be sure that now she’d found your mouth she did not lose it. (38)

Here, we can distinguish Harry’s reliable report from his unreliable judgement to reveal the discrepancy of unreliability, expressed as a gap between Harry’s experience and his comprehension. Again Harry seems reliable as far as the facts go. There is no cause to doubt that Caroline kisses Harry just as he describes because he does so only from within the bounds of his experience — her kissing him takes him by surprise, and he is struck by how immediately physical she is with him. Harry is reliably reporting on the axis of fact, character and event, even though, here, his response also sits on the same axis.

But his naivety takes on another hue when he first supposes kissing to be a cosmopolitan “way of showing you were pleased, like shaking hands”, and, second, guesses that the reason for Caroline’s physicality, overwhelming to him, has to do with a need in her to cling limpet-like to the object of her

affection. Harry's perceptions mark his naivety, and yet his first reflection is highly fallible while his second is less so. His hypothesis that there might be "a rule saying how often you needed to kiss before you moved to ... shaking hands maybe" is clearly misguided because the reader knows no such rule exists. Further, the reader recognises that Caroline's enthusiasm for kissing – and here acknowledging that Harry's report is taken to be reliable – is beyond the norm. Hence, Harry's second reflection on Caroline's particular penchant for kissing – "it was as if she had to be sure that now she'd found your mouth she did not lose it" – might speak more closely to her private motivations despite his naïve shortcomings of experience. Harry might be an unreliable reader of social codes but far more reliable on the deeper nature of Caroline herself.

When Harry missteps in his reflection about the formality of kissing he puts into play the ironic loop which Booth imagines to underlie all unreliable narration whereby the implied author and reader are, in Wall's phrasing, "silently nudging one another in the ribs at the folly and delusion of the narrator" ("Challenges" 21). We are, according to Booth's perspective, meant to identify the humour when Harry wonders if there is a rule which sees kissing give way to shaking hands instead. We read his statement as an expression of naïve limitations, and smile with the implied author who has clearly inserted such an expression of naïve decency for our enjoyment, as if an authorial wink to readers on the implied authorial level, readers who know that Harry's take is misguided and warm to his naivety because it renders him vulnerable.

Certainly the effect of Harry's unreliability might raise a smile in the reader who knows humour when it appears, but the risk of handling humorous instances of unreliability in this way is that it comes to rest with authorial intentionality, thus overlooking how irony often inheres in dramatic or structural terms as well. For instance, after reflecting on the beauty of Caroline, Harry concludes:

Caroline was nice. My mother had said she was shy, almost as if this was peculiar, but I could see there was nothing peculiar about Caroline, my



mother must have mistaken Caroline's niceness for shyness, and this didn't surprise me because my mother often got the wrong idea about people at first and had to change her mind later, like with Mr Dalloway, saying at first he would be a better teacher if he didn't have such a high opinion of his own good looks, then not seeming to mind him at all after he'd called on her a few times to talk about our progress at school. (39-40)

The irony cannot be lost on the reader. Virtually every utterance and train of thought speaks to Harry's naivety in hugely ironic terms, bearing in mind the rest of the novel. Despite what Harry says here, Caroline is highly peculiar if we consider that sexually desirable young women don't usually prey upon younger boys, while later on the reader has her instincts rewarded if she now begins to suspect that Janet's involvement with Dalloway is sexual. Cued to these interpretations, the reader takes satisfaction at the syntactic level, noting, for instance, how the irony is underlined by Harry's confident assertion that his mother "often got the wrong idea about people" when the novel shows, in its resolution, how it is Harry himself who palpably has the wrong idea about people.

Later, when Harry is traumatised by the sight of Caroline and Buster having sex in the meat works, the irony operates the same way. Harry worships Buster and approves of the time that Caroline has for him because, in Harry's view, Buster keeps her safe from the threat of Wiggins. He is, however, pointedly unaware of the sexual connection between Caroline and Buster until he sees it for himself. For the reader on the other hand, reading on the synthetic level and alert to the text's ironical dimensions, the revelation of Caroline and Buster's sexual relationship is no surprise. The reader, therefore, sees the emotional storm bearing down upon Harry far in advance of its breaking upon him. The irony is structural, part of the narrative patterning of the text which satisfies the reader's need for a well-made narrative arc. Even if obviously a sign of authorial design, in a structural sense, the irony does not depend on a collusion between author and reader. Nor does it require, of necessity, that other values inessential to literary form such as humour or ethical evaluation be 'shared' by author and reader. Even though such values are often in plain view,

and even though the real-life author and real-life reader may share those values, the sense of 'collusion' between them is, I suggest, more an effect of structural irony. Booth's authorial irony holds that the author and the reader must share the same values to get the irony. No doubt this accounts for the effect as registered by the authorial reader. But in a more technical sense, the irony is generated out of the interaction of the mimetic and synthetic dimensions of the text. We see a character moving in one direction of interpretation, and privately, on our side of the text, understand the more efficacious interpretation to lie in the opposite direction.

Increasingly our judgements on Harry, as both a character and a narrator, involve navigating between mimetic and synthetic reading. As we perceive the text's mimetic features, nonetheless our engagement makes sense of those with recourse to the text's synthetic and thematic dimensions as well. Having cast Harry as a naive narrator and noted signs of his ironic limitations, the reader can then look to particular instances of his narration to see how those limitations furnish a greater understanding of the particularity of his character. As Phelan points out:

interpreters will examine the homodiegetic narrator's character – including such aspects of character as motives, values, beliefs, interests, psychology, race, class, and gender (to the extent these matters can be inferred from events and descriptions) – for clues to the narration and the character's narration for clues to the character. (*Narrative* 111)

For example, we know, or at least infer, from much of Harry's narration that he is bounded by his experience of early adolescence. On the first day that Harry sees Caroline, the same day he reflects on her "sort of creamy" beauty, he finds himself strangely silent in her company. As he reflects that night about the trip home from the wharf:

I remembered what a damned chatterbox I had been in the wagon with her and Cal and Dibs and the suitcases, and I thought it was strange how I was such a chatterbox then and yet now I did not want to talk. I did not want to stop looking at her but I did not want to talk to her, or to anybody. I had been like this since dinner, since Dad had started talking. He was certainly

talking, you would think Caroline had been sent especially for him to talk to, all she had to do was listen to him. And Cal. Cal talked too. Not me, though. Not since dinner. In fact, not since the trip from the wharf. (37)

And, a little later: “I probably would have told her of the pistol and a few other secrets if Sydney Bridge Upside Down had gone any slower or the trip had been longer. And all this was only a few hours ago. Yet now I did not want to speak. Now, while the rain pounded away, I just wanted to look at her” (39). The authorial reader, by now cued to Harry’s naivety and the limitations arising from his perspective, can make out the clear indicators of his naivety here, inhering in his status as an early adolescent. Harry is not only struck into quietness around Caroline, but he registers the effect as an altogether new experience to him and hence one beyond his ability to account. But his report, both in its language and in its limited self-reflection, suggest that Harry is experiencing a pubescent mood-swing.

‘Did Harry tell you about *his* famous storm?’ Dad asked her. ‘The one when he sailed in the *Emma Cranwell*.’

Caroline, who was certainly the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, smiled at me. ...

‘You tell me, Harry,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said, very sulky. I had been sulky for several minutes. I didn’t know why.

‘You tell me then, Uncle Frank,’ she said, not seeming to mind my sulkiness. (Emphasis original, 36-37)

Harry’s moodiness and implicit sense of isolation from those around him who are unmarked by such changes – not only Caroline but Cal and Frank – suggest something of the emotional and psychosocial changes that typify adolescence.

Harry’s desire to both look at Caroline and to keep quiet within that experience convincingly blends two markers of pubescent change. Coupled with his limited ability to reliably report beyond the experience itself – that is, unable to reflect from a more mature perspective on the raw experience of his adolescence – we can see how our view of Harry as a character both informs and springs from how we read him as a narrator. Noting Harry’s ironic limitations and his naivety we can read Harry’s sulkiness for how it shows a

character struggling to understand his own hypersensitive emotional state. Equally, we can read in reverse to speculate that, precisely because he is an early adolescent negotiating new experience whose exact nature is beyond him, he operates as a naively limited narrator.

The opening of chapter three shows Harry still narrating largely naively but also with a sense of burgeoning curiosity, directly stirred by Caroline: “I was thinking about everybody in Calliope Bay, one after the other. This was because of what Caroline said about Sam Phelps. She made me think about him in a different way, then I wondered if I could see the other people in Calliope Bay as a stranger like Caroline would see them” (34). Though he reaches for greater reflection, his tendency to boyish imagining on the back of naive limitation still shines through. On the Prossers, for instance: “I thought about lonely Mrs Prosser and about skinny Susan ... I even imagined that Mr Prosser, missing for years, would unexpectedly return with a fortune and make Susan and her mother show their true feelings”; or on Mrs Kelly: “I could probably imagine all sorts of things about her if I tried. I did not try” (35).

But the greater significance of his narration has to do with how he gives himself away without realising in respect of Caroline, his naivety giving rise to an instance of unreliable evaluation resting on subtly untrustworthy narration:

The funny thing is I forgot what Caroline said about Sam Phelps. I mean, I forgot for more than two days. Then I remembered on her third morning with us. It was just after we had been running around with nothing on that I remembered. We had been running from her room to our room and back again, up and down the passage, in and out of the kitchen, and we were getting puffed, I was not surprised when Caroline dived onto her bed, pulled a sheet over herself and said from the pillow that she'd had enough. Cal and I didn't mind stopping; we'd had our share of smacks.

Cal, who was still shy about Caroline seeing him wearing nothing, went off to get dressed. I sat on Caroline's bed, near the end.

‘I've remembered something,’ I said, looking straight ahead in case she sat up and let the sheet slip and she thought I was staring. ‘Remember what you said about Sam Phelps the other night? About him being handsome?’ (51)

Harry narrates the scene as if it provides the necessary preamble to the conversation he has with Caroline about Sam Phelps, but his narration is more striking and significant for how it handles the scene itself. This is the first that the reader learns Caroline has joined the boys in the ritual of their morning running game. It is possible to misread Harry's report initially: though we know that he and Cal run up and down the house in the mornings with nothing on, we might assume that were Caroline to join in, similarly *au naturel*, then this would be something Harry thought worth reporting. His matter-of-fact "we had been running around with nothing on" initially seems more likely to refer to him and Cal alone; with the other, more remote, possibility being that although Caroline has thrown her kit for the morning run-around, Harry finds this a mere and undeserving detail. This is unlikely, given that he has already waxed dreamy-eyed in her presence and developed an attachment to being kissed. Either way the reader is caught wondering, unable to tell whether Harry's "running around with nothing on" refers only to him and Cal or to Caroline as well. It is only when Harry tells us that he sat on her bed and tried not to stare that we know Caroline has been naked with the boys the whole time. But this means that the passage now shows such a rapid slide from innocent to less innocent reportage that the whole section seems suspect. Because in the end Harry knows he shouldn't stare, his initial underreport on Caroline's nakedness seems disingenuous. At the same time, because of his underreport, his reflection that he shouldn't stare seems to situate the whole passage as an instance of underregarding: Harry makes an evaluation which the reader can understand to be "moving along the right track but simply does not go far enough" (*Living* 52). Harry knows that seeing his cousin unclothed would represent a transgression of familial norms, but that makes his description of the game itself seem altogether too casual, a deliberate and purposive underreport in order to avoid round judgement on a breach of norms.

Harry's disingenuousness becomes more replete as the chapter goes on. As he picks up the thread of that morning, after Caroline has fallen asleep in the bed:

I went to my room and got dressed. Then I made the bed. Cal must have gone outside. He was a funny kid, he hadn't minded playing the running game with me, but now that Caroline joined in (after looking in and surprising us on her first morning) he seemed to think it was a rude game and I wouldn't be astounded if he said tomorrow that he would rather not play. This was all right with me, except that he might tell Dad, and I was certain Dad would not like us seeing so much of Caroline's body. I would warn Cal, I would tell him I would think up a revenge if he spoiled our fun.

I looked into Caroline's room on my way to the kitchen. She was still asleep.

Out in the kitchen, I stacked the breakfast dishes and ran the water into the sink. Here I am again on my own, I thought; no help from Caroline. Not, of course, that I expected her to do the dishes; it was just that, before she arrived, I'd figured I would have a rest from doing the dishes. I did not mind doing them, I would not complain about doing them. If she did offer to do them, or to sweep up or anything like that, I would refuse to let her, I would tell her she was on holiday and we wanted her to enjoy herself, we did not expect her to do any damned housekeeping. If she insisted, it would probably be polite to let her do something. So far she hadn't insisted.

No, I didn't mind Caroline not helping. (56-57)

Harry feigns innocence and then deceives himself. First, his commentary on Cal's behaviour is deeply unreliable, its account unable to be squared either in its own terms or against Harry's earlier report. To offer bemusement in the face of Cal's reticence is plainly dishonest. In prose loaded with signifiers meant to express a sense of puzzled disengagement from Cal – "a funny kid" who "seemed to think [playing with Caroline] was a rude game" – Harry's tone teems with insincerity because he has already shown that he knows very well the familial norms transgressed by playing naked with Caroline (51). Concluding that it would hardly be a shock were Cal to avoid playing in future is not only an understatement but hints at deception too since it seems to be the

outcome that Harry secretly wants. Harry's attachment to Caroline has already started to develop into jealousy (53-56), so if Cal's absence is "all right" with Harry, it must be read as ironic understatement rather than neutral acceptance. But of course, Cal's withdrawal presents a risk to Harry's time with Caroline if it raises the chances that the younger boy will dob the pair of them in with Frank. The threat prompts a rare flash of reliable reportage from Harry, lighting up the full range and depth of the unreliable narration on show in other directions. Freely admitting that he will take his revenge on Cal if he narks indicts Harry as a character but it also shows an awareness that what he is up to with Caroline is wrong, even if, in his naivety, he does not fully understand the contours of the violation their behaviour represents. Attempting to both mitigate the wrongdoing in which he is participant and reclaim some kind of innocence, Harry again affects an air of befuddled disassociation as he supposes that Frank will see something wrong, somehow, with two boys eyeing their fully grown and naked female cousin during romps around the house.

Harry is no doubt untrustworthy here, but the real question is whether, in the end, he comes to believe any aspect of his own account. As the passage continues and he wonders whether Caroline will wake up and decide to help with the dishes, it seems that Harry is really trying to deceive himself as much as any other audience. Despite his ultimate claim to the contrary – "I didn't mind Caroline not helping" – her absence clearly irritates him: "Here I am again on my own, I thought, no help from Caroline." Hence, the reader might infer that such is his infatuation that he would rather make excuses for her than confront his own conflicted feelings. His repetitious affirmations serve not only a rhetorical function as he explains to us why he is not really upset with Caroline at all, but signal that he is trying to talk himself into believing it as well.

Harry never fully succeeds in convincing the reader that his regard for Caroline is unconditional but he maintains a commitment to that unattainable ideal for much of the novel. On the one hand such commitment suggests that

Harry's tendency to misread and misregard is deeply entrenched, reiterating his naivety. On the other hand, the more Harry tries to reason with himself the more untrustworthy he seems. This might seem to bear out Olson's view that narrators can move from fallibility to untrustworthiness, but her assertion that fallibility and untrustworthiness are mutually exclusive requires that Harry sheds his naivety at the moment he is motivated to untrustworthy narration. Rather more complexly than Olson's terms would allow, even during instances in which Harry seems untrustworthy – such as when he tries to fool himself into thinking that he doesn't mind Caroline not helping – his fallibility is kept in play as well since we don't know how far Harry really believes his own reasoning. If he is dedicated to an ideal which he has installed for himself based on a hopelessly mistaken reading of the situation with Caroline, then he remains fallible because naive. At the same time he may be untrustworthy if his narration is strategized to protect this self-interest. An alternative permutation could be that if he has misreported – that is, if he told himself he didn't mind Caroline not helping, but knew he really did – then he is untrustworthy but less naive having learned a valuable lesson about the extent to which the human heart can lead its owner to self-deceit in the name of improperly targeted desire. But of course, as a naïve narrator, he cannot be expected to soundly articulate that self-reflection, meaning the reader must allow that, perhaps, where no self-reflection is offered then no self-reflection cogently exists. Either way, what remains is Harry's dedication to Caroline and his increasingly complex unreliability in accounting for it.

Harry scours outside for the absent Cal, inadvertently runs into Susan, and then returns indoors to wipe the dishes. He cannot keep his mind from Caroline, still fixated by thoughts that he ought to be front and centre in hers:

I had wondered if Caroline would hear the rattle of the dishes and come out and insist on helping. Evidently she hadn't. Better get on with the sweeping. I would do the kitchen first, then the passage, then our room, then maybe I would go into Caroline's room –

Should I go to her room first? After looking so long at Susan Prosser, I wouldn't mind looking at Caroline. It would be a nice change.



I forced myself to keep to the first plan. I swept the kitchen quickly, then began on the passage.

'Harry!' called Caroline.

I dropped the broom and sped up the passage. I stopped in her doorway.

She was sitting up in bed. The sheet had slipped. After a moment or so I noticed that she looked more beautiful than ever. (62)

Having manipulated his own thinking as he attempts to convince himself that he doesn't mind Caroline not helping with the washing up, his feeling nonetheless remains whereby he needs to be needed by Caroline. Yet this is only imparted to the reader through a screen of ironic narration. When Harry wonders "if Caroline would hear the rattle of the dishes and come out and insist on helping", to immediately conclude that "Evidently she hadn't", the reader can pick up Harry's misreading. The only thing truly evident is that Caroline hasn't come to help, but he naively, and inadvertently humorously (thereby arises the irony), chalks that up to her not having heard the rattle of the dishes. Implicitly he theorises that had she heard then naturally she would come and help. If Harry was a different, more mature character, prone to sardonic reflection, then we would very likely read into his comment an understated, gentle sarcasm signifying a narrator cognisant of the facts behind the situation. Without that level of self-reflection, we see Harry as an unreliable narrator, naively limited.

It is clear to the reader that Harry's emotional response to Caroline is conflicted in ways that are beyond his experience and ability to reflect upon reliably. Only a few pages earlier, Harry is overcome with jealousy when Caroline disappears first with Cal and then with Sam Phelps. Showing Caroline the abandoned meat works, Harry is separated from her and he reacts with barely contained anger. From the top of the works he observes the scene below and relates his jealousy:

I looked at the group by the railway line and now at Dibs ... cutting across to be near her, near *my* cousin. And now at Dibs speeding up because Caroline and Cal had climbed into the freight wagon and Sydney Bridge

Upside Down was moving. Sam Phelps was in his seat at the front of the wagon, holding the reins loosely, heading for the wharf with Caroline and Cal. What a dirty trick! Cal could have called me, *he* knew I'd like a ride, Caroline might think I didn't care, but Cal knew better, he could easily have yelled to me. That kid played some dirty tricks, I thought. And what right had Dibs, jumping now into the wagon, to be travelling with my cousin? (Emphases original, 54)

As he descends the stairs of the works, Harry's thoughts lead him into a death fantasy in which Caroline is made to pay emotionally for so callously abandoning him: "I went down slowly, kicking the footholds to make them more dangerous. Serve her right if I crash, I thought. Poor Harry, she would think when they found my body. And all she could do then would be give me a last kiss" (55). Despite Harry's darkly emotive reverie, in a sense he narrates far more reliably here than previously – when recounting the running game – or later – as he does the dishes and tells himself he is not upset with Caroline – because the reader has full access to Harry's misguided but nonetheless sincere emotional response.

We can see how Harry's early impressions of Caroline show an immediate infatuation with his cousin, and how those in turn signal the heavy bias towards her which carries much of the action of the novel. Harry's infatuation both springs from his naivety and points to biased judgements to come, but if this loads the dice even more heavily against the odds of his ability to perceive and judge reliably, it doesn't justify all bias as exclusively fallible narration. In Harry's case, his bias for Caroline blinds him to reality, and thus marks his unreliability as an expression, at times, of both his fallibility and his naivety, but it also leads him to both behaviour and narration which makes him untrustworthy. Harry's example shows how a character's natural bias may be regarded as one of the cues that engaged readers note on their way to compiling a complex view of character. In doing so it resists the straightforward attributions of unreliability that Olson imagines to hold.

### *Morality & convention*

We can see then how useful both Olson's and Phelan's accounts of unreliability are to our reading of Harry's narration. While Olson's categories of fallibility and untrustworthiness provide the poles of Harry's unreliability, Phelan's exacting distinctions between types of unreliability help us more finely interrogate the dynamics of reportage, reflection and evaluation in discrete instances of either fallible or untrustworthy narration. Equally we can say that Harry's unreliability shows up pointed distinctions between Olson's and Phelan's accounts. To conclude this chapter, I argue that while both Olson and Phelan encourage us to read between mimetic and synthetic levels, Harry's narration shows that Olson's navigation between the mimetic and synthetic assumes a connection between morality and unreliability which Phelan's prescription carefully avoids. I suggest that the hard and fast distinctions maintained by Olson are countered by Phelan's complexity, and that this difference carries over into Olson's insistence that unreliability ought to be reliably read, while Phelan's terms, though more precise, allow the opposite.

Although Olson's formulation derives from Phelan's taxonomy, it also re-inscribes some conventionally established notions of unreliability especially relevant to Harry's narration. In particular critics such as Riggan hold that the naive narrator is, by definition, both morally-upright and appealing as a character. In the case of Huck, it is his warmth as a character which installs him, for Riggan, as the archetype of naive unreliability. If we reconsider a few moments in the novel already explored, we can reflect that Harry is, at times, charming in his naivety in a way that sharply recalls Huck's narrative mode. When Harry unwittingly disturbs Janet's afternoon tryst with Dalloway, for example, the humour by which the author knowingly imparts knowledge of the affair to the reader paints Harry as an innocent and likable narrator. His concern for Dibs's spelling is naive, charming, and decent, and falls along the same lines which underscore Huck's naive reading of why the widow Douglas is saying grace. This is an important point of comparison to explore, first because it suggests that Olson's ethically naïve narrator is, in itself, a

convention of unreliable narration; and second, because the categorical distinctions upon which such conventional archetypes depend are further maintained as Olson navigates between mimetic and synthetic levels to draw mutually exclusive – that is, categorical – distinctions between fallible and untrustworthy narrators.

Booth (*Fiction* 159, *Irony* 141), Riggan (146-57) and Phelan (“Estranging” 228-31) all understand Huck as an ironically limited but ethical narrator. All read the same structure into Huck’s irony, finding his questionable judgement to be redeemed on the ethical plane. Just as crucially, however, each note that the irony is not only measured in the gap between Huck’s ethical standards and those of society around him, but also conveyed through the humour arising from his naivety. For Booth, Huck’s unwitting humour seems symbiotically attached to his ethicality, concluding that we read precisely for “the wonderfully warm moral comedy of Huck’s ‘mistake’”, itself “built [upon Huck’s] verbal misjudgements and his essential moral integrity” (*Irony* 141). Like Booth, on the back of Harry’s naive charm, Riggan finds Huck morally praiseworthy in the warmest human terms (145). But Riggan goes even further, installing such an unreliable narrator as the archetype of naïve narration: “by definition ... the naïve narrator embodies in his actions, words, and character a positive opposing spirit to [societal] malaise” (169-70). Despite naive limitations, the naive narrator must narrate with a sense of goodness palpable to the reader, a quality of character that the reader can admire (155-70).

Effectively Booth and Riggan canonise the dynamics of naive unreliability by closely reading the particular dynamic of unreliability in an already canonical narrator; the configuration of unreliability in Huck’s account is thereby ingrained with conventional force. Because Huck’s humour is central to how we recognise his naivety, his humour thus becomes an important part of what satisfies Riggan’s desire for “a positive opposing spirit” in spite of Huck’s naive limitations. Booth entwines just these elements – humour and naivety – when he finds the “warm moral comedy” of *Huckleberry Finn* to lie at the heart

of the book. Thus canonically secured, Huck's humour becomes a marker of his essential innocence.

What the conventional formulation risks is that if Huck's humour can now be read as a marker of his innocence, and if Huck is ethically reliable, then humour itself becomes a marker of ethical reliability. If we find the naïve narrator charming in their naivety, we read the naïve narrator as an innocent and inscribe his essential morality. Thus the hermeneutical move is revealed: we read the naïve narrator as an innocent and then use that innocence to inscribe his essential morality. But doing so involves a subtle manipulation of what the reader takes innocence to be. When Harry describes the afternoon he unwittingly interrupted Janet with Dalloway we see that he has little understanding of the adult world; he is, therefore, 'innocent' in the third sense of the word given by the OED: "Having or showing the simplicity, ignorance, artlessness, or unsuspecting nature of a child or one ignorant of the world; devoid of cunning or artifice; simple, guileless, unsuspecting; hence, artless, naïve, ingenuous". But, for critics like Riggan, having establishing the naïve narrator's innocence via ignorance and artlessness – and here we note the inflections of naïve humour in Harry's narration – that innocence is then conflated with another sense of the word: "Of persons: Doing no evil; free from moral wrong, sin, or guilt (in general); pure, unpolluted". Hence, the ironic humour of the author bonds Harry to the reader, and, having established the narrator's charming naivety, the reader of Riggan's kind will then want to commend Harry in wider moral terms as well. Such a reader has their work cut out for them when they have to negotiate the suspicion that Harry is a serial murderer.

The adherence to such archetypes – and hence promulgation of them as well – is in itself highly ironic given that Olson, like Booth and Riggan, wants to read character narrators as real people. Riggan justly reasons that because character narrators are, in the fictional planes they habit, drawn as individuals distinct from other individuals, then many of the qualities they exhibit must be those by which we identify individuals in the real world: "precisely because of

these narrators' simulated humanness and because of the realism inherent in the situation of a character's speaking to us directly, the natural limitations of human knowledge and judgment and memory come into play". Because, in other words, people are partial as individuals, realistically drawn character narrators will show the same partiality. It's reasonable to find, therefore, that "any possibility of absolute reliability with regard to all facts and facets of the events and characters within such a narrative is canceled" (19). But this leads Riggan to collapse the synthetic and mimetic levels of the text, suggesting that narrators be regarded as if actual people rather than fictional constructions: "precisely because the narrator sits before us as a human being – albeit a fictionalized one – we naturally react to him in varying degrees in human terms and not just as a disembodied voice providing us with information" (20). Riggan here cleaves to Booth's reckoning, which is laid down more stridently: "No narrator or central intelligence or observer is *simply* convincing: he is convincingly decent or mean, brilliant or stupid, informed, ignorant, or muddled. ... most evident when a narrator tells the story of his own adventures, we react to all narrators as persons" (emphasis original, *Fiction* 273). Riggan's and Booth's formulations risk eliding unreliable narrators' fundamental literariness by insisting on their essential humanness instead, an insistence which undercuts the status of fiction as fiction, and an appreciation for how texts work as texts.

Olson too, in her critical intervention, narrows the gap between the evocation of character which seems realistic – and therefore plausible to us in human terms – and the workings of the textual apparatus itself. As she argues her position: "Referring to a textual construct as a person seems justified in this case, since characteristics such as 'unreliable,' 'untrustworthy,' 'unconscious,' and 'fallible' are ones we apply to individuals. When judging narrators as unreliable, readers treat them like new acquaintances" ("Reconsidering" 99). Like Riggan and Booth, Olson might make a sound general observation: of course readers will read fictional characters as textual constructions that remind them of encounters with or between real people. But her reasoning feels slack

when she misconstrues Phelan, for instance, on whom she draws to justify the importance of considering the influence of readers' own real-world judgements when negotiating character narrators. Olson is right to note that when Phelan posits that we look to character for clues to narration and vice versa (*Narrative* 111) he "makes explicit the fluid movement between the reader's analysis of character (what [Olson calls] personality) and the narrator's discourse", but she miscalculates by reading this to mean that "When judging narrators as unreliable, readers treat them like new acquaintances" ("Reconsidering" 106, 99). What Phelan makes explicit is the interplay between character and narration when the reader negotiates the text as a text: narration informs the reader's view on character, character informs the reader's view on narration. As far as locating "aspects of character", Phelan implicitly warns *against* reading beyond the text itself, for such qualities can only "to [an] extent ... be inferred from events and descriptions" (*Narrative* 111). Olson's point that we use common terms (such as unreliable, untrustworthy, unconscious and fallible) to describe narrators and real people does not offer the hard evidence she needs to find that we treat narrators like real people. Whereas we always come to the former as individuals encountering a textual construct, we must approach the other as a shared human engagement where different rules of judgement also apply. For Olson's proposition to hold, it would have to be equally true to say that we treat new people as if character narrators we encounter in novels. That proposition seems absurd because of what narrators actually are: textual constructs offering us access to a range of experiences which are all made up, which are bracketed off from the reality we inhabit, and hence allow us to reflect on whichever aspects seem most compelling in their capacity as narrators. Reversing Olson's terms in this way shows that when she compares literary and real-world engagements – to justify reading the one just as she reads the other – she situates the text in a way markedly different from Phelan. Because Phelan sees readers' assessments of character and narration as conjoined engagements, both of which depend on how finely the reader can

interpret the evidence of the text, he situates the text itself as the underlying locus of meaning.

On the other hand, the correlation Olson insists on between reality and fictional representations makes it far harder to hold that narrators who are fallible can't also be untrustworthy. Naivety might be one of the given conditions of childhood, but peddling artless untruths might be just as constitutive of childhood as worldly ignorance. If we allow that character narrators might – like the actual humans upon whose profiles the fictional constructs depend – prove to be unreliable in radically different ways depending on the particularities of circumstance, then we might also allow that a character narrator like Harry can be allowed to show untrustworthiness in his narration as well. Convincingly rendering Harry in mimetic terms, thereafter it allows Harry multifaceted unreliable narration must invite more complex theoretical accounts of unreliability.

The deeper point for literary analysis is to consider how experience is expressed through literary channels. If this adds to our understanding of how fictional structures deal with, and increase apprehension of, human experience, it also redirects us to the deeper question at stake in any literary analysis which seeks to uncover what it is about fiction that we take to be worthwhile of our attention.

Olson's theory, which cleaves fallibility from untrustworthiness, and which necessarily locates bias on the side of fallible narration, differs because it looks to impose critical structures on fiction. This calls to mind Lanser's cautionary note "against any premature closure of the system, however comforting that option might appear", given that "Complexities such as [a changeable narrator] or dual voice cannot be resolved by forcing a categorization upon the text, nor can the text be fully appreciated and understood without allowing the pluralities to surface" (172-73).<sup>28</sup> Trying to figure Harry's fallibility in respect of both Janet and Caroline steers interpretation towards Phelan's more complexly ordered account of

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<sup>28</sup> See pp. 47 and 70.



unreliability and allows us to produce the kind of multifaceted reading of unreliable narration usually disallowed in discussions which favour the archetypes most conveniently applicable to more straightforward attributions of unreliability on conventional terms.

Central to my argument here has been how approaches like Olson's simplify Phelan's taxonomy, narrowing the interplay between fallibility and untrustworthiness by first insisting on an unnecessarily hard and fast distinction between fallible and untrustworthy narration and second implying that narrators whose unreliability shifts in the course of a narration may only move from fallibility to untrustworthiness. Although Olson stops short of fully articulating this shift, since she holds that "the separation of narrators into untrustworthy or fallible applies for all narrators traditionally labeled unreliable", then even though "it is possible for narrators to move from being fallible to untrustworthy in the course of a narration", they can't be both at the same time (104). Though she stakes her claim on Phelan's view that narrators can be unreliable "either by falling short or distorting", nowhere does Phelan claim the mutually exclusive division between those two distinct kinds of unreliability in individual narrators which Olson imposes.

Olson thus implies that a narrator's swing from fallibility to untrustworthiness is closely tied to character development, from naivety to knowledge, reflected in a shift from innocent to calculated reportage. Harry's narration works against this assumption in two ways. First because he shows traces of fallibility and untrustworthiness in the same narrative instances. When Harry's unreliability in respect of Caroline takes on shades of untrustworthiness he doesn't automatically lose his prior fallibility. It is only when he witnesses for himself Caroline's sexual intimacy with Buster that he seems to lose his naivety and renounces his former bias towards her. And second because the structure of his narrative is more complex than it first appears. When he recalls seeing Janet and Dalloway before she left for the city, he still narrates naively, and yet as a flashback the prior knowledge it

represents casts doubt on the naivety he has maintained through the novel to that point.

In the next chapter I approach these kinds of complexities in greater detail, for as the novel proceeds towards its conclusion, negotiating Harry's unreliability becomes even more complicated along these lines. While the markers of his fallibility and his untrustworthiness seem to become more pronounced, accounting for them becomes more elusive. When the final shape of his narrative emerges, the possibility of reconstructing what really happened that summer begins to recede and with it our chance to reliably read Harry's unreliability. Nonetheless, we see Phelan's terms come into their own. Applied to the whole of Harry's troubled narration they might not render his unreliability with a straightforward and comprehensive clarity in the way that Olson imagines critical accounts to necessarily aspire towards. Rather, they allow us to instead to more finely, more deeply, conceive of a multifaceted unreliability which challenges the very idea that unreliability should always be reliably read.

## *Chapter Three:*

### *Insecure Narration*

#### *Introduction*

I turn now to consider Harry's narration of the deaths of Susan and Wiggins, distinct but connected episodes whose narrative intricacies are more subtle and potentially misleading than they first appear. In both cases the evidence seems carefully meant for us to find Harry untrustworthy as a narrator and guilty of murder, or at least culpable of death. I begin by looking at Harry's narration to do with Susan, compiling the outward markers of his untrustworthiness which seem blatant. By now we have been led to regard Harry's under-reportage with suspicion, so when Harry elides Susan's death altogether despite being present at the scene, we are compelled to read beneath the surface for signs of Harry's guilt. And yet the clues are teasingly laid. Ironically, as Harry plots to do away with Wiggins his narration offers subtle hints towards his innocence in respect of Susan. Despite the signs of his untrustworthiness throughout, Harry's elision of events the night Susan dies might be reliable underreport and Harry not as guilty as he first appears.

While Harry's unreliability is beyond doubt, the nature of that unreliability is hard to pick. Is he highly untrustworthy or only marginally so? Is he reliably underreporting because naively limited? Without knowing for sure the extent of his involvement in Susan's death, one avenue by which we might precisely read Harry's unreliability is thus shut down. The problem for the reader is that Harry's unreliability doesn't lead to easy assignments of his guilt or innocence. Instead, looking more closely at the mechanisms of unreliability, we find, first, that they work against rather than with each other; and second, that some of what first appear to be compelling signs of Harry's unreliability could also be red herrings, purposively laid by the implied author to lead us towards an ascription of unreliability which can never be reliably made. As we become aware that many of the hints to Harry's unreliability are

synthetic motifs implying a highly artificial sense of authorial design, then those signs might not point to narrative resolutions necessarily geared to rendering reliably read unreliability. Rather, I argue, the signs of unreliability are manipulated before us to put a watertight reading of Harry's trustworthiness – both as a character and a narrator – out of our reach. The point then is not to find whether Harry is guilty or not, nor to accurately ascribe his particular unreliability, but to consider more finely the complications we must negotiate in our attempt to do so.

Hence, I make the case that Harry's unreliability to do with the deaths of Susan and Wiggins signals the deeper complexities quietly at play through the whole novel but which gather intensity as events build towards the book's close. Harry's unreliability in respect of Susan and Wiggins refuses smooth interpretations and hence our attention is drawn to consider more finely how the machinery of unreliability really works. In this way, Harry's narration through much of the novel offers a clue to the interpretive challenge lying in wait with the narrative's disquieting conclusion. For in the end any firm ascription of Harry's unreliability is put beyond reach by the profound temporal dislocation which separates the novel's first fifteen chapters from the final two. Narrating events from years later, Harry now has a tenuous grip on reality, adding an extra layer of complexity to an already intricately organised narrative.

Through the second half of the chapter, and to conclude my discussion on Harry's unreliability, I square those temporal dislocations against ascriptions of unreliability to find that, in the end, Harry's unreliability is left in radical doubt. Mentally deranged, the later-narrating Harry presents as virtually a different narrating consciousness altogether. Despite glimpses of a shared syntax with his prior narrating self, and although his later account shows narrative continuity on the story arc, incompatibilities between the two sections are too disruptive to be ignored. Harry's earlier account was marked by his childlike naivety. But the novel's conclusion is narrated from a very different perspective, implying the fallibility of the mentally insecure. Either the

later-narrating Harry has affected his earlier naivety and is thus highly untrustworthy, or there are two narrating positions implied, each displaying different modes of unreliability. Hence, I argue, the novel is one of Rimmon-Kenan's "ambiguous narratives" (103): one which leaves the reader in a state of perpetual doubt between mutually exclusive alternatives. In the next chapter I will apply my reading of Ballantyne's novel as an 'ambiguous narrative' to the context of New Zealand literary history, but here my task is to explicate the specific nature and mechanics of that ambiguity, which to this point have not been explored in detail. Harry's unreliability unable to be reliably, securely read, thus I offer his account as an example of what I call radical unreliability, or insecure narration.

### Susan

In the first section of this chapter I offer a closer examination of Harry's narration concerned with Susan. Exchanges between the two become increasingly tense in the events leading up to her death one night in the meat works, itself presented midway through the novel in chapter seven. Initially the markers of Harry's untrustworthiness seem too strong to be ignored or overridden, so I begin with an account of Harry's troubled involvement with Susan to put the case of his untrustworthiness, both as a character and a narrator. In doing so, I follow the terms offered by Phelan and subscribed to by Olson among others, that we might look to character and narration for mutually informing clues. The clearest ones seem to leave little doubt that Harry can be regarded as untrustworthy in his dealings with Susan as both a character and a narrator.

Through the first half of the novel Harry breaks from the childhood world he has known till then. For the reader this is a transition marked by his infatuation with Caroline, his increasing isolation from his friends, and lit up against the backdrop of slow-motion familial breakdown. We can safely expect this plot trajectory to bear on Harry's development as both a character and a narrator. That is, we will expect to see changes in Harry, as a character

attempting to negotiate the challenges laid down by the events of the story, but reflected too in his handling as a narrator laying down the story arc. Taken together, Harry's development as character and narrator cohere to form the narrative whole. After all, extending from Phelan's idea that we look to the "narrator's character ... for clues to the narration and the character's narration for clues to the character" (*Narrative* 111), it makes sense that the development of each—character and narrative—should be symbiotic in first-person narration. Even if Harry fails to meet and safely negotiate the challenges ahead of him, his failure will still make narrative sense if it upholds and reflects the idea of development upon which narrative itself depends.

It is just this sense of narrative development which underpins Olson's assumption that narrators who begin as fallible narrators may become untrustworthy in the course of a narration, with the shift from fallibility to untrustworthiness implying a loss of innocence in negative terms. The case for this to apply to Harry's situation would run thus: Harry shows his naivety virtually from the moment he begins narrating, thus marking himself as almost certainly highly fallible. But as the pressure builds on Harry and he looks to protect his interest in Caroline, he becomes embroiled with Susan in a power game, and thereafter his unreliability takes a darker turn. Complicit in Susan's death, he elides his own involvement, thus seeming to have turned the corner from fallibility into untrustworthiness. On the surface this seems a plausible interpretation, but it unravels when the signals of Harry's unreliability are more finely examined. The complex interplay between these signals offers an alternative reading whereby Harry can be exonerated of Susan's murder, first exposing Olson's assumption that the development of unreliability must proceed from fallibility to untrustworthiness, and then redirecting our analysis to more closely consider the dynamics of Harry's multifaceted unreliability.

If ever Harry has a reason to mislead his audience then his misadventure in the meat works with Susan is it. As a character he has to this point shown a recourse to violence and, as a narrator, an inclination to underreport such violence, downplaying its effects. For instance, early in the novel, when he and

Cal clear the passion vine growing over the roof of the shed – Harry picking the fruit and tossing them to Cal waiting below – Harry casually reports that he aimed a few at Cal’s head but underreports his brother’s response, saying only that “he ducked those” (8). It is only later when Harry is confronted by Susan that Cal’s potential trauma at the hands of Harry comes into view:

‘... You enjoy hurting others.’

‘Like Dibs, you mean?’ I said.

‘Even your own brother,’ she said. ‘I’ve seen you throwing passion-fruit at him.’

‘Only in fun,’ I said. ‘He doesn’t care.’

‘I’ve heard him crying,’ she said.

‘All kids cry,’ I said. ‘The Kelly kids cry and it’s nothing to do with me when they cry. I don’t make them cry. So I don’t know what you’re talking about. Honestly, I don’t.’ (114-15)

Harry here seems to misread in his ripostes. He might throw passionfruit at Cal in fun, but he cannot confidently claim that his little brother “doesn’t care”. The reader suspects that, given Susan’s view of events, Harry’s perspective on his behaviour is awry. Throughout the novel the reader is increasingly cued to read Harry’s frequent, if at times subtle, tendency to underreport as a clear sign of an untrustworthy character – in particular, one given to violence. If Harry’s underreport can be consistently tied to his violent tendencies, then we can infer that such underreport is motivated by a consistent need to hide his own violent behaviour. From there it is a short step to hold him untrustworthy as a narrator. When Susan dies in the meat works, Harry’s omission of the event is damningly conspicuous given the apparently familiar configuration of underreport and violence.

Harry’s antagonism with Susan is plain throughout the novel to this point, but underlying that antagonism is a suggestion of pre-adolescent sexual fascination between them. Dibs and Cal allude to an episode years before in which some or all three of the boys “[saw] her bum through the holes in her bloomers” when she was climbing a cabbage tree (31). Later Harry’s report shows his regard for Susan to have a naively sexual dimension, even leaving

open the possibility that there has been some kind of involvement between the two, at the level of childhood exploration or testing of boundaries: “I no longer cared what Susan Prosser was like beneath her dress; I knew her body wasn’t as great as Caroline’s, and for the first time in years I did not want to look at it” (60). Caroline, it seems, has replaced Susan as an object of desire for Harry. Appositely, then, it is the arrival of Caroline – harbinger of Harry’s burgeoning sexual curiosity beyond the limits of childhood fascination – that draws Susan back into the frame and with considerable enmity. Though Susan has been consciously avoiding Harry, when she becomes aware of Caroline and suspects an illicit involvement between her and Harry, she looms threateningly back into view. Susan is suddenly interested in conversation with Harry once more, though clearly it is to elicit information about Caroline and drop hints about Janet’s involvement with Dalloway (57-61). In exchanges of rising tension Susan looks to have her suspicions confirmed and threatens to write to Janet to lay those suspicions bare.

Susan and Harry try to outmanoeuvre one another, mainly by lording knowledge – or potential knowledge – of the other’s secrets. Their standoff comes to a head one Sunday night outside the meat works. Dibs has discovered that Susan takes to walking alone at night; one Sunday Harry follows her. When the two talk, Susan reveals that she has indeed written a letter to Janet, to “let [her] know what’s been happening”, a veiled but direct threat to report on Harry’s games with Caroline (117). Harry tries to counter by suggesting Susan has secrets of her own. Cal has seen her in Wiggins’s van which Harry finds suspicious (26-28, 58), though when he confronts Susan with this, intending to upset her with illicit aspersions, she calmly tells him the butcher was taking her to the dentist in Bonnie Brae (123-24).

When Harry tries to further taunt the girl with an embarrassing detail from years before, Susan remains unperturbed and the exchange ends in their unlikely reconciliation:

‘So it *was* you [urinating] behind the bush that time?’ I said. ‘So that’s who Dad was telling my mother about! I was wondering about that.’



'Why do you tell lies?' she asked, sounding quite calm.

'He did see you,' I said.

'I imagine he did,' she said. 'But you knew that. You weren't wondering if I was the one. So why tell lies about it?'

I did not know what to say. Heck, if what I had told her didn't make her unhappy, what else would?

She sighed. 'Not that I really blame you,' she said. 'I do know why you tell lies. It's not you I blame, Harry.' She did not sound stern or sarcastic; she sounded as if she wanted to be my friend.

I lowered my head. 'I'm sorry, Susan. I only wanted to make you a bit unhappy. I don't care what you did. You were only small then, you had to do it in a hurry. I'm sorry.'

'I guessed you were trying to make me unhappy,' she said. 'But I can't be unhappy about something that happened so long ago.'

'I know,' I said. 'I apologise, Susan.'

'I believe you mean it,' she said. 'I accept your apology.'

'Thank you, Susan,' I said. (Emphasis original, 124)

The exchange seems to resolve the antagonism between them and yet immediately afterwards the chapter takes one of the darkest turns of the whole novel. Having made their peace, Harry decides that, while he's at the meat works, he might as well collect the pistol which the boys have secretly stashed in one of the works' upper floors. Susan is fascinated and follows Harry inside. Harry's narration breaks off at this point and the next morning Susan's body is found in the works by Sam Phelps. Even though Harry and Susan appear to have genuinely made up, the apparent sincerity between them is overwhelmed by a distinctly ominous shift in the mood of Harry's narration as he brings to a close the scene with Susan. During those final few moments, when he decides to collect the pistol, his manner drastically darkens:

'Well,' I said, 'suppose I'd better get the pistol, then go home.'

'What pistol?' she asked as I moved into the works.

I paused. 'Just an old pistol we found,' I said. 'We left it upstairs. Better take it home before the small kids find it.' I walked towards the stairs.

'Does it work?' she asked from a few yards back.

'No, it's broken,' I said, reaching the stairs.

'Where did you find it?' she asked.

I kept walking. 'In one of the rooms here,' I said, not turning. 'It's up on the second floor. I'll just get it, then I'll go home.'

I did not stop to check that she was following me. I knew she was.

Her footsteps were echoing in the works. (124-25)

Harry is deliberately leading Susan inside. His aside that he supposes he ought to collect the pistol has the feel of an artless ruse to pique Susan's curiosity. Harry knows that the pistol – which he knows Susan doesn't know about – is an object of exotic and compelling interest, so downplaying its significance so casually – "Just an old pistol we found" – reads as an attempt to stir Susan's interest in the other direction. When Harry says that he did not stop to check Susan was following him because he knew she was, we suspect that Susan has done exactly as Harry has wanted. Harry's dialogue feels disturbing for the strategic manipulation it represents. And, if strategic and manipulative, then likely to be deemed untrustworthy in some measure. At this point we register that Harry also leads us into the works as carefully and menacingly as he leads Susan, giving us only the bare detail of his movements – "I moved into the works ... I walked towards the stairs ... reaching the stairs ... I kept walking ... not turning". Harry's narration mimics his conversation with Susan, its surface directness and simplicity seeming to hide a much darker motivation. Harry's handling feels deeply suspicious, purposive and insufficient. The authorial reader effectively passes judgements on two levels – on Harry's dialogue with Susan, and on his narration of events. Because he seems to be hiding something on both levels Harry feels untrustworthy. To those who read on wondering just what Harry might be hiding, a major problem is that the pistol – which has only been alluded to by the boys in conversation, never actually seen by the reader – is supposedly in the cave, not the works. As Harry later discloses: "It had been hidden under some rocks at the back of the cave ever since we had found it" (139). Harry is either untruthful in his account to us (if the pistol has been moved from the cave to the works, directly contradicting

Harry's later report), or he has lied to Susan (and the pistol is not in the works at all on the night of her death).

What follows in the order of the story is, evidently, the first of the "terrible happenings", though it is neither fully disclosed by Harry nor straightforwardly narrated. After he has told us that he heard Susan's footsteps behind him, "echoing in the works", Harry immediately skips forward: "I go now to the afternoon of the following day" (125). Sam has found Susan's body in the meat works. Fortunately for Harry, nobody knows he was with Susan the night before. For the reader, on the other hand, privy to the grand evasion of Harry's narration, eliding what happened when he led Susan into the works, Harry's guilt appears beyond doubt.

After the event Harry underreports again. It is Dibs who yells through the open window news of Susan's death:

'Hey, Harry!' he shouted. ... 'Come out and see! Susan Prosser's dead! Sam Phelps found her body at the works!'

Caroline was first off the bed. She looked back at me from the doorway. 'I *thought* I heard her name being called during the night,' she said. 'I must have fallen asleep —'

'Dibs is probably having a joke,' I said, slowly getting off the bed.  
(Emphasis original, 125)

We read Harry's answer to Caroline as misdirection since, if we are right to suppose that he was in the works when Susan died, then he knows it is no joke. By now beginning to read all of Harry's misdirection and evasion as untrustworthy, we add it as further evidence of his guilt. Offering no reflection at all on Caroline's recollection that she thought she heard someone calling for Susan the previous night only deepens the reader's suspicion of Harry. Was it Harry himself who called Susan's name?

As gaps in his account proliferate Harry becomes more unreliable, probably untrustworthy, and hence looking to his narration for clues to his character brings damning interpretive consequences. Presenting himself as an untrustworthy narrator seems to indict Harry, at the very least, as an accomplice to Susan's death, and possibly her killer. Reading in reverse, from

character to narration, to corroborate our suspicions, we remember that he has perceived and identified Susan as a direct threat to his involvement with Caroline: "I had not liked the way she snooped this morning, asking questions about our running around in the house, wanting to know why Caroline hadn't helped with the dishes. Susan Prosser had better watch out, I thought" (66). Harry has a clear motive to remove Susan, and his language — "Susan Prosser had better watch out" — could hardly be more direct without becoming an outright statement of intent. In his prior behaviour Harry shows the necessary inclination to violent retribution that the reader probably requires of a killer, while the emotional pressures on him can easily be read as incendiary factors as well.

While Harry avoids interrogation he does not entirely escape suspicion. Mrs Kelly's regard for Harry plummets in the immediate aftermath of Susan's death:

Mrs Kelly gave me another of her looks when she saw me whispering to Dibs. I'd had many of these looks lately, which was why I never called on her nowadays; I had the feeling that if I turned up expecting a piece of bread and some of her plum jam, she would tell me to clear off. I couldn't think why she looked at me like that; I used to reckon she was friendly, much more interesting than Dibs to talk to. (144)

For the reader led to infer Harry's guilt from the multiple signs of his unreliability as a narrator on the one hand, and his untrustworthiness as a character on the other, Mrs Kelly seems a valuable corroborator. Charged with manufacturing from the remainder of the text an account of what really happened, we might look to the views of other characters for the clues we need, since Harry himself offers no sustained reflection on the fate of Susan after her death. By now his silence after the event is as incriminating as his non-report of the event itself. Hence, Mrs Kelly's suspicion seems to match our own.

If we look for other corroborators among the novel's characters we might note Sam Phelps's choice of words on the wharf when Cal nearly drowns (but is rescued by Harry). Protesting his innocence Harry maintains it was an accident. Sam Phelps replies: "'There'll always be accidents with you about'"

(137). By now the word 'accident' has become loaded. Early in the novel Frank warns his boys off the works: "'Three men died there,' Dad told Cal. 'They knew of the dangers but that didn't stop them having accidents'" (4). In an effort to deflect attention from the time he pushed Dibs over the cliff, Harry tells Caroline that, despite the danger of the hilltop, "'So far [there had been] no accidents'" (70). Later, in a rare comment on Susan's death, Harry remarks in passing that "It was an accident. She should have been more careful" (191). In the world of the novel, the word accident is consistently tied to mortal danger, and with falling from dangerous heights. As the word recurs we invest it with a particular interpretive significance until the word itself is a kind of shorthand to Harry's untrustworthiness. But by now the reader isn't strictly looking to character and narration for mutually informing clues to untrustworthiness. If we take the repetition of the word 'accident' as a sign on the authorial level that we are right to suspect Harry, then we have crossed to reading on the synthetic level. So while Sam Phelps, for instance, has no direct evidence that we know of to finger-point Harry over Susan's death, nonetheless we read his words as portentous and significant. His intonation and syntax become meaningful on a symbolic level, and, therefore, as highly artificial, purposively constructed textual features.

Having crossed over to read at the synthetic level of the text, bearing in mind authorial design and narrative convention, the reader will have noted the numerous references to the danger of the works (4, 13-14, 16, 53-55, 94-104) and thereby expect some tragedy or at least drama to occur there at some point in the narrative. Harry has repeatedly alluded to pushing people from dangerous heights—he not only pushes Dibs over the edge of the cliff, but threatens to push him off the wharf (31), and then speculates on pushing him from the top of the works (53-54). He has also toyed with the idea of frightening Susan in the works: "I can't imagine Susan Prosser for instance being brave enough to even look down the chute, supposing she was ever brave enough to go to the top floor. One of these days I might ask her to go up there, to test her, to see if she's brave as well as clever" (97). When the reader understands that Susan has

apparently fallen to her death in the meat works and that Harry was not only there, but led her into the works himself, the narrative machinery of the novel seems designed towards guiding the authorial reader to a clear interpretation.

### *Reliable underreport?*

Clearly, then, some of the most damning indicators of Harry's untrustworthiness occur with the death of Susan Prosser. But do we not, in the end, rely a little too heavily on the machinery of the novel's synthetic level to find Harry untrustworthy? How mutually affirming really are our inferences between Harry's untrustworthiness as a character on the one hand and as a narrator on the other? When we apply more pressure to Harry's narration his guilt is harder to pin down. To begin with, because we can never reconstruct for ourselves beyond all doubt what really happened we cannot precisely locate Harry's untrustworthiness as a narrator. That is, if Harry had deliberately killed Susan then his underreport would be highly unreliable, but if she fell to her death of her own accord then his underreport might be only marginally unreliable, perhaps another indicator of his naïve limitations – a sign, for instance, that he lacks the mental clarity or strength to directly report such a traumatising event. And, after all, as Phelan also reminds us, not all underreport is unreliable, if the narrator presumes their audience to be able to reliably fill the gap in their report (*Living* 52). If Harry is reliably eliding, then he takes a risk given the other incriminations of his report. But can a naïve narrator, already limited on the axis of knowledge and judgement, be expected to reflect that, on balance, his underreport seems an acknowledgement of his guilt?

Either way, because we don't know what happened in the works that night we cannot accurately gauge the unreliability of his underreport. Just as Harry's underreport might signal either fallibility or untrustworthiness, and hence leave in play both his innocence and his guilt, so too his insufficient – barely even present – interpretation of events around Susan's death. Though his lack of reflection is conspicuous, the reader actually has a choice to make:

does underreading in this case indicate that Harry is unwilling to offer any reflection in order to hide his own sinister involvement, or, as a child, is he simply unable to reflect on the full force of the tragedy and the complexity of its cause? Given how often his naïve limitations repeatedly evoke a narrator too far out of his depth to fully reflect on his situation elsewhere in the novel, this is a possibility. Another reason for Harry's silence might be that, because he knows he is seen as an untrustworthy character by those around him, he can guess that any account in which he admits to being in the works that night but denies pushing Susan through the chute is unlikely to be believed. Or it could be that Harry really did push Susan and thus withholding his account of what happened that Sunday night in the works is as damning as it seems. So while Harry outwardly seems mutually untrustworthy as both a character and a narrator, obtaining firm ascriptions is harder than it would first appear – ironically enough because of the very elisions signalling his unreliability. In this way Ballantyne subtly toys with the reader inclined to Phelan's method whereby character and narration offer clues to one another – as Harry's narration around Susan shows, sometimes the clues themselves can be as inviting as they are confounding. To apply Phelan's terms further, and more explicitly: even if Harry's untrustworthiness might be confidently established, we are still left wondering why the implied author withholds the specific evidence or structures to guide us to a full reconstruction of events, or to pinpoint the exact nature of Harry's untrustworthiness.

If we comb the text for more subtle evidence by which we might redeem Harry we can note a few suggestions that Harry and Susan have a more amiable history than their outright hostility suggests. According to Harry the two had been friends until he accidentally killed his family's Muscovy drake:

Couldn't she realise, I asked her plenty of times, that I had been as fond of Kingsley as anybody else in Calliope Bay? Was it my fault I landed on him after jumping from the shed roof? But it was no use, Susan Prosser did not like me any more [*sic*]; no matter how often I tried to be friendly, she sniffed and turned away. (24)

Before Caroline arrives Harry still holds hope of rekindling his friendship with Susan – on the very morning that the *Emma Cranwell* bears Caroline to Calliope Bay, he entertains the prospect of meeting Susan at the wharf and striking up conversation; later he wonders, hopefully, if perhaps “Susan didn’t actually mind [him] and might only be teasing when she seemed to run from [him]” (35). Elsewhere, a kind of puppy love between Harry and Susan is quietly conveyed in a couple of casual asides. Early in the novel, as Harry describes Susan’s increasing aversion to him, he concludes: “Heck, ... I’m not chasing her just because I don’t want her to go on thinking I’m a fibber. What do I care?” (24-25). ‘Chasing’ in this sense must connote Harry’s positive interest in Susan, underlined by his “What do I care?” which, of course, shows that he cares very much about the friendship he once cultivated with her. The idea that the friendship might once have taken the form of special affection is further hinted when Cal interrupts one of Harry’s conversations with Caroline: “(‘Harry chases Susan Prosser,’ said Cal, but didn’t get another word in)” (38). If ‘chases’ here means ‘likes’, and if Harry is relieved that Cal “didn’t get another word in”, perhaps Harry eschews previous dalliances with Susan in the interest of pursuing a far more exciting involvement with Caroline.

Another argument between Susan and Harry holds a subtext which similarly points to the pair’s previous friendship, suggesting that Susan knows Caroline has replaced her in Harry’s affections:

‘You haven’t even met Caroline,’ I said. ‘What can you tell my mother about her?’

‘I can put two and two together,’ she said.

‘Why don’t you like Caroline?’ I asked. ‘How can you be jealous of somebody you haven’t even met?’

‘I’m not jealous,’ Susan Prosser said, reaching for her books, standing.

‘You are,’ I said, putting out my hand. I thought I should pull her back, make her tell me why she was jealous of Caroline. But she dodged my hand.



‘I can see her, I can hear her,’ she said. ‘I know what she’s like. She’s insincere. She’s the insincerest person I’ve ever seen or heard.’ (86-87)

Susan is upset, indicating that she too has cared about her friendship with Harry. Despite her jibes – “‘What sort of grown-up will you be? I imagine a large, coarse person who thinks only of his own pleasures ... Spiteful as well (114)’” – or the name calling – “‘Own up, nasty Harry’” (113) – the fuller context of Susan’s involvement with Harry suggests that she is struggling to reconcile conflicting feelings for him. When Susan sees through Caroline, Harry is literally unable to hear the truth. In response to Susan’s allegations of Caroline’s insincerity, Harry reacts involuntarily: “[It] amazed me so much that I shoved my hands over my ears and fell back on the sand. I closed my eyes and kicked my legs in the air. ‘Yee-ow!’ I shouted” (87). Harry’s emotional response speaks to the depth of the lies he has been telling himself in respect of Caroline: if he didn’t believe Susan’s words to ring true at some level he would likely remain unmoved.

When Harry and Susan appear to make up their friendship – outside the meat works and, inconveniently for arguments in favour of Harry’s moral integrity, probably only a few minutes before Susan’s death – an empathetic honesty between the two is re-inscribed. Susan is sympathetic and understanding: she alone in the novel says that she knows *why* Harry lies, and, more importantly, absolves him as well (125). On the other hand, Harry’s lack of sympathy after the event is just as notable: “How could I feel sorry for her? I did not feel sorry for her, I did not care now” (141). Would Harry “feel sorry” for Susan if he had deliberately killed her? Or is this merely an outward denial of his deep remorse, another of his self-deceptions which points to a deeper, more uncomfortable truth below? “I did not care now” indicates that Harry cared about Susan’s death at one point, but his change of heart seems to be spuriously made:

It was after she died when I discovered what a fibber she was ... She had fibbed about the budgie (‘What budgie?’ asked Mrs Prosser when Dad, at my suggestion, offered to look after Joey), and she had fibbed when hinting

at what she would write to my mother about Caroline and me (the letter said nothing about our running game) ... I did not care now. (141)

Does this suggest that Harry didn't care anymore because he knew that his secret with Caroline was safe? This paints Harry as a psychopath. Although the prior history between Susan and Harry must at least cast a shadow of doubt over his motivation to kill her, every signal one way or the other seems purposively laid to cancel out possible signals leading in the other direction.

To my mind, the most compelling evidence to suggest that Harry may reliably underreport the night in the works with Susan comes later in the novel. The crucial evidence comes as Harry devises to do away with Wiggins once and for all. To best explain how requires some plot summary. After Susan dies Harry maintains his troubled obsession with Caroline, an involvement which clouds his judgement, skewing his perspective on the reality of the situations developing dangerously all around him and diverting his attention from what will turn out to be the real sites of conflict and threat. While Susan had suggested knowledge of the affair between Janet and Dalloway (85, 116), with Harry's immediate concern being to protect his interest with Caroline, Susan's insinuation about Janet's involvement with Dalloway goes unreflected upon, seemingly unnoticed. Nonetheless, as the story events unfold, Harry is at least able to note the signs of extramarital trouble between his estranged parents as they appear. He notes, for instance, Janet's letter to Frank in which she stalls confirmation of her plans to return (129), and later learns that Dalloway will not be back to teach the next term (141). And yet as the signs incriminating Dalloway and Janet slowly become clearer to the reader, Harry's own attention is focused in another direction: on the immediate threat to Caroline in the shape of Wiggins.

The occasion of the carnival in the larger neighbouring town, Bonnie Brae, is where that threat begins to seriously bear down upon Harry. Throughout the day Harry's anxiety grows as Wiggins stalks Caroline, herself oblivious to the butcher's designs, largely because of Harry's intervention as her protector which sees him strive to keep the butcher at bay. In the end Harry

is worn out emotionally, exasperated by Caroline's failure to recognise the all-pervading danger which seems so clear to him, but in so doing he clearly miscomprehends Caroline's own behaviour as well. Though Harry's perception of Wiggins's lust for Caroline is accurate, he wilfully misreads her actions as confirmation of his own misconceptions – Harry is initially convinced that he sees Caroline in a doorway "hiding from Mr Wiggins" (163) only to later suspect, somewhat but not much more comprehendingly: "Was she not really hiding? Was she waiting for somebody?" (166). Harry is right about Wiggins, but misreads Caroline, missing altogether her interest in the male performers and carnival workers, an interest which is, for the reader, obviously loaded with sexual implication. Harry's misunderstanding is turned directly into a frustration with Caroline and an implicit acknowledgement that his infatuation has begun to cost him: "Finding her and saving her did not seem to have done me much good, all it meant was that I had missed [Buster ride his motorcycle in] what was probably one of the most exciting parts of the carnival. Blow Caroline, I thought" (165). In the end, as the rain comes, Harry tries to reflect on the frustrations of the day, but is once again hamstrung by his own misunderstanding. Although Caroline's sexual attraction to Buster is clear to the reader by this point, Harry is not upset by it because it completely passes him by. The extent to which he under-reads the sexual politics in play around him is ironically underscored when he ruefully reflects in another (misguided) direction:

the drops got heavier, and the rain went on and on and washed out Bonnie Brae's happy day.

Even without the rain, though, the rest of the day would have been awful. In fact, it had turned awful before the rain. And I knew who was to blame. That damned Wiggins. (166)

A few days into the resumption of the school term after the summer holiday, the new teacher, Mr Norman, asks the class to define, by example, the word 'predicament'. Harry is not allowed to offer an answer, but later he finds himself ruminating on the possibilities nonetheless in respect of his own situation. By now, following the carnival, the lecherous threat that Wiggins

poses to Caroline – and hence to Harry – has risen to become very real in the boy's mind:

I had forgiven Caroline for seeming to act oddly to me at the carnival. I had decided Mr Wiggins was the only one to blame for the carnival not being as exciting as I had expected it to be. I had also decided that I hated Mr Wiggins. I spent so much of Sunday thinking how I hated the butcher that I even forgot how close school was. I later realised, in fact, that I was in a *predicament* over Mr Wiggins and his annoying habits. I realised this when I saw the word on the blackboard and would have given it to Fat Norman as an example (changing the names) if he had nodded to me. He hadn't nodded to me. He had not even looked at me.

Ordinarily, I would probably have gone on thinking how stupid Fat Norman was and no wonder the only job he could get was in Calliope Bay. But I did not go on thinking like this. Because I suddenly thought of a way out of the predicament. The thought was so surprising that I blinked, I could no longer see the words on the blackboard. (Emphasis original, 170-71)

It is only as the novel proceeds towards its calamitous climax that the nature of Harry's revelation comes into full and disturbing view.

The first step in Harry's plan is to make himself stronger. Following a chance encounter with Buster who advises that press-ups will help, Harry begins a training regime. Although Harry has some end goal in mind he is evasive on the details, both misleading others and underreporting as a narrator. Harry reflects that Buster's advice "fitted in great with [his] plans, everything would go smoothly now", but he wonders too "Would the press-ups be enough?" (176). 'Enough for what?' the reader has to ask, but Harry does not disclose. The reader can only infer Harry's motivation from scraps of conversation with others and fleeting reflection on the back of typical underreport. When Dibs asks Harry about his training, he replies that part of his "training is secret" (185), but when Sam Phelps asks Harry what he was doing "tossing bricks at the works" (188), we are offered the thread we need. Again, Harry's underreport (he has not mentioned tossing bricks in the works) is suspicious. More so when he inwardly reflects that Sam Phelps has

“trapped” him (188), but outwardly disputes Sam Phelps’s take to Cal: “‘... You shouldn’t believe everything old Phelps says.’” (191). Later, however, Harry verifies Sam in his report to us:

Along by the furnace-house I saw some of the bricks I had been throwing during the past week or so. I also saw that the furnace-house wall, my target, was scratched and chipped where the bricks had landed. People might wonder about those marks. Maybe it was just as well Sam Phelps had been talkative; he had warned me. I must remember to tidy up after school tomorrow night. (192)

The reader can triangulate that throwing the bricks is part of Harry’s secret training, though why Harry is training at all remains a mystery. He does not tell us and to others he tries to avoid the question, though he does give away something of the desired end he is hoping to achieve when he answers Dibs:

‘Well, I might go in for boxing when I’m older,’ I said. ‘Buster reckons I’d make a good boxer, he reckons I could be as good as his friend Kid Savage. But I want my body to be strong before I go in for boxing. I want to be as hard as nails, I want to be able to fight anybody, anybody in the world. That’s why I’ve been doing all these press-ups, all this running. Part of my training.’ (184-85)

Harry might indeed want to be strong enough to fight anybody in the world, but the more specific target he has in mind comes into focus, and with little surprise to the reader, when Wiggins visits on the Friday night and invites himself in, clearly looking for Caroline. Harry realises his chance has come:

I did not speak. And I paused before I followed him. I was thinking hard. Although I had known I would have to be strong to tackle Mr Wiggins, I had not been able to work out *how* I would tackle him. Some day [*sic*], I’d thought, I would have my chance. I had no idea, of course, when that day would come. It might have taken months to come, even years. Yet I had been certain it would come, sooner or later, and I would be ready for it when it did come. Had it come already? Could tonight possibly be the time? Was I strong enough yet? How could I do it? (Emphasis original, 212)

Harry leads the butcher to the works where, we can safely infer, Harry pushes Wiggins from the second floor. The parallels with Susan’s death are clear, but these must be finely rather than broadly read. Plainly there are compelling

similarities in situational terms. Harry leads both Susan and Wiggins to the second floor and both die falling through the chute. Both Susan and Wiggins have been arch nemeses to Harry, threatening his involvement with Caroline. Hence the motivation for Harry to murder Wiggins is the same or similar to that which the reader will have already ascribed to Harry, in respect of Susan's death, if Harry is believed to be guilty in that case as well.

But, crucially, Harry only resolves to take desperate measures in his predicament with Wiggins after the death of Susan. What's more, when the solution occurs to him, in the classroom during the first week of school, he experiences a profound moment of revelation. He is so stunned by surprise that the classroom begins to swim before his eyes. The words on the blackboard dissolve and his attention is diverted intensely inward: "I was staring at [Fat Norman], I could see his mouth opening and shutting; but I did not hear a word he said" (171). It is hard to square the force of the sudden revelation with an account which also holds that he set out to murder Susan: if he'd deliberately pushed her from the second floor through the chute of the works then the idea that he might do similarly with Wiggins would hardly strike him as a bolt out of the blue.

On the synthetic level, however, the arrangement of Harry's narration in both cases is remarkably similar, leading us to link the deaths of Susan and Wiggins. Just as Harry elides the death of Susan, so too with his narration of Wiggins's death. In both instances, Harry announces the death at the beginning of a chapter, and with recourse to a peculiar story-telling, fairy-tale voice. On the death of Susan: "There was a skinny, snoopy girl who lived on the edge of the world, and her name was Susan Prosser and she died during the summer holidays I'm telling you about" (105); and on the death of Wiggins: "There was a hairy, cheeky lady's man who often visited the edge of the world, and his name was Mr Chick Wiggins, and he died in the place where he had once killed many animals" (198). I suggest again, however, that ascriptions of unreliability made on the synthetic level of the text carry an extra burden of significance, and one that becomes increasingly telling in the present discussion. Phelan's

distinction between the agendas of realism and metafiction shows why. Says Phelan:

Realistic fiction seeks to create the illusion that everything is mimetic and nothing synthetic, or, in other words, that the characters act as they do by their own choice rather than at the behest of the author; metafiction, on the other hand, foregrounds the synthetic component, making us aware of its own construction. (*Living* 20)

If unreliability can be suggested as a synthetic property, and thereby highly artificial, “aware of its own construction” as it were, such unreliability might take on metafictional dimensions. Then, “at the behest of the author”, we might be led to ascribe unreliability by a trail of conventional red herrings. Is Harry unreliable in the way we look to discover, assuming his unreliability will be smoothly resolved into something closer to realist or mimetic terms, or is there another game being played here on the authorial level?

Though we might be right to tread with caution in ascriptions of unreliability on the synthetic level, Harry’s distinctive fairy-tale voice – which only surfaces at moments of high significance – must also be understood as a distancing device. When the fairy-tale voice appears Harry’s natural register recedes, his usual boyish intimacy replaced by a more universal and disembodied tone, putting himself at a remove from the events he narrates – here, because those events are the deaths in which he has been closely involved, then the fairy-tale voice becomes a cunning variation on underreport. Harry’s usual tone returns in short order as he continues to narrate each chapter, but his evasion persists. He disrupts the linear order of the story by skipping forwards and backwards to narrate around events, opening a gap between story and narrative progressions. Here is Harry narrating events after Susan’s death:

It was Sam Phelps who found her body. Sam Phelps lifted her body on to Sydney Bridge Upside Down and brought it to Mrs Prosser. This was on a Monday afternoon.

I start with Sam Phelps and Sydney Bridge Upside Down and the body of Susan Prosser, but now I go to our wash-house on the morning of that day. I was there with Caroline. (105)

Through the chapter he continues to leap around, his narrative thread reordering story events: “I go now to the morning of the day before. This, of course, was when Susan Prosser was still alive ...” (112), and after a lengthy digression, “I go now to the following afternoon, to the time in Caroline’s bedroom” (119), before returning to the night of Susan’s death: “Now I go to the works the night before. This, of course, was Sunday night. The moon was shining” (121). Likewise, narrating around the death of Wiggins: “Sam Phelps found his body one Saturday afternoon. I start with Mr Wiggins and the finding of his body, but now I go to our house on the afternoon of the previous day, after school, before tea. I go to Caroline’s bedroom” (198). Harry then skips forward, past Wiggins’s death – “I go now to our backyard the following morning. This, of course, was a few hours before Sam Phelps found Mr Wiggins’ body” (201) – before returning to narrate the night of Wiggins’s visit – “I go now to the time the night before when Cal was in bed and I was alone in the kitchen. Dad and Caroline had been away for more than an hour” (208) – and then leaping ahead past the death of Wiggins once more: “Now I go to our cave the next afternoon” (215). In both cases Harry is notably evasive, his narration fractured by constant analepses and prolepses whose complicating effects are ironically underlined by his suggestion that, when he skips backwards and forwards, we can “of course” keep hold of the order of events. Though it is hard to distinguish between synthetic and mimetic elements here, because Harry’s narration of the separate deaths of Susan and Wiggins is so similar, the reader is led to take the same inferences and make the same judgements: Harry seems guilty in both cases and, taken together, both seem to strengthen the connection between instances of underreport and untrustworthiness.

On the other hand, more subtle markers of Harry’s innocence might be read elsewhere. Harry confidently states that “Susan Prosser had fallen through the chute hole” (128). This could be received knowledge, reflecting a widely held agreement on what befell Susan, but it might equally spring from Harry’s first-hand knowledge of the event. Later he tells Bruce (son of Mr Norman)



more stridently what happened to Susan, and with more authority than might be expected from one who hadn't been present. Bruce, having heard about Susan's death, finds it "rather mysterious", to which Harry is quick to reply: "'Nothing mysterious,' I said. 'She fell through a chute whole, that's all. It was an accident. She should have been more careful.'" (191). When he shows Bruce the works he points out "the chute opening Susan Prosser had fallen through" and reassures Bruce that "it was not actually dangerous ... Only a very clumsy person would stumble" (192). Scanning the text for any clue to what went on the works that night, we might consider this to be a naively guarded insinuation that Susan was not pushed through the chute but stumbled of her own accord. Harry does not so confidently signal any such knowledge in the aftermath of Wiggins's demise. In passing he refers to the time "two weeks after Mr Wiggins' accident" but offers not a word more (241). The word 'accident' is, on its own, enough to indict Harry.

The reader can never really be sure, however, just how reliable Harry's underreport around Susan's death really is. As compelling as the possibility might seem, it only ever remains a possibility. We have already seen how Harry raises our suspicions when he leads Susan into the works, enticing her with the secret of the pistol. It seems likely that Harry is lying to Susan, given the other indicators of his unreliability during that short passage. But this does not necessarily consign his guilt if we remember too his reflection, during chapter six, that he might "test" Susan by taking her to the top of the works sometime. He may have lied to Susan to entice her to the top of the works, but not necessarily to push her to her death. During events leading up to Susan's fall, Harry's stated intent is to take revenge without violence, to hurt her "without hitting her" but by making her "unhappy" instead (122). That Harry's plans may have gone horribly awry for him seems borne out in chapter thirteen's interior monologue when he draws a parallel between the deaths of Kingsley the duck and Susan herself which cannot be ignored. "I don't want to see Kingsley", recalls Harry, "I don't want to remember him. Kingsley is dead. I didn't mean to kill him. I meant to scare him, but I did not mean to kill him. I

miscalculated. I landed on him instead of beside him. Whatever Susan Prosser said, I did not mean to do it. Poor dead Kingsley, poor dead Susan Prosser – I scream ...” (239). Symbolically it seems that, for Harry, the accidental death of Kingsley both suggests and stands in for the accidental death of Susan.

We can say that the evidence of the text is more complex for what it elides but nonetheless suggests, and yet this leaves us with two interpretive options. First, because Harry is hopelessly naïve he is prevented from telling the whole truth and so the truth can only be inferred. Or, second, because Harry lies to Susan but does not directly admit this to us, we hold his account untrustworthy and therefore can never be sure of the truth. In both readings the truth is put beyond reach, but the one seems to condemn Harry and the other exonerate. And yet while both readings derive from the same evidence neither is conclusive. Harry’s culpability in Susan’s death can never be confidently ascertained one way or another. (Even if we think he didn’t set out to kill her, did he push her? Accidentally? Did he cause her to stumble?) The truth seems harder to reconstruct the closer the text itself is read for clues of Harry’s unreliability. This seems counterintuitive. One of the upshots of Phelan’s taxonomy is that the more exactly textual signals are read for signs of unreliability – and as part of an implied author’s purposive creation of a cohesively interpretable text – the closer we will come to secure understanding of the whole. This might assume that our interpretive enquiry is restricted to the literal level on which we read to find – or perhaps reconstruct – what really happened. But if the novel itself resists a reliable reading of events through Harry’s complex unreliability, then such resistance is what the novel and its implied author set out to achieve.

### *Towards insecure narration*

Having picked up the obvious signs of Harry’s untrustworthy narration but finding them less convincing than they first appear, we look to the text for more information, for more signs encoded in the text. This keeps with the dominant strain of rhetorical approaches to unreliability, from Booth, through Riggan,

Phelan and Olson, and compatible with the constructivist/cognitivist approaches of Yacobi and Nünning. It chimes too with the methods of Chatman, Lanser, Rimmon-Kenan and Wall. The essential point is that when the reader finds a problem in interpretation, the obvious move is to reinterpret more finely – practically, the move is to reread. But if we are continually sent back to the novel because we are repeatedly thwarted by Harry's complexly configured narration, we find only more complexity in need of account. If the interpretive possibilities remain open, then our attention must instead be redirected to more closely consider the dynamics between the distinct markers of unreliability themselves. It is here that another, deeper way of reading the whole novel comes into view.

When Harry not only underreports but then offers virtually no reflection on the events he has completely elided, we can note that the space between the authorial reader and the other, non-narrating characters has been narrowed noticeably. That is, we are given barely any more access to the inner, narrating Harry than his fellow characters. We know, unlike them, that he was in the works that night, but Harry offers neither direct report nor secondary reflection by which we might furnish our knowledge of what went on there. With the space between authorial readers and characters so narrow, we are, therefore, led to judge Harry the same way. The reader, whose access to Harry has been drastically reduced, might be tempted to follow the lead of characters like Mrs Kelly or Sam Phelps who read Harry with the same suspicion that the text has led us to hold of the boy as well. But the reader can't entirely trust Mrs Kelly. Not because Mrs Kelly seems untrustworthy herself – though the reader will note her apparent extra-marital involvement with Wiggins – but simply because no character's account can be taken at face value and inscribed as an immutable baseline of judgement: they must be bound by the same rules of partiality as the narrator, and are therefore prone to judging in their own interests or on the back of their own limitations. If Mrs Kelly finds Harry suspect in the death of Susan, her hunch might chime with the estimation others hold of Harry's character, but it cannot bear out the suspicion itself. The

challenge for the reader, then, is to read Harry with a finer understanding than the characters around him, even though the reader's access to Harry is limited in a similar way.

Without access to Harry's account of what happened in the works, but also implicitly warned to take the views of other characters with caution, how does the reader ascertain Harry's guilt or otherwise? The question itself has become beside the point. The real point of our interpretation must fall precisely on the crux of this insolubility. Denied the possibility of safely reconstructing a reliable version of what really happened (and therefore held, as Rimmon-Kenan would say, "in a position of permanent oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives" (103)), the reader is redirected to consider what is really required to obtain the fullest understanding of the text. If a reader immediately recognises the markers of Harry's unreliability, they might assume that the readerly task before them is a matter of ascertaining Harry's reliability one way or the other. This makes sense, given how often unreliable narrators can, with the right reading strategy in place, be reliably read in their unreliability and the reader make fuller sense of the text in other hermeneutical directions. But if the reader remains thwarted by Harry's unreliability, or if Harry's unreliability remains somehow out of reach, as if stubbornly refusing fixed interpretation, then the more exacting interpretation is to take precisely such instability as the entry point into proper analysis and interpretation.

Ironically, with his decision to kill Wiggins in the works comes some evidence which exonerates him from the murder of Susan. This is important to our whole reading of the novel, not because it exonerates Harry entirely, but precisely because it offers no more than a partial recuperation of his reliability and innocence in respect of Susan. Once again, the markers of unreliability are set into motion against one another, both inviting and thwarting the possibility of reliably reading Harry's unreliability and hence installing unreliability itself as the core concern of the novel. Harry's complex underreport of Susan's death puts the reader into a state of hermeneutical uncertainty on a literal level. But the deeper significance of that uncertainty is how it prompts us to more deeply

interrogate how the dynamics of unreliability work within the whole novel. Just as the text makes it impossible to decide what really happened in the case of Susan — offering clues for and against Harry's culpability but then withholding any firm resolution on them — the novel also, in the end, puts a reliable reading of Harry's unreliability out of reach. That this might be the real interpretive point of the whole novel comes rearing into full view with the novel's conclusion. For the remainder of this chapter I look to the final section of the novel to show how the temporal dislocations between the narration to that point and the book's baffling close finally put any firm ascription of Harry's unreliability out of reach.

### **Radical unreliability**

Chapters sixteen and seventeen read as if a distant epilogue to the prior narration of chapters one to fifteen. Narrated from years after the events of the summer previously recounted, and in a starkly different register, they mark a break with the narrative to that point, thus dividing the novel into two distinct but conjoined sections. And yet accounting precisely for the relation between those respective sections is as compelling as it is evasive, for the latter account bears as many markers of connection as it does disconnection with the one prior. Most compellingly, those points of connection and disconnection bear directly on how we ascribe — or, more accurately, how we cannot ascribe — Harry's unreliability. Just as the reader can never be sure of Harry's exact involvement in Susan's death despite the evidence carefully laid in either direction, reliably reading Harry's unreliability is similarly out of bounds, despite the temptation to do so, having read both sections such that we might — to import Olson's terms — “render fallible and untrustworthy narrators reliable in their unreliability” (105). The finer interpretive point then isn't to find Harry's guilt by establishing the precise contours of his unreliability and thereby render Harry reliable in his unreliability, but to consider that sometimes the signals of unreliability may be set against one another, forcing

us to interpret in the other direction, towards a more radical unreliability that cannot necessarily be read one way or the other.

Because the closing section is narrated from years after the events of Harry's final summer in Calliope Bay, much of the narrative interest trades on the reader's natural curiosity to find out what has become of Harry in the intervening time. We learn that he has run away to the city in search of Janet, following his resolution at the end of the summer (narrated in chapter fifteen) to forgo his interest in Caroline and help Frank (260). In chapter fifteen, however, Harry underreports his plans, only referring obliquely to his deeper motivations and leaving us to infer his intentions. Hitch-hiking from Calliope Bay towards Bonnie Brae, with the aim of catching a bus to the unnamed city two hundred miles beyond the further town of Wakefield, he wonders whether he ought to have left an explanatory note to Frank. Decides Harry: "Best to send him a letter tomorrow or the next day. I would try to explain why I had left, why I had taken his money, why it might be a long time before I saw him again" (263). Harry hopes that "Maybe he would understand later that what [he, Harry,] had done was the only thing [he] could have done" (264). But it is only in the fragmentary account of the novel's following chapter, describing events years later, that he declares his motivation. Harry is, he tells us, "always looking" (271), and then divulges further: "Just as when I first came to this city, I am looking for her. I no longer knock on doors, it is true, but this is because I knocked on so many when I first came, I knocked on all the doors it was possible for a grubby country kid in dirty boots to knock on. Does Mrs Janet Baird live here?" (272).

Harry's itinerant and ostensibly homeless existence in the large and nameless city is portrayed in a register striking for its sudden stark impressionism. Over the last eight pages of the novel the relative order of the previous fifteen chapters gives way to another narrative register altogether, muddying reality with make-believe and evoking a mental state precariously balanced on the edge of reason. As chapter sixteen disquietingly begins: "Would you believe me, I ask, if I mumble mumble mumble?" (270). Glimmers

within the prior account have foreshadowed the fractured lens of the latter-narrating Harry to some extent. Contained within chapters six and thirteen are a series of fluctuations into intense inner monologues, most likely to signify Harry's own nightmares, marked by a somewhat similar impressionism and indicating a mentally traumatised narrating agent (94-104, 221-40). Even so, the shift in register of the novel's close is pronounced, and by the novel's end arguably the one remaining certainty is that Harry's grip on reality has loosened to become terminally insecure at best. He is now living in a basement at the grace of a nameless friend from whom Harry keeps the real business of his endless search in the city. Haunted by dreams he claims to forget having, Harry is told by his friend: "you live in nightmares, you don't know where the nightmares end and real-life begins" (276). Thus the dramatic shift in tone between the novel's two distinct sections underlines his friend's conjecture that, for Harry, the boundary between real-life and the imagination is now a blurred line.

But Harry's self-awareness has not left him altogether; moments of relative clarity are still possible. Although apparently disconnected from the world around him in ways which show physical vagrancy and suggest mental delusion, he at least understands the terms of the disconnection shaping his relationship with perhaps his one remaining interlocutor: "He thinks I am looking at the lights and the flashing signs. I don't tell him why I am really looking because I know he won't believe me. He thinks, when I tell him other things, that I make them all up" (271). Here the reader notices that, once again, Harry is regarded as a figure of indomitable suspicion. In the earlier section of the novel, Harry is routinely deemed dishonest by those around him. Frank warns him to "take care" as "nobody likes liars" (6), while Sam Phelps also cautions Harry, "Don't lie, son", speculating further that all the "Baird fellows seem to go in for lies" (188-89). Susan Prosser continually baits "nasty Harry" (113) and eventually even Mrs Kelly, who, early on, figures as a kindly, surrogate-aunt for Harry, cools noticeably in her regard for him (229). Regardless of whether such round judgements on Harry's character are

justified, the final allegation of his dishonesty, put to him by his companion at the end of the novel, carries ramifications that the previous instances do not: now accused of making up stories as an adult, the veracity of Harry's whole narration to this point is hence thrown into doubt. Should Harry's friend be believed, the constituent events of practically the entire novel, the "terrible happenings" (1) of one fateful summer in Harry's childhood, could be interpreted as no more than the far-fetched fabrications of a disturbed man. Thus the novel itself can, in the end, be read as an elaborate story-telling exercise – the account of an unreliable narrator who, in an effort to explain his sorry lot in life, provides a backstory that wavers between the plausible and the fictitious.

Harry himself acknowledges that he is seen by others as a liar, and yet he neither wholly confirms nor contests the legitimacy of those imputations. Reflecting on the implications of disclosing in full the situation surrounding Janet's disappearance to his friend, he explains: "I do not tell my friend about her. Having him for a friend is handy, he will not stay my friend if I tell him about my mother, he will order me from the basement, he will say at last I have gone too far, he is sick of my fibbing" (275). But here Ballantyne grants Harry a carefully crafted syntax to allow two incompatible possibilities to remain in play: from Harry's reflection, his story about Janet's escape to the city may or may not be a lie. For all that "he is sick of my fibbing" could be inferred as a damning admission of untruthfulness on Harry's part, the clause could easily be read as part of the indirect speech act attributed to Harry's friend: "he will say at last I have gone too far, [he will say] he is sick of my fibbing." Whether or not Harry admits to lying here cannot strictly be told.

Elsewhere, however, it appears that Harry has spent his years in the city telling tall-tales to everyone he meets. Most of these read as surreal and highly suspect allusions to events constituting the earlier part of the novel. Clearly implausible at face value, they nonetheless appear to contain grains of truth. Harry tells his friend, for instance, that he has met Uncle Pember: "He was riding a horse called Sydney Bridge Upside Down and at first I did not



recognise him, I thought he was a butcher named Mr Wiggins. This was because of his whiskers. Then I remembered that Mr Wiggins did not usually have whiskers" (276-77). If Harry was telling a truth consistent with the version we have just read of his long-ago summer, a better reason not to mistake Pember for Wiggins might be that he knows he killed the butcher in the meat works years before. Of course, the reader has already disbelieved Harry's story because the chances that Pember was seen riding Sydney Bridge Upside Down – an old, "slow-moving bag of bones" (1) at the time of the prior narration and probably long since dead – are as remote as can be imagined.

Other curiously familiar fragments are just as teasingly laid, both referring to Harry's previous account but refusing consistency with it as well. Having earlier told us, for example, that he stole Frank's whip when he ran away (264), when questioned later he explains the whip as part of an elaborate kidnapping in which he was held in a dungeon and only escaped having done enough press-ups to acquire the strength to knock out his captors. ('Kidnapping?' the reader is likely to ask.) The account Harry offers his friend reads with the same apparent half-light of truth and make-believe:

Do you know, I say, that there was a castle near where I lived? ... Do you know, I say, that I once saved a beautiful short-sighted girl from being captured by a hairy monster? ... Do you know, I say, that I slew the hairy monsters *and* a skinny witch? ... Do you know, I say, that I was once the strongest hero, inch for inch and pound for pound, in the world? ... Do you know, I say, that I used to run along halls and up and down staircases with this beautiful girl and that neither of us wore clothes and she used to lie on a big satin-covered bed and let me look at her breasts and pussy and say what a nice big cock I had and let me lie with her and let me cry on her breasts and if I'd been a few years older would have let me marry her and would probably have waited for me to grow a bit if an older hero hadn't turned up in a Daimler one day and taken her to the castle and fucked her right left and centre while I looked on? (Emphasis original, 271)

The reader can pick where Harry alludes to his prior narrative: refiguring the meat works as a castle, for example, or casting Buster as "an older hero [who] turned up in a Daimler one day" to claim the "beautiful short-sighted girl" for

himself. But why does Buster drive a Daimler rather than ride an Indian? Why is Caroline's short-sightedness only now revealed to the reader? On the other hand, some details are entirely consistent between Harry's prior and later accounts: when adult Harry tells his friend that the beautiful girl "let [him] lie with her and let [him] cry on her breasts", we recall Harry's earlier report, narrating his time with Caroline the day after Susan died: "I sat on the bed and presently [Caroline] turned and put her arm around me, and I lay there beside her and neither of us spoke. And all that happened was that she raised her black sweater and let me rest my damp cheek on her breasts" (121).

So what is the reader to make of this latter-narrating Harry's allusions to his own backstory, the one we have just been reading for the previous fifteen chapters? The problem involves negotiating the points of both connection and disconnection between the two sections of the novel. Specifically, it involves recognising the consistencies between the two accounts without overlooking or minimising the complications of the inconsistencies between them. To do this we might bear in mind, once again, Phelan's cue to look to character for clues to the narration and to the narration for clues to character (*Narrative* 111). First, this reminds us that we have two possible planes of interpretation, or two distinct avenues by which to approach interpretation, being character and narration. Applied to the whole of *Sydney Bridge*, we find that the temporal divide between the novel's two sections largely preserves continuity on the level of fact, character and event, but seriously complicates continuity on the level of narration. That is, we can recognise a consistent narrative arc across the entirety of the novel, but Harry's handling feels radically split by the temporal dislocation between the novel's distinct and respective sections. We can note how Harry's motivation to run away to the city is consistent across the novel – in both accounts he is in pursuit of Janet – or we can note that the same points of psychological trauma are suggested in both prior and later accounts: Janet's affair with Dalloway, Caroline's sex act with Buster, and Harry's involvement in the deaths of Susan and Wiggins are all significant psychological factors to the narrating consciousness on both sides of the novel's temporal divide. And

on either side of the divide Harry never consciously identifies as a victim of sexual abuse though the signs of that abuse are clear. But we have to balance these points of connection against a consideration of Harry's handling from two distinct and separate narrating positions.

The Harry we encounter in the novel's closing section might be mentally unstable and therefore fallible as a narrator, but, if so, he is now fallible in an entirely different way to previously, where his fallibility was primarily an expression of his naivety. And yet, on the level of plot and character, Harry's later mental delusion cannot be so easily disentangled from his prior naivety. As his friend who listens on disbelievingly tells him, "You must have read too many fairy-tales" (271), suggesting to the reader that Harry's slide from one kind of fallibility to another represents both a profound dislocation and a connection with his past. We can appreciate that even if, as his friend believes, Harry has read too many fairy-tales and can no longer distinguish between real-life and make-believe, details like the meat works might be exaggerated into a castle because it seems to make a kind of symbolic sense to the latter-narrating Harry. Traumatized by the events which transpired in the works that summer – the deaths of Susan and Wiggins, and then paying witness to Caroline and Buster – Harry might now feel the works themselves to represent a kind of Gothic horror in recollection. But that he embellishes minor details like replacing the Indian for a Daimler cannot be so easily resolved. We cannot tell Harry's motivation for seemingly misreporting here, but on the other hand, there is nothing to say that Buster didn't really drive a Daimler beyond Harry's prior account, which is, itself, unreliable by turns. Even if we deem it far more likely that Buster rode an Indian all along and Harry has invented the Daimler – or misremembered the motorbike as a car – Harry now appears unreliable for how, once again, he offers no reflection by which we can account for his tall-tales. Given his apparent state of mental perturbation, is he knowingly reinventing versions of the backstory he has just narrated, perhaps deliberately obfuscating his listener for his own amusement, or is he genuinely deranged in his recall? Although we must be tempted to read his declaration

that he killed a skinny witch as his confession that he killed Susan in the works, we can hardly hold the presently-narrating Harry's version of accounts to be above reproach, given his tendency to embellish so wildly in the later account.

So while connections which show a consistent story arc are readily available between the two accounts, interpreting Harry's narration on either side of the divide to reconcile that consistency is far more challenging. Initially it seems there are enough syntactic markers to suggest the same narrating agent. Harry's opening sentence of chapter sixteen, for instance, "Would you believe me, I ask, if I mumble mumble mumble?" (270), directly recalls the puzzling syntax we encounter when Caroline reads to Harry from her autobiography in the prior account:

Caroline read: 'I'll mumble mumble you to the big parade, declared Uncle Pember. Mumble mumble, he added. I was very little and did not always hear what he said. Mumble mumble is what I often thought he said. Ponk ponk, I would say back to make him chortle. (111)

Or that, throughout the whole novel, Harry consistently uses the terms 'bop' and 'bopping' to mean punching or hitting. Here, the common syntax shows too that Harry's recourse to violence is another strong indicator of a consistent sense of character across both accounts, just as he is consistently seen as a liar by those around him.

Harry also narrates his search for Janet in a familiar tone of naïve boyishness. Describing his mother to the strangers he meets he reports thus:

she has brown hair, she walks quickly, she talks quickly, she turns pink when she's excited, she smokes a lot of cigarettes, she has a pair of red earrings and a pair of black ones, she doesn't like sitting down for long, she likes to keep moving about, she taps her chin with her fingers when she's crabby, she likes to be tidy and puts on a clean dress and lipstick even before she goes to breakfast, she is angry if other people go to breakfast in their pyjamas, her favourite colours are red and blue and black, she doesn't like washing clothes and she isn't fond of gardening, she makes pretty good ginger beer, she doesn't make very good jam, she doesn't like people who get sick or stay away from school or work, she gets angry if anybody farts, she reads travel books, she thinks sums and spelling are good for

kids, she sometimes cries when she is in bed and thinks everybody else is asleep, she calls my father Hoppy when he's not at home to hear her, she sleeps with other men when my father is at work, she has a special friend called Mr Dalloway. (273)

Yet even if Harry's tone feels familiar here, it feels manic too, delivering the impression of rote replies, indicative of a mental state on the edge or one that has lost the capacity for self-reflection, which, as Harry's prior account wound up, he had in fact begun to acquire.

Towards the end of Harry's recall of the summer, in chapter fourteen, he begins to show signs of a twofold depression, but even within this depression, an increasing maturity as well. Struggling to reconcile his involvement in the deaths of Susan and Wiggins, his mental wellbeing is all the more precarious as he is thrust into the emotional turmoil attendant on adolescent change. Harry spends hours hiding in his room, under his bed:

It was dusty under the bed. Dad usually gave the house a sweep-out on Sundays, and sometimes I went around with the broom before school, but neither of us was much good at reaching under the beds, some of the dust under this bed had probably been here for as long as my mother had been away. I should be out in the sun, I only got gloomy under the bed, I kept waiting for somebody to call for me, I expected the Bonnie Brae policeman to arrive at any moment and say he had discovered my secret. If I were at the wharf, fishing with Cal and Dibs and Bruce, I would not think about the policeman. These days, though, I could not be bothered with Cal and Dibs and Bruce; they seemed too young, too ignorant. I no longer got excited about the same things they did. (249-50)

Thus Harry's slide into depression nonetheless coincides with greater self-reflection. Here Harry is able to recognise, for example, the increasing distance between himself and the other boys, not only as a psychological consequence of his decision to do away with Wiggins but reflective too of adolescent change.

Harry's depression cannot be easily separated from his sexual involvement with Caroline. Despite De Goldi's description – "innocent romps" (xi) – there can be little doubt that Harry is a victim of his cousin's sexual exploitation. While Cal retreats from the running game when Caroline enters,

Harry embraces her inclusion. The earlier passages detailing Harry's infatuation point only to a natural curiosity on his part, reflective of a boy's first stirrings of a more mature sexuality, suddenly more inclined to women than girls. But Caroline's reciprocation becomes alarmingly clear. Running naked in the mornings quickly gives rise to private encounters between the two, which Harry notes by implying her suggestive behaviour – Caroline lets the sheets slip when Harry is in her bedroom in the mornings and dresses in front of him sans underwear (62-63). But the more their involvement becomes sexualised the less Harry is able to report on it, because it is beyond his ken to make sense of the experience. Alone on the beach together Harry can only describe his erection in the terms of Caroline's teasing – "'Harry's naughty dingdong'" (80) – and then escapes to play with Cal and Dibs, conflicted by what to make of the experience:

much as I liked what Caroline said, it did make me feel trembly, as if I was doing wrong.

So that was what I was thinking while I followed Dibs and Cal across the rocks. I was thinking Caroline was the most beautiful girl in the world and I didn't care how often she pointed to my dingdong – and there was nothing wrong with this. (80)

While Harry's infatuation with Caroline intensifies until he witnesses her in the works with Buster, he registers until that point the increasing pressure borne of his complicit but deeply troubled sexual involvement with her. In one flashback, narrated as if from within a dream, Harry portrays the mental and emotional tension he feels and, more explicitly, shows that their physical involvement is predicated on Caroline's abuse of him: "What do you want me to do? Do you want to grab my hand and do what you did when we were running the other morning? You know, when you held my hand down there between your legs and wouldn't let me take it away. I can't, dear Caroline, I can't, I can't ..." (104). Harry only forsakes his attraction to Caroline when he is traumatised by the discovery of her and Buster having sex in the works: "I ran. They're no different, I thought. The squeals and groans are the same. Like the cries of dying animals. Hit by hammers, stabbed. How could she

let such a huge thing go into her? No wonder she laughed at mine, no wonder she gave it a baby name. I was a baby. He was a man" (259). And yet, Harry maintains his conflicted attachment to Caroline – part devotee, part unwitting victim – on both sides of the novel's divide. Later he boasts that he "was in love with the most beautiful girl ever to sail in the *Emma Cranwell*", undone in his affection only by an older hero in a Daimler. In each section Caroline remains an object of deeply disquieting sexual desire.

Though Harry is still limited by his naivety at the end of his childhood account – he follows through on the unwise decision to run away, for instance – he is able to reflect with greater acuity on his situation, more able to reliably perceive and judge the behaviour and feelings of others. As he reflects on the impact his disappearance is likely to have on Frank:

I felt very sad at the thought of how he would look when my letter arrived. He would look miserable, the way he had looked for days after getting my mother's last letter. Every day after that letter he had written to her, but she had never written again. Eventually he seemed to realise she really had finished with us, and he stopped looking miserable and looked angry instead, then he went around with his face stiff and frowning all the time, and he was still like that. I wished I did not have to make him miserable again. I wished he were a cruel father and I hated him, so that it would be easier for me to run away, so that I would not have to think of the unhappiness I caused him. But there was no other way. I could not stay in Calliope Bay now that the summer was ending, now that everything had changed, now that she and Dalloway were having fun in the city. No matter how much it hurt Dad, I must go. (263-64)

Harry's greater reliability in terms of reflection and insight, hard-won by the end of his account of the summer, is conveyed in his closing words with an almost heart-breaking sense of understatement. Delivered to Bonnie Brae by the friendly truck driver, Mr Dobson, the man comments: "'Well, there we are, Harry. There's Bonnie Brae ahead. Journey's end, eh?'" Harry's response shows an awareness of the stakes of his situation, as he drily reflects inwardly, and with a grim resignation showing signs of a move towards maturity: "Not just yet, I thought" (269).

And yet the novel's closing chapters show little of this greater capacity to self-reflection and increased reliability on the axis of perception and judgement. On the contrary, Harry's later narration shows a drastic regression in these terms. Far more prominent throughout the novel's close is the sense of a narrating consciousness that is nervous and disengaged, delivering a fractured account of life in the city, struggling to coherently describe a world of threat he doesn't fully understand:

So I pretend, as I walk up the main street with [my friend], that I am as excited by the girls with plump legs and white boots as he is, I grin when he makes remarks from the side of his mouth about the ones leaning through the windows of the old cars parked by the pavement, cars full of hunters, ready to roar off with their catches as soon as they have gone through all the kidding that the girls with plump legs and white boots seem to want before they'll climb in. I also pretend, when two hunters take off from a doorway after three girls, that I share my friend's doubt about whether the hunters will be in luck, I know that inside a block they will be certain of their catches. My friend, of course, is a hunter. I will leave him when we reach the coffee bar, I will go on alone and stay away from the basement until he has thrown out his catch, I have my own kind of hunting to do. (275)

Harry admits to having little interest in the glitzier seductions of the city:

[My friend] doesn't know that when we walk up the glittering main street nibbling our peanuts, I am not looking for girls in short skirts and white boots, I do not care about the brilliant windows full of record sleeves, I do not want the snappy trousers, jackets shirts shoes in other windows, I am not looking for new kicks. (272)

Rather, most of Harry's later narration comprises his account of the tall-tales he has told over the years to all he has met on his search for Janet. But while this forms a powerful and compelling connection to his prior account in terms of plot continuity, it complicates the whole novel from a narrative perspective.

With Harry now lost in a past he cannot reclaim, his capacity for self-reflection has been, apparently, shut down. This puts Harry's regression on the level of character fundamentally at odds with the novel's narrative progression.



Harry's slide on the level of character can be reconciled with plot development because we understand Harry to have slid into mental instability. But we cannot so easily reconcile this development on the level of narration. The problem rests on the effect of the temporal divide between sections. We might assume that, because the novel ends with Harry's homeless existence in the city, therefore the whole narrative must have been delivered from that point in time. Two striking and subtly conjoined features of Harry's first account seem to support this. First, buried within chapters six and thirteen, are monologues which read as if accounts of nightmares. They might be both experienced and delivered from within Harry's first-person present position as a child narrator – after all, as Frank tells him, “it had been a disturbing time and [so Harry] might be affected in ways [he] was not [himself] aware of, deep-down ways that only showed themselves in nightmares”. Harry's own report bears out this possibility: “When I yell at home, deep in the night, Cal wakes up, then wakes me, and he tells me to stop having nightmares, he says it happens every night and he can't sleep properly because I yell so much” (227). Equally, however, if Harry's adult friend is able to report on his nightmares, we might infer that the nightmare sequences are interjections from Harry's latter-narrating self. If so, this implies that we are meant to read the whole text as the cohesive account of the one narrating consciousness. And, if the one narrating consciousness, then one delivered from a stable narrating position, which can only then be situated at or after the time narrated in the novel's closing chapters. This makes sense of the second striking feature of Harry's prior account: his recourse at crucial points to a fairy-tale voice. As a distancing device, the voice opens a psychological space between the personality of the narrator and the intimacy of the events the voice describes through its relatively disembodied tone. But it affects a subtle sense of temporal distance from those events as well. When Harry begins the novel, “There was an old man who lived on the edge of the world”, he tells us that he “start[s] with this man and his horse because they were there for all the terrible happenings up the coast that summer, always somewhere around” (1). Harry then “go[es] to a cliff-top on a

January day” to narrate the fight with Dibs. But noting the connotations (where emphasised) of those “happenings up the coast *that summer*”, “on a January day” suggests a significant temporal distance between the narrator and the events he describes. And, if such a notable temporal distance, then the whole of Harry’s narration up to the end of chapter fifteen has been narrated from a time after the events themselves.

Although Harry’s first account offers virtually none of the mature self-reflection which we would expect had he narrated from an adult position, an adult position is implied nonetheless when his fairy-tale voice imposes a distance, both temporal and psychological, between himself and the events he narrates. This alone would not be a problem, but when Harry does narrate as an adult, he is too mentally unstable to be read as the same narrator. He narrates as if without any memory of the prior account beyond a recall of plot details; he offers nothing that shows a continuation or extension of the glimmers towards more mature self-reflection that the earlier, naively-narrating Harry showed significant signs of developing. His adult voice is markedly different from both the naturalistic childlike register dominant through the novel to that point and the fairy-tale voice to which he has sometimes, earlier, defaulted. Despite some common syntactical markers with his prior account, stylistically, Harry’s later narration is, by comparison, far more disjointed and impressionistic, far less reflective, and entirely without Harry’s previous moments of naïve charm.

By so explicitly and repeatedly distinguishing between Harry’s prior and later accounts, what might be implied here are at least two other alternatives. First, if it seems that the two conjoined but clearly distinguishable sections of the novel imply a split-consciousness in their narrator, we might think of the novel as comprised of two separate narratives – one explaining the events of the summer, told from Harry’s first-person present sometime after the account itself, and the other narrated many years later, by which time Harry’s grip on those events has become precarious. We can note, then, the apparent incompatibilities between Harry’s earlier and later accounts, decide that each

seem to be narrated by a different narrating consciousness, and therefore infer that even while Harry has narrated the prior account years later, it can't be as many years later as when he narrates the novel's closing sections, for the respective voices are too incongruous, too incognisant of the reflections or the tendencies of the other.

The second alternative is to consider that the two sections do not imply such a radically divided narrator but indicate the presence of two separate narratees. Though Chatman holds that a narratee is not indispensable to narration (150), Rimmon-Kenan (who largely follows Prince, Gérard Genette and Chatman) reasons that every narrator must address a narratee, explicitly or implicitly, as part of that narrator's purposively directed narrative act, meaning that narratees are indispensable, but allowing as well that they may be extra- or intradiegetic (104). Although the narratee(s) implied within and by *Sydney Bridge* are covert, taking no part in the story, nonetheless, Harry's highly characteristic use of analepsis and prolepsis imply a narratee of whom he is highly conscious in his report. For example, he begins, "I start with this man and his horse ... I start with Sam Phelps and Sydney Bridge Upside Down, but now I go to a cliff-top on a January day" (1), and then consciously redirects again: "I go back now to the beginning of that day" (3). Because Harry is highly self-conscious as a storyteller in these instances, then he necessarily acknowledges his audience as well. Although a deeper discussion of the role of the narratee is beyond the ambit of this discussion, even relatively basic accounts of the role of the narratee throw considerable light on the possibilities we must confront in dealing with Harry's apparently split-consciousness narration. As Schmid explains: "the representation of the narratee is built up on the representation of the narrator insofar as the former is an attribute of the latter, similar to the way in which the image of the implied reader partakes of the characteristics of the implied author" ("Narratee"). If Harry has offered us two such very different narrative representations as to have us consider the possibility of two distinct narratives, then these must imply different narratees accordingly. Projecting from Harry's prior account we can infer a narratee who

is open to Harry's intimate confessions and his narrative digressions, while from the second account we can project a somewhat more distant audience, perhaps a narratee altogether closer to one of Harry's nameless interlocutors in the city: one who listens but whom Harry does not completely trust. If we allow that Harry addresses two distinct narratees, then the inconsistencies of voice between his two very different accounts are resolved while the consistencies between them are maintained.

On the other hand, if Harry does narrate with two distinct and separable narratees in mind, then we have to reconsider the idea of two distinct narrating-present positions. The different narratees of the novel's two sections imply a narrator addressing two different audiences rather than a narrating consciousness whose sudden switch in register necessarily implies a temporal break between one narrating-present and the next. So assuming the one narrating consciousness re-inscribes the possibility that Harry narrates from one point in time. And if Harry narrates from one point in time then reliably reading his unreliability becomes impossible. In the first account Harry is fallible because naïve and in the second he is fallible because apparently mentally insecure. But if these two kinds of fallibility are present in the same narrating agent, who narrates from a single point in time, then we cannot decide between them. If we give priority to the second account, if we believe his mental insecurity is not a sham of some kind, and that he is unreliable because prone to wild flights of fancy, then his prior account cannot be taken at face value but is, instead, a highly elaborate but in the end questionable deceit. We could say that the first account proves Harry is not really mad, only limited by naivety, but that makes his second account all the more unreliable – it means that his second account is even more untrustworthy because his mental instability is an act or a cover of some sort. If his questionable mental state is feigned then he is again fundamentally unreliable.

This might justify reintroducing a split-narrative model based on the novel's temporal divide. Doing so allows us to hold in mind two narratives, addressed to two narratees, and delivered from separate points in narrative

time. Our ascription of unreliability then holds that Harry is first naïve and then mentally unstable. But if this implies that Harry's unreliability is, at last, able to be reliably read, we have only done so by essentially treating Harry as two different narrators. And if we have to take the unusual step of treating an unreliable narrator this way, then it is precisely *because* we cannot decide on his unreliability: if we split Harry's narrating consciousness then we have admitted that we cannot reliably read his unreliability, but if we do not split his narrating consciousness, then we are left in a state of permanent oscillation between his naivety and his mental instability. The option I argue is to take both avenues: allow that the mechanisms of his unreliability inscribe Harry as a radically unreliable narrator, his unreliability unable to be secured.

## Chapter Four:

### *The Gothic Challenge to Social Realism*

#### Introduction

I begin by arguing that Harry's radical unreliability encourages us to read with the synthetic elements of the text in mind, and demonstrate that Harry's prior account is not only a highly constructed backstory, but a Gothic one at that. Because Harry's later account is fractured almost to the limits of what narrative sense can accommodate, then without the prior account for reference it would read as if the ramblings of a deranged mind – a mind which, though it might have known the truth once, is now lost in between a place of nightmares and real-life. As we try to corroborate Harry's later narration we defer to his prior account, and in doing so acknowledge that one of the major effects of Harry's radically split narration is to regard events narrated through the first fifteen chapters of the novel as a narrative within a narrative.

Considering the ramifications of such a framing device, I argue that the Gothic markers of the novel behave differently in the novel's respective sections. In the novel's brief but distinctly separate closing chapters, Gothic and realist elements are at odds, both indicating and indicated by a radically unreliable narrator. However, throughout the earlier section, comprising most of the novel, realism is entwined with the Gothic. How are we to make sense of such a seemingly radical divide? I argue that, first, Harry's Gothic backstory, unreliably narrated, looks to overhaul and galvanise local realism by using a series of highly artificial (Gothic) constructions to inject a heightened sense of drama and narrative suspense. As Evans has suggested, Ballantyne's first novel, *The Cunninghams*, published 20 years earlier, proved the bind of the post-war New Zealand realist writer who, committed to delivering a "scrupulous realism ... that pointed up all too sharply the limitations of living [in New Zealand,] threatened to yield a fiction that was boring" (*Penguin* 190). *Sydney Bridge* is anything but boring. But it makes the point that perhaps local realism,

at least of the time, could not easily have it both ways, looking to deliver high drama on the one hand while maintaining total fidelity to the conditions of local reality on the other. By the novel's close we realise we have been led along a narrative which, despite surface claims to mimetic fidelity, has also been shaped by highly artificial, synthetic markers. Phelan reminds us that while every fiction carries synthetic elements, these can be foregrounded to varying degrees against mimetic ones. It is only in the end that we see how Harry's radical unreliability then calls the veracity of his entire Gothic backstory into doubt. Hence, it is only in the end that we see just how emphatically the novel marks the narrative limits of local social realism. Especially pertinent here is the emergence of literary criticism concerned with articulating a distinctly local Gothic literature. To close this thesis then, I argue that reading the novel in mind of the complex relationship between Harry's unreliability and the artificial construction of the text allows us to read *Sydney Bridge* as an aesthetically-coded complaint against the received terms of New Zealand literary criticism itself.

### *Reading on the synthetic level*

At the end of the novel, when Harry is shown to have wound up living a derelict, essentially homeless existence in a large and nameless city, his physical rootlessness is reflected in his fragmentary, virtually hallucinatory recollection of what he has narrated to us previously as his prior, childhood existence. The reader is then put into a seemingly impossible interpretive position. Because the later-narrating Harry cannot be trusted – fallible because of what we take to be his mental anxieties expressed through a fraught narrating voice – we can't take what he says at face value. To the strangers he meets in the city he must seem fallible in the extreme, with his talk of killing skinny witches and hairy monsters. To the reader, however, privy to the prior account and thus able to read the skinny witch as Susan and the hairy monster as Wiggins, Harry's fallibility is harder to gauge. There is little doubt that Harry kills Wiggins in his earlier account. If Harry effectively admits to killing him later then we might

feel vindicated in our assignation of Harry's guilt and congratulate ourselves for reading through his unreliable narration. But to those readers, like myself, who believe that the evidence of Harry's prior narration supports only that Susan fell accidentally – even though we don't know Harry's full involvement – his other claim, that he killed a skinny witch, seems more problematic. Certainly Harry has struggled with feelings of guilt connected with Susan – does he now blame himself for what happened? After all, as we have seen, he deliberately and seemingly deceptively led her into the works the night she died.

The point is that we have to default to the prior account – we don't actually trust him later on at all. To put this into perspective, consider the version he gives to his friend of how he met Uncle Pember:

Would you believe me if I say I saw Uncle Pember the other night in this street? Continue, he says. I continue: He was riding a horse called Sydney Bridge Upside Down and at first I did not recognise him, I thought he was a butcher named Mr Wiggins. This was because of his whiskers. Then I remembered that Mr Wiggins did not usually have whiskers. So I went up to this man and I said: Are you Uncle Pember? He said: Yes. And you're Harry Baird, are you not? I said I was. He said he was mumble mumble mumble and would I like to hop up behind him and go out to see his chandelier. I said: No thanks, I've heard all about your damned chandelier. Please yourself, he said, and galloped away on Sydney Bridge Upside Down. (276-77)

The reader has only heard of Uncle Pember through Harry's report of listening to Caroline read from her autobiography. There, in a register as semi-garbled as the later-narrating Harry and as naïve as he is earlier, Caroline recounts her childhood Uncle with (perhaps unwitting) suggestions of paedophilia. A chandelier is also involved (120). We might suspect that Harry has not met Uncle Pember at all as he has described – underlined by the plainly implausible appearance of a fit and healthy Sydney Bridge Upside Down – and thus that Harry has fabricated the whole episode. But on the other hand we cannot say for sure that Harry has not run into Pember somewhere down the road from his



childhood, so we cannot rule with any real certainty on the extent of Harry's fabrication.

And yet while the reach of Harry's untruths is left vexingly unclear, to be believed is uppermost in his concern. Having delivered the bizarre story of meeting Pember, Harry asks his friend: "Do you believe me?". "Sure" comes the reply and Harry is relieved: "Thank goodness, I say" (277). Having deemed Harry's stories to date highly suspect, however, his friend's final "Sure" can only be read with thoroughly ingrained irony, if not outright sarcasm. We can note, then, that Harry is a curiously conflicted narrator, for despite the outlandish liberties he takes with whatever the truth may be, his sense of self-worth is nonetheless invested in his plausibility as a storyteller. It is here, in the second section of the novel, that we begin to see Harry not only as a narrator, but as a storyteller even within his own narration.

Reading Harry's account this way, ever more fundamental expressions of doubt begin to nudge their way forward as we look for clues to his reliability. Even Harry's hometown, Calliope Bay, a tiny settlement so isolated that it seems to sit, as Harry reminds us in the novel's most insistent refrain, at "the edge of the world" (1, 47, 105, 168, 198, 262, 274, 278), comes to seem deeply suspect. Till now the reader has no problem reading Calliope Bay as an archetype of small-town New Zealand that, even fictionalised, doesn't seem to break the realist frame. But with the radical divide of the novel's two distinct sections now casting all of Harry's prior account into doubt, then the possibility that Calliope Bay is itself the stuff of Harry's own fabulation is eerily evoked when Harry is asked by a stranger in the city, "Where in God's name is Calliope Bay?" (274). The question shows a speaker who has not heard of Calliope Bay, but taking God's name in vain shows a deeper cynicism, as though the speaker might believe no such place exists. Because the question comes in the final section of the novel, where nobody Harry meets quite seems ready to buy his story, it carries much more fundamental and far-reaching implications. As readers we don't need Calliope Bay to be utterly consistent in mimetic terms with the world outside the novel – we know we are reading

fiction after all – and yet the possibility that it is fictionalised, even within the novel, is put into play once we have reason to suspect that Harry might be a pathological liar. If there is a chance that Harry, as a presently fallible (because mentally unstable) narrator, has somehow made the whole thing up, then it is now that we might consider the ramifications of Harry's unreliability to be much deeper than we have hitherto imagined.

We do not need to determine beyond all doubt whether Calliope Bay really has been made up by the unreliable Harry – but the finer point might be precisely that we can't. Harry's radical unreliability leads us to consider that the most tautly honed interpretations of the book needn't set out to prove his unreliability one way or the other – the finer task is to consider the novel's deeper concern with narrative structure arising from the impossible task of doing so. A similar principle applies as we consider the fuller implications of Harry's storytelling. If we allow the possibility that Harry has fabricated much more of his prior narration than we have previously supposed, then the question, "Where in God's name is Calliope Bay?", is not simply a distancing device between prior and later accounts. Rather, the connotation of radical doubt implied by the question underlines that the distance between the two sections creates a frame narrative – one in which the ontological status of the prior narration is called into question. At this point the reader cannot overlook the literary allusion of the name Calliope Bay, Calliope being the muse of epic poetry. Are we meant to read Calliope Bay as a self-reflexively literary device as well as a version of small-town New Zealand legitimised by its resemblance to local reality? Beginning to read with such markers of the novel's artificial construction in mind, we find that Harry's unreliability has now directed us to read on the synthetic level. (Earlier in this thesis I reflected that we tread with caution when handling unreliability with recourse to the synthetic level of the text.<sup>29</sup> Here I hope to demonstrate how such caution might proceed.) Rereading Harry's prior narration with these possibilities in mind – that he might have made up the whole account, and that his radical unreliability is a clue to read

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<sup>29</sup> See pp. 122, 132-34.

synthetically rather than mimetically – we find that Harry’s entire backstory seems marked by highly artificial constructions.

Reading synthetically we can begin by noting, again, Phelan’s distinction between fictions which emphasise the mimetic component and those which stress the synthetic, a divide which creates extremities between realist and metafictional modes respectively. Of course, even in the most realist fiction the synthetic element will always be present “because any character is constructed and has a specific role to play within the larger construction of the narrative, but the synthetic may be more or less foregrounded” (*Living* 20). We can reflect here that as we negotiate Harry’s narration we do interpret his actions and thinking according to what we know of human thought and behaviour, but we also read the clues to his unreliability conventionally. Thus we negotiate between mimetic and synthetic approaches. As suggested previously, however, reading on the synthetic level can be risky as far as attributing unreliability is concerned, since, if the synthetic component is where characters think and behave “at the behest of the author” (rather than seeming to “act as they do by their own choice” as aspired to by realist fiction) (*Living* 20), then the odds of encountering authorially-planted red herrings must increase. It is only in hindsight that we can begin to spot misdirections of a synthetic kind in Harry’s narration, finding, for instance, that while the distancing function of his uniquely textured and rarely deployed fairy-tale voice seems to add an incriminating tone in the deaths of Susan and Wiggins, as a sign of Harry’s guilt it seems laid to deceive, since Harry’s culpability in each case is different.

If it is in hindsight that we are best placed to properly interpret synthetic elements – which is just, given Phelan’s note that those components are read in relation to “the larger construction of the narrative” – then I argue here that the synthetic componentry of *Sydney Bridge* becomes foregrounded the moment we realise we have been given a story within a story, and one whose claims on the mimetic level are undermined by its radically unreliable narrator. Phelan’s broad working definition of the synthetic function pertains well to how I propose the synthetic markers of *Sydney Bridge* to work: if we read *Sydney*

*Bridge* as a novel “aware of its own construction” then we read Harry’s narration with conventions in mind and looking out for signs that those conventions are being upheld or undermined. This means not only conventional clues to his unreliability, but conventional clues to other literary categorisations based on entirely different premises – the conventions of genre, for example. How do we place Harry’s narration in those terms?

### **Sydney Bridge & local Gothic**

Although proper critical attention to *Sydney Bridge* has been notoriously thin on the ground since its publication,<sup>30</sup> the novel has more recently been regarded by a few commentators for its Gothic overtones. De Goldi calls the novel, among other things, “a gothic anti-romance” (x). William J. Schafer, Jennifer Lawn, Alex Calder and Mercer also note the novel’s Gothic leanings, but, as will be seen, none thoroughly account for how the Gothic signifiers behave in relation to its social realist aspects, much less in light of the narrative’s radically-split construction. Certainly the novel is heavily imbued with Gothic shades and motifs, but I argue that these occupy the text in very different ways in the novel’s respective sections. In the final two chapters the Gothic devices are bald indications of Harry’s unreliability: his skinny witches and his hairy monsters, his dungeons and his castles, these do not merely lend the narration Gothic turns but imply a narrator who is lying or mad or a little of both. In the prior narrative, however, the Gothic is far more smoothly imbricated into an account which seems outwardly to satisfy in realist terms as well. The meat works, for instance, marks a recognisably realist provincial New Zealand, but because it is abandoned and falling dangerously into disrepair, it also takes on Gothic hues.

Susan and Wiggins both die nasty deaths inside the works – appropriately in the middle of the night – while the unreliable narration of Harry overlays the grisly deaths with uncertainty, adding mystery to the

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<sup>30</sup> De Goldi’s introduction underlines the lack of critical regard the novel has received with particular recourse to Evans who has long claimed *Sydney Bridge* to be “the great, and unread, New Zealand novel” (emphasis original, x).

macabre to produce what can be seen as a peculiarly Gothic effect. Although precisely what constitutes Gothic literature is itself still widely contested, at bottom most accounts of the Gothic hold that these two elements – the mysterious and the macabre – are fundamental to notions of the Gothic as a genre (T. Jones 7). Examples of formative Gothic literature characteristically make use of (often multiple) occasions of violent death – consider, for instance the body counts in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliff’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796). The theme continues throughout later incarnations of Gothic literature such as Edgar Allen Poe’s short story, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), and in far more recent, contemporary fictions which harbour Gothic claims such as Toni Morrison’s slave novel *Beloved* (1987). Timothy Jones exhaustively charts the historical use of the term ‘Gothic’ in respect of fiction, showing just how fluidly the description has been applied. He notes that it was only as recently as 2008 that the OED offered to define the Gothic as fiction, itself noting prevalence of “supernatural or macabre elements” within “suspenseful, sensational plots”, a definition which is agreeable across most critical accounts. Extended critical use of the term has also created a range of subgenres: from Southern Gothic to various national, Colonial and Postcolonial Gothics; from the Female Gothic to Science Fiction and Cyberpunk Gothics (T. Jones 28).

With so many different types of Gothic now articulated, it must be that basic Gothic values – the OED’s “suspenseful, sensational plots involving supernatural or macabre elements” – have either been consciously honed and deployed to serve specific political or cultural aims by writers and critics alike, or they have become discernibly varied in their effects as they have developed in distinct political or cultural contexts. With this distinction in mind I argue that the Gothic in *Sydney Bridge* allows Ballantyne to forcefully critique the status of local critical realism as he encountered it. But I acknowledge too that conjoining Gothic and realist elements in the same text has accumulated a tradition of its own in New Zealand literature, one that recent criticism has begun to chart and explicate.

Hence I now discuss how *Sydney Bridge* operates as a Gothic novel, and consider its place in respect of a nascent local Gothic tradition. Opening her discussion of 'Settler Gothic' in relation to New Zealand literature, Lawn suggests that "alienation, abandonment, horror, fear, and violence" are the Gothic values particularly at play in the local context ("Domesticating" 46). *Sydney Bridge* bears out Lawn's configuration, its horrific, fearful and violent events related through a child narrator who begins the novel abandoned by his mother and becomes slowly more alienated from all those around him. Echoing the alienation and abandonment underlying Harry's social estrangement is the distancing note struck by the setting: the "terrible happenings", we are told, occurred "up the coast", "on the edge of the world" (1). To Lawn's index of local Gothic value comprising "alienation, abandonment, horror, fear, and violence" we can justifiably add 'isolation'.

After all, a great deal of other notable New Zealand writing trades on the extent to which a characteristic remoteness, virtually inscribed as the New Zealand condition, can be imbued with Gothic foreboding. Two of Katherine Mansfield's settler fictions, for example, "The Woman at the Store" (1912) and "Millie" (1913), though strikingly realist with their burnt paddocks and hot dusty roads nonetheless embody, as Lydia Wevers describes, the threat of a savage landscape through associations with murder and madness ("The Short Story" 258-59). Timothy Jones has identified a number of Frank Sargeson's short stories as "Gothics" (212-235). Among these, "A Great Day" (1937) and "I've Lost My Pal" (1938) are apposite to the present discussion: both stage their chilling murders in isolated, rural settings, the latter on a farm and the former on a small, unpopulated island off a remote beach. Jones points out that despite being revered in canonical terms as "a staunch critical realist" whose work is routinely praised for its "authentic" vision of New Zealand and New Zealandness, Sargeson's writing is more multifaceted than the most dominant critical accounts have previously managed to articulate. More than realist fictions with Gothic strains occasionally hinted at (and occasionally critically noted), many of Sargeson's stories are in fact substantively Gothic in and of

themselves (212-13). With Jones demonstrating that even the archetypal local realism of Sargeson might be read as Gothic fiction, the tension between Gothic and realist aspects in *Sydney Bridge* is, in itself, a tension with local pedigree. Looking in other canonical directions, we find that although Janet Frame's fiction provides an impressionist counterpoint to the realism embodied by Sargeson, her story "The Lagoon" (1961) repeats the Sargesonian death-by-drowning motif, and with equally Gothic overtones. As a setting, sleepy Picton does not quite generate the sense of rural isolation evoked by Mansfield and Sargeson, but "The Lagoon" revels in the mysterious and macabre all the same, thanks to the narrator's great grandmother, the Māori princess dressed in handmade lace who murders her husband by pushing him into the lagoon at high tide (Schafer 137-38, T. Jones 216). As with Sargeson, Frame uses the coastline, or the water's edge, as a space of Gothic threat.

So too in *Sydney Bridge*. The cliff-top, for instance, is gravely dangerous for the threat of falling "a long way down" to the rocks and the wharf below (2). The wharf itself is off-limits to the children and with good reason since Dibs falls off and into the sweep of a dangerous current (29), and Cal almost drowns there later on (135-37). Caroline's arrival in Calliope Bay is marked by the first storm of the summer, which everyone understands to increase the danger of the rising river. In a particularly Gothic turn, Harry tells Caroline that once, after a big storm, the body of an old tramp was pulled from the river by Mr Kelly. Underlining the macabre shift, Caroline herself chips in with a response in which Gothic melodrama is heightened to reach black comedy:

'Enough of that,' Dad said, ... 'Caroline doesn't want to hear of such unhappy things. Do you, Caroline?'

'I don't mind, Uncle Frank,' she said, looking less sad. 'We all know people die. We know death is not unusual. So many people are dying all the time. Many thousands every minute of the day and night. Many, many thousands.'

Suddenly our house seemed very quiet.

We looked at Caroline. Her voice had been calm, soft – it had been nice. Not only that. Something in it had made me chilly, and I could not

decide what this was. Anyway, I could tell that Dad and Cal had also noticed it. Dad had stopped by the stove, the teapot in one hand; Cal, who had been fiddling with a teaspoon at the table, had also stiffened. We were silent. It took a loud knock on the door to wake us up. (41)

Frame's story "The Reservoir" (1963) provides an especially useful point of comparison to elucidate how the Gothic works in *Sydney Bridge*. As in Ballantyne's novel, Frame's story evokes the Gothic through a fear associated with the isolation of the rural or semi-rural New Zealand landscape. Like Harry Baird, Frame's narrator focalises the world around her through a lens which distorts reality, merging the factual and the make-believe via Gothic turns.

The Reservoir was the end of the world; beyond it, you fell; beyond it were paddocks of thorns, strange cattle, strange farms, legendary people whom we would never know or recognize even if they walked among us on a Friday night downtown when we went to follow the boys and listen to the Salvation Army Band and buy a milk shake in the milk bar and then return home to find everything was all right and safe, that our mother had not run away and caught the night train to the North Island, and our father had not shot himself with worrying over the bills ...

The Reservoir haunted our lives. (74)

Though the potential danger of the semi-rural environ hovers between the real and imagined, with the narrator channelling the viewpoint of a girl whose imagination fills the gaps in her knowledge, she nonetheless perceives the threats with recourse to what she knows of the real world as well. Hence, the paddocks of thorns and the unfamiliar farms with their unfamiliar cattle and people are factual details which, in the hands of the narrator, take on a fantastical hue, seeming to her both "strange" and "legendary". During Friday nights downtown, in the excitement of an edgier social space than the familiar domestic setup of home, it is even possible to imagine absconding mothers and suicidal fathers. Harry would relate.

The tendency of Frame's narrator to read the fantastical from the everyday holds with the long-held notion whereby the Gothic is expressed, or felt, not merely when subject matter turns to the sinister or the macabre, but when the known is bent towards the unknown. Underlying what has become a



stable formulation of the Gothic is the idea of the ‘uncanny’, a peculiarly Gothic expression of the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Avril Horner’s summation of the uncanny is worth quoting at length. As she explains:

The German word *unheimlich*, meaning ‘uncanny’, is one much used in criticism of Gothic writing. Its use in this manner derives from Sigmund Freud’s famous essay ‘The “Uncanny”’, published in 1919. In this essay, Freud distinguishes between *heimlich*, meaning ‘familiar’ or ‘belonging to the home’, and *unheimlich*, meaning all that is ‘unhomely’, or ‘uncanny’, and is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and *not* familiar. However, he points out that *heimlich*, in so far as it is associated with the domestic or the private, can also mean that which is concealed and kept out of sight. From these lexical ambivalences, he deduces that in some senses *unheimlich* coincides with its opposite, *heimlich*. (Emphases original, 287)

With this in mind, tracing the Gothic directions in “The Reservoir” involves more than simply spotting what might seem obvious Gothic signifiers, surfacing through the wild imaginings of the narrator, even when they exemplify apparently straightforward Gothic values such as the macabre or the supernatural. Though certain textual signifiers must fire in the mind of the reader for a text to operate as a Gothic, the Gothic is felt as a presence when particular operating principles apply. Applied to the suicidal father, for instance, though the image of a man turning a gun on himself might be disturbing and unnatural enough to begin with, if the uncanny can be found to coincide with the familiar, then suicide imagined in the domestic environment lends it a peculiarly Gothic heft in Freud’s terms.

The reservoir of Frame’s story and the abandoned meat works of Ballantyne’s novel work on the same principle, but on a larger scale. Like the “shearing shed Gothic” of Sargeson (T. Jones 219), Frame’s reservoir and Ballantyne’s meat works generate Gothic purchase through associations with isolation, danger and death. But they also count as markers of a rural or semi-rural New Zealand that are so recognisable as to be iconic and therefore familiar. In which case, as Gothic symbols, both reservoir and meat works trade

not only on the malevolent but the quotidian, registering the strangely fluid relationship between Freud's *unheimlich* and *heimlich* in staunchly local terms of reference. Reservoir and meat works are not only moored in the real world setting of New Zealand farmland but highly emblematic of it as well, and yet, as powerful markers of danger, death and the unknown to the children who observe and encounter them, they figure as compelling local instances whereby the "*unheimlich* coincides with its opposite, *heimlich*".

Lawn's observation that the "Gothic works in a manner akin to a shifting warp of the familiar" ("Warping" 15) cleaves to the same idea but also subtly directs attention to how the Gothic effect is rendered. Notably, both Frame's and Ballantyne's Gothic turns rely on their child protagonists' shared though not identically mannered tendency to the dramatic and to fabrication. Both reservoir and meat works are figured as powerful Gothic symbols partly because it is the children themselves who generate narratives around them. As expressions of fear founded on naivety and curiosity, their accounts demonstrate Horner's formulation that the uncanny is "frightening precisely because it is *not* known and *not* familiar" (287). But they register too the subtleties of Lawn's "shifting warp of the familiar" ("Warping" 15); consider, for instance, the moment of truth for Frame's narrator, as she beholds the subject of her fear for the first time:

The damp smell of the pine needles caught in our breath. There were no birds, only the constant sighing of the trees. We could see the water clearly now; it lay, except for the waves beyond the shore, in an almost perfect calm which we knew to be deceptive — else why were people so afraid of the Reservoir? The fringe of young pines on the edge, like toy trees, subjected to the wind, sighed and told us their sad secrets. In the Reservoir there was an appearance of neatness which concealed a disarray too frightening to be acknowledged except, without any defense, in moments of deep sleep and dreaming. The little sparkling innocent waves shone now green, now gray, petticoats, lettuce leaves; the trees sighed and told us to be quiet, hush-sh, as if something were sleeping and should not be disturbed — perhaps that was what the trees were always telling us, to

hush-sh in case we disturbed something which must never ever be awakened?

What was it? Was it sleeping in the Reservoir? Was that why people were afraid of the Reservoir? (87)

Frame's narrator describes with both an eye for realist detail and an introspection conducive to leaps of the imagination. Her clean observations – the damp pine needles, the calm water, the fringe of neatness around the reservoir – continually give rise to Gothic quirks and inflections: the trees sadly sigh, the calm water deceives, and the order of the landscape only heightens the fear of what lies hidden beneath the surface of the water. Everything appears normal and yet everything evokes silence, secrecy, fear and dread.

While both Frame's narrator and Harry Baird can be prone to fantastical expressions and conceptions, the danger of both reservoir and meat works is thoroughly inscribed in the minds of the children by the adults around them; just as the reservoir is off-limits to the children in Frame's story – "Our father looked up from reading his newspapers. 'Don't let me catch you going near the Reservoir!'" (89) – so too is the abandoned meat works of *Sydney Bridge* – "'Keep away from the works!' Dad shouted" (4). While Frame's children hear of the "news in the paper, discussed by my mother with the neighbors over the back fence. Children had been drowned in the Reservoir" (75), the Baird boys are lectured by Harry's father thus: "'Three men died there,' Dad told Cal. 'They knew of the dangers, but it didn't stop them having accidents. If it could happen to them, men knowing what might happen if they weren't careful, it could happen to you. So keep away. Or you know what I'll do to you.'" (4)

In both stories the danger of the rural environ is imparted to the children through the mythologizing force of rumour or anecdote, and then refigured by the children with epic enormity. Calliope Bay is routinely placed by Harry "on the edge of the world" while Frame's reservoir represents, in itself, "the end of the world". As we are told by Frame's narrator, "beyond it, you fell", resonating too with Harry's conception of the dangers associated with the isolation of Calliope Bay: he reminds us repeatedly, through recourse to the words of Mr Dalloway, that living on the edge of the world presents the danger

of falling off (12, 168, 274). A broad comparison between the stories thus begins to suggest a vocabulary of local Gothic signifiers and tropes: both reservoir and meat works are iconic but threatening, feared but venerated as they are incorporated into childhood adventure; because both are off-limits they are also, almost inevitably, sought out by the children.

The children themselves fit what could be considered a local Gothic type. Along with, for example, Ronald Hugh Morrieson's gang in *The Scarecrow* (1963), or Mansfield's solitary, traumatised girl in "The Woman at the Store", the children in "The Reservoir" and *Sydney Bridge* belong to a tribe which De Goldi sees spread throughout New Zealand fiction: children who, archetypally, represent the "watching child – a child doubly burdened by preternatural insight *and* fatal misunderstanding of the behaviour and events unfolding around him" (emphasis original, ix). For Schafer, *Sydney Bridge* in particular typifies something of New Zealand Gothic, for its "gothic theme is ... linked explicitly with a story of adolescence, with the idea of growing up in a fearful and unknown adult universe" (137).

Schafer's postulation, however, risks mishandling the Gothic theme in *Sydney Bridge*. Because the Gothic is conveyed through Harry's suspicious involvement in the deaths of Susan, Wiggins and (possibly, it is revealed in the novel's penultimate line) Mr Dalloway too, the story ends with Harry tragically unredeemed. Schafer's terms – "a story of adolescence, ... the idea of growing up" – imply a transition from childhood to adulthood that, if not smooth, is at least normative, but in *Sydney Bridge* the transition itself is profoundly destabilised. In the end, with so many events elided and Harry's self-reflexive understanding (which he shows signs of developing) radically shut down, Harry cannot be considered anything like a properly adjusted member of society. Holding on to the fragments of a past which both explain and undermine his adult grasp on the world, Harry's is, if anything, an example of a tragically derailed adolescence, and thus his story one about *failing* to grow up in a fearful and unknown adult universe.

It is there that, for all their shared Gothic effects, “The Reservoir” and *Sydney Bridge* diverge. While both reservoir and meat works are invested with a psychic presence to stand as symbols of children’s fear and dread, and though both mark a landscape of mortal risk in real terms as well, Frame’s narrator keeps her tendency to the folkloric and the fantastical in check with the subtle, implied tone of an adult looking back; there is a knowing humour at play whereby the narrator is able to both reimagine the wide-eyed fears of childhood, identifying with an earlier self, even as she reassures us such fears were ultimately unfounded. The story ends with the reservoir shorn of all its Gothic power: having been met head on, the mythical danger associated with it has been negotiated and the reservoir itself safely reduced to the ordinary:

We arrived home, panting and scratched. How strange! The sun was still in the same place in the sky!

The question troubled us, “Should we tell?”

The answer was decided for us. Our mother greeted us as we went in the door with, “You haven’t been long away, kiddies. Where have you been? I hope you didn’t go anywhere near the Reservoir.”

Our father looked up from reading his newspapers.

“Don’t let me catch you going near the Reservoir!”

We said nothing. How out-of-date they were! They were actually afraid! (88-89)

So although, like Harry, she focalises the world around her through a lens that distorts reality – merging the factual with the make-believe and with similarly Gothic overtones – the whimsical turns within her narrative, while conjoined with her experience of the real world, is knowingly held as a distinct element within it as well. As in *Sydney Bridge*, Gothic fantasies merge with actual dangers. The difference is that when the narrator of “The Reservoir” elevates fanciful threats such as the fleeing mother or the suicidal father to the same level of actual ones such as sunstroke or the reservoir itself, we are conscious not only of the intrusion of fantasy, but also that the narrator is as aware as we are of the child protagonist’s lurch towards the outlandish. Typically, the girl’s wilder flights of fancy are brought firmly back down to

earth because the worldly, older narrator presents them to us with gently mocking hyperbole: "What should we do if the Reservoir ran dry? Would we die of thirst like Burke and Wills in the desert?" (74); "The sea was drying up, soon you could paddle or walk to Australia" (77).

Other fears are real enough, but even as they spiral out of control in the overactive imaginations of the children, the narratorial presence is ultimately reassuring, keeping the fantastical slyly in check. When talk of minor ailments transmogrifies into a full-blown fear of polio and its consequences – which, with connotations of disfigurement, hold a kind of Gothic menace – the children's view of medical treatment becomes suggestive of the torture chamber or the dungeon:

"a whitlow, an ingrown toenail the roots of my hair warts spinal meningitis infantile paralysis ..."

"Infantile paralysis, Infantile paralysis you have to be wheeled in a chair and wear irons on your legs and your knees knock together...."

"Once you're in an iron lung you can't get out, they lock it, like a cage...." (Ellipses original, 86)

Even here, with the narrative advancing purely through the direct speech of children, the presence of a discerning narrator is suggested; prone to drama and exaggeration, the children's ascending scale of fear follows a plausible free-flowing logic, but we recognise too that we are *meant* to see how easily and naively they climb the ladder of (here Gothic) inference. Because the Gothic imaginings of the child protagonist are so knowingly handled by the adult narrator a sense of distance is opened between the narrator's former and present selves. Gothic effects are deliberately deployed to demonstrate the extent of the ironical purchase of the narrator.

Harry's tone of voice and his simplified approach to storytelling is of an entirely different order to that of Frame's narrator, whose wry overtones and observations evoke a character with a firm grasp on the world of the child she was and how she viewed the adult world around her. By contrast Harry's voice, as we have seen, often shows a boy narrating events with the same perspective between narrating and narrated selves. And yet although he is not

given to Gothic description in the same way as Frame's narrator, his narration works on the same structural principle. While Frame's narrator uses the Gothic to measure the distance between narrating and narrated selves, Harry is bound by the perspective of his childhood, narrating his story by channelling the point of view of the child he was. Hence, while Harry is prone to exaggerations and limitations, he offers views genuinely held in the moment of his narration. In Harry's naively narrating eyes, the Gothic is a clear and present danger.

But there is an added layer of complexity here. First, we can note that for Frame's narrator the Gothic effect inheres in her imagining, put into perspective by an implied adult narrator, while for Harry, narrating without the sense of an advanced narrating consciousness, the Gothic inheres in reality. It seems to follow that while some of the same Gothic motifs recur across both texts, they occupy the respective narrations in entirely different ways. We can recognise, for instance, that the threat of an absconding mother and suicidal father is a naïve flight of fancy for Frame's narrator, but a very real threat for Harry. But this is not quite the same as saying that, viewed from Harry's perspective, everything is a symbol of danger or dread, the entire landscape interpreted by the naively limited Harry as a terrain of Gothic threat. Saying so might be true to an extent – his tone and perspective does point to a Gothic imagination at work, as for instance, when he opens his account "on the edge of the world" (1). There, Harry's perspective immediately suggests a potentially Gothic space, the evocation of isolation closely associated with the suggestion of abnormality – perhaps even horror – implied in the "terrible events". But this is where the fundamental difference between *Sydney Bridge* and "The Reservoir" comes into view. Whereas Gothic threat is dissolved by the mature reflection of Frame's narrator, for Harry, Gothic threat plays out in reality since, as we understand from the novel's opening, terrible events really did happen and thus we will read on – with Gothic suspense – to find out what they were.

Having introduced the setting of those terrible events in the novel's opening passage, Harry then goes to another 'edge'; to the cliff-top where, on a warm summer afternoon, he pushes Dibs over the precipice. The episode

clearly foreshadows the later deaths of Susan and Wiggins who fall or are pushed from the top floor high inside the meat works, while Harry chillingly concludes the novel with the suggestion that, much later, he also pushed Mr Dalloway from the fifteenth floor of a building in the city (278). Throughout the novel physical thresholds are figured as places of mortal danger, but that danger is then thoroughly realised in mysterious and sensational deaths. In “The Reservoir”, however, any Gothic threat is negated with the coolly appraising eye of the narrator who assures us that all was well in the end. Hence, the Gothic of *Sydney Bridge* is partly implied by the particular view of a naïve narrator prone to Gothic imagining but also carried by the actual events comprising the story.

Thus, in *Sydney Bridge*, the Gothic perspective of the narrator seems to merge with the Gothic turn of events. Harry’s Gothic imagining is intense – consider, for example, when he narrates as if from within the space of nightmare, trapped in the works with Wiggins and a rampant Sydney Bridge Upside Down:

I can’t get there I can go no higher no matter how loud the hooves are thundering up the stairs now thunder all around me and I can only wait for the horse to reach me to crash upon me and I watch. I watch Sydney Bridge Upside Down leap flying hooves and foam from the stairs and land on the floor below me. I watch Mr Wiggins jump clear. I watch Mr Wiggins run with a knife to Sydney Bridge Upside Down and stab and slash until blood spouts everywhere. (104)

A Gothic flight of fancy perhaps, but then again the living and breathing details from which such nightmares spring are in themselves already loaded as potentially Gothic signifiers. Wiggins is not only a butcher but, as Harry remembers, used to be a meat worker “in the old days, one of the powerful fellows who killed animals with sledgehammers” (15). It is appropriate that Wiggins dies in the works, since it is “the place where he had once killed many animals” (198), while his dramatic entry into the story is also shot through with already Gothic symbolism: drawn by the arrival of Caroline, he makes a surprise visit to the Baird house after dark, on the night of a violent storm.



The more one looks to the concrete aspects of fact, character and event, the more the Gothic can be seen to inhere in the details – Harry’s perspective imparts a distinctly Gothic value, but the raw material of his narration is predisposed to Gothic treatment. The cliff-top, for instance, is a place of grave danger, but it comes Gothically replete with a dead tree far too precarious to climb. The meat works is already a ruin and the wharf is sliding into dangerous disrepair. Everywhere, it seems, the physical environs show signs of terminal decay, hence their fitness to Gothic purpose. Harry is taken with the “mysterious house without chimneys, and paths that went off into the bush and took you to rather amazing places, like ... a burial ground, or a redoubt, or a broken-down windmill” (38). Sam Phelps lives in a rickety, rusty shack, “sheltered by the cliff and the trees, and this was just as well”, observes Harry, for “a good wind would blow it away” (187). The only living animal who appears during the entire book is the novel’s titular horse – Kingsley the duck is dead, and Joey, Susan’s budgie, is revealed to be a lie, no more than a figment of childhood imagination. Sydney Bridge Upside Down is himself on death’s door, Harry describing “a slow-moving bag of bones” (1). Harry’s portrayal merely heightens the already Gothic air – the horse is sway-backed, hence deformed, following years of service hauling carcasses from the works to the wharf, while the cargo we see him carry includes the dead bodies of Susan and Wiggins.

So although the Gothic hue pervades through the tone and perspective of Harry’s narration, the constituent events and characters of the novel’s plot – the plot, effectively, comprising all Harry’s prior narration – are already set up to signify the Gothic. Pointedly, it is not only Harry’s perspective which delivers a Gothic charge; Mrs Kelly, for instance, recounting the misadventures of a young woman she once knew, remarks that when she remembers Tilly, she is “reminded of old tales about pure maidens pursued by black-hearted rascals. Usually a castle, bats flapping in corridors, weird happenings at midnight. No telling if anybody will arrive to help the heroine escape” (92). Here, Mrs Kelly

invokes the Gothic with recourse to bald clichés of the genre far beyond the register of realism.

Having said that, critical opinion of what constitutes the Gothic in a literary sense often argues that the Gothic rests not merely on the details of the ruined castle or the virgin trapped terrifyingly inside, but the disquieting effects these produce. As Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall point out,

the assumption of Gothic Criticism [is] that the 'Gothic' is to be defined not according to observable features of theme and setting but according to the realms of psychological depth from which it is supposed to originate (dream, fantasy) or the psychological responses it is believed to provoke (fear, terror, horror). (216)

As far as those psychological responses appear in *Sydney Bridge*, it is not only Harry who is traumatised. In one of the most memorable passages of the entire novel, Mrs Kelly's Gothic intonation powerfully recalls the terms of Lawn's "shifting warp of the familiar" ("Warping" 15), investing the isolation of rural New Zealand with Gothic foreboding, itself registered in the disturbing psychological effects on characters:

'When people first came to Calliope Bay,' she said, 'what troubled them most was loneliness. I don't mean the people in the very old days, the first one or two who farmed in the district before there was any sort of settlement. I mean those who came to build the works, then those who came because there were jobs for them at the works, then those who moved in when others moved out, then of course those who came to help pull down the works. All these people were very lonely for a time. They seemed so far, far away from everything. No part of the country, of the world even, seems so faraway as this. And when people are faraway and lonely they often behave curiously, this is well-known. The teacher, many years ago, who tied a child to a tree in the school grounds would not have done so in any other place. Or, nowadays, the way Mrs Prosser hides because she lives in such a faraway place. She is lonely, so she holds back. Even the rest of us, popping into one another's homes and chatting, can see and hear only so much. I know I hold back when I go visiting, I know the others do too. Now, I asked your mother if she was looking forward to her holiday in the city. She said she was. "Are you sure, Janet?" I asked. Then she said she

didn't like leaving you boys, she said that she should have taken you with her, she would not be able to truly enjoy her holiday for thinking of you. On and on in this fashion. Was it the truth? Or, once she had made the two dozen bottles of ginger beer, did she give another thought to those who would drink it when she was gone? This is not for me to say. I can only suggest that escaping from loneliness is not always a matter of going from one place to another. How many bottles are left, Harry? (10-11)

Sam Phelps's curious history holds similar connotations. Reports Harry:

There was a bit of a mystery about old Sam Phelps ... people said he had once lived in a good house with his pretty daughter. The pretty daughter, they said, had run away, then Sam Phelps had moved from the good house, then the house had been pulled down. After that, they said, he had gone to the pack. Nobody seemed to know where his daughter had gone to, and if *he* knew, they said, he certainly wasn't talking. (Emphasis original, 18)

With suggestions of madness arising from loneliness and isolation, the Gothic is forcefully at play in these passages, but they also count in Harry's narration as plot details which are again, therefore, 'already Gothic' — it is not Harry's overactive imagination which lends the Gothic effect but the reported words or accounts of others.

At the same time, Harry's own narration does show that on occasion the Gothic effect of psychological disquiet does come to rest on his perspective — limited, as we have seen, in his capacity as a naïve narrator. One day, from the top of the works, he spots Wiggins and Mrs Kelly apparently trapped inside the butcher's van, itself stuck in the middle of the storm-swollen river. Harry goes to help, but, by the time he arrives, finds himself to have been somehow eerily thwarted: "Mr Wiggins' van had gone. So had Mr Wiggins and Mrs Kelly. It was as if I had only imagined seeing them" (17). When Wiggins makes his dramatic entry to the Bairds' house to make himself known to Caroline, Harry recounts what he observed with the same kind of eerie ambiguity, as if reality dissolves before his eyes. Wiggins invites the girl to the races but Caroline knocks him back. Undeterred, the butcher asks her what she doesn't like about races:

'I can't remember,' she said. 'I do remember that I didn't enjoy being there.'

'Is that a fact?' said Mr Wiggins. 'Is that a fact?'

'Drop dead,' said Caroline.

At least that was I imagined she said when I saw her mouth open twice while Mr Wiggins gazed at her. She did not speak, she just shaped the words. I must have been mistaken about the words she chose, of course. Because she was smiling and still looking nice. (45)

### *Gothic challenges to social realism*

What then is the reader supposed to make of troubled Harry Baird's account, given his highly unreliable narration, both contingent upon and coupled with his Gothic backstory which is, itself, immediately undermined by the novel's baffling conclusion, where Gothic touches seem to re-inscribe Harry's unreliability even more fundamentally? Certainly the dramatic and unsettling shift in tone, setting, and style which closes the novel shows Harry to be a narrator pushed to (and beyond) the limits of his own understanding. The most telling effect of the novel's concluding chapters is to expose Harry's childhood as a story told within the novel, thus supplying the wider frame of reference which theories of unreliable narration suggest are central to the successful negotiation of any unreliable account. But the frame narrative also introduces metafictional dimensions, encouraging us to read on the synthetic level. This makes sense, since the novel's backstory shows Harry to be a storyteller prone to organising the narrative of his childhood according to motifs and structures that trade on an awareness of particular storytelling conventions. Most plainly those conventions pertain to the Gothic, marking it as a Gothic novel.

And yet for much of its history *Sydney Bridge* has not been read as a kind of local Gothic metafiction but as social realism. Perhaps this makes sense too, given Ballantyne's own credentials as a social realist writer. His debut novel, *The Cunninghams* (1948), is often regarded as an epitome of the mode (L. Jones 161), while *Sydney Bridge*, for all its Gothic inflections, does trade on much that seems consistent with the concerns of local social realism. For Evans, the

derelict meat works, for example, evinces the harsh economic realities of post-depression New Zealand, providing a pointed backdrop to the break-up of the Baird family ("David Ballantyne").<sup>31</sup>

But to close the argument of this thesis, I propose that part of the reason for the novel's long time in the critical wilderness has to do with a lack, generally, in recognising that local fiction with social realist dimensions can also employ or embody other applicable modes. As Timothy Jones demonstrates, the Gothic in New Zealand is an underdeveloped field, and yet approaching even the country's most canonically regarded fiction with a 'New Zealand Gothic' in mind can reveal hitherto untapped dimensions. I argue that with the novel's Gothic tendencies conjoined to social realist ones but configured via a radically unreliable narrator, *Sydney Bridge* is a book that pitches the Gothic to point to the limits of local social realism and thereby open new interpretive avenues in New Zealand literary criticism.

Harry's nameless companion speculates that Harry's surfeit of tall stories owes to his having "read too many fairy-tales" (271), while outside the frame of the novel the fairy-tale turn of Harry's voice has been noted too. De Goldi (x-xi), Mercer (399), and Stead ("Whimsical" 124) all cite the folkloric cadence of the novel's opening sentence: "There was an old man who lived on the edge of the world, and he had a horse called Sydney Bridge Upside Down" (1). For Stead, "the voice of the story-teller" with its "suggestion of fairy tale" is crucial to readings of the novel attentive to how it "transcend[s] the limits of 'social realism'" ("Whimsical" 124). Stead is right to imply that critics determined to read *Sydney Bridge* as a social realist text in the most narrowly prescribed terms are likely to forgo the avenues of interpretation opened by the fairy-tale voice of the narrator. On the other hand, though Stead implies where

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<sup>31</sup> Evans's article, "David Ballantyne and the Art of Writing in New Zealand", appeared in *Islands* in 1981. Evans discusses the trajectory of Ballantyne's career to that point—which, as it turns out, was to yield no further novels—in adventurous but still effectively social realist terms. For Evans, Ballantyne charts the "progressive loss of [New Zealand's or New Zealanders'] innocence that began with our exploitation of the land in the nineteenth century. [And hence] the essence of our national tradition is not our innocence in a corrupt world but our contribution to that corruption" (36). Thus, the symbolic value of the meat works, for example, is not read by Evans for its Gothic overtones but as an emblem of economic decline.

the limits of social realism are to be found in stylistic terms, nowhere does he consider to what new ends the novel's fairy-tale voice might be put. His discussion does little to dislodge the standards of social realism: despite its fairy-tale hue, ultimately the "impeccable" opening of *Sydney Bridge* is grounded in "prose economically tailored to the limits of the statement made"; prose, that is, which an approving Stead sees as the first language of social realism itself ("Whimsical" 124). As Lawrence Jones observes, the mode of critical realism which Ballantyne had earlier developed with *The Cunninghams* drew heavily on Americans Ernest Hemingway and James T. Farrell — Hemingway widely noted for his "simplicity and understatement", and Farrell after whom "[Ballantyne] worked out ... a method in which the narrator was totally effaced" (171-72). Encouraging the novel's critics beyond the bounds of social realism is one thing, but doing away with its terms altogether is another.

Ironically it was the local reliance on ill-fitting critical approaches that Stead meant to unpick in his discussion of Ballantyne. Writing in 1979, Stead saw the critical marginalisation of Ballantyne in terms symptomatic of the shortcomings of local criticism of the time, both high- and middlebrow, in dealing with local literature that dared to stray too far from the familiar, beaten path:

One feels there is no firm critical ground on which to take a stand, that reviewers are subject to every wind that blows, and that even the occupants of our university English Departments, confronted with something local and new, are, with a few obvious and honourable exceptions, mostly babes in the sacred wood. ("Whimsical" 125)

If Stead believes that a truly sophisticated local criticism is required to justly deal with the most sophisticated local products on their own terms, he suggests a general allegiance to the position often emblematised by Allen Curnow's rallying cry in his 1960 introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. But although Stead's premium on the "local and new" parrots Curnow's famous call for New Zealand writers to concern themselves with the "local and special" (17), Stead also offers a grim recalibration of its prospects in a new age. What was, for Curnow, an "adventure, or series of adventures, in search of

reality", had, for Stead, less than two decades later, lost its way in a "climate of uncertainty [where] portentousness is easily mistaken for the real thing; while a subtle voice—as Ballantyne's at its best undoubtedly is—goes unheard or undervalued" (125).

Teasing out the novel's realist elements from the non-realist while holding them meaningfully together has been a tricky act to manage, and not only for Stead. Mercer, for instance, is content to describe the novel's "dizzying array of non-realist modes mixed with aspects of social realism" (394), but unable to uncover a finer, less giddy sense of purpose beyond how the fusing of modes seems to constitute a formal break with Sargesonian realism. While Sargeson himself—ironically enough—praised the novel's Gothic leanings in a letter to Ballantyne, applauding the use of the "meat works ruin as a kind of Mrs Radcliffe's castle" (Reid 165), Dennis McEldowney retreated not only from Ballantyne's suggestively sinister subject matter but also how it was related through its narrator's curious merging of usually distinct literary postures:

... nothing is quite what it seems; there is an undertow of dread. Would such an affectionate outgoing boy...? Even if...? Or is one not to take all his reminiscences at face value; is the line between realism and romance not to be drawn precisely where he seems to draw it? And if so...? Such questions will have to be discussed by a critic not primarily concerned with readers who do not know the book. (Ellipses original, Reid 166)

Even Sargeson, though left "with an immense ... feeling of admiration for the book", admitted to Ballantyne that he was "maybe a little puzzled", cautiously guarding his optimism that *Sydney Bridge* was "not quite like anything previously experienced" by casting a wary, noncommittal eye on the wider critical climate: "How well it comes off ... is for the future to say" (Reid 165).

Decades on, Sargeson's words ring with a certain irony. Even after its first republication in 1981—around which time Patrick Evans lauded it as "*the great, and unread, New Zealand novel*" (emphasis original, De Goldi x)—the book remained largely overlooked by both critical and popular readerships. Glimmers of canonical regard however began to appear thereafter; Evans, in his *Penguin History of New Zealand Fiction* (1990) placed it alongside Sargeson's *Joy*

of *the Worm* (1969) as the triumph of the provincial period (200), and Lawrence Jones later indicated the novel's canonical importance in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991, 1998).<sup>32</sup> Following the novel's initial republication by Text in 2010, the publisher included it in their 'Text Classics' series in 2012, suggesting that perhaps the novel had attained an iconic status. And yet the 2012 reissue retained De Goldi's introduction to the 2010 edition, itself forcefully underlining Evans's point that the novel has *not* had the kinds of acclaim which a select few implore it deserves. Writes De Goldi: "In a sort of faithful, and hopeful, ongoing test of Evans' long-ago claim, I check it out quite regularly, ask people – book groups, librarians, teachers, other writers – if they've ever read it, if they've even heard of it: nope." Concluding her speculation on the curiosities contained within the world of the novel itself, De Goldi drily reflects that "Perhaps the real mystery is why *Sydney Bridge Upside Down* is still – more than forty years since its [original] publication – not read" (xii). Thus, *Sydney Bridge Upside Down*'s place in the local canon feels singular and perplexing: it is a masterpiece that not many have heard of and fewer still have read, far less written about. While Evans's and Jones's broad surveys might bestow canonical value they cannot offer the kinds of intensive critique which the individual works on whom their revisions confer significance presumably demand. Curious, then, that where *Sydney Bridge* is concerned few have stepped into the critical breach.

Instead, the novel is routinely subject to occasional sidelong praise that circles its importance and yet leaves it teasingly untouched. Calder, for instance, prefacing his 2011 book, *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand*, calls *Sydney Bridge* "One of our best gothic novels", but makes no further mention of it or its author in his study (viii). Similarly, Lawn, reviewing Bryan Reid's *After the Fireworks: A Life of David Ballantyne* (2004) in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, recognises that *Sydney Bridge* "exploits the conventions of provincial literature in a self-conscious way" ("Bags" 99), but has not written on the point more widely. Nonetheless, Lawn questions Reid's "relatively

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<sup>32</sup> Unless indicated, all references to Jones's entry in the *Oxford* are to the 1998 edition.



sketchy” account of the novel’s inception in terms that suggest not only familiarity with the book and its author, but his wider body of work as well:

Why is it that Ballantyne turned to such dark subject matter at mid life? Might gothic inklings be perceived in Ballantyne’s earlier writing, such as his horror story ‘In Memoriam’ or the imbecile girl, decapitated kitten, and extra-marital sexual transgression of *The Cunninghams*? And what texts or styles (including film genres) did Ballantyne have in mind when he termed the novel ‘gothic comedy’? (95)

If the novel’s reputation has been secured – if only to a degree, and mainly among an academic readership – then to De Goldi’s question – ‘Why is the book still not read?’ – we can surely add another: ‘Why is the book still not written about?’

Although critical inquiry into the novel has been scant, its slim dossier shows a network of thematically connected responses. As De Goldi herself declares:

There are many ways to describe *Sydney Bridge* ... a coming-of-age story, a gothic anti-romance, a ruined-pastoral thriller, a family tragedy. It has been variously assessed as proletarian fiction, young adult fiction, post-provincial fiction. It is all those things, of course, *and* the pre-eminent example of slaughter-house fiction... . (Emphasis original, x)

Calder and Lawn deem it a Gothic novel, while for Evans and Jones it represents an apotheosis of the provincial period of New Zealand literature (Evans 200, L. Jones 177-78). While such claims share a tendency to justify the novel for how it figures in respect to certain literary traditions, if multiple readings really are equally applicable – for instance, the Gothic, the provincial, the post-provincial – then another part of my interest here is to consider not simply how *Sydney Bridge* might participate in more than one tradition at a time but to query the efficacy and the overriding purpose such categorisations are supposed to serve.

With the novel appearing in the late 1960s, around which time a general shift from provincial to post-provincial periods becomes discernible for both Evans and Jones, *Sydney Bridge* can be classed according to what those two

critics understand to be distinct but directly related traditions. Evans holds that the novel “reworks the [provincial] mode in a way that comes close to perfecting it” (*Penguin* 200), while Jones reads the book’s “impressionist” devices – its “dreams, recurring images, projected wishes [and] repressed knowledge” – as a superlative demonstration of “the technical advances of the New Zealand novel since the early 1930s” (178). Concluding “The Provincial Period, 1935-1964” in the *Oxford History*, he tables *Sydney Bridge* (inconveniently published in 1968) as “the most striking example” of a culminating move whereby the provincial period’s separate tendencies for critical realism on the one hand and impressionism on the other were brought together in the same text (177-78). Jones thus finds the sense of an ending in *Sydney Bridge* in similar terms to Evans, who argues that while the novel proved “it was possible to remain pretty much within the provincial mode and do well by it”, so too *Sydney Bridge* “looks back over fifty years of New Zealand writing and consummates its themes, drawing to an elegiac close a long initial period of development in a work that ... is one of its crowning achievements” (200).

Certainly, the story of Harry’s childhood trades on local tropes that are, by now, well-established and instantly recognisable. “Not a single thing in the novel is original,” Evans writes, “from its small-town setting with its castle-like meatworks to its peg-legged father who seems to have stumped his way out of something by Morrieson (one-legged father in the second novel) or Cross (one-armed father in the first)” (*Penguin* 200). For Evans, then, the distinguishing features of Harry’s childhood summarise the essential qualities of the New Zealand provincial novel itself (*Penguin* 200). And yet Harry’s wayward existence in the city as an adult surely signals the dramatic societal shift which Jones nominates as a crucial marker of the post-provincial. As Jones observes, after 1965 a new kind of New Zealand novel begins to emerge, one increasingly attuned to and reflective of the country’s “rapidly changing [economic and social] environment” (178). Although Harry himself is uninterested in “the glittering main street”, replete with “brilliant windows full of record sleeves” and “girls in short skirts and white boots” (272), such vivid details read as if

deliberate illustrations of Jones's post-provincial New Zealand, from its "move to a consumer society [and] increasing urbanization and suburbanization, [to] the sexual revolution ... [and] emergence of a more distinctive youth subculture" (178-79). Harry's profoundly destabilised narrative perspective, then, shows Ballantyne demonstrating with peculiar purpose the emergence of Jones's post-provincial writer, who, forced to "deal with several waves of unprecedented social change" (178), typically found that "the conventions and explanatory patterns developed by the previous generation of novelists would not work" (179). Thus, Harry's fractured view of the urbanized world around him not only evokes the social shockwaves of a society in transition through the disturbed psychology of an alienated narrator, but shows Ballantyne shifting gears to register those shockwaves stylistically, galvanising the tone of his writing to reach a new, visceral pitch. The shift from a provincial to a post-provincial outlook in local fiction of the time is thus pointedly but subtly underlined by the novel's two distinct sections – the first offers a Gothically-inflected account of the last summer of childhood, the second a harshly realised post-provincial, urban reality. Hence, Harry's Gothic backstory is contained within an outer social realist frame. With Harry's unreliability in mind, this pitches the Gothic and the social realist in oppositional terms, and suggests the basis of the book's sly critique of distinct literary forms' fitness to local purpose.

And yet the predominant criticism maintains that holding the book's diverse registers together, although welding the impressionism of Frame to the vernacular of Sargeson, more or less advances the same concerns as those typically found within local social realist fiction. What criticism there is of the book tends to rely on continuations with, rather than breaks from, local traditions.<sup>33</sup> So while both Evans and Jones read *Sydney Bridge* as one of the

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<sup>33</sup> Mercer does attempt to justify *Sydney Bridge* as a purposive break with Sargesonian realism; however, since she sees this break "as part of [Ballantyne's] generation's attempt to develop New Zealand literature", her reading also looks to preserve the novel's place in respect of local literary traditions, essentially following De Goldi's lead that the novel can be read as proletarian fiction, young adult fiction, and post-provincial fiction, for it is "all those things" (399). Mercer finds that the novel "mixes" its "social critique and comedic gothic with something approaching folkloric fantasy" – so although she acknowledges the complex register of the novel, she also re-inscribes its basically social realist orientation (399). Finding that "The novel's setting [with its derelict meat works] thus undercuts

closing texts of the provincial period, their terms also allow it to be read as one of the opening chapters of post-provincial New Zealand literature as well. Though *Sydney Bridge* marks the completion of a stage arbitrarily deemed by Jones – at least according to the sub-headings of his entry in the *Oxford History* – to have ended four years earlier, the divisions Jones draws between the provincial and post-provincial periods are better understood to operate on a sliding scale, for widening the zone of their shared territory underlines the reflexivity written into his definition. As he says: “The name ‘Post-provincial’ implies a reaction against the ‘Provincial’ period, but the novelists who have emerged since the mid-1960s have not so much repudiated the work of their predecessors as they have absorbed and widened it” (178). Similarly, although Evans distinguishes between the provincial and post-provincial, he suggests that, as respective terms, they are most meaningful (perhaps only meaningful) when understood to denote co-functioning parts of the same system. “The whole question”, he writes, “of categorising fiction in terms of its provincialism and otherwise is of course a subjective one and important only in allowing discussions and comparisons. ... As far as [‘post-provincial’] distinguishes Seventies writing as being different to what came before, the distinction seems useful to me” (*Penguin* 204). In particular, for Evans, “Ballantyne’s *Sydney Bridge* seems clearly to mark a turning point *in the genre*” (emphasis added, *Penguin* 204). If Evans’s conjecture regards the provincial and post-provincial as distinct but conjoined categories, then stationed at the turning point of a literature concerned with both provincialism and its after-effects, *Sydney Bridge* has claims to make that are relevant to both sides of the provincial equation. But if Jones is right to hold that the shift from provincial to post-provincial writing in New Zealand was essentially marked by “a conscious effort to deal with a society that was evolving away from the puritan monoculture that had been the target of Provincial writers, and to include those who had been

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representations of New Zealand as a pastoral paradise” places the novel firmly in the social realist tradition (399). Mercer further justifies the novel’s social realist pretensions by recognising that Calliope Bay might be read as a fictionalised version of Hick’s Bay, the East Coast settlement that similarly slid into post-Depression decline, thus tying the book even more strongly to the provincial mode.

excluded or marginalized by Provincial writing”, then either term, provincial or post-provincial, implies the same social realist concern to critique society.

Evans’s and Jones’s claims belong to a period of critical discourse which arrives years later than the novel itself. In the immediate climate of its critical reception, *Sydney Bridge* could be neither quantified as the apotheosis of the provincial period nor the opening of the post-provincial if provincialism was still to be contextualised by the frame of its own historical moment. Although Sargeson triumphantly declared it on publication “the one [he’d] been waiting for” (Reid 165), suggesting a kind of fulfilment of some movement or other, only critics writing later, such as Evans and Jones, could be expected to clearly tease out the shifts between what they saw as provincial and post-provincial characteristics and thereby quantify the achievement of *Sydney Bridge* accordingly. Evans and Jones thus figure prominently among those to whom Sargeson had implicitly deferred when he noted that the book’s success was “for the future to say” (Reid 165).

Nonetheless, Sargeson’s high but cautious regard points up the extent to which *Sydney Bridge* managed to both accumulate the technical achievements of the past and yet break with its conventions, and in a way that, I suggest, neither Evans nor Jones ever fully realise. Even as he registered the boldness of its apparent departures, Sargeson suggested they were nonetheless developed out of Ballantyne’s past social realism; in a letter to Ballantyne he writes, “it’s all still there, but different nonetheless, [and] perhaps the best thing you’ve done” (Reid 165). Sargeson suggests further that *Sydney Bridge* was of a different order to other local novels appearing at the time as well: “what you are up to does give you a let-out from neatly tying up *all* the loose ends ... I think why it took me some time to settle in was it didn’t in a hurry come clear to me exactly the sort of fiction you had written ... for me reading-time was a necessary ingredient to assist me in seeing” (emphasis original, Reid 165). Although never clarifying “exactly the sort of fiction” he thought Ballantyne *had* written, Sargeson at least understood a crucial aspect of the novel’s difference to lie in Ballantyne’s handling of his narrator’s perspective: “I noted the [Auckland] Star

made the point of the risk of monotony with it all handed over to the boy [Harry Baird] – but I found it a matter of reconciling myself to the angle, then I was willing to go along” (Reid 165).

Consciously standing back from offering any kind of “critical exegesis” in his letter to Ballantyne, Sargeson nonetheless directs us to the point at which exegesis might begin: to the narrative machinery. In the most challenging terms laid down by the novel itself, this means accounting for the complex perspective of its troubled narrator. This is the point which McEldowney prefers to sidestep, but if he warily regards the confusing lines drawn between realism and romance at the hands of Harry Baird – exactly the lines Sargeson is prepared to be led along – then, between them, McEldowney and Sargeson hint that the source of the novel’s central difficulty could also be the wellspring of its success. Later, Jones tantalisingly notes that “by the last two chapters (in his narrative present) [Harry] raises doubts about the reliability of the previous narrative” (178). But finding only that this “forces the reader to enter [Harry’s] thoughts and do some decoding” comes up short – though he might be right to count the novel for its technical advancement, nowhere does Jones ponder that perhaps Harry’s unreliability actually switches the core concern of the formerly social realist novelist to more fundamental questions of narrative structure, subtly undermining long-held assumptions that, at heart, local fiction *must* engage with local reality.

Though the blending of distinct conventions, styles and modes within *Sydney Bridge* has been noted by its few observers down the years, none thoroughly account for how or to what ends. Mercer wants to read the novel as a purposive break with Sargesonian realism and yet Stead reminds us not to disregard such realism altogether. Assuming Mercer and Stead are right to esteem the novel so highly, the novel’s non-realist aspects must be understood to serve a meaningful purpose in relation to its non-realist ones, yet neither Mercer nor Stead explain why, for instance, Harry speaks in a voice that channels by turns the different vernaculars of a boy from the country on the one hand and a deranged adult on the other; nor for that matter, why the

matter-of-fact is related, at times, in the register of the fairy-tale. Jones finds *Sydney Bridge* remarkable for how it manages to combine the provincial mode's dominant strands of critical realism and subjective impressionism in the one novel (178), which perhaps accounts for the aesthetic quality that Evans has in mind when he observes that although "not a single thing in the novel is original ... in Ballantyne's hands everything is new and intense, made over as if being explored for the very first time" (*Penguin* 200). Unsurprisingly most readings of *Sydney Bridge* take a broadly similar approach, quantifying the novel's effects for how well they bear out already established lines of enquiry recurrent through local literary criticism. Hence, if Sargeson detects something of Mrs Radcliffe's castle at work in Calliope Bay's abandoned meat works, then the novel seems to participate, as Lawn and Calder suggest, in a local Gothic. Equally, however, if aspects of Ian Cross's *The God Boy* (1957), with its critique of puritanical New Zealand, gauged through the violent outbursts of its child protagonist are also present in *Sydney Bridge*, as Mercer (398) and Jones (178) among others maintain, then the novel seems to have earned its place in the local social realist tradition as well.

Critically accounting for how the distinct modes work in the book requires that those modes are already clearly established. But thereafter part of the interpretive problem around *Sydney Bridge* comes to rest on the prior dominance of social realist criticism on the one hand, and the neglect, until recently, of attending to a local Gothic. For a genre that so often trades on evocations of "alienation" and "abandonment" (Lawn, "Domesticating" 46), one of the dominating features of the New Zealand Gothic has been, fittingly enough, its conspicuous absence from local critical discourse. Lawn contends that "the phenomenon of the Gothic as such in New Zealand arts and culture has not drawn sustained critical attention" (46). Timothy Jones agrees, finding as recently as 2010 that

the study of New Zealand's Gothic is still at an early stage. There is no monograph on the subject, although it is dealt with in several chapters in

more general considerations of New Zealand literature.<sup>34</sup> There is one collection of essays, recently published, that specifically addresses the New Zealand Gothic.<sup>35</sup> Beyond this there are only a handful of journal articles. Nor has there been anything like an anthology of New Zealand Gothic fictions that might describe a Gothic canon in a New Zealand context. (201-202)

Specifically Jones notes Mark Williams's handling of "Janet Frame's suburban Gothic as early as 1990", but also that it took another eight years for "the first substantial treatment of a national Gothic [to appear] in the American critic William J. Schafer's *Mapping the Godzone*" (202). Lawrence Jones's work over precisely the same timespan also registers the increasing presence of the Gothic on the critical radar: while his comprehensive survey of the New Zealand novel in the original, 1991 edition of *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* made no mention of the local Gothic strain, the updated version of seven years later gave three pages over to what he called "Kiwi Gothic" (219-22). If a stable critical definition of the New Zealand Gothic has yet to be established, then accounting for such an avowedly Gothic novel as *Sydney Bridge* is problematic. Nonetheless, Lawn and Timothy Jones agree that there is such a thing as New Zealand Gothic – at least, both use the term frequently enough to suggest so. Equally, however, the absence of an established local Gothic canon helps explain the novel's long consignment to the critical and popular margins.

For Lawrence Jones, Noel Virtue was "the originator of the mode with his *Redemption of Elsdon Bird* in 1987" (220). And yet Jones acknowledges the range of influences working on Virtue in ways that call the precision of this claim into question. The presence of writers associated with the Southern Gothic tradition – in particular, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and James Purdy – are detectable in Virtue's work, but so too are a clutch of local writers: Sargeson, Cross, and James Courage, "among others" (220). So despite the bringing to bear of the Americans, if, as Damien Wilkins observes, *The*

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<sup>34</sup> Here Jones footnotes Mark Williams's *Leaving the Highway* and William J. Schafer's *Mapping the Godzone*.

<sup>35</sup> Here Jones footnotes *Gothic NZ*, edited by Misha Kavka, Jennifer Lawn and Mary Paul.



*Redemption of Elsdon Bird* reads “like a lost piece of early Sargeson or a discarded draft of *The God Boy*” (L. Jones 220), then it seems simplistic to offer Virtue sole credit for kick-starting “Kiwi Gothic”.<sup>36</sup> Rather, the clear literary influences present in Virtue’s work suggest that Sargeson, Courage and Cross – for all that they might have served the ends of critical realism as well – were complicit too in the burgeoning of a local Gothic.

Even more influential than Sargeson or Cross on Virtue was Ronald Hugh Morrieson. Noting that Virtue dedicated novels to Morrieson, Jones makes this meaningful via close reading of the texts themselves:

*Then Upon the Evil Season*, with its Morriesonian deaths, *Always the Islands of Memory*, with its grotesque catalogue of family disasters, and *Sandspit Crossing* (1993) in which Magdalen Maidstone battles with a ‘perverted preacher, a buggering butcher from Babel, a gruesome grinning ghoul’ (three variations of Morrieson’s Scarecrow), all have strongly Gothic elements ... (220)

Framed in these terms, Jones thus presents a strong case for Morrieson, not Virtue, to be considered the originator of the local Gothic mode. The new threads in New Zealand literature which Jones picks up in the 1998 edition of the *Oxford History* amount to a break with the 1991 version of what is effectively the same long essay but without the explicit identification of the Gothic strain, and yet Jones resists following through on the implications of the revisionism his later handling trades on. Though his reading of Virtue indicates the presence of a Gothic thread in New Zealand’s critical realism dating back to Courage and Sargeson, and suggests too the fuller flowering of the Gothic in Morrieson’s work, Jones nonetheless prefers to register the Gothic as a distinct mode in and of itself, and as a palpable force, in effect “since the late 1980s” (220). The Gothic moves in Morrieson might come into full view with the arrival of the bolder, more lurid, Gothic styling of Virtue, but the significance of Morrieson’s work is not radically rethought as a consequence. Rather, in 1998, as in 1991, Jones frames Morrieson’s contribution in terms that cleave strongly

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<sup>36</sup> It might also be noted that *Elsdon Bird* was published first in the UK, by Peter Owen in 1987, and the following year in New Zealand by Century Hutchinson.

to those of critical realism – even implying that his achievement does not reach *beyond* the bounds of those terms: “Morrieson’s creative imagination,” Jones maintains, “seemed to spark only when he had the puritan and the anti-puritan poles of small-town society for the current to flow between” (1991, 154; 1998, 163).

In accounting for factors such as tradition and influence, acknowledging the threads of distinct literary modes where they appear within the same text is crucial – as, for instance, when Jones recognises both realist and impressionist tendencies within *Sydney Bridge* (178). But important too – and perhaps especially when engaging with notions of canonicity – is to recognise *when* new presences first become distinct to us as readers; for these not only change our view of the texts themselves, but also our view of what went before.<sup>37</sup> Introducing his *Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*, Evans expresses just this concern: “Any kind of literary history, particularly if it has a whiff of chronological sequence, tends to set into that look of cause-and-effect that leads to ideas of historical inevitability” (9). But if Jones is right to suggest that the origins of Gothic New Zealand literature are detectable in Sargeson and Cross, and if Evans calls accurately the thematic proximity of Morrieson’s *Came A Hot Friday* (1964) and Cross’s *The God Boy* to Ballantyne’s *Sydney Bridge*, then Ballantyne too can be given a place, in hindsight, in the constellation of writers influencing what Jones would only later come to see as “Kiwi Gothic”. In that sense it becomes immaterial that neither Jones nor Evans mention *Sydney Bridge* directly in relation to a local Gothic strain; rather, if we allow that what comes later ought to shape our view of what has gone before, then their terms implicitly – if unwittingly – permit the inclusion of *Sydney Bridge* in a category which their own work feeds into, but whose borders they were not particularly

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<sup>37</sup> As T. S. Eliot understood it in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (emphasis original, 15). Applied to the question of updating national literatures, Eliot’s thinking effectively recommends an approach that is more layered and complex in its reach than Jones’s terms can be held to strictly demonstrate.

concerned with establishing for themselves. Part of what Jones and Evans begin to provide then, in the 1990s, is a critical scaffold which is not consciously given over to exploring the idea that the local Gothic has been inexcusably underappreciated – unrecognised, even – but is far from averse to those claims as well. In this sense, Jones's and Evans's surveys usefully represent how the critical thinking of the time sat poised against an interesting moment for Gothic Studies in New Zealand. While Jones shows an increasing openness to note the overtly Gothic turns of Morrieson, Evans describes *The Scarecrow* as a "comic novel about a sex-murderer that has echoes of the Dracula myth, the Western and a number of other popular art forms not usually found in New Zealand writing" (199). Even without exploring the Gothic field as such, Jones and Evans at least acknowledge what would later be seen as a peculiarly local Gothic lens, hence their terms subtly reflect an increasing tendency towards an open acknowledgement of the local Gothic.

Like Evans, Schafer compares *Sydney Bridge* to Morrieson, Ballantyne managing a novel "similar in tone and feeling to Morrieson's writing minus the manic comedy" (137). Similarly, for Stead, "*Sydney Bridge Upside Down* and *The Scarecrow* might have come from the same stable" ("Ronald Hugh Morrieson" 253), partly, no doubt, for how Ballantyne's opening passage reads like "Morrieson-style narrative, but under perfect control" ("Whimsical" 124). Both Evans and Stead imply the Gothic hue of *Sydney Bridge* by comparing what seem to be Gothic elements in common with Morrieson's fiction. But with the sense of a local Gothic yet to emerge in critical discourse, neither Evans nor Stead draw a link in explicitly Gothic terms. Even if Schafer under-reads somewhat how the Gothic operates in *Sydney Bridge*, comparing the novel to Morrieson via the Gothic frame at all counts as a notable intervention.

Both novels signal their Gothic intentions from the beginning, but whereas Morrieson's famous first line declares murder directly, and with equal parts horror and intrigue – "The same week our fowls were stolen, Daphne Moran had her throat cut" (1) – Ballantyne's holds, arguably, a more complex range of Gothic evocations and with more restraint:

There was an old man who lived on the edge of the world, and he had a horse called Sydney Bridge Upside Down. He was a scar-faced old man and his horse was a slow-moving bag of bones, and I start with this man and his horse because they were there for all the terrible happenings up the coast that summer, always somewhere around. (1)

Ballantyne intimates violence far more subtly than Morrieson's slash-and-bluster, instead trading on the suggestion accumulated in details that hover curiously between the specific and the elusive: the scar-faced old man living at the edge of the world where terrible events are set to unfold. For Stead, Ballantyne's "perfect control" is a matter of achieving a style of "prose economically tailored to the limits of the statement made" ("Whimsical" 124). This is a fair enough assessment of the mechanics of the writing, but Stead leaves unstated how it also ratchets up the sinister tension. Ballantyne holds the specifics – the "scar-faced old man" and the horse, "a slow-moving bag of bones" – at a tantalising remove from the reader, setting events vaguely "up the coast that summer", but with the old man "always somewhere around". By deliberately withholding the full significance of nonetheless purposive details Ballantyne imparts a faint yet forceful Gothic disquiet. Stead might be right to describe the prose "economically tailored to the limits of the statement made", but there is a space of psychological tension indicated beyond those limits as well, and it is there that *Sydney Bridge* hits peculiarly Gothic notes.

Thus it seems to me that *Sydney Bridge* neither breaks cleanly with the traditions to which it has justifiably been tied, nor simply advances them, but offers a more sophisticated and targeted comment on their respective strengths and limitations than has previously been allowed. If the novel seems to invite both Gothic and social realist approaches, my reading argues the co-dependence of these distinct modes in *Sydney Bridge*: Harry's disturbed recollection of his childhood is not only presented as a story told within a story, but as a Gothic yarn unreliably narrated from within a wider, social realist frame. And yet, counterintuitively, the frame itself offers no resolution on Harry's unreliability, but complicates it instead. At its core, then, the book is concerned with exploring both the possibilities and the limitations of the novel

form itself. On these grounds I argue its particular relevance to the local literary landscape, certainly as Ballantyne himself encountered it, but applicable too to its development in the decades since. While Lawrence Jones is right that *Sydney Bridge* demonstrates a conjoining of the usually disparate realist and impressionist modes of the New Zealand provincial period and that the book thus achieved a new standard in the local fiction of the time, this innovation does not represent the limit of the book's achievement. Rather, its formal organising principle – how Harry's Gothic narration operates as a backstory within the book's outwardly social realist setting – commends the book to debates about the nature of unreliable narration suggesting its significance in respect to theoretical contexts wider than those narrowly conceived by New Zealand provincialism of the 1960s. In this the book reads as if it were written ahead of its time in a couple of ways. First, the novel complicates even some of the most contemporary theoretical accounts of unreliable narration; and second, the Gothic turn of *Sydney Bridge* is deployed as a direct critique of the limits of social realism on the local front which has become clearer and more trenchant in time.

“... I know he won't believe me. He thinks, when I tell him other things, that I make them all up. I do this, he thinks, because I lived so long in a place where nothing happened, now I must pretend a lot of things happened” (271). So Harry reflects to himself – and us – on another turn about the nameless city with his friend, in search of the mother who left him, he tells us, years ago. On one level, the remark is a distancing device, casting the events of Harry's childhood into a long-ago past, widening the space between the book's Gothic kernel and its outer realist shell. But on another level, Harry's aside directly addresses Evans's complaint with local social realist fiction, that such meticulous realism could only produce fiction that bores as narrative (190). Indeed, Sargeson remarked of a draft of Ballantyne's first novel, *The Cunninghams*, that he had been “overpowered by the dullness of [the] characters' lives” (L. Jones 161). By contrast Harry's Gothic backstory is one in which, Harry admits, “a lot of things happened” (271) and whose narrative

register trades on manipulating, in De Goldi's words, "the reader's growing anxiety around exactly what is happening and who is responsible for the 'terrible things'" (xii). The Gothic of *Sydney Bridge* thus represents the pointed extent of Ballantyne's departure from the models of the time. That they were models he once helped to construct underlines – if somewhat ironically – Evans's justification of *Sydney Bridge* as an important marker between provincial and post-provincial periods; for if, as Evans says, the real value of that dividing line is to provide a tool for comparison, then what more persuasive justification for the line in the sand than the novel which Ballantyne offered as a "gothic comedy" and whose punchline is surely directed at the terms of the very realism he himself once practised?

## Conclusion

To draw this discussion to a close, I offer a few thoughts about how the ideas contained here might contribute to further critical enquiry. Plainly the field of scholarship concerned with figuring how we recognise, respond to, and understand unreliable narration is complex, and my study here only does brief justice to those complexities. Nonetheless, by tracing the major lines of debate, I hold that the category of insecure narration and the entity of the unsecured narrator help us to better apprehend the fuller dimensions of the concept of unreliability.

The view I have presented on radical unreliability is intended to progress understanding rather than to formulate a conception offered as a final word. It may be, for example, that even such bafflingly unreliable narrators as the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and Harry in *Sydney Bridge* can begin to be further differentiated, their examples held against one another to show variations of radical unreliability. For example, in the case of the governess, the question seems to be whether she is reliable or highly unreliable, whereas Harry presents us with mutually exclusive alternatives between different kinds of unreliability themselves. Allowing for this, and with a view to avoiding the hard and fast distinctions I have argued against in this thesis, I would encourage examples of radical unreliability to be approached with the expectation that each instance will present unique challenges.

Having attended closely to the peculiar variant of Harry's unreliable narration, and remarked where it both echoes the unreliability of the governess and sounds something anew, I expect that other kinds of insecure narration are waiting to be heard. One of the most important fictional texts to this thesis is *The Remains of the Day*. Certainly Ishiguro shows just how deft his handling of the unreliable narrator can be in what is, arguably, his most accomplished novel. And yet his first book, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), is perhaps even more tantalising for how it might be read in relation to the ideas I've explored here. Utterly beguiling in its resolution, Ishiguro himself later expressed concern that

the book's close, whereby the narrator's past is fused with that of another character, is "a little too baffling". Widely lauded nonetheless, Ishiguro remarked of hordes of confused readers that "People seem to spend too much energy working on it as if it was a crossword puzzle [which] wasn't [his] intention" (Wroe). Though Ishiguro might have had a clear interpretive resolution in mind, the possibility that the text itself might move in another direction is compelling, especially given the book's thematic concerns. Despite Ishiguro's misgiving, perhaps *A Pale View of Hills* suggests the purchase of radical unreliability as a metaphor for the private traumas associated with war and cultural memory. Just as I have read Harry's unreliability to signal a pointed complaint against the local social realist concern, radical unreliability needn't be narrowly conceived as an exercise in literary paradox for its own sake.

To dwell a moment more on *Sydney Bridge* in relation to the local context: if the interpretive challenges that the novel presents once helped consign it to the margins of the local scene, I would argue that its present resurgence now helps chart an intriguing new strain in New Zealand fiction. Although recognisably set in New Zealand, the book's Gothic turn also knowingly reframes 'New Zealand' as a literary trope accumulated over years of literary practice. After all, as Evans – who found it a near-perfect example of the provincial novel – also remarks, "Not a single thing in [it] is original" (*Penguin* 200). It thus deserves comparison with a handful of recent novels to shrewdly portray New Zealand as a cultural or artistic construction rather than a setting mimetically faithful to local reality. Dylan Horrocks's graphic novel *Hicksville* (1998) offers a metafictional rendition of an isolated coastal New Zealand town, populated with local stereotypes and home to a secret library of the world's rarest comic books, its own comic frames repeatedly referring to some of New



Zealand's most iconic fine art.<sup>38</sup> Or Nigel Cox's *The Cowboy Dog* (2006): a surrealist Western set on the North Island's iconic volcanic plateau.

This study conjoins three distinct points of interest by closely reading a little-known novel to explicate a complex facet of unreliable narration, and then demonstrate how new avenues of interpretation might be opened into other fields of interest as well. Insecure narrations, then, might encourage innumerable and unpredictable possibilities not only for our critical engagement with unreliability, but for the rich and surprising interpretations that promise to follow. And if, as readers, we are always compelled by the pleasure of reading on, unconscious of what lies in wait, just as much as we are driven by our need for interpretive certainty in the end, perhaps radical unreliability speaks as a metaphor for the immersion in reading itself, as if a theoretical construct always holding open the gap between unknowing and knowing, between desire and experience.

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<sup>38</sup> *Hicksville* is set, incidentally, in Hick's Bay, the tiny East Coast settlement where Ballantyne spent some of his early childhood (Reid 3-4), and upon which he based his fictional Calliope Bay (Stead, "Whimsical" 127).

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