Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature

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From a narratological point of view, one of the most controversial legacies the eighteenth-century novel has bestowed onto its inheritors is the technique of authorial narration. Described by Franz K. Stanzel as one of three typical narrative situations, authorial narration as defined in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory is ‘characterized by a highly audible and visible narrator’ who ‘sees the story from the ontological position of an outsider, that is, a position of absolute authority which allows her/him to know everything about events and characters, including their thoughts and unconscious motives’ (Jahn, 2005, p. 364). This association of authorial narration with an assumption of ‘absolute authority’ has, in conjunction with the modernist preference for ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’, made the mode seem suspect to many twenty- and twenty-first-century novelists and their audiences. David Lodge, to name a prominent example, sees ‘an increasing reluctance among literary novelists to assume the stance of godlike omniscience that is implied by any third-person representation of consciousness’ (Lodge, 2002, p. 86). Authorial narration, it might seem, is reactionary, both aesthetically and ideologically speaking: incompatible with contemporary scepticism towards authority and grand narratives.

It could be seen as a surprise, then, that authorial narration has been making a comeback since the last decades of the twentieth century. Paul Dawson has recently shown that in works by contemporary British and American authors like Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, Zadie Smith, Jonathan Franzen and Don DeLillo, there is a ‘prominent reappearance of the ostensibly outmoded omniscient narrator’ (Dawson, 2009, p. 143). He argues that while the “universal” moral authority of the classic omniscient narrator is indeed no longer available to contemporary writers, it has ‘been replaced by a range of non-essentialized and more specific relativized modes of narrative authority’ (Dawson, 2009, p. 149) which are realized in contemporary versions of the ‘classical’ model. Dawson ties this renewed interest in authorial narration on the part of novelists to concerns about the perceived decline of the novel’s cultural significance in the age of digital media.
A pressing question that Dawson’s excellent analysis leaves unanswered is how universal the ‘moral authority of the classic omniscient narrator’ really is (or was). As I will argue in this paper, closer examinations of the use of authorial narration in the eighteenth-century novel suggest that authorial narration in the eighteenth century is no less complex and contradictory than its twenty-first-century counterpart. Then, too, it served to reflect on authority as a problem for the novelist rather than straightforwardly assuming an authoritative stance. Seen in the context of the history of the novel, this makes perfect sense: mid-eighteenth-century authors like Henry Fielding, Sarah Fielding or Charlotte Lennox were intensely involved in debates about the purposes and functions of the novel as an emerging cultural phenomenon. Authorial narration as a technique (or maybe better, a spectrum of techniques) provided a rhetorical means of importing such debates into the pages of the novel.

I have elsewhere discussed Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* – a work often referred to as providing stable narratorial authority – as an example of highly complex and ambivalent rhetorical self-fashioning in which the author of the novel playfully asserts and disputes his own claims to authority (see Birke, 2015). The large number of intrusive authorial commentaries in *Tom Jones*, I argued, serves to reflect on and complicate notions of novelistic authority rather than to cement such claims. With their highly ironic and sophisticated commentary, Fielding’s novels are of course in some ways a special case. In this paper, I will consider authorial narration in the 1750s, the decade after the publication of *Tom Jones*, in which novelists, on the one hand, sought to build on the critical success of Fielding and Richardson, and on the other hand were writing back against views of the genre as superficial or salacious.

My two examples will be novels that represent juxtaposing tendencies: Eliza Haywood’s *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) employs commentary throughout, but in a less obtrusive way than Fielding. The anonymously published *The History of Charlotte Summers, the Fortunate Parish Girl* (1750), in contrast, continues and intensifies the playful commentary as a form in its own right. It exemplifies the novelist’s self-conscious stance towards his or her own work as a cultural artefact that scholars like Thomas Keymer and Christina Lupton have described as characteristic of the time (see Keymer, 2002, p. 17; Lupton, 2011, p. 290). I will show that in both its

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1 The seminal point of reference for all such studies is Wayne Booth’s 1952 article on ‘The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction Before *Tristram Shandy*’, in which he describes works featuring narrators (both homo- and heterodiegetic) who comment on the act of narration in
flamboyant and more restrained varieties, authorial narration was a key technique for reflecting on the problem of the novelist’s authority in a period in which the ‘rise of the novel’ (Watt, 1957) was gaining momentum.

Theoretical and Terminological Foundations

The different narratological conceptualizations of authorial narration have reflected a broad range of views on its defining characteristics. For Stanzel, a main concern was to distinguish the voice of the authorial narrator from that of the author – a move that freed theorists from narrowly intentionalist discussions. Since then, narratologists have concentrated on two major phenomena associated with the technique. The first of these is the authorial narrator’s ‘omniscience’, or what Gérard Genette has called ‘zero focalization’, i.e. a distribution of information ‘where the narrator knows more than the character’ (Genette, 1980, p. 189). The second aspect is the degree of the authorial narrator’s ‘intrusiveness’, which is created by the commentaries that make the narrator ‘audible and visible’ (Jahn, 2005, p. 364). As Dawson rightly points out, these two aspects are not necessarily linked, and there are many instances of zero focalization without instances of intrusive comments. He thus proposes to limit the usage of the label ‘omniscient narration’ to ‘those works which actualize a panoramic narrator, which perform omniscience, rather than those narratives which report without comment, or in which commentary does not reveal a sense of the narrator’s personality’ (Dawson, 2009, p. 148).

While I agree that the two phenomena should be distinguished, I would argue that ‘omniscience’ is not the best label to use because it emphasizes the aspect of focalization instead of that of intrusiveness. Narratorial comments, as I will demonstrate in my analyses, should more usefully be seen as rhetorical bids for authority than as expressions of god-like all-knowingness. Stanzel’s term ‘authorial narration’ at first sight seems to be problematic as well, since it suggests precisely what Stanzel wanted to get away from: the idea that the narrator’s voice is that of the author. This, however, could be less inappropriate than classical narratology has made it in order to show that Sterne’s employment of narratorial digression in *Tristram Shandy* was not an original invention, but had quite a few predecessors in the 1740s and 1750s.

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2 Dawson also argues that ‘[w]e need not take the notion of an all-knowing narrator literally’ (2009, p. 148), as those critics tend to do who seek to describe the authorial narrator as a telepath or a superhuman entity.
out to be. As Susan Lanser has argued in her feminist study on the history of narrative mediation, the voice in narratorial commentary (re)produces the structural and functional situation of authorship. In other words, where a distinction between the (implied) author and a public, heterodiegetic narrator is not textually marked, readers are invited to equate the narrator with the author and the narratee with themselves. This conventional equation gives authorial voice a privileged status among narrative forms (Lanser, 1992, p. 16).

The idea that authorial narration is a mode of self-fashioning on the part of the writer is particularly useful insofar as it gives a convincing answer to the question where the ‘authority’ of this type of narration stems from: it is connected with the act of storytelling, with acts of invention, selection and persuasion, rather than with supernatural powers such as all-knowingness. What narratological theory has not sufficiently acknowledged so far is that the ‘authority’ of authorial narration is neither monolithic nor uncontested: it involves different kinds of authority (defined by the OED as ‘the power to influence action, opinion, belief’), which do not necessarily reinforce each other. One type of authority (which I label ‘narrative authority’) comes as part and parcel of creating a work of fiction: it is the power to influence the reader’s beliefs with regard to what happens in the story, what characters do and think and so on. Being accepted as an author of fiction means being able to put forward such authority claims, which cannot be contested.3

However, commentaries extend beyond the facts of the fictional world: they involve, for example, claims with regard to the psychological credibility of the characters that are portrayed, or with regard to the moral implications of the story. Such claims to psychological and ethical authority transcend

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3 There is one branch of narrative theory that has given careful consideration to authority as a problem: feminist narratologists, first and foremost Susan Lanser (1992), have argued that explicit authority claims were problematic for female writers, who were not granted the same authoritative status as their male counterparts. More recently, Vera Nünning has shown that women writers in the eighteenth century tended to use more unobtrusive strategies, whereas their nineteenth-century counterparts ‘like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot could make extensive use of the privileges of overt narrators and thus lay claim to a position of authority’ (2012, p. 104). These studies offer important contributions for historicizing and contextualizing narrative strategies. The one point in which they fall short, in my view, is that they tend to cement a monolithic view of overt authorial commentary as straightforwardly assuming a position of authority rather than negotiating various, sometimes contradicting or contentious, authority claims. This is why they have problems with female authors like Eliza Haywood, who do use overt authorial commentary.
the specific cases to which they are attached. They are linked to larger ideas about the purpose and potential of fictional writing, for example the notion that novels can give particular insights into the human psyche, or that they can function as models for morally sound behaviour, etc. Whether authors of fiction are regarded as authorities with regard to moral or psychological questions is obviously a contested and also historically variable issue. The authority claims in authorial narration, then, can function as instantiations and extensions of contemporary debates about the functions of novel-writing. This is particularly obvious in the case of those commentaries that offer general maxims (I will call them ‘gnomic’) and those that reflect on acts of narration or reception (‘metadiscursive’ commentaries).4

Claims to kinds of authority other than narrative authority have a somewhat contradictory aspect insofar as the more explicitly they are put forward, the more do they expose themselves to potential scrutiny and criticism. In contrast to the fictional ‘facts’ themselves, the reflections offered in commentary are subject to discussion – in a sense, many of these utterances can be read as partial answers to the question ‘why should I read this book?’ By spelling out a particular position, commentaries also open up the possibility of contradiction, and thus, ultimately, the question of whether the story should have been told differently (or even not at all). In this sense, I argue, narratorial comments problematize authorial control at the same time at which they invoke it.

The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless

Eliza Haywood’s The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless starts out with a general statement about contemporary morals and manners:

It was always my opinion, that fewer women were undone by love than vanity; and that those mistakes the sex are sometimes guilty of, proceed, for the most part, rather from inadvertency, than a vicious inclination. The ladies, I am sorry to observe, are apt to make too little allowances to each other on this score, and seem better pleased with an occasion to condemn than to excuse [...]. There are some who behold, with

4 My typology of commentaries follows the suggestion of Ansgar Nünning, who distinguishes between comments focusing on particular characters or events (he calls them ‘analytical’; I prefer ‘diegetic’ in order to emphasize their focus on the universe of the fictional characters) as well as the types I have labelled ‘gnomic’ and ‘metadiscursive’ (Nünning, 1997).
indignation and contempt, those errors in others, which, unhappily, they are every day falling into themselves; and as the want of due consideration occasions the guilt, so the want of due consideration also occasions the scandal: and there would be much less room either for the one or the other, were some part of that time which is wasted at the toilette [...] employed in examining the heart, and what actions are most becoming to the character (BT, p. 3).

After this general remark, the narrator moves directly into the exposition of the story: ‘Betsy Thoughtless was the only daughter of a gentleman of good family and fortune in L—e, where he constantly resided...’ (BT, p. 3). In these passages, Betsy is introduced as having ‘a great deal of good-nature’ (BT, p. 4), but being naïve and susceptible to flattery and thus in danger of falling under the bad influence of another young woman, the tellingly named ‘Miss Forward’, who ‘had a great deal of the coquette in her nature’ (BT, p. 5).

At first sight, the beginning of the novel seems to be a good example for the use of authorial commentary to straightforwardly convey a moralizing message, in this case one about female vanity and the dangers to which it exposes even generally amiable women. This is precisely how some critics have seen the novel, for example Lanser, who charges Haywood with conventional misogyny (Lanser, 1992, p. 49). It might seem puzzling, then, that in her introduction of the edition in the ‘Mothers of the Novel’ series, Dale Spender represents the novel as a feminist classic: ‘Eliza Haywood holds up to scrutiny the values of her day and she does not hesitate to focus on the sexual double standard and its inherent injustice’ (Spender, 1986, p. xii). Such widely differing evaluations of the novel are, I want to argue, possible not despite the overt narratorial commentary, but rather because of the specific ways in which it is employed.

First, Haywood sets the tone for the novel in the choice of topic for this first gnomic commentary: the fallibility of conventional judgment, which attributes immodest behaviour to ‘vicious inclination’ rather than to a more complex and common mixture of vanity and lack of circumspection (a mixture that is also already alluded to by means of the protagonist’s telling name). The passage, then, sets up two conflicting ideas about of the main purpose of the subsequent introduction of the protagonist Betsy and her

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5 Citations are from the Pandora edition of the novel.
6 Vera Nünnning offers a Lanserian reading of the passage I have cited, regarding it as an example of a ‘firm and overt establishment of a position of moral authority’ (2012: 90), which takes a male subject position and criticizes behaviour that is represented as typically female.
ill-advised behaviour: is the reader mainly invited to judge the character, to decide to what extent she is a positive or negative example for female behaviour – or is this an injunction on the reader to monitor precisely these evaluations, to reflect whether the reader has the same uncharitable views that were just criticized?

Second, this ambiguity is intensified by the fact that the first and the second paragraph of the novel are not connected by any explicit transition clarifying the application of the gnomic statement in the first passage to the descriptions of the second. In the terms suggested by Karin Kukkonen in her reading of Haywood, the narration flaunts the Gricean maxim of relation: it abruptly shifts from a very general observation to specific descriptions of individual experience and thus poses the question of relevance. If they do not want to regard the sequence as incoherent, readers will themselves have to look for ways of applying the moral from the gnomic statement to what follows.7 In contrast to the pattern established by Henry Fielding’s narrators, who frequently reflect on the effects the narrative could or should have on the projected reader (albeit in an ironic manner),8 Haywood here does not use metadiscursive commentary or explicit reader address. Readers are left to infer that the reference to the process of ‘examining the heart’ in the first paragraph of the novel can also be read as a writing programme for the novel itself, which, in laying open the motivations and emotions of its protagonist, is supposed to foster insights into human behaviour as well as self-scrutiny in the reader. Here, again, the protagonist’s telling name and its exposition in the title point the way: they signal to the reader to expect an exploration of Betsy’s character as a type – in this case, a familiar stereotype of femininity which is sympathetically expanded in the course of the novel. This expansion is facilitated by the range of different possible connotations of the word ‘thoughtless’ – ranging from the negative ‘lacking consideration for others’ to the positive ‘free from care or anxiety’ (see OED).

Third, one could say that the oscillation between an assertion of conventional norms and values and their critical examination is already self-reflexively announced in the first chapter title: ‘Gives the reader room to guess at what is to ensue, though ten to one but he finds himself deceived’

7 Kukkonen describes the narrator in Betsy Thoughtless as ‘uncooperative’ with regard to the maxim of manner – she shows how the narration anticipates future events in the story, thus playing with reader expectations (Kukkonen, 2013, pp. 210-15).
8 See e.g. the beginning of Chapter 11 in Tom Jones: ‘It hath often been observed by wise Men or Women, I forget which, that all persons are doomed to be in Love once in their Lives. […] Miss Bridget is an Example of all these Observations’ (Tom Jones, pp. 64-65).
Kukkonen observes that such references to the handling of reader expectation serve to establish the narrator herself as a coquette, who like many of the female characters in her novel ‘manages her encounter with the reader, prefiguring inferences, disappointing or gratifying them’ (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 215). I would add that in contrast to the coquette, Haywood’s narrator invites readers to be aware of this interplay at the same time in which they are engaging in it. This awareness is, possibly, heightened by the juxtaposition of different modes: there is a contrast between the playful mode typical of the chapter titles and the somewhat more sober tone of the narration proper. Whereas Henry Fielding’s novels are characterized by a pervasive use of irony and direct reader address, Haywood uses these devices much more sparingly, so that their condensed employment in the chapter titles becomes more conspicuous. The question raised by the combination of the chapter title and the first two paragraphs, then, is not only ‘what is going to happen on the level of the story?’, but also ‘what kind of book am I reading, and what kind of insights can I expect from it?’. Even taken by itself, the chapter title already touches upon both questions, as the reader’s guess about ‘what is to ensue’ could pertain either to the actions described in the novel or the reading experience on which the reader is embarking.

Authority claims are thus evoked and negotiated in complex ways at the beginning of Betsy Thoughtless. The many evaluative phrases in the first paragraph (‘guilty’, ‘vicious’, ‘I am sorry to observe’), first of all, announce moral authority. At the same time, the gnomic commentary lays claim to psychological authority, as it puts forward a general observation about the true motivations of typical female behaviour (‘those mistakes the sex are sometimes guilty of, proceed […] rather from inadvertency, than a vicious inclination’). This combination suggests an affinity to conduct literature.

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9 The narratological distinction between the level of the paratext and that of the main body of the text should not preclude the treatment of such paratextual elements as chapter titles in the case of authorial narration: one important element of the ‘(re)producing of the structural and functional situation of authorship’ (Lanser, 1992, p. 16) in these novels is the suggestion that the narrative voice is that of the person responsible for or at least involved in selection (sometimes also invention/creation) and editorial arrangement of the textual elements.

10 For a discussion of the function of chapter titles in mid-eighteenth-century English fiction, in particular the novels by S. Fielding and Lennox, see Birke (2012). I argue there that chapter titles are frequently used to juxtapose different narrative styles and thus heighten the sense that the title is a playful commentary on the text – a similar technique is employed in Charlotte Lennox’ The Female Quixote and, even more strikingly, in Sarah Fielding’s The History of David Simple.
with its aim of regulating female behaviour.\textsuperscript{11} Such an implicit purpose is complicated, however, by the aspects analysed above: the focus on social norms of evaluation as themselves problematic, the implicit challenge to establish connections between gnomic statements and the description of concrete characters and events, and the playful attitude towards the reader encapsulated by the chapter title. The novel is positioned as a text that can not only incorporate the regulatory potential of conduct books, but present deeper truths about the human heart and character. At the same time, it is suggested that these two kinds of purpose and authority may be at odds with each other. Moreover, by highlighting the issue of reader expectation and by playing with the cooperative principle, the novel foregrounds the processual character of the practice of reading and ultimately raises the question of the degree and the limits of authorial control.

Although, as I have already observed, metadiscursive commentary – including reader address and references to narrative technique – is much less extensively employed in \textit{Betsy Thoughtless} than in \textit{Tom Jones} (apart from the use in chapter titles), there are quite a few notable instances, as for example in Chapter 2:

She [Betsy Thoughtless] had a great deal of wit, but was too volatile for reflection; and as a ship without sufficient ballast is tossed about at the pleasure of every wind that blows, so was she hurried through the ocean of life, just as each predominant passion directed.

But I will not anticipate that gratification which ought to be the reward of a long curiosity. The reader, if he has patience to go through the following pages, will see into the secret springs which set this fair machine in motion, and produced many actions which were ascribed, by the ill-judging and malicious world, to causes very different from the real ones.

All this, I say, will be revealed in time; but it would be as absurd in a writer to rush all at once into the catastrophe of the adventures he would relate, as it would be impracticable in a traveller to reach the end of a long journey, without sometimes stopping at the inns in his way to it. To proceed, therefore, gradually with my history (BT, p. 8).

After the diegetic commentary on the person of the protagonist, which evokes the conventional metaphor of the self as a vessel at sea, a metadiscursive commentary is added which calls into question the explanatory

\textsuperscript{11} There are some direct allusions to the genre, for example the title of Chapter VI: ‘May be of some service to the ladies, especially the younger sort, if well attended to’ (BT, p. 31).
and proleptic significance of the former. The reader is warned not to assume that the catch-all assessment of the character as fickle can provide the same insight into the ‘secret springs’ or underlying character traits and motivations that the narrative as a whole is supposed to convey. This recurring evocation of the special effect of fictional writing is here combined with a play on the (also conventional) metaphor of the novel as a journey – as famously elaborated on by Fielding in *Joseph Andrews*, when he compares chapter titles to ‘Inscriptions over the Gates of Inns [...], informing the Reader what Entertainment he is to expect, which if he likes not, he may travel on to the next’ (*Joseph Andrews*, p. 90). Haywood modifies the metaphor by describing the author, not the reader, as a traveller. By doing so, she suggests a synchronization between the process of reading and the production of the text – both the impatient reader and the hasty author need to slow down. The modification thus highlights the interdependence between expectations on the part of the reader and designs on the part of the author: they must constantly be negotiated. The metadiscursive commentary dramatizes such a negotiation as a spectrum of rhetorical acts in which the reader, as the writer’s counterpart, is not just an implied addressee, but projected in more specific attitudes: being patient or impatient, finishing the book or not, more or less carefully judging the characters. This serves to privilege or suggest specific stances on the part of the reader – however, it also acknowledges the fact that just as the writer is free to lay out her own rules for her work, the reader is free to evaluate the results and to realize the act of reception in his or her own individual way.

*The History of Charlotte Summers, the Fortunate Parish Girl*

While Haywood’s *Betsy Thoughtless* represents a tendency to tune down the intrusiveness and irony of the Fieldingesque authorial narrator, the anonymously published *Charlotte Summers*, ‘one of the more successful fictions of the 1750s’ (Lupton, 2011, p. 292), features the opposite approach to authorial narration, increasing the self-reflexive tendency of the technique to the point of excess. This is done, for one thing, by playfully emphasizing the family resemblances to Fielding’s work. In the introduction, the narrative voice is explicitly marked as imitating Fielding’s style. The narrator

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12 The novel has been attributed to Sarah Fielding (who is still listed as the author, for example, in the catalogue of the digital library of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek), but the critical consensus seems to be that this is a misattribution (see Foster, 2004, p. 62; Moore, 2013, p. 759).
introduces himself as an illegitimate child, ‘the first begotten, of the poetical issue, of the much celebrated Biographer of Joseph Andrews, and Tom Jones’ (CS I, p. 3). The homage to Fielding is furthermore evident both in the highly intrusive authorial commentary and in the novel’s plot: the protagonist, the orphaned Charlotte Summers, is taken in by the benevolent, Allworthy-like Lady Bountiful. Like Tom Jones, Charlotte is forced to leave and to go on an adventurous journey that eventually brings her to London and unsavoury places like a brothel and a debtor’s jail. In the end, both her lost parents reappear, so that (again like Tom Jones) she turns out not to be an orphan after all, and she is allowed to marry the man she loved all along, Lady Bountiful’s son Thomas.

Like the authorial narrator in Fielding’s novels, the narrator of *Charlotte Summers* throughout the novel comments extensively not only on the characters and events but particularly conspicuously on his narrative technique, which is frequently compared with Fielding’s. He resolves to imitate, for instance, the division into chapters and books, which are prefaced by digressive introductory chapters:

> These were Mr. F—g’s nodding Places for his Readers; for he it seems could not take a Nap, but he was obliged to pump and sweat for laborious Dullness to please them […]; but it was his Misfortune to be a Wit, and consequently out of his natural Element when endeavouring to be really stupid; but for me whose Wit is borrowed and the Effect of Art, and to whom Dullness is natural, there is nothing in Nature more easy to me than to take a sound Nap with my Readers for twenty pages together (CS I, p. 33).

Such playful disparagements of his own abilities are typical of this narrator, who is preoccupied with the question of how the reader will experience and react to the narrative. One main means of exploring this question is to take the trope of the author-reader relationship as face-to-face interaction to an extreme: the narrator not only envisages himself, like Fielding in *Tom Jones*, as an inn-keeper who provides for his guests (CS I, p. 4) and as the arbitrator of social relationships who brings his readers ‘into the Company’ (CS I, p. 12) of the characters. He also offers a whole scenario in which the **READING IS TRAVELLING** and the **READING IS SOCIAL INTERACTION** metaphors are combined and extended:
Before I introduce my Readers to the Company of Miss Charlotte Summers, I must make them acquainted with some of her Friends […], for which Purpose, I must beg their Company as far as Carmarthenshire, in Wales. […] We Authors are always provided with an easy flying Carriage, which can waft our Readers in an Instant […]: We are Masters of a Kind of Magic, that we have only to speak the Word, and presto, you are transported […] to the Place where we would have you attend us. Don't you find already the magical Effect? The Journey is over, and we are just alighted at the Gate of a stately old Building […]. You may enter freely, I'll conduct you to the Parlour, where you may have the Honour to salute the hospitable Owner of this venerable Mansion (CS I, p. 13).

‘Author’ and ‘reader’ are both imagined as acting participants in the fictional world rather than as the producer and recipient of a book. Of course, by explicitly evoking the process of readerly immersion into the fictional world, the narrator disrupts rather than enhances it. Similarly, by insisting on the supernatural powers of the author, the narrator draws attention to the differences between actual travel and the reader’s mental travel, the magical use of words to affect time and space, and the writer’s use of words to describe time and space. The outlandish image of the author’s superior power raises the question of his or her actual influence: what kind of impact do narratives actually have on their readers?

In fact, the specific image of the magician is itself already ambivalent with regard to the question of power. He could either be a wizard performing real magic, or an illusionist with a bag of tricks – the word ‘presto’, in particular, suggests a commercial performance rather than a supernatural action. Like the innkeeper who needs to advertise his services and keep his customers happy in order to make a living, the magician could then also be read as a figure representing the dependence of the author on the reader. The reader is somebody to be manipulated, but also to be enticed and convinced (in the rhetorical manoeuvre performed in the passage) – and also somebody who may prove to be beyond the author’s control, and even in turn exerting control on the author. Rather than just asserting a sense of authorial power (however playfully), this passage – like many of the other metadiscursive comments – raises the question of its extent and limits.

This ambivalence with regard to author-reader relations is also evident in a particularly noticeable feature of the novel: its projection of possible reader reactions as concrete situations or interjections (a technique that was subsequently also used, among others, by Laurence Sterne in Tristram
Shandy and, a century later, by William Makepeace Thackeray in Vanity Fair):\textsuperscript{14}

I fancy by this Time, my Readers are pretty well acquainted with the Lady Bountiful, and ready to thank me for the Pains I have taken, to introduce them into such valuable company, but I can hear Beau Thoughtless and pretty Miss Pert, whispering to one another, ‘Hang the old Woman, I wish we were done with her, we have seen enough of her, I wish to see the young Wench, there has been so much talk about, whereabouts can she be? Sure she’s locked up in the old Lady’s Closet. The Devil take our Conductor, after leading us such a Dance, from London to Carmarthenshire, to keep us so long from what we want to see;’ but I must inform the pretty Triflers, that I am determined my Readers shall learn something in every Chapter, and in this, amongst other Things, they much learn and practice Patience […]. But that you may not be altogether discourag’d, I must tell you, that I am now going to speak of her [Lady Bountiful’s] Faults; a Subject I am sure you cannot be so soon weary of, as it borders so much on your dearly beloved scandal (CS I, pp. 24-25).

Further reader figures whose reactions are described in detail include Miss Censorious, who is shocked (though also fascinated) by any hints of sexual misconduct, Arabella Dimple, who reads Charlotte Summers in bed and has taken the already-cited commentary about the nap seriously, so that she has to turn back a few pages to understand what is going on in the narrative, and the Widow Lackit, who insists that the novel’s ending include the protagonist’s marriage.

Wayne Booth points out the ridiculous character of ‘this multifarious “reader”, who is always, underneath his various disguises, the same stupid person introduced for the real and unspecified reader to laugh at’ (Booth, 1952, p. 181). Clearly, these reader figures represent expectations towards the novel that are not altogether admirable (though not, I would argue, identical): Thoughtless and Pert want racy entertainment, Miss Censorious wants an affirmation of her hypocritical sense of moral superiority, and the Widow Lackit wants vicarious gratification. The actual reader is certainly not invited to identify with these satirically drawn figures, and by evoking concrete circumstances and even dialogue, the novel makes them appear as a special type of fictional character rather than a stand-in for myself as

\textsuperscript{14} Booth, in fact, sees Charlotte Summers as a missing link between Tom Jones and the more radically self-reflexive Tristram Shandy (see Booth, 1952, p. 181).
I am perusing the text. However, it should be noted that the novel, while making fun of these readers’ attitudes and demands, at the same time caters to them. The way Thoughtless, Pert and Censorious talk about Charlotte, for example, highlights the sexual interest that can be taken in the descriptions of the ‘young wench’, who is, like Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa, continually exposed to unwanted sexual attention in the novel (and, for example, nearly raped by a man who adopts the same trick as Mr. B. in *Pamela* when he switches places with the heroine’s maid and bedfellow one night). Similarly, the Widow Lackit’s demand for a conventional happy marriage at the ending is complied with in the final chapter of the novel.

The passages evoking the reader figures thus, more vividly than the more conventional reader address in *Betsy Thoughtless*, foreground how expectations on the part of the audience force authors to some kind of response, be it to deny or to cater to such expectations. Moreover, they reflect on the problem of the novel’s purpose in a more general sense: they raise the question of how to keep the reader interested (for example in the many ironic references to the narrator’s dullness), of how to address questions of sexual morals without being salacious, of what a reader could or should hope to ‘learn’ from a novel besides ‘Patience’. In alluding to the commercial, material, social and ideological implications of novel-writing and reading as a social practice, they dramatize not just the variety of possible roles to be taken by the reader, but also the possible social functions that can be fulfilled by the author of the novel, as well as the issue of his or her still precarious cultural standing.

**Conclusion**

The two case studies have shown how in the 1750s, the technique of authorial narration that had been popularized by Henry Fielding in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* was taken into different directions: some authors opted for a restrained use of authorial commentary, others for its conspicuous extension. Further examples of the first option include Sarah Fielding’s *The History of the Countess of Dellwyn* (1759), John Kidgell’s *The Card* (1755) and Charlotte Lennox’ *The Female Quixote* (1752); William Goodall’s *The Adventures of Captain Greenland* (1752) is one of the (much rarer) examples

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15 Kidgell’s novel contains a number of original highly self-reflexive elements, which play with aspects such as typography and graphic design (see Barchas, 2003, especially pp. 112-17), but its use of authorial commentary is not very extensive.
of the second. I have argued that in both variants, narratorial commentary is used to complicate and reflect on the issue of authority and the relations between author and reader rather than just to reinforce authorial control. A closer look at the mid-eighteenth century as an early stage in the evolution of novelistic technique, then, serves to complicate simplifying views on the functions of authorial narration in literary history. Concerns about the practice of novel reading and writing in our age of mounting digital competition are only the most recent phase in a long tradition of novelistic self-reflection, for which authorial narration is a fundamental tool.

Works Cited


