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Authenticity in Narratology and in Literary Studies

In contemporary culture the label ‘authentic’ is pervasive. Not surprisingly, though, its precise meaning is difficult to grasp. A reason for this may be that the word *authenticity* is in use in everyday language as well as in academic terminology. This creates problems from both sides. On the one hand, everyone has an implicit understanding of the concept and, as a result, its meaning tends to be vague and non-systematic. On the other hand, some academic usages do not conform with everyday intuitions. A case in point may be, for example, the distinction between *sincerity* and *authenticity* proposed by Lionel Trilling in his well-known study of the cultural career of these concepts since the Renaissance, which probably does not mirror ordinary use of the two lexemes (Trilling 1972, 2).¹ A second problem is the variety of meanings attributed to authenticity as an academic term. No core concept is discernible here that stays stable across various disciplines.² Even within the confines of literary studies and narratology, the diverse meanings attributed to authenticity cover, as we shall see, a broad range. A third impediment for any reconstruction of the meaning of authenticity is the gap between the word and the concept. Authors may refer to the concept of authenticity without using the word.

1 According to Trilling, the concept of sincerity emerged at the Renaissance as a crucial moral concept that means “the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one’s own self” (Trilling 1972, 4). Trilling holds that *sincerity* has been replaced since the eighteenth century by *authenticity*, i.e. the demand to be true only to oneself as an ultimate ideal and cutting “through all the cultural superstructures” (9).

2 See the surveys and essays in Bendix (1997) for anthropology; Funk, Gross and Huber (2012), Haselstein, Gross and Snyder-Körber (2010), Kemal and Gaskell (1999) and Knaller and Müller (2006) for aesthetics and media studies; Godlovitch (1999) for musicology; Lacoste, Leimgruber and Breyer (2014) for linguistics; Salmela (2014) for psychology; Straub (2012) for literary theory; Varga and Guignon (2014) for philosophy; and Weixler (2012) for narrative theory. Also see → III.2 Freeman. Knaller (2007) delineates a history of both the word and the concept.

Instead they may use, synonymously, expressions such as *accuracy*, *genuineness*, *originality*, *purity*, *sincerity*, *truthfulness*, *veracity*, *veritableness*, or *verisimilitude*.

These problems put anyone who tries to provide a definition of authenticity into an uncomfortable position. It is impossible to find a single consistent meaning without neglecting some current usages. Authenticity is a complex concept that includes interrelated but heterogeneous meanings. In the face of this, it seems advisable to restrict the area of application in this essay and to deal with authenticity strictly as a text-related phenomenon – not as a feature of, say, persons, states of mind, performances, or objects. I will delineate three textual dimensions in regard to which the concept of authenticity is being used, namely with respect to a text’s origin, to its reference, and to its stylistic strategy (Martínez 2004). As we shall see, these dimensions can be discussed for fictional as well as factual narratives.

1. Authenticity as appropriate origin

According to some usages, a text needs to possess a proper genealogy or history of production in order to qualify as authentic. If we can transfer empirical psychological findings concerning the evaluation of material art objects to literary art works, the acceptance of an art work as authentic depends on the recipient’s conviction that the work is truly and materially the product of its artist or author. The two “key factors underlying the value of original artwork” are “the assessment of the art object as a unique creative act (performance) and the degree of physical contact with the original artist (contagion)” (Newman and Bloom 2012, 558).

In textual criticism the authenticity of a text means that the text derives entirely, in all its details, from its author. In order to establish a text’s authenticity, its author may need to authorize it. This does not necessarily mean that the author declares himself/herself to be the sole creator of the text (a copy-editor or editor may have contributed) but that he/she approves of its final shape. The connection between authenticity and authority is also crucial for narratives with religious claims (→ III.9 Mauz). A sacred narrative qualifies as authentic insofar as it is divinely inspired. The actual existence of this inspiration, however, has to be authorized by the church. Authenticity is thus established by the authority of an institution (*authentia auctoritatis*): “Munus autem authentice interpretandi verbum Dei scriptum vel traditum soli vivo Ecclesiae Magisterio concreditum est, cuius auctoritas in nomine Iesu Christi exercetur” (*Dei Verbum* 1965, cap. II, § 10) [“The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted

to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ" (*Catechism* 1994, 27).]

In law we find a similar connection between the authenticity of a document and its authorization by the court. Documents have to be formally authenticated by the court in order to count as evidence:

[...] a record is authentic if it is what it claims to be, that is, if its identity (i.e., the whole of the attributes that uniquely identify it, such as the name of its author and its date) and integrity (i.e., its wholeness and soundness) can be either presumed or verified. The same can be stated for the concept of record authentication, which the juridical system considers to be both the process of establishing authenticity and the legal attestation of it as affixed to a record. (Duranti 2005, 2)

In linguistics the concept of the native speaker establishes a close link between a (typically oral) discourse and its possibly authentic origin, as Florian Coulmas argues: "The native speaker is [...] seen as being the gate keeper of authenticity because [...] the ultimate judges of naturalness can only be the [native] speakers of a language. [...] nativeness is *the* one universally accepted criterion for authenticity" (Coulmas 2017 [1981], 5).

In fictional narratives one might, from one perspective, expect that its originator, the author, should not be important for the text's authenticity. After all, in fictional discourse the author does not speak directly to the reader, with affirmative force, but expresses himself/herself only indirectly through the mouths of the narrator and the characters. In other words: the author of a fictional discourse does not utter authentic propositions; instead, he/she imagines authentic propositions uttered by fictive characters. Nevertheless, some readers make authenticity claims with respect to the author also in the case of fictional narratives. In such cases, the author is expected to possess an appropriate identity; if he/she does not, his/her narrative is deemed to be inauthentic. If a text is authentic, it is read as symptomatic, as a true expression of experiences or identity features of its author. Such a symptomatic reading may transcend the individuality of the author and include collective identities (nation, race, class, gender) which the author shares or is taken to be a part of.

Let us take the case of Holocaust literature. In his novel *Efraim* (1967), the German author Alfred Andersch created an autodiegetic Jewish narrator, Georg Efraim, who relates his life in post-war Germany. Andersch, who himself was not Jewish, was criticized for this narrative device. He was said to have usurped Jewish identity. Another example for the importance of the author's identity for authenticity claims of fictional narratives is the novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper* (1994) by the Australian writer Helen Demidenko. In this novel, a young female Ukrainian narrator tells the story of her uncle, a peasant who during World War II collaborated with the Germans in the mass murder of Jews. The first editions of the

novel included textual and paratextual hints that the narrator has much in common with the author Demidenko, who was also of Ukrainian origin. Based on these hints, the novel invited a reading as a covert autobiographical account of a second-generation Holocaust testimonial. Some time after the publication the author's real identity was disclosed to be the Anglo-Irish writer Helen Darville and this caused an uproar in the press (cf. Meyer 2006). Scandals like these indicate that in the case of fictions told by authors who give voice to (typically victimized) groups of which they themselves are not a member there are some readers who consider these texts to lack authenticity and thus hold them to be morally problematic (→ IV.5 Phelan).

2. Authenticity as true reference

Another dimension of textual authenticity is its postulated reference to historical facts. In this sense, a narrative is authentic only if it is factually true, that is, if it depicts events which actually occurred in the depicted manner. Factual narratives which include made-up material are considered to be inauthentic. For example, autobiographical narratives claim that they are truthfully based on the author's memory. As Ochs and Capps note, *to remember* is "a factual mental verb. Factual verbs presuppose the certainty of a proposition. [...] Remembering, then, is an authenticating act: Rememberers [sic] publicly claim to have brought to conscious awareness a state, event, or condition that is real in their eyes; they believe it to be true" (Ochs and Capps 2001, 284).

Fictional narratives, on the other hand, can claim historical 'authenticity' by referring to specific historical persons, events, or locations. They do so by mentioning for instance proper names like *Napoleon*, *World War II*, or *Freiburg* or by using other textual and paratextual signals. A fictional narrative's referential authenticity depends on the degree to which particular parts of its storyworld can be identified with particular counterparts in reality. This transition between fiction and fact is of peculiar importance in genres situated in the grey area between fictional and factual discourse such as the historical novel, the autobiographical novel, autofiction (→ IV.6 Iversen), the nonfiction novel or the roman à clef.

3. Authenticity as stylistic strategy

The third dimension of textual authenticity conceives of authenticity as the product of textual strategies, or style, which are redeployed in order

to achieve an impression of authenticity. It seems that there exist two contradictory stylistic ideals of the authentic text.

On the one hand, authentic discourse can be linked to elaborated speech. In classical rhetoric, a speaker's *elocutio* includes the command of techniques of *evidentia* (*enargeia*) that will enable him/her to represent events as if the recipient were to see them with his/her own eyes (Quintilianus 1995, IV.2.123; VIII.3.61). In order to achieve *evidentia*, classical rhetoric recommends the use of detailed descriptions, of deictic adverbs suggesting spatial presence on the scene, of the historical present, of addresses to the reader, and of direct speech in the representation of conversations between characters (Lausberg 1973, 402).

The impression of authenticity can also be achieved by including linguistic features of particular sociolects or dialects into the direct speech of fictional characters. In the nineteenth century this stylistic device was frequently used, for example, by authors of the US-American 'local color'-literature, the colonial novel, the regional novel, and the 'Dorfgeschichte' as well as in naturalism (→ IV.2 Warhol). Since then this device has become widespread. According to this stylistic norm, it would be inauthentic if a peasant or a working class member spoke in erudite language.

On the other hand, the impression of authenticity may be created not by means of masterful stylistic *ornatus* but, on the contrary, by resorting to unlearned, imperfect, fragmented or tainted discourse. Such *sermo humilis* was seen as characteristic of Christian religious discourse beginning with the Gospels (Auerbach 1965). Its 'humbleness' or modesty mirrors the incarnation of God as a suffering mortal being. However, it goes without saying that such a *sermo humilis* may be the deliberate product of a skillful rhetoric. To some extent, Roland Barthes's famous 'reality effect' (*effet de réel*) is akin to this discourse strategy which conveys the impression of authenticity by being seemingly deficient. Barthes considers the excessive mentioning of diegetic details of the storyworld that he detects in writings by Jules Michelet and Gustave Flaubert to be superfluous in terms of narrative functionality and proposes that they produce an air of authenticity by connoting the inexhaustible particularity, or concreteness, of reality (Barthes 1968; but see → IV.1 McKeon).

Both elaborated discourse and *sermo humilis* are means of generating *evidentia* and thereby enhance the recipient's immersion in the storyworld. According to this effect-related attitude, it is not important whether the narrative is factually true or not. Verisimilitude, however, is important because it increases the persuasive effect. Donald Spence's concept of "narrative truth," as opposed to "historical truth," also points to the rhetorical dimension of textual authenticity:

Narrative truth can be defined as the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality. [...] Historical truth is [...] dedicated to the strict observance of correspondence rules; our aim is to come as close as possible to what ‘really’ happened. (Spence 1982, 31–32)

4. Intersections: Testimonial authenticity and self-reflexive authenticity

The three aspects (or meanings) of textual authenticity distinguished here do intersect, of course, with each other in various ways. Two interesting cases of such intersections are testimonial authenticity and self-reflexive authenticity.

As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps observe, testimonial or experiential narratives tend to display their authenticity by couching the narrated facts within subjective mental events like ‘thinking,’ ‘knowing,’ ‘intending’ or ‘feeling’: *I knew there was something wrong with him*. As Ochs and Capps put it:

Even though remembering is imperfect and malleable, tellers of personal experience work to authenticate their memories and, in so doing, to make their narrative accounts sound credible. [...] Reconstructions of past life events are authentic when tellers direct their attention to and psychically inhabit those events. (Ochs and Capps 2001, 284–286)

This strategy of staging the text as an authentic testimony of an eye witness in order to gain credibility echoes the goal of *evidentia* in classical rhetoric. Testimonial authenticity links to the stylistic evocation of experience on account of the objective nature of the reported occurrences which are authenticated not as factually true or verisimilar, but as *experientially true* (‘I can vouch for having felt that way’). However, despite Ochs and Capps’s reference to the linguistic markers of asseveration, this kind of authenticity is primarily achieved through the authorization of the experience through the teller’s personal testimony and thus not necessarily a *stylistic* technique.

In recent years, another strategy of creating an effect of authenticity has become prominent in literature as well as in other media. Antonius Weixler, who calls it “meta-discursive authenticity” (Weixler 2012, 9), points out that one way of producing the impression of authenticity is to criticize traditional kinds of authentic discourse and to explicitly affirm that authenticity is impossible to achieve. Such texts tend to use anti-mimetic and anti-illusionistic devices (for instance, paradoxical combinations of factual and fictional features) in order to achieve a second degree-kind of authenticity.

5. Authenticity in theories of fictionality

The term authenticity has also been used in connection with some theories of fictionality. Lubomír Doležel links authenticity with the truth claim of voices within the fictional text. Authentic voices are crucial for establishing the “fictional existence” (Doležel 1998, 145) of a particular world of fiction. Doležel defines “authentication” as “the transformation of a possible entity into a fictional entity achieved by the performative power of the fictional text” (279) and postulates a variety of modes of authentication (145–168). The actual domain of a fictional world can be established by the “authoritative narrative” (149) of an anonymous third-person narrator or through the accounts of characters as long as these accounts do not contradict each other or the heterodiegetic narrator’s propositions. Graded modes of authentication obtain in the case of subjectivized third-person narrators or of first-person narrators. In self-voiding narratives (skaz, metafiction) or in impossible fictional worlds, according to Doležel, the logic of authentication can be subverted.

In his theory of fictive discourse, Félix Martínez-Bonati discriminates between “real authentic sentences” (by which a speaker addresses somebody in a real communicative situation) and “real inauthentic sentences” (which, as in indirect discourse, represent real authentic sentences but without proper illocutionary force). In fictive discourse, the real author produces real inauthentic sentences, whereas the narratorial voice utters “imaginary authentic sentences” (Martínez-Bonati 1981, 78–80).

So Doležel links the ‘authenticity’ of speech within fictional texts to its truth-value with regard to the storyworld and hence his account bears on the referential meaning of authenticity, whereas Martínez-Bonati is instead concerned with the communicative source of a speech and therefore links authenticity to a proper origin.

6. An example: Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments*

In order to exemplify the distinctions proposed in this essay, let us reconsider Benjamin Wilkomirski’s notorious alleged Holocaust autobiography *Fragments. Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (first published in German in 1995 under the title *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948*, English translation 1996) (→ IV.8 Lavocat). The book relates the cruel infancy of a Jewish boy, born in 1938 Poland, who was forced to live, at the age of three to four years, in the concentration camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau. His mother and his five siblings were murdered. After the liberation and some years in Krakow, he was transferred to an orphanage

in Switzerland and eventually adopted by the Swiss couple Doesseker. His traumatic experiences during the Holocaust were repressed. It was only much later, as an adult, that Wilkomirski, with the aid of psychotherapy, could recover his Holocaust memories and eventually tell of them in writing. Wilkomirski's supposedly autobiographical account produced an enthusiastic reader response and was soon translated into nine languages. As a child survivor of the Holocaust, Wilkomirski became a public person. He met Holocaust scholars and other survivors, gave lectures and talks in schools and universities, participated in conferences, starred in TV documentaries, and figured in fundraising tours for the Holocaust Museum in Washington. He even met his real father again: Yakow Maroko, a Majdanek survivor who had lost his son in the concentration camp, had recognized Wilkomirski in a TV documentary.

However, in 1998, Wilkomirski was accused of fraud. The true story as it emerged is this: Wilkomirski was no Holocaust victim. Instead, he was born in 1941 (not 1938) in Switzerland under the name of Bruno Grosjean. His father left his mother during her pregnancy. The child grew up under difficult circumstances. When he was two years old, his mother had to give him away. He lived partly with alternating foster parents, partly in an orphanage. At the age of four he was adopted by the wealthy Zürich couple Doesseker. Later on Wilkomirski began to develop an interest in Jewish history, culture and religion (neither his biological mother nor his foster parents or his adoptive parents were Jewish). From 1972, when he was thirty-one, he began to claim that his true identity was that of the Holocaust victim Binjamin Wilkomirski, a story which he made public in *Fragments*. Although Wilkomirski/Grosjean/Doesseker until today apparently insists upon the veracity of his memoirs, the fraud cannot be disputed anymore. Besides lots of other evidence, a DNA-test confirmed Wilkomirski's descentance from his biological (Swiss) father. After the disclosure of Wilkomirski's true identity the publishers withdrew *Fragments* from the market.

Wilkomirski's *Fragments* is an illuminating example of the conceptual entanglement between the concepts of factual narrative, fiction, and authenticity. After its publication, *Fragments* was first of all read as an *authentic trauma narrative*. This reading corresponds to the attitude Wilkomirski himself adopts inside and outside his text. He explains at the very beginning of the text that he is not able to present his memories in an orderly fashion. Instead, his memories consist of isolated blocks of images depicting, mostly, violent events of his early childhood which unexpectedly rise to the surface:

My earliest memories are a rubble field of isolated images and events. Shards of memory with hard knife-sharp edges, which still cut flesh if touched today. Mostly a chaotic

jumble, with very little chronological fit; shards that keep surfacing against the orderly grain of grown-up life and escaping the laws of logic.

If I'm going to write about it, I have to give up on the ordering logic of grown-ups; it would only distort what happened. (Wilkomirski 1996, 4)

The title, *Fragments*, already indicates the dispersed nature of these long-time suppressed but eventually recovered memories. After the disclosure of Wilkomirski's real identity, however, *Fragments* was regarded as a fraud, that is, as a feigned and therefore referentially and subjectively *inauthentic trauma narrative*. The broken promise of referential authenticity caused strong reactions from severely disappointed readers. Recipients' reactions would certainly have been different had Wilkomirski presented his text from the beginning as a *fictional trauma narrative*, that is as the imitation of an authentic trauma-narrative in a fictional textual frame. In this case, *Fragments* could have been praised for its stylistic authenticity which would have been attributed to Wilkomirski's skillful deployment of the rhetorical repertoire of trauma narratives without laying himself open to accusations of mendacity.

Wilkomirski has encountered the disclosure of his fraud with astonishing reluctance. He himself, it seems, still believes that in his book he faithfully depicts the truth of his personal life, perhaps following the suggestion included in *Fragments*: "Legally accredited truth is one thing – the truth of a life another" (154). According to this reading, his memories would be objectively wrong but *subjectively authentic*. *Fragments* could then be read as an instance of an *authentic trauma narrative*, but in a revised sense. The historically false content would then expose the true traumatic experiences of a Swiss orphan which have been relocated within a frame of induced false memories of a Holocaust victim in the sense of Freudian *screen-memories* (*Deckerinnerungen*, see Freud 1953 [1899]). Finally, in still another perspective, *Fragments* could be read as a *collective victim narrative* authentically depicting the essence of the universal experience of being a victim. The huge international acclaim that *Fragments* earned immediately following its publication indicates that many readers were so eager to welcome this depiction of universally valid suffering that they ignored concerns about its historical accuracy which were soon advanced by some emotionally less engaged critics.

Some of the different readings which I have proposed may be recognized already in a passage in the "Epilogue" of *Fragments*. Wilkomirski here summarizes competing versions of his identity: "As a child, I also received a new identity, another name, another date and place of birth. The document I hold in my hands – a makeshift summary, no actual birth certificate – gives the date of my birth as February 12, 1941. But this date has nothing to do with either the history of this century or my personal histo-

ry” (154). Here we find the historically true personal identity (“document”) as opposed to Wilkomirski’s subjective account of it (“personal history”) and in contrast to the assumptions of the collective memory (“history of this century”).

The various possible readings of *Fragments*, I have argued, correspond to the varieties of concepts of authenticity. Thus, one has the promise of referential authenticity when the text is read as a trauma narrative; the skillful command of the textual repertoire of Holocaust literature in order to evoke, within a fictional frame, the impression of authenticity; and, finally, the referentially misleading but subjectively truthful *Deckerinnerung* which comes to the fore by tracing the authorial origins of the text.

The example of Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* suggests that the term *authenticity* is as complex as it is problematic. Its enduring appeal in academic as well as in public discourses is not always accompanied by conceptual clarity. Indeed this is, perhaps, the very reason for its success.

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