

**UNRELIABLE NARRATION AND (DIS-)ORIENTATION
IN THE POSTMODERN NEO-GOTHIC NOVEL:
REFLECTIONS ON PATRICK MCGRATH'S
THE GROTESQUE (1989)**

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**1. Introduction: Towards a Theory of the Cultural
Functions of Unreliable Narration**

Ever since its invention by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the concept of the unreliable narrator has been one of the most important narratological instruments in the analysis of narrative texts. But although it has lost nothing of its interpretive usefulness, the concept has come under attack and become the subject of intense critical debate again in recent years.¹ In particular, Ansgar Nünning has strongly and convincingly argued in favour of a redefinition of the unreliable narrator by drawing our attention to some of the shortcomings of the accepted traditional definition.²

Booth describes the unreliable narrator as one whose value system or norms are not in accordance with those of the implied author of the text, and Chatman claims that this results in a "secret ironic message about the narrator's unreliability" (1990: 151) sent by the implied author to the implied reader. Nünning's criticism of this approach to the concept is based on his dissatisfaction with the idea of an implied author, which, he claims, is nothing but a rather vague and ill-defined anthropomorphization of the reader's own value system and horizon of understanding.³ He therefore suggests that we should redefine the unreliable author as an interpretive strategy on the part of the reader with which the latter

tries to cope with discrepancies and inconsistencies within the text as well as between the narrator's norms and his own cognitive frames of reference.⁴

This is not the place to recapitulate in detail Nünning's cogent criticisms of the traditional conceptualization of unreliable narration, but we would like to take up here some of his suggestions and look at the problem from a slightly different angle. Nünning is primarily interested in the development of a watertight and consistent definition and theory of what an unreliable narrator is and of how the phenomenon can be identified on an intersubjective basis. This necessarily implies that a lot of attention is given to the formal aspects of the concept, and Nünning has a lot to say in this respect. However, there is also a pragmatic aspect to his reconceptualization of the unreliable narrator, such as when he claims that the reader, when confronted with irreconcilable oppositions between the world presented in the text and his own model of reality, tries to dissolve the resulting tension by declaring the narrator to be an unreliable one, thus "naturalizing" the text by bringing it back within his cognitive horizon (1998: 26).⁵

The problem we see with this description of the pragmatic dimension of unreliable narration is that it seems to neglect the transformative power of the text in so far as the latter is relegated into the realm of a deviant other the function of which it is to reconfirm—through its negative categorization as unreliable—the dominant schemata, frames or interpretive patterns of the reader. The naturalization of the text through the dissolution of the hermeneutic tension created by the inconsistencies of an unreliable narrative constitutes a kind of closure which privileges the reader's horizon over that of the narrator and allows the recipient ultimately to sink back into his armchair where he spends a nice and cosy evening with the ideas of his reconfirmed world picture. In new historicist terms, this would turn unreliable narration into an instrument of containment only and would ignore its subversive potential. The idea of the naturalization of a text, then, is one that is prone to neglect the often irreducibly aporic elements and faultlines in many fictions and instead foregrounds the human need the reader feels for the harmonising of the discrepant. This yearning for consistency and harmony, for a well-patterned world that can clearly, accurately and reliably be represented by the frames and schemata of our world models, is a reflex of our need for orientation, our will to understand and thus control and domesticate the world we live in in order to be able to feel safe in it.⁶ "[M]an is a pattern-building animal" (Antor 1992: 40), but in times of epistemic crisis such as the modern and postmodern periods, the disorientation of the lost interpretive centre that cannot hold any longer more often than not turns the cognitive "naturalization" of the world into an open-ended process the teleological potential of which seems to be on the wane.

Valuable as the recent debates on whether and how to redefine the concept of the unreliable narrator may be, then, we would like to suggest that it is of essential importance to go further than most critical narratology has gone so far and discuss the cultural functions of the use of such a device as that of the unreliable narrator. Our formal taxonomies ought to be as accurate, as free from internal contradictions and as cognitively watertight as possible, but a functional analysis of when, how and in particular to what purpose narrative tools have been used in prose fiction in concrete historical and cultural circumstances is an indispensable prerequisite to turning narratological analysis into a worthwhile activity. Only then can narratology lead to relevant and interesting interpretations of narrative texts and avoid the risk of turning into an arcane ivory-tower glass bead game.

Nünning himself, having delineated the most important principles of the redefinition of the concept of the unreliable narrator, briefly mentions new horizons for further enquiry and in this context refers to the needs of a "cultural" or "historical narratology" (1998: 36), which centre around the functional aspects of the use of such narratological devices as the one discussed here. In what is to follow, we will attempt to embed the discussion of unreliable narration in Patrick McGrath's novel *The Grotesque* (1989) in a discussion of the consequences of the epistemic crisis of postmodernism as well as in an analysis of the new attractions of gothic writing as well as of the grotesque in an age in which the problem of orientation has turned into a particularly virulent one.⁷ This case study, then, will suggest how close reading and narratological analysis can link up with an interpretation of the historical and cultural situation and of the functions of specific narrative devices within specific contexts.

2. Patrick McGrath's *The Grotesque* and the Crossing of Borders

Patrick McGrath's first novel, *The Grotesque* (1989), is a remarkable example of postmodern neo-gothic writing in English, and although such a term conveniently enables us to label the book, the novel is notoriously difficult to categorize because one of its main characteristics is the principle of transgression. All kinds of rules are violated here and borders are crossed in a book that does not even stick to the norms of established novelistic genres and combines features of the gothic tale with characteristics of the detective novel.⁸

The first person narrator of the text, Sir Hugo Coal, tyrannically rules over his family at his inherited home of Crook Hall. In his idiosyncratic urge to exercise total control over his environment, he breaks out of the rules of ordinary civilized behaviour and thus tries to provoke and force into submission his wife Harriet and

his daughter Cleo, such as the occasion when, at the dinner table, he quite openly feeds maggots to a monstrous toad called Herbert after his father-in-law (14).⁹ He has no sympathy for his wife's distaste at the spectacle, which he provokingly claims to be nothing but an ordinary manifestation of natural processes. Not only does Sir Hugo cross the border between what is by most people considered to be the normal and the abnormal,¹⁰ but he also transgresses the norms of average social behaviour in his excessive need to dominate over others through the exercise of his idiosyncratic whims.

Sir Hugo's hobbyhorse is paleontology, and he is constantly engaged in trying to reconstruct the skeleton of *Phlegmosaurus*, supposedly a Mesozoic raptor and an important link in a chain of argument with which Hugo tries to prove that dinosaurs really were the precursors of today's birds.¹¹ Coal thus tries to cross the established boundaries of conventional scientific taxonomies and become the founder of a totally new system of classification in paleontology. Not only would this paradigm shift constitute a transgression of the borders of traditional thought, but it would also make its creator a famous man, of course, so that Sir Hugo's scientific exertions are also based on personal vanity.

14

The Coals, at the beginning of the novel, have a new butler, Fledge, who, together with his wife Doris, is to run the household and serve his employer's family. Here, too, though, the reader is confronted with a transgression of the borders of what one would normally expect in such a case. Since the Fledges' position is one of trust, one would think that the Coals only hired them after careful enquiry and after having been presented with appropriate references. The opposite, however, is the case. The Fledges were "engaged on the spot" by Harriet Coal, despite the fact that "there seemed to be some difficulty with their papers", a fact Sir Hugo "was not very happy about" (17).

These elements of transgression — Sir Hugo's idiosyncratic and despotic rule over his household, his attempts at reconstructing a raptor's skeleton and the unresolved mystery about the Fledges' earlier history — are three important components of a story that thrives on the breaking of taboos and on the transgression of the rules of social life in western society, with the effect of creating an atmosphere of uncertainty, danger, threat and horror in the reader. And indeed, horrible things do happen in the course of the novel, and these events in turn constitute violent transgressions of the done and of the expected. In one scene, for example, Sir Hugo is shocked, as he tells us, to see his prospective much-hated son-in-law Sidney Giblet engaging in homosexual activities with Fledge, the butler (53-56), whom he also suspects of carrying on a relationship with his wife Harriet.

When, not long after this incident, Sidney disappears without a trace, the conventional framework of the explicable is transgressed once again. An

atmosphere of mystery and menace is thus created, and Sir Hugo's daughter Cleo finely expresses the effect the incidents have on her and on the reader when she says: "I just hate all this not knowing" (63). Certainty is re-established only through another transgression, i.e. by the breaking of the taboo of taking another person's life, when Sidney's bones are found weeks later in Ceck Marsh, the treacherous moorland surrounding Crook Hall (109).¹² In a further twist of the spiral of transgression in this novel, it soon turns out that Sidney's bones were given to Sir Hugo's pigs to gnaw before being dumped in the marshes (110-111). Not only does this direct the police investigation in the direction of George Lecky, Sir Hugo's loyal servant and one-time army comrade in Africa, who is now suspected of having murdered Sidney, but it leads to yet another broken taboo when it turns out that the very pigs who seem to have devoured Sidney's flesh were later slaughtered and then served up as sausages and ham to the inhabitants and guests of Crook Hall so that the reader is confronted with a case of cannibalism in a story set right in the heart of England. As Sir Hugo drily states: "We had all, indirectly, and unknowingly, eaten Sidney" (162).

After the discovery of Sidney's gnawed bones, George is arrested in due course (130-131) and accused of first-degree murder. It is only after he has been sentenced to death (167) and his execution is imminent that he breaks his stubborn silence and accuses Sir Hugo of having killed the young man (178). No one in the novel believes him, though, and Lecky is hanged, which, in turn, constitutes another transgression because by now the reader himself suspects that Sir Hugo may have murdered Sidney Giblet, whom he hated and did not want to see as his son-in-law. Coal would have had both a motive and the means to kill Sidney, and in retrospect, Hugo's dream of his beloved *Phlegmosaurus* killing an unfortunate brontosaurus in a swamp by slicing the creature's throat with its awful claw (102) sounds like a psychological reflex allowing Coal to cope with the memory of how he cut Sidney's throat out on Ceck Marsh. Lecky's hanging, then, rather than being the act of retributive justice it is supposed to be, would be an act of state-sanctioned injustice, with the murderer getting away unscathed, so that the prevalent ethical system would not only be transgressed but completely inverted.

Although there are many clues and other pieces of circumstantial evidence in the text pointing in the direction of Sir Hugo being the murderer, his guilt remains irritatingly difficult to prove, though, and the exact truth about what happened to Sidney even at the end of the novel remains shrouded in mystery,¹³ despite the strong suspicions the reader may have concerning the narrator. Once again, rules are transgressed here, in this case the norms of the classic detective story, in which the riddle of the crime is solved and the culprit is justly punished.

15

Once again, then, the reader is at a loss as to what rules apply in the story, and he is constantly trying to gain new orientation in a tale that seems to have set out consciously to destroy conventional patterns of expectation and understanding in a fictional universe that is out of joint and in which apparently nothing can be taken for granted.

3. The Narrator's Transgressive Unreliability

The one source that could possibly provide orientation in the novel, i.e. the voice of the narrator, leaves the reader in the lurch just as much as the various elements cited above. For although the story is told by Sir Hugo himself, he very quickly turns out to be a very unreliable narrator indeed. Almost at the very beginning of the book, he informs the reader of the fact that he is "to all intents and purposes a vegetable", able to "lift not a finger, nor even *blink* at will" (16). When, in this context, Sir Hugo for the first time mentions his "cerebral accident" (16), it becomes clear that he has suffered a kind of stroke and has remained seriously physically handicapped.¹⁴ To what extent he has also been mentally impaired is still open to speculation at this early point in the narrative. But the question is one of the utmost importance, since the reader on the one hand is confronted with so many disquietingly disorienting incidents and details and on the other has as his only source of information the monologic narrative presented by Sir Hugo. The latter's report of his repulsive habit of feeding maggots to Herbert, the toad, for example, certainly transgresses the borders of what an ordinary western reader would expect of a normal and sane average person, but it could nevertheless be interpreted in two different ways, namely as a symptom of madness or as a not very appetizing but also rather amusing idiosyncrasy on the part of a natural scientist who can only "welcome such phenomena [i.e. maggots and toads, etc.] as facets of Nature" (14). The first of these two interpretations would place Sir Hugo in the realm of an abnormal other, while the second would constitute a more or less convincing attempt at giving the first person narrator the benefit of the doubt and providing an explanation for his unusual behaviour that would somehow refamiliarize it and thus still make it acceptable.

Very soon, however, the reader's doubts about Sir Hugo's unreliability receive new food in so far as there are internal contradictions in what the narrator tells us, inconsistencies of a kind that make the reader suspect that Sir Hugo wants to present himself at a given moment in a favourable light and then unwittingly gives himself away.¹⁵ For example, when the narrator comes to talk about the late Mesozoic predatory carnivore that he claims to have discovered himself in East Africa and the skeleton of which he tries to reassemble, he gives the creature's name

as "*Phlegmosaurus carbonensis* (so named because the bones came up slightly charred-Greek *phlegein*, to burn)" (21). Not only does the parenthetical explanation of the etymology of the name provided by Sir Hugo point up his qualities as a very learned person indeed, i.e. someone who still has a knowledge of Greek, but it also directs the reader's attention to the first part of the designation for the dinosaur and thus away from the second part, which effectively names the creature after Sir Hugo Coal. If the latter seems to be blissfully unaware in this scene of the close parallel between his own name and that of the prehistoric animal he claims to have discovered, this is uncovered as the mask it is a little later, when he proudly refers to his "single, all-consuming passion-the beast that bore my name, *P. carbonensis*" (41), the abbreviation of *Phlegmosaurus* proving that what really counts for Sir Hugo is to have the creature named after himself. By now the reader knows that he is confronted with a very conceited narrator who is not always honest and who presents a façade the reality behind which has to be inferred from such indirect signals as the inconsistency just pointed out.¹⁶

The reader's doubts concerning Sir Hugo's seriousness as a scientist and his reliability as a narrator receive further impetus when it turns out that his portentous announcement that he "was to deliver an important lecture to the Royal Society of Paleontology" (21) on the subject of *Phlegmosaurus carbonensis* was nothing but wishful thinking since the Royal Society is interested neither in his paleontological theory nor in the lecture he has offered to give on it (30). Coal's suspicions directed against Sykes-Herring, the Royal Society's representative, and against the latter's "machinations" (31) are relativized by the fact that they follow immediately upon Sir Hugo's speculations about his butler Fledge's supposed malicious joy over his employer's difficulties (30-31). In the light of the narrator's vanity, such suspicions appear as nothing but the result of the hurt feelings of a self-appointed and unsuccessful amateur scientist, and this impression is reinforced rather than weakened when Sir Hugo tries to justify himself after having described the Royal Society's letter of refusal concerning the proffered lecture:

The problem is, men like Sykes-Herring, themselves blinkered, find the breadth of vision of a naturalist like myself acutely threatening, for, as a function of their long formal training, they are devoid of the most vital of scientific attributes, *imagination*. They bring too much categorical and theoretical baggage to the task, they see what they expect to see and no more. The gentleman naturalist, by contrast, has an open-minded and theoretically eclectic attitude toward natural phenomena, and is thus far better equipped for informed, imaginative speculation. He is far more likely to make the sudden brilliant intuitive leap to revolutionary truth. This is why I have always had such trouble with the Royal Society, with men like Sykes-Herring; this is why they accuse me of mixing up my bones, why they refuse to publish my papers, why they sabotage my lectures. They practice safe science, and safe science to my mind is no sort of science at all.

[...] Sykes-Herring's letter, and the animosity that lay behind it, disturbed my concentration [...]. The whole business, my lifework, *Phlegmosaurus*. a sense of bitter futility impregnated all my thoughts, and I simply could not stay with it with any sort of zeal (43).

Although the reader may have heard about the role of the imagination in the history of scientific inventions and about the speculative element inherent in scientific research, this can do but little to save Sir Hugo's position here, since the signifiers pointing towards his unreliability are too numerous and too powerful. Coal violates many of the reader's expectations as to what constitutes a scientific approach. His emphasis on the role of the imagination seems exaggerated, and his dismissal of categories and theories stands in blatant contrast to his own attempt at devising a new categorization of prehistoric fauna based on his own unproved theory. His ideal of arriving at "revolutionary truth" through a "sudden brilliant intuitive leap" again has the ring of wishful thinking to it, and the assumption of Sykes-Herring's animosity by now sounds like the repetition of the *idée fixe* of someone suffering from persecution mania rather than a fact we can take for granted. What is more, the use of repetition in Hugo's syntax, with its fourfold use of "why" as an explanatory device intended to justify his position, is indicative of the narrator's considerable excitement as he self-pityingly describes what he considers to be his undeserved problems. At the end of the passage quoted here, Sir Hugo himself explicitly refers to the intense emotional reaction the whole affair of the lecture and of the Royal Society's critical attitude towards his theory has created in him and thus unwittingly weakens his status as a reliable source of information.¹⁷

Attempts at self-justification and thus at legitimizing his position and at authenticating his own narrative occur in other contexts as well,¹⁸ such as when Sir Hugo suspects his wife Harriet having an affair with the butler Fledge behind his back:

But perhaps you think I'm making all this up, perhaps you think these the delusions of a diseased imagination. Explain to me why, then, if Fledge had not seduced Harriet, and thus bent her to his will, she made no protest when he turned my wheelchair to the wall? (81)

Apparently, Coal himself realizes that his speculations about his butler and his wife's supposed infidelity do not sound very convincing and therefore feels the need to provide evidence, although the latter turns out to be just as speculative as his science. Moreover, he is in no position to make accusations of this sort since he himself has erotic dreams about Doris Fledge (50-51) and once even made a pass at her (136), an action in which he was caught *in flagranti* by his butler. He may

therefore have a vested interest in constructing an illicit affair between his wife and Fledge in order to re-establish a balance of moral failure and thus overcome any latent bad conscience he may have so that his manoeuvre of self-justification described above only serves to further stress his unreliability.

The way Sir Hugo fantasizes about the supposed sexual relationship between Fledge and Harriet casts further doubt upon his earlier speculations concerning Fledge's homosexuality and his relationship with the unfortunate Sidney. This is due to the fact that in his imagination, when he thinks about Fledge in bed with Harriet, he concentrates on sexually very explicit visual descriptions of the naked butler (e.g. 138, 163, 169, 174) to such an extent that the reader suspects that these thoughts provide Coal himself with not inconsiderable erotic pleasure. The implication of this is, of course, that Sir Hugo has homosexual leanings himself and, unreliable narrator that he is, has merely projected his own sexual preferences on the butler he hates so much and has such great interest in maligning.¹⁹

In another passage, Coal as a narrator once again acts according to the tenet that attack is the best means of defence and tries to take the narrative bull by the horns by openly talking about his difficulties in presenting a consistent and acceptable version of what actually happened. This time, however, he does not succeed in coming up with even a semblance of an explanation:

So I sit here [...] and try to construct for you as full and coherent an account as I can of *how things got this way*. You must forgive me if at times I appear to contradict myself, or in other ways violate the natural order of the events I am disclosing; this business of selecting and organizing one's memories so as to describe precisely *what happened* is a delicate, perilous undertaking, and I am beginning to wonder whether it may not be beyond me. The scientific attitude to which I have for decades been faithful, with its strict notions of objectivity, etc., has come under heavy assault since the accident. Cracks have appeared, and from out of those cracks grin monstrous anomalies. I cannot subdue them. I have become superstitious. I am subject to "sightings" (114).

Once again here, the narrator breaks through the boundaries of what is expected of him by the reader. Instead of reasserting his claim to narrative authority, he seems already to have given up the game and self-pityingly supplicates the reader's compassion and understanding. The passage quoted here, then, is in effect a premature and abortive attempt at self-justification, and at the same time, of course, it increases the reader's wariness as to the status of what is presented by Coal.

Although Sir Hugo's unreliability by now is established beyond any reasonable doubt whatsoever, this does not simply mean that everything is quite clear in so far as nothing presented by the narrator can be believed or accepted. Rather, the reader finds himself in a curiously awkward epistemological situation because on

the one hand Hugo's words provide the only material to go by and on the other hand the constant awareness of the narrator's unreliability at least potentially calls everything in doubt. Where to draw the line, what to believe and what to reject, at times becomes a very difficult decision indeed.²⁰ Sir Hugo as first person narrator sometimes even seems to play a rather facetious game with the reader, such as when he reports a conversation with his son-in-law, Henry Horn, in the course of which he expresses surprise that he didn't know "that all the Coals were mad" (96). Although this may only have been a jocular remark to his second daughter's husband, the reader is bound to take it more seriously after all he has heard from Coal. This confronts the reader with the equivalent of the Cretan liar's paradox, however, so that no matter how he reads Hugo's words, the latter's unreliability is foregrounded and the reader's precarious epistemological tightrope walk becomes ever more dangerous.

Further textual and contextual markers of Sir Hugo's unreliability as a narrator could be enumerated *ad nauseam* here. However, as was pointed out at the beginning of this article, we consider unreliable narration not to be an end in itself of narratological enquiry, but a tool with a specific function within the historical and cultural contexts in which the text was produced. Suffice it therefore to say here that the various techniques employed in *The Grottesque* to render Sir Hugo unreliable serve to heighten the feeling of uncertainty created in the reader by the various transgressions of norms and expectations. The effect of disorientation is thus compounded by the unreliability of a narrator who pathetically fails to provide epistemological clarity in a fictional universe that seems to have fallen apart.

4. The Excesses of Gothic Transgression and of the Grottesque

The lack of orientation caused by unreliability and uncertainty is further reinforced in the novel by its conscious reference to the tradition of gothic writing and to the grotesque. The latter is hinted at in the title of the novel itself, and many of the elements in the text produce gothic effects with the help of grotesque features. Sir Hugo himself, the unreliable first person narrator, is a grotesque figure, and the title of the book cannot but be read as a direct reference to him. The principle of distortion and defamiliarization, which, according to Christian W. Thomsen, is the constituent characteristic of the grotesque, with its distortion of proportions and dimensions, is incarnated in both a physical and a moral sense in Coal (1974: 11). Right at the beginning of the book, Sir Hugo declares: "I have come to believe that to be a grotesque is to be my destiny. For a man who turns into a vegetable — isn't that a grotesque?" (16). But the distortions of Coal's outward physical

appearance are just the objective correlative of his twisted inner psychological world. In one of the apologetic passages of self-justification, he explicitly points this out himself when he says: "There is something I have learned since being paralyzed, and that is that in the absence of sensory information, *the imagination always tends to the grotesque*" (69). Sir Hugo thus confirms the aberration of his thoughts with respect to the norm that an ordinary reader would expect, and he thereby points directly to his own unreliability as a narrator. In this novel, then, the unreliability of the narrative is to be seen as a result of the narrator's grotesqueness, and these two features of the book both have the same function in the cultural context of the text, as will be shown below.

Just as transgression is a constitutive principle of unreliable narration, so is it of the grotesque, and both have the effect of producing a feeling of disorientation and uncertainty in the reader. The gothic is another tool with which such a result can be achieved in narrative texts, and indeed, *The Grottesque*, in a very demonstrative way, places itself within the tradition of gothic writing that has been prominent in anglophone literature ever since the second half of the eighteenth century. In Sir Hugo, we have a twentieth-century equivalent of both the gothic villain and of the monster. Instead of a skeleton in the cupboard, in *The Grottesque* we find a skeleton in the barn, and Crook Hall, Coal's family seat, is the equivalent of the gloomy castles of earlier gothic fiction or of the old houses of later representatives of this kind of narrative. Crook Hall dates back to the sixteenth century and thus constitutes a remnant of a slightly mysterious past in the present. Moreover, it is also "completely overgrown with ivy", and the windows peer through the foliage like the eyes of "some stunted and shaggy beast" (20). Not only is the anthropomorphization of Sir Hugo's house reminiscent of the similarly "eye-like windows" of Poe's *House of Usher* (1967: 138),²¹ one of the most important texts of nineteenth-century gothic writing in English, but the effect here once more is of uncanniness and of a latent threat so that the reader's feelings of safety and certainty are yet again undermined. This is even intensified by the following description:

Crook, curiously, faces south, a remarkable decision on the part of the builder, given the sixteenth-century belief that the south wind brought corruption and evil vapours. It requires extensive work, particularly the roof, which leaks, and the plumbing, which is not only unreliable but noisy. A flushed toilet rumbles like thunder, in Crook (20).

Any possible associations the reader may have had whereby the south signified light and, by extension, possibly even reason, are here turned into their opposite and, in yet another transgression, new links are established with notions of darkness in the form of the forces of evil and decay. This semiotic leap is repeated in the

description of the ominous rumbling and thunder of the plumbing because what ought to provide a luxury of modern life here only creates a sense of disintegration and foreboding.

If the castles of eighteenth-century gothic fiction were often surrounded by dark forests in which one could easily lose one's way, Crook Hall is situated in "abrupt, uneven country, full of hills and woods" (21) and surrounded by Ceck Marsh, in which one can also easily get lost. This topographic feature of the text is another physical equivalent to the philosophical problems of orientation and disorientation that feature so prominently in the novel.

More gothic and grotesque effects can be found throughout the text. Doris Fledge, the Butler's wife, for example is described as a woman who "at first sight [...] gives the appearance of a large crow, an unblinking alien to human affairs, a corvine transmigrated into woman's form" (19). Not only do we feel reminded here of Poe's raven and the ominous atmosphere of foreboding surrounding it, but we also think of the numerous other black birds jolting us out of our complacent feelings of security in texts ranging from eighteenth-century gothic fiction to Alfred Hitchcock's *Birds*. The allusion to the metempsychotic transmigration of souls adds an element of the supernatural from one strand of the gothic tradition, and the reference to "an unblinking alien" introduces the notion of an uncomfortable alterity that adds a sense of menace to the description of Doris. When Fledge's wife, in a late scene in the novel, cuts off half her index finger in the kitchen in a state of drunken stupor (179), the motif of dismemberment already present in the reappearance of Sidney's gnawed bones is taken up again, and this heightens the effect of a fictional universe full of horrors which is governed by the principles of the gothic.

This effect is staged in an almost paradigmatic manner in a number of scenes, which might have been taken out of a textbook on how to write a gothic narrative. When Sidney Giblet disappears, for example, Sir Hugo describes how he and his daughter Cleo search the area for the young man. On their quest, they pass through the graveyard by the church at night, which stands out against a sky full of black rainclouds and partly lit by a moon hanging threateningly "huge and low and yellow" above the horizon (61). When they come to George Lecky's farmhouse, they are confronted with an ominous scene:

George's farmhouse was a square, squat, yellowing structure, and this night it seemed to glow with an eerily vivid and unwholesome lustre. I pushed open the back door and shouted his name. There was no answer. We went in, and the wind, which had freshened considerably in the last few minutes, slammed the door behind us with a bang. The kitchen was empty. A naked bulb hung from a length of twisted cord in the middle of the room and shed a dull, harsh light on the few sticks of furniture,

the flagstoned floor, the rusting stove with its tin chimney rising crookedly through a hole in the ceiling and rattling dully as the wind came gusting down. A first volley of rain beat up against the window, which was uncurtained, one smashed pane patched over with a piece of damp cardboard. "George!" I shouted, and [...] there was no answer. It was weirdly disturbing, and my scalp for a moment prickled with a vague sense of dread —his lorry was in the yard and the light was on, but where was the man himself? I told Cleo to wait in the kitchen while I went through the house; but all the rooms were empty. "He's not here", I told her as I came back into the kitchen. The rain was lashing the windows by this time, and we could hear the pigs grunting on the far side of the yard. There was suddenly an ugly noise overhead, and Cleo turned to me, her eyes bright with alarm. It was a raspy, grating, scraping sound, and it seemed to accelerate, and as it did so it grew thunderously loud —it was a slate, I realized, dislodged by the wind, sliding down the roof. [...] It was all very uncanny. We returned to Crook in silence (61-62).

In this passage, the two protagonists are on a quest, but instead of finding the hoped-for presence (of George and of Sidney), they are only confronted with an absence. Instead of finding an answer to the question of where Sidney is, they are presented only with a second question, namely that of where George is. Far from knowing more, they know less as a result. The fullness of understanding is substituted in this scene by the disconcerting and mysterious emptiness of the kitchen. The description of the weather conditions has the ring of pathetic fallacy to it, although it is not absolutely clear to the reader what the wind and the rain might be the equivalent of in the world of humans. The effect of such a device is that of creating an atmosphere of violence and menace, and once again the reader feels at least as uncertain and exposed as Cleo does in this scene. This latent sense of an aggressive and hostile presence is heightened by the implied anthropomorphization of the house, the sounds and movements of which in the wind make it appear to be a living thing. The sound of the loose tile sliding down the roof may be rationally explained, but, as in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, where supposedly supernatural events can also be explained in a natural way with the help of reason, the nerves of the narrator and of Cleo have been jolted. Gone is the feeling of security in a fictional world in which anything seems to have become possible.

The gothic effect of the above scene becomes even stronger on a second reading of the book, because once the reader knows that Sidney's bones will later be found gnawed by the pigs on George's farm and that just before his death George accused Sir Hugo of having killed the young man, a double chill is sent down the reader's spine. On the one hand, we realize that the sound of the pigs grunting in this scene may be the sound they make when eating Sidney's flesh off his bones. But on the other hand —and this adds yet another twist to the spiral of gothic horror— the

reader also realizes that Sir Hugo being the unreliable narrator he is, as well as one of the suspects in the case, the description of the scene we get here from him may be a well-planted red herring presented to us by the mad monologist of the novel in order to divert our attention away from him and arouse our suspicions against George who may be engaged in feeding the freshly slaughtered Sidney to the pigs in this scene.²² The reader thus becomes aware of the fact that he may all the time have been listening to the voice of a ruthless murderer, with the latter being the only source of information available to us.²³

"Gothic signifies a writing of excess" as Fred Botting tells us in his introductory survey of this kind of narrative literature (1996: 1), and once again, the reader here is confronted with excess in the sense of a going beyond, a transgression, be it transgression of the bounds of moral norms and expectations, be it excess in the form of a breaking of the rules of reliable communication. But rather than present further examples of gothic elements in the novel, in what is to follow we will try to bring together the analyses of the various kinds of transgression we have presented so far in order to describe the cultural functions of these devices in the postmodern environment in which the novel was published.

24

5. *The Grotesque, Transgression and the Postmodern Condition*

We have seen that the fictional universe of *The Grotesque* is one in which established frameworks of thought and orientation are disregarded and in which the bounds of the known and of the familiar are exceeded. This results in disorientation both in the protagonists of the novel and in its readers, in a feeling of uncertainty and menace that seeks resolution in the reestablishment of consistency because as pattern-building animals we are in need of cognitive frameworks that allow us to feel comfortable in a supposedly intelligible and manageable world.²⁴ The twentieth century, with its extended epistemic crisis, its loss of a centre and its discovery of the problematic status of universalist master narratives and essentialisms,²⁵ was one in which such problems of orientation were felt to be particularly pressing and important. While in the high modernist period of the early twentieth century, writers still tried to overcome the decenteredness of our fragmented existence and at least hinted at the feasibility of such a project in their depiction of Joycean epiphanies or fleeting moments of vision in Virginia Woolf, in their eclectic use of unifying myths and in their new and imaginative reworkings of earlier grand narratives, late twentieth-century writers, influenced more by the philosophies of postmodernism, were less optimistic in this respect and rather stressed the constructedness of a multiplicity of limited centres none of which could lay claim

to representing truth and reality as such and therefore could not aspire to the status of ultimate authority.

All the tools of transgression used in *The Grotesque*—be it the tradition of gothic writing or the use of the grotesque or such a device as that of unreliable narration—are eminently prone to produce such an effect of decentering, of fragmentation and of disorientation, and they incite the reader to try and recenter the world by re-establishing conceptual and interpretive consistency. They are thus to be seen as agents of a strategy of reader-activation which, as remains to be shown, does not present ready-made alternative concepts and frameworks but uses the epistemological and epistemic suffering it engenders in the reader to make him look for a way out himself.

Sir Hugo Coal, the unreliable narrator of *The Grotesque*, is the embodiment of the epistemic crisis we have been talking about here. His existence is characterized by fragmentation on various levels. He is the representative of a minor feudal dynasty that seems to be in total decline. Not only does this come out in the rotten state of Crook Hall, which is almost beyond repair, but it is also palpable in his own madness and in the incipient madness in his daughter Cleo triggered off by the crisis of Sidney's death. Sir Hugo himself, in a characteristic way, compares his house with "a dying mammoth, down on its knees but tossing its tusks against heaven in one last doomed flourish of revolt" (42). Although he was able to father children, Coal at the time of narration has become almost impotent (76), and he admits that "I would at times permit myself to weep, as I contemplated my own ruin and the ruin of my house" (88). In his dreams he "would [...] merge organically with Crook and we would rot together on that high hill overlooking the valley [...]" (157). We become witnesses in this novel to what could be referred to, in allusion to another important text in the tradition of gothic writing, as the fall of the house of Coal.

25

Disintegration and fragmentation, then, do not only occur on the merely physical level of the illness of Sir Hugo's smitten body, but on other levels as well. Beyond the family, however, there is also a certain anachronistic social order that is engaged in the process of dissolution, for Sir Hugo embodies feudalism both as a member of the landed gentry and the lower aristocracy and as a representative of British imperialism. The bones that are the raw material for his reconstruction of his beloved and doubtful *Phlegmosaurus carbonensis* he brought back from Africa, where he obviously served in the British colonial forces together with George Lecky, whose totally irrational and to him ultimately lethal loyalty to Sir Hugo goes back to their time in imperial British Africa. If, as the reader strongly suspects, Sir Hugo has indeed killed Sidney and George is innocently killed in Sir Hugo's place, then the loyal servant is exploited and victimized by his master just as much as the

African colonies were abused and exploited by the British imperialists. The novel thus demonstrates the rottenness of the old colonial system and shows its inability to survive.

Coal himself explicitly expresses his consternation at the way in which his world dissolves around him and at his own impotence in the face of this process when he states that "I was acutely conscious of my inability to intervene in any way — watching things fall apart takes its toll, I discovered; one tends to fall apart oneself" (158). Sir Hugo here unwittingly quotes from William Butler Yeats' famous poem "The Second Coming", the third line of which — "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (1974: 99)— has become a *locus classicus* of modernist poetry. For the narrator of the novel, the old patterns have fallen apart, and he desperately holds on to the remnants of understanding and control to the tatters of which he hopes he can still cling. This comes out in an almost ironic way when Sir Hugo refers to his old family motto to stave off despair:

Nil desperandum. Since I was a boy I've felt that those words were meant for me. At times of crisis—in Africa, for instance—they have given me strength. It's surprising, is it not, how much solace can be had from two words—literally, "there is no reason to despair"? Perhaps they matter so much to me because I have a very real tendency to despair (118).

26

The whole novel, in a way, is nothing but an attempt on the part of Sir Hugo to escape from despair. At the beginning of his narrative, he addresses the reader and tells him that "when my story is over I shall be dead" (18), and indeed, on the very last page of the book, he dies, obstinately muttering one last time "*Nil desperandum*", but nevertheless unable to protect himself from the freshening wind significantly "blowing from the south" (186). Coal, then, is a kind of paranoid postmodern Scheherazade whose only weapon with which to fight off despair and death is the narrative pattern-building that constitutes the book.

There is a clear process of decline discernible in the novel, beginning with a Sir Hugo Coal still very much in charge of things around him and gradually but unstoppably moving towards a total loss of control. This can be seen in small details, such as in the narrator's garden, which undergoes a transformation from a well-tended "flower garden, with its terraces and its goldfish pond, its hedges and lawns, all threaded with narrow, winding paths and enclosed by a crumbling brick wall" (26) to a place "growing wild" (26), with "the untended weeds [...] crowding the blooms of the bulbs" (164) after the death of George Lecky, who also acted as Sir Hugo's gardener.²⁶ Sir Hugo is a very dominant character, and he finds it hard to let go in the disintegrating universe around him, such as when he says: "Strange how reluctant I was to acknowledge that control of my fate lay beyond my own conscious will. Habit of a lifetime, I suppose" (115).

The garden in *The Grotesque* is just a minor example of a more general movement from order to chaos, from orientation and control to disorientation and confusion, and nowhere does this become more palpable than in the treatment of science in the novel. At the beginning of the book, Sir Hugo presents himself as the representative of a scientific approach to the world, a view indebted to the Enlightenment ideals of empirical rational analysis and understanding in the service of the detection of the truth and the moulding of the best of all possible realities. He himself describes his initial position as that of someone who "was still an empiricist" (53),²⁷ and the reader at first sees Sir Hugo's statements in the light of such a tradition. In particular, Coal is an adherent of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and of the principle of selection through the survival of the fittest. At first, he manages to use this scientific orientation as an enlightened cloak with which to hide his dictatorial tendencies and his dreams of absolute control. For example, when he talks about the new butler Fledge, he mimes the modern liberal opposed to hierarchical social relationships such as that of master and servant and uses his wife Harriet as an excuse for having a butler at all:

She was brought up in the belief that a house was not a house without some sort of manservant in it. Not that she's a snob, but she's so totally assimilated to the outlook of her father, the colonel, that she finds it impossible, in some respects, to adapt to changing social and economic conditions. Failure to adapt, I would tell her, leads to extinction; but she never cared. "Let us die out then", she blithely replied, "but let us at least do it comfortably" (19-20).

27

Sir Hugo here turns out to be a social Darwinist as well, and this is another textual signifier the collision of which with most readers' expectations and attitudes points towards the narrator's unreliability, although at this early stage of the narrative many a reader may still give him the benefit of the doubt. Harriet's supposed response to Coal's alleged criticism of the institution of the butler can be read in retrospect as a foreboding of the fall of the house of Coal we have already analysed. Nevertheless, the above passage also functions as part of Sir Hugo's construction of himself as a sober man with a rationalist scientific outlook on the world.²⁸ His interest in Darwin is so great that he even shares his idol's eating habits, as he tells us himself:

Like Darwin I do not care what I eat as long as it's the same every day [...].Mrs. Fledge apparently was in the same culinary tradition, and this permitted me to devote my mealtimes to reading the *Times*, or thinking about my lecture, or tormenting Sidney Giblet, with no anxieties about what would appear on my plate (23).

Here once again, what is supposed to be evidence in favour of Coal's scientific leanings rather puts in doubt his reliability and the status of his science. His

obsessive identification with Darwin constitutes another transgression of the boundaries of what an ordinary reader would expect and makes Sir Hugo appear to be a monomaniac, as a consequence of which his trustworthiness is called into doubt. In our context here, however, the passage quoted above is also interesting because it testifies to an almost neurotically heightened need on his part for security, control and orientation. He abhors the surprise of being confronted with something new or unknown, a position which belies his alleged preference for Darwin's idea of the survival of the fittest based on the principle of adaptation to changed and new environments. Rather, Coal prefers a static order within a clearly-defined framework in which the unexpected does not exist.²⁹ He literally hides behind the *Times*, i.e. behind a conservative newspaper representing an old hierarchical division of society in which people like him had a comfortable position. However, he obviously has no problems in confronting others, such as the detested Sidney, with the disorder and contingent surprise he himself abhors so much. Once again, Hugo's attempt at placing himself within a certain scientific tradition only contributes to his self-detection as an unreliable mad monologist.

Coal's scientific knowledge also turns out to be unreliable in so far as he is not interested in what is accepted as important mainstream knowledge, but in the arcane details of specialist areas. For example, he is fascinated by the life-cycle of the bot-fly, which he explains to the reader in the following words:

Do you know about the life cycle of the bot-fly? *Gastrophilus equi*? It lays its eggs on the forequarters of a horse. When the eggs hatch out, the irritation makes the horse lick the hairs and swallow the larvae. The larvae feed on the inner lining of the horse's stomach for a year; and then lodge in its dung and are excreted. They bury themselves in the ground and pupate—and the process starts all over again. Elegant, no? Elegant, invariable—and pointless (25).

What is interesting here is not only Sir Hugo's pride in the specialist knowledge he hopes to impress the reader with, but his own reaction to what he so braggingly flaunts in front of our eyes. We have here in a nutshell the experience of the modern and postmodern loss of the centre because the more he knows, the more the idea of a meaningful world serving a particular purpose seems to become untenable. Knowledge of the life-cycle of the bot-fly to Sir Hugo is aesthetically pleasing, and the reliability of the unchanging repetition of the process may cater to his need to avoid the surprises of sudden change, but its cyclical structure also destroys any illusion of teleology and thus raises the question of the meaning or purpose of natural processes in an unfeeling and contingent universe. Darwinism itself, i.e. the theory Sir Hugo favours so much, contributed a great deal to the fragmentation and the discrediting of older teleological world pictures, the explanatory power and the potential for orientation, the loss of which Coal indirectly seems to mourn here.

It soon becomes quite clear that Sir Hugo suffers from the new uncertainty of the epistemic crisis that characterizes the age he lives in. Regretfully, he has to acknowledge the waning of truth in the twentieth century and in empirical science:

[...] even for a scientist, pure empiricism is extremely hard to achieve, so hard, in fact, that one begins to doubt the possibility of constructing any version of reality that is not skewed in advance by the projections, denials, and impostures of the mind—or even (chilling thought) by a factor as simple and crude as the angle of vision afforded by the chance emplacement of one's wheelchair. Out of such accidents does "truth" emerge; I begin to think it a chimera (69).

Coal arrives at his realization of the contingency of the universe and of the precariousness of the notion of truth, which has become a commonplace of postmodern philosophy, only towards the end of the process of decline he goes through. For a long time, however, he does everything he can to stave off the loss of orientation, control and security this implies. In the face of the fragmentation of more comforting patterns of explanation and of social control, he refuses to give in and produces his own patterns. As he points out, "[s]ometimes it's an effort to keep everything in order" (69). His construction of the skeleton of *Phlegmosaurus carbonensis* is a case in point. It is to be the cornerstone for a new "scientific" taxonomy that will not only reorganize paleontological categories, but place Sir Hugo at the head of scientific discourse in this area. As he says himself: "I expected, frankly, soon to be dominating the discourse of natural history" (107). What is at stake here, then, is not so much the truth as the issue of power and control.³⁰ Faced with the symptoms of change and of social as well as philosophical fragmentation, i.e. with the loss of the epistemic centre that characterized the crises of modernism and postmodernism, Sir Hugo, whose pattern-building reflex is even stronger than that of most "normal" human beings, gives up the notion of a universalist truth and recognizes the influence of the perceiving subject in the construction of explanatory frameworks and concepts. However, he does not become a relativist, but tries to impose his own newly-created pattern as a new master discourse.

This is where his unreliability as a narrator takes on an important function within the postmodern discursive economy of the novel. Many a contemporary western reader can share or at least well understand many of the thoughts and feelings of Sir Hugo Coal. The experience that the increase of scientific knowledge does not necessarily make the world one that is easier to understand, and that it may raise more questions than it helps to solve, is one that has been very widespread indeed in the twentieth century. Coal's unease when being confronted with disorder and chaos may also be a reaction the reader can share with him. Sir Hugo's attempt at constructing and imposing a new master narrative, however, is totally discredited by his unreliability. Although he does his best as a narrator to pull us over to his

side, the number of transgressions —of norms, of rules of probability, of the reader's expectations, etc.— is so enormous that we are completely alienated from him and made to cast another critical look at what we are told.

Unreliable narration, the use of the grotesque and the exploitation of gothic elements all come together in this novel in so far as they are means of transgression the function of which is to create epistemological and epistemic defamiliarization with the aim of making the reader stop and look and think again. The alienation thus engendered replicates the modern loss of the centre and it makes us aware of the impossibility of universally valid master narratives by making us share the paranoid and self-discrediting perspective behind a madly exaggerated attempt at recreating the cosy security of a well-ordered universe the truth and reality of which can be represented within a conceptual framework of certainty and control. Sir Hugo's desperate bid to preserve social and epistemic power is doomed to fail and only leads to absolute chaos.

This leaves us with the question of where this literary text leaves its reader in the end. Left in a vacuum between the Scylla of epistemological and epistemic loss and the Charybdis of the impossibility of reconstructing a new master narrative as a new centre, what is the reader supposed to do? Obviously, the immoral and absolutely unreliable Sir Hugo has nothing to offer in this respect. But the defamiliarization he creates in the reader through his numerous transgressions as unreliable narrator in a narrative full of gothic and grotesque elements may fulfil a valuable function of making this postmodern novel appeal, which turns out to be an immensely literary function. As the Russian formalist critic and theorist Viktor Shklovsky pointed out in his seminal essay "Art As Technique" (1917), defamiliarization is the hallmark of literariness because "[t]he technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' so as to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (in Lodge. 1988: 20). Sir Hugo also makes us look again, in this particular case at the cognitive forms he uses in his mad attempts at creating a new order. These cognitive forms, the frameworks and patterns devised by the mad monologist of the novel, turn out to transgress too many boundaries and to violate too many taboos with results too awful to be acceptable in any way. For in his paranoia and his obsessive imaginative pattern-building, Coal is like a Machiavellian postmodern representative of an ethical "anything goes". Our revulsion against Sir Hugo, then, is also a revulsion against such a postmodern release from any moral bounds whatsoever, and it is in this respect that the text partakes in a more recent development that constitutes a reaction against the philosophical radical relativism of early postmodernism, namely in what has been called the ethical turn of postmodernism, a tendency that figures prominently in British literature of the 1980s and 1990s.³¹

It is here that we come back to our earlier criticism of a definition of unreliable narration as a strategy of naturalization, a hermeneutic ploy on the part of the reader used in order to create consistency again after being confronted with the transgressive discrepancies of a mind such as Sir Hugo Coal's. The point to be made about this approach is that the reader of *The Grotesque* does indeed attribute the status of unreliability to Sir Hugo because the negative alterity of the latter's views is totally unacceptable. But this is far from being tantamount to the closure of a re-established consistency. Sir Hugo is much more than just another madman. Whether we like it or not, his is the only point-of-view available to us in the text of the novel because everything is filtered and reported to us through his words. Any disagreement we may feel with him is the result of his own intratextual self-contradictions and of the clashes between the limits of the reader's frameworks and Coal's transgression of these very boundaries. Moreover, as has already been pointed out, Sir Hugo is not merely a grotesque ogre producing nothing but unacceptable statements. He is also the carrier of modern and postmodern concerns we may very well share. Many a postmodern reader may feel that he suffers from the same unease at the loss of a centre in a fragmented universe. But it is the absolutist claim to having it all his way after all and of being allowed to impose a new explanatory pattern of order onto the world that constitutes Coal's alienating philosophical and criminal hubris and leaves the reader alone in his search for new frameworks. At the end of the book, then, there is not the possibility of simply relegating what we have read to the realm of the abstruse or the abnormal and then leaving it at that. Rather, Sir Hugo's unreliability is clearly perceived by the reader, and his ideas and actions are rejected by us, but the cultural sources of his mad craving for order and orientation, i.e. the loss of a centre in a fragmented world devoid of universalist master narratives, make it impossible for us simply to follow a strategy of containment by declaring Sir Hugo mad and closing his file after his death at the end of the book. Rather, the novel develops a subversive strategy in so far as it incites us to go further and devise new patterns of our own to cope with the epistemic crisis of our age without investing such alternative frameworks with the authoritative claims of grand discourses as Hugo Coal tried to do. The depiction of the abnormality of the narrator's pattern-building activities clearly demonstrates the need to try and devise and negotiate some common ethical basis for human activities in an era whose centrifugal forces of disorienting fragmentation confront us with complicated philosophical and social problems.

6. Conclusion: The Place and Function of Narratology in Cultural Analysis

In this essay, unreliable narration in *The Grotesque* has been shown to be but one of three main strategies of transgression the purpose of which is to achieve an effect of defamiliarization as a catalytic tool designed to get the reader started towards the negotiation of a new ethics for the postmodern period. In gothic writing, as Botting has shown, "the uncanny disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality. [...] the uncanny renders all boundaries uncertain [...]" (1996: 11). Patrick McGrath himself has defined the gothic in a way that stresses in similar terms its aberration from what we generally expect:

If we think our language is built of sets of oppositions, the Gothic is that which always tends toward the darker side of any opposition one cares to throw up. So that the Gothic would always be motivated more by insanity than by sanity, disorder than order, ruin rather than whole structure, disease rather than health, decadence rather than virtue. Tripping down all the values we can uncover within language, within culture, the Gothic is that form of fiction which is fascinated with the transgression of that norm, always pushing from light to darkness, day to night, reality to dreams (Morrow 1989: 30).

Thomsen has very aptly described the very similar functions of the grotesque, as they can also be observed in McGrath's novel:

Da das Groteske starken formalen und inhaltlichen Kontrastbezug zur Realität akzeptierter Normen aufweist, kann es, indem es durch Verzerrungen und Verfremdung Mißstände aufdeckt, Ordnungen in Frage stellt, die Oberfläche gesellschaftlicher Erscheinungsformen aufbricht und Hintergrundzusammenhänge enthüllt, auch den Anstoß zur Überwindung und Bewältigung von Orientierungslosigkeit liefern, ohne damit ein neues Orientierungssystem zu vermitteln. Ihm kommt somit in Intention und Wirkung sozialkritische Funktion zu. Diese ist meist moralisch-satirisch eingekleidet (1974: 12).

Finally, unreliable narration, with its transgressions of the rules of textual consistency and its violation of the boundaries of contextual frames, creates an orientational deficit just as the gothic elements and the grotesque do in McGrath's novel. The narrative phenomenon of unreliable narration analyzed here, then, is an important but in no way a privileged device of reader activation.

This has serious consequences for the status of narratological analysis. We consider the latter not to be an end in itself, but only one admittedly very important means to the end of literary and cultural analysis. Narratology can only have a lasting value if it finds the way out of the ivory tower of a purely formalist or structuralist analysis in order to open up to cultural studies in a wider and interdisciplinary sense.

Wilhelm Füger very fittingly in this context distinguishes between "stringente Systematik sowie Differenzierungsschärfe" on the one hand and "praktische Eignung für die Globalinterpretation konkret vorgegebener, oft hochkomplexer Erzähltexte" on the other (1983: 179). As Füger also points out, we need both, but the more global analysis of the cultural functions of narrative devices such as that of unreliable narration, which clearly has to go beyond the boundaries of the text, is still in its infancy. Nünning, as we have seen, has made an important and valuable contribution to the redefinition of the concept of unreliable narration on a more consistent and systematic basis. The pragmatic value of his work, however, will only become visible if the project inherent in the last of the twelve "open questions" he raises at the end of his article (1998: 33), namely that of a cultural or historical narratology, is taken seriously (36-7). This, however, implies a slightly changed focus and different priorities for our future investigations of narrative texts. Narratological questions will still have to play an important part in our interpretive activities, but they will be decentered in so far as they will play an ancillary role in the analysis of cultures. The cultural narratologist does not merely abuse narrative texts as quarries that provide him with the raw material for the process of refining his taxonomies still further. Rather, he will continue to try and make his analytic tools as sharp as possible and to devise consistent systems of analysis, but this will not turn into a game of glass beads because he will use his perfected tools in order to explain the cultural functions of texts in specific historical contexts in the sense hinted at by Nünning. The first steps in this direction have already been taken, and some of the articles in his critical volume on the phenomenon of unreliable narration are good examples of this beginning.³² Much remains to be done, though, and narratology should not miss this opportunity of widening its appeal to practitioners of cultural analysis.

Notes

¹. See Hof. 1980: 418-431; Yacobi. 1981: 113-126; Hof. 1984; Shen. 1989: 300-311; Reuck. 1990: 154-168; Wall. 1994: 18-24; Nünning. 1998; Fludernik. 1999: 75-95. For further bibliographical information see the bibliography at the end of Nünning's book.

². See Nünning. 1998. "Unreliable Narration zur Einführung: Grundzüge einer kognitiv-narratologischen Theorie und Analyse unglaubwürdigen Erzählens". In Nünning. 1998: 3-39.

³. This is not the place to argue about Nünning's suggestion to do away altogether with the concept of the implied author (see also Nünning. 1993: 1-25). Suffice it to say, therefore, that although his criticism of the anthropomorphization of the reader's own constructions rightly points to the fact that there is indeed no anthropomorphic subject or agent with an ontology of its own hidden away somewhere in the text, the idea of such an implied author may nevertheless be

helpful in describing an anthropomorphic illusion the average or common reader (i.e. one without specialist academic training in literary analysis) actually uses. In other words, although the concept may be based on a logical fallacy, it may still be valuable as an accurate and non-fallacious description of a very wide-spread if erroneous idea used by the great majority of recipients of narrative texts and therefore have a legitimate place in narratological terminology.

4. Here and in similar cases in the following, always read *she* and *he*, *her* and *his*, *her* and *him* for *he*, *his*, *him*.

5. Nünning here refers to Jonathan Culler's definition of naturalization in *Structuralist Poetics* (1975).

6. See Antor. 1996: 65-85, esp. 67-69.

7. It is interesting to observe in this context that the overwhelming majority of the unreliable narratives listed by Nünning at the end of his book (1998: 287-290) are examples of either modern or postmodern writing in English, which raises the question of why unreliable narration is such a much-used textual tool in books in the era of modernism and after.

8. In an interview, Patrick McGrath revealed that before publishing his first novel, he had experimented with the writing of detective stories as well as of science fiction and of gothic fiction. See Morrow. 1989: 30.

9. All page references are based on the following edition of the novel: Patrick McGrath. 1990. *The Grotesque*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

10. Nünning is of course right when he points out that the frames of reference used by the reader to judge the narrator and his reliability or unreliability must be made explicit in discussions of unreliable narration. He is also right when he points out that there is no generally accepted standard of what is considered to be 'normal' (see Nünning. 1998: 22). We will nevertheless use the terms

'normal' and 'abnormal' here and elsewhere in this essay because we consider it to be superfluous to point out that within the cultural interpretive communities this text is read in—and this includes non-Western recipients—it is not the done thing to feed a toad with maggots at the dinner-table. Similarly, we have doubts as to the validity of Nünning's argument that a paedophile would not find anything wrong with Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita* and that therefore the "Voraussetzungssystem" of the recipient must not be taken for granted. Nünning's general argument here may be absolutely right, but in the case of this particular example, it is of purely academic interest. A paedophile might very well understand what makes Nabokov's narrator feel and act the way he does, but everyone knows—including even many paedophiles, we would like to argue—that the community of paedophiles never could or should be the standard for an evaluation of Humbert Humbert as character and as narrator.

11. Interestingly, nine years after the publication of *The Grotesque*, in an almost uncanny illustration of Oscar Wilde's dictum that life imitates art more than art imitates life, *Time Magazine* ran an article on the important find of a fossilized baby dinosaur in Italy, which some paleontologists subsequently claimed could prove that dinosaurs could "comprise the direct ancestors of modern birds". See Lemonck. 1998: 57.

12. It is an interesting detail to observe here the way in which telling names are used in this novel to create a gothic atmosphere of terror and hidden menace. Crook Hall is not only a rather crooked house, but inhabited by a mad crook as well. Ceck Marsh, at least to a reader with a knowledge of German, is reminiscent of German *Zecke* or 'tick', the latter of course—through the idea of the sucking of blood—conjuring up the notion of vampirism. Finally Sidney's family name of Gible is reminiscent both of *giblet* in the sense of 'an unessential appendage' (*OED*, s.v. *giblet*) and of *giblets*, i.e. the innards of birds. The first sense might be a reference to the way Sidney's corpse is thrown away into the

marshes like a piece of garbage, while the second meaning could point to Sir Hugo's use of the claw of *Phlegmosaurus carbonensis*, the alleged predecessor of birds, to kill Sidney. Finally, the young man's family name also reminds one of the gibbet whereon George Lecky is to be hanged so that the overall effect of such a use of telling names is a decidedly gruesome one.

13. See Sims. 1998. "Die Darstellung grotesker Welten aus der Perspektive verrückter Monologisten: Eine Analyse erzählerischer und mentalstilistischer Merkmale des Erzählertypus *mad monologist* bei Edgar Allan Poe, Patrick McGrath, Ambrose Bierce und James Hogg". In Nünning. 1998: 109-129, esp. 125.

14. The exact medical term for Sir Hugo's problem is 'catalepsy'. See Morrow. 1989: 30.

15. See Sims. 1998: 124.

16. See Nünning. 1998: 27-28, where inconsistency is cited as one of the most important textual signals indicating unreliable narration.

17. See Nünning. 1998: 27, where the narrator's self-contradictoriness is cited as a textual symptom of unreliable narration.

18. See Nünning. 1998: 28.

19. See Sims. 1998: 125. McGrath himself in an interview talks about Sir Hugo's "homosexuality" (Morrow 1989: 31).

20. See Sims. 1998: 124.

21. McGrath said in an interview that, at the age of twelve, he was "immersed in Poe" (Morrow 1989: 30).

22. On the concept of the mad monologist see Sims. 1998: 109-111, as well as Gaby Allrath. 1998. "But why will you say that I am mad? Textuelle Signale für die Ermittlung von *unreliable narration*". In Nünning. 1998: 59-79, esp. 62-65.

23. McGrath himself makes a similar point when talking about the difficulty for the reader of evaluating Fledge in the novel: "[...] when we think about Fledge, we do have to remember that we never get inside Fledge's head. We're always inside Sir Hugo's head". (Morrow 1989: 31).

24. See Charles Taylor on "inescapable frameworks" in his magisterial *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*: 3-24.

25. See Sedlymayr. (1948) 1985.

26. The garden metaphor is used frequently in postmodern texts dealing with the problems of how to preserve a legitimate kind of order in a universe devoid of master discourses. Ian McEwan's novel *The Cement Garden* and Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia* are but two of the most prominent examples in this respect. See my "Sozialisation zwischen Norm und Tabubruch: Ian McEwans Roman *The Cement Garden* als Lektüre im Leistungskurs Englisch". 1997: 267-286, as well as my "The Arts, the Sciences, and the Making of Meaning. Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* as a Post-Structuralist Play". 1998: 326-354.

27. Of course, we are confronted with another internal contradiction within Sir Hugo's narrative here, as his earlier disparaging remarks on "safe science" and his words on the desirability of a "sudden brilliant intuitive leap to revolutionary truth" (43) illustrate.

28. This is necessary to allow for the gothic effects of the novel's "obsessive and steady expulsion of reason to isolation" (see Morrow. 1989: 30).

29. It is interesting to observe in this context that Sir Hugo's medical condition, catalepsy, makes him static in a physical sense as well, for "the cataleptic victim stays rigid in whatever position he is put" (Morrow 1989: 30). McGrath himself called Sir Hugo "frozen" (31).

³⁰. In his dreams, Sir Hugo even identifies with *Phlegmosaurus* himself, roaming a Mesozoic swamp and killing whatever comes in his way (see 100-103). In these dreams, all other prehistoric animals are afraid of the dinosaur, and *Phlegmosaurus carbonensis* is in control of everything and wields absolute power.

³¹. A similar development can, for example, be traced in the work of Julian Barnes and of Graham Swift. Dennis Potter's

stage play *Sufficient Carbohydrate* is a good example of this tendency from the recent history of English drama. See Antor. 2000. "Is there a Ship on the Horizon? Notes on the Ethics of Dennis Potter's New Humanist Postmodernism in *Sufficient Carbohydrate*". In Vernon and Cook. (eds.): 127-148.

³². With regard to McGrath in this context see in particular Sims. 1998: 113-116 and 122-125.

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