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Preface

What do the shock created by James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and debates about the French writer Michel Houellebecq's provocative work have in common? Frey's book, published in 2003, was marketed and hailed as an authentic autobiographical memoir recounting the author's recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. Oprah Winfrey set it on her book club's reading list and invited Frey to her show. Frey's sales, as could have been expected, went soaring sky high. Suspicious, the website the Smoking Gun exposed central autobiographical facts represented in the book as made-up, causing consternation: Oprah was shocked, and so were audiences who had sometimes used Frey's "authentic" work as a kind of self-help book, as attested in heated blog exchanges.

Houellebecq's case is somewhat different. Critics from the start appeared hesitant about how to classify not just his work but also, even very much so, the author's intentions and stance. Should the bleak views on Western society conveyed by his novels be taken as serious analysis, as satire, or more cynically, as just the next commercial cocktail of sex, violence, and stereotypes? Both Frey's and Houellebecq's cases raise questions regarding what I call the author's ethos. In their attempt to determine their own classification of the work, and their own position with respect to it, critics often refer to what they perceive as Houellebecq's deep-down character and intentions. But an author's persona may be just as elusive as his or her work. Besides, interpreters are often sensitive to different clues and frame these in different modes.

In ancient Greek, *ethos* referred to a person's or community's character or characterizing spirit, tone, or attitude. Aristotle famously distinguished ethos as one of the three main means of persuasion, alongside pathos and logos. My use of the notion ties in with this rhetorical coinage, revised in the past decades in institutional art sociology and discourse analysis by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Ruth Amossy, and

Dominique Maingueneau. These approaches, to which I will bring some complements and reorientations, can be profitably articulated to narratology, in its attempts to go beyond textual analysis.

Questions of trust or distrust, of personal or institutional authority and credit, and of ethos management and justification, are evidently not confined to literature. Rather, they are fundamental in all domains of life, from the domestic sphere to the worlds of banking, economics, politics, and media, as the current crises of credit, in both the moral and the financial senses, demonstrate. From childhood on, people develop a workable, but clearly fallible, capacity to detect and estimate in a split second shades of seriousness, irony, or deception in a speaker's utterances, on the basis of all kinds of clues, physical, discursive, or other. In many cases, though, we have to navigate uncertainties regarding the extent to which people actually mean their words. What counts as an appropriate ethos also varies according to the social situation and changes over time. Moreover, whatever ethos one may mean to project, interpreters sometimes jump to wholly different conclusions. Many of us know the embarrassment of our ironies falling flat.

Uncertainties about a discursive ethos increase in written speech, as Plato already observed. Fictional narratives augment the risks, as by convention they would uncouple the work, as expression of intentions and beliefs, from its actual author (an idea that will be nuanced in later chapters). Throughout the history of literature, moreover, writers, and whole schools of writing, have cultivated ethos ambiguities, whether for reasons of censorship, out of provocation, or for sheer delight.

This book springs from my long-standing interest in the capacity literary narratives have to make audiences imagine a story world refracting multiple perspectives. Engaging in literary narratives leads readers into taking perspectives on perspective taking, assessing the value of values. My explorations have been nourished by the work of many, and my debts are evident on every page. I wish, however, to explore some aspects of ethos attributions that have remained, to my sense, underaddressed in narratology. More specifically, this book develops the argument that in processes of interpreting and evaluating narrative texts, ideas about characters', narrators', *and* authors' ethos—for instance, about their sincerity, reliability, authority, or irony—are not just the result of interpretive processes. They also play a central framing role even before, and throughout, the reading process. Ethos ascriptions, interwoven with ge-

neric classifications, arguably allow readers to frame the kind of game they are engaging in, determining their reading strategies and the value regimes they believe should apply to the work. Some genres, moreover, especially incite readers to construct an author's ethos, though clearly writers can play with such expectations. The explored approach hence also aims to account for the diversity of readers' ethos ascriptions, often overlooked in narratological models but exemplarily evidenced in ideologically or ethically controversial or (possibly) ironic works.

Ethos attributions, I hope to demonstrate, are as crucial in interpretation and evaluation processes as they are impossible to tackle through fail-safe methods of description and analysis, if only because such ascriptions result from interpretations. Hence my interest in hermeneutic, phenomenological, sociological, and cognitive approaches that might help us understand how we understand. Some of these frameworks, however, challenge the formal text-analytic or descriptive stance claimed or suggested by classical narratology, which persists in many so-called post-classical amendments, as well as in the discourse analytic and institutional approaches to which I will refer.

So along the way, this book came to mirror my own reflection on the kinds of intellectual enterprises theories of narrative are, or purport to be. My own perspective, as a narratologist, is hermeneutic, in a double sense: I hope to contribute a heuristic for spotting ethos clues in literary narratives, as other narratologists have done for tracking the unreliability of narrators, for instance, enriching the range of practices of literary interpretation; but my main objective is to propose, in what somewhat redundantly I call a metahermeneutic way, a reconstruction of socially encoded pathways along which interpreters, including myself, assess a discursive ethos. Both perspectives entail a reappraisal of interpretation as either a core activity or a central object of study. While seeking to objectivate interpretive processes, metahermeneutic analysis remains hermeneutic in its procedures and aims. It rests on arguments offered for critical discussion rather than on mere description or on empirical reception research (however, it should be compatible and complementary with respect to the latter).

To give my readers an idea of what to expect, here is a thumbnail outline of the book's argument. The introduction, "Why Ethos?," recalls the main

tenets of the notion of ethos in ancient rhetoric and explains the timeliness of a focus on ethos for the theory of narrative and narrative interpretation. Part 1 considers the role of ethos attributions in narrative fiction from a wide-angle view: chapter 1 sets out to establish the relevance of a focus on ethos and on interpretation from a cognitive-anthropological and hermeneutic perspective. Ethos attributions arguably belong to a basic cognitive competence we share with other living beings, allowing us to determine in a split second the intentions of the figures we find in our environment and to react appropriately. Narrative art arguably offers occasions to exercise such a crucial competence. It also allows us to reflect on the pathways through which ethos attributions, and interpretations more generally, are achieved.

So when critics or ordinary readers debate about Frey's honesty or Houellebecq's irony, they not only make explicit what count, for them, as relevant themes and values "in the book," they also strengthen or modify, and even fight over, socially recognized pathways for interpreting and evaluating that reach further than this singular case. These acts of interpretation, and ruminations *about* interpretation, can be considered to be part of what Merlin Donald in his evolutionary theory of culture described as culture's constitutive self-reflection, or metacognition. In this light, the negotiation referred to in the title of this book designates a double process: the individual interpreter's mental negotiation of a variety of potential semantic clues, which is itself inscribed in processes through which cultures articulate and negotiate, or fail to negotiate, competing ways of feeling, thinking, meaning making, and value attribution. The second section of chapter 1 compares hermeneutic models of interpretation and cognitive models of meaning making, pointing out continuities and differences that are not always acknowledged.

Chapter 2 pursues in more detail the ideas that meanings, relevance, and value positions attributed to narratives, as well as the paths along which we attribute them, are socially fabricated and negotiated and that our estimations of the author's ethos play a role in these processes. As narratology does not offer much support here, I will draw, first, on sociological-historical research on authorial postures and conceptions of literature by Bourdieu, Alain Viala, Jérôme Meizoz, Nathalie Heinich, and others; second, on French or Francophone discourse analysis, since Amossy and Maingueneau developed the rhetorical concept of ethos into

a rich heuristics for the analysis of ethos in all kinds of discourse genres, including literature; and third, on Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's research on people's acts of classification, taken to underlie their evaluation practices. These approaches afford valuable insights also for a metahermeneutic understanding of divergences in readers' interpretations and evaluations of literary narratives. To illustrate these perspectives, I discuss the diametrically opposed constructions of Houellebecq's ethos by two critics, as well as some framing difficulties raised by Christine Angot's tricky autofiction.

Part 1 thus forms the context for the discussion of narratology's treatment of issues pertaining to ethos in part 2. In chapter 3, as a prelude to this second part, I comment on the variety of objectives cultivated by narratologists, which lead to quite different kinds of investigation and validation procedures. These various understandings of narratology can be set out on a scale, with on the one side (cognitive) science and ideals of scientific rigor and, on the other, the practice of interpretation. Somewhere in between there is the place for what I call narratology as metahermeneutics.

Chapter 4 zooms in on five key narratological issues that are central for any reflection on how and why one would attribute an ethos to narrative voices or agents: narrative communication, embeddedness, intentionality, fictionality, and reading strategies. The theoretical stances one adopts on these issues determine whether narratology should leave out interpretation or considerations about real authors and readers, including their ethos. Chapter 5 examines, among others, the following questions: Under what conditions would readers attach importance to a character's or narrator's ethos, or rather to an author's? What aspect of authorship would they have in mind? And how would such different ethos attributions affect the interpretation and evaluation of a work? My key examples throughout part 2 include, again, Frey's, Angot's, and Houellebecq's works, as well as Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Djinn*, and Samuel Beckett's *Not I*.

Part 3 further explores the framework's heuristic potential, concentrating on issues that pop up regularly throughout the book. Chapter 6 investigates the central issue of generic framing. Some (sub-)genres, including novels of ideas and engagé and documentary and autobiographic writing, seem to program particularly strong authorial ethos expecta-

tions as part of tacit generic communication contracts. Hybrid or parodic generic framing problematizes such normative ethos expectations, creating, alongside the generic uncertainties, hesitations as to how the works should be interpreted and evaluated, which may turn into critical awareness of such conventions.

François Bon's *Daewoo* will allow me to discuss ethos expectations tied to genres of *writing the social*. In what looks like a nonfiction novel in good engagé tradition, the narrator, who conspicuously recalls Bon himself, sets out to investigate and denounce the consequences for people's lives of the closing down of the Daewoo factories in eastern France. What writerly posture and ethos can be drawn from this work, and, in a loop, how do they feed into readers' interpretation and appreciation of Bon's writing? Christine Angot's *Sujet Angot* similarly offers a good case for analyzing ethos norms attached to *writing the self*, and especially to autofiction as generic hybrid. In this curious autobiography by proxy, often perceived as raw and authentic, the portrayal of "Christine Angot" is delegated to Claude, the name of Angot's ex-husband in real life. How do one's classifications of the text's genre, as autobiography or metafiction, for instance, and of an author's ethos, as sincere, ironic, or authoritative, for instance, affect one's interpretation and evaluation of the book one reads?

Chapter 7 probes into two basic attitudes in terms of ethos: sincerity and irony, often perceived as two sides of the same coin. Though sincerity is frequently considered as the default mode of communication, I argue that more systematic attention to conventional sincerity clues or topoi pays off, as it highlights the intimate connection of such clues to generic framings and the imagined communication situation, as well as to historical and cultural communicational norms. The section on irony considers rhetorical and linguistic theories that may be fruitful for analyzing ethos attributions more generally. I discuss in particular Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's idea that utterances can be framed as mentioned rather than used, with potential effects of ironic distancing, and the idea of ironic interpretation as a form of frame switch. Besides Houellebecq, my key example here are the work and persona of the controversial Russian postmodern writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, as they have been interpreted by scholars and broader audiences. The chapter ends with an analysis of ethos clues, in connection to reading strategies, in Dave Eggers's *A*

Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, appropriately poised between sincerity and irony.

The book's concluding remarks on narrative, ethos, and ethics address, among others, the question of how the analysis of ethos relates to ethical criticism. I expect the proposed conceptual frameworks to have at least some heuristic value for ethical, rhetorical, or ideology criticism. They should sharpen the interpreter's sensitivity to clues that he or she uses to establish the sincerity, reliability, or authority (or lack thereof) of narrative voices and of authors. This assessment, however incomplete and intuitive it may be, affects what stance, what kind of worldviews and values, one takes a text or its author to convey. From a scholarly and analytical perspective, such a metaethical inquiry serves to illuminate the diversity of interpretive and evaluative pathways. It also leads to hypotheses about the grounds on which narratologists, critics, or ordinary readers infer and judge the rhetorical and ethical impact of a text: What kinds of assumptions, about literature, about selves, about ethics, do people's reading habits entail? When and how do they consider fiction to involve an author's or their own responsibility? Metahermeneutic reflection can, however, also become a more personal exercise, as when one reflects on one's own interpretive and evaluative habits and their underlying values and assumptions, in a reading group or a classroom situation, for instance. This perspective has an ethical and (self)reflective potential that could be exploited more actively in educational or professional coaching settings.

For whom is this book intended? It targets an audience of students and scholars interested in perspectives on literature afforded by narrative theory, rhetoric, discourse analysis, literary history and sociology, ethics, and hermeneutics, as well as those curious about cognitive approaches to questions about narrative and interpretation. I also hope to capture the attention of anyone concerned with the role of literature in present-day society: Why do we bother with literary texts and their authors? How do literary texts and their authors ensure their relevance and authority in the world of the Internet, television, and commercialism? Readers who are keen on perspectives that allow them to expand their own understanding of controversial and ethically puzzling literature and art should also find some food for thought here. Those who are afraid of technical detail may want to concentrate on the case studies, located

mainly at the end of part 1 and in part 3, though I hope to keep them on board through the thorny theoretical issues by demonstrating the general relevance of such theory for everyday life and by building on examples.

Let me end this preface on a self-critical note. The notion of ethos hardly comes out as a consistently rigorous analytical concept. It functions as an umbrella term, drawing attention to a common denominator in quite heterogeneous aspects of narratives, literary or not, and of their interpretation. Interdisciplinary cocktails, moreover, have their own risks. Specialists may find my use of their theoretical frames or methodologies eclectic and lacking in precision or they may question the function I give them in my work's overall framework. Yet I believe that this particular combination of approaches can be well defended, as each addresses a blind spot in the others. Others, better equipped than myself for empirical research, will hopefully feel inspired to undertake the testing of the proposed hypotheses. The readers I will be speaking about are either the author of this book, with her multiple selves, or the ones I imagine on the basis of my experience with many kinds of readers, though my comments on particular works often also draw on actual reception documents.

Many of my examples involve French literature and theorizing, sometimes not yet translated into English. I trust my readers to extend the arguments to other works, in other languages, alert to the specific cultural backgrounds in which ethos clues would operate. Narrative theories share to some extent with all hermeneutic scholarship the condition of being rooted in national traditions. A collateral aim of this book is the desire to bring together approaches that often happily ignore each other because they operate in different language areas and translations often arrive astonishingly late. If we consider not only the arts but hermeneutic theories and criticism themselves as forms of cultural self-reflection, to make theories travel beyond frontiers of disciplines and languages perhaps contributes to reflexivity about our own cultures and ways of seeing. I hope that this book, in its own ways, thus lives up to the challenges implied in the title of the series in which it appears, *Frontiers of Narrative*.

I am grateful for the one-year research leave awarded to me in 2009–10 by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), which allowed me to complete a first draft of this book. During the process of

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The Case of François Bon's *Daewoo*," in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000): A Critical Assessment*, ed. Gillis J. Dorleijn, Liesbeth Korthals Altes, and Ralf Grüttemeier (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 261–84; "Slippery Author Figures, Ethos, and Value Regimes: Houellebecq, a Case," in *Authorship Revised: Conceptions of Authorship around 1900 and 2000*, ed. Gillis J. Dorleijn, Ralf Grüttemeier, and Liesbeth Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 95–117; "Sincerity, Reliability and Other Ironies—Notes on Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*," in *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*, ed. Elke D'Hoker and Gunther Martens (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 107–28.