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⋮ Ethos and Narrative Interpretation

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Ethos and Narrative Interpretation

The Negotiation of Values in Fiction

LIESBETH KORTHALS ALTES

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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

thinking and writing, I felt supported and challenged by many people, only some of whom I can single out here. This book contains my ruminated reply in the ongoing discussion with Barend van Heusden and my other Groningen colleagues, especially from the Department of Arts, Culture and Media, and of course with students in various academic settings, local and international. Henrik Skov Nielsen, Francis Langevin, Kees Meerhoff, and Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar generously criticized the manuscript at various stages, holding up to me a humoring mirror of my own discursive ethos. Many colleagues have at some point been inspiring sparring partners or allowed me to present ongoing research, among them: Ruth Amossy, Jan Baetens, Lars Bernaerts, Marina Grishakova, Nathalie Heinich, Elrud Ibsch (my Doktormutter, who, sadly, is not there anymore to share in the pleasure of seeing this book published), Stefan Iversen, Fotis Jannidis, Vincent Jouve, Jakob Lothe, John Hillis Miller, Ansgar and Vera Nünning, Jim Phelan, Gisèle Sapiro, Wolf Schmid and his Hamburg colleagues, Simone Winko.

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My deepest gratitude, though, goes to my loved ones. I dedicate this book to John, Caspar, and Floor.

Earlier versions of some of the material in this book have previously appeared in print, and though most of it has been heavily revised, I am grateful for permissions from the publishers to draw on it here: "Aesthetic and Social Engagement in Contemporary French Literature:

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.



Why Ethos?

[D]etaching the utterance from [its] surrounding context is like focusing on the semantic content of a compliment without stopping to consider whether it is being said earnestly or ironically.

DAVID HERMAN, *Basic Elements of Narrative*

Houellebecq's work and persona provide for a book like mine almost too good a case.¹ Let me explain what I mean through some brief comments on *Atomised*, the author's breakthrough novel, and its reception.² *Atomised* tells the story of two half brothers, Bruno and Michel, left to the care of their grandparents by their mother, who went off to discover the thrills and deceptions of self-actualization, spurred by the spirit of May 1968 in France. While Bruno is obsessed with sex, which brings him more solitary suffering than pleasure, Michel, just as lonely and desperate, withdraws into the realm of science. His genetic discoveries lay the basis for cloning that will allow humans to reproduce without sexual intercourse. At some point the reader realizes that what mostly reads like conventional narration by an omniscient narrator is in fact the narration of one such clone, who observes, from around 2080, the gloom of the late twentieth century with the commiseration of a new and liberated humanity.

Not only was Houellebecq's novel understood to question—but how ambiguously!—the achievements of feminism, sexual and social emancipation, and the culture of individualism, offering cloning as a solution to all human misery; his work also raised suspicion regarding its success: Was that success due to the book's literary quality, whatever might be meant by that, or rather to some scandal effect and effective hyping?

Hailed as the renewal of the novel of ideas, rejected as mere branding or as the breviary of political reactionism, on all sides *Atomised* elicited debate about the author's or the narrating voice's deep-down ethos.

In a kind of public trial, Houellebecq's former colleagues at the magazine *Perpendiculaire*, for instance, found him guilty of defending in his novel disquieting antihumanist positions, yet paradoxically also with a disturbing artistic haziness (Tordjman 1998). They ominously concluded, "Let those who, today, separate aesthetics from politics take their responsibilities in the face of the future" (*La Revue perpendiculaire*, 1998). For others, instead, the novel presented a superior irony in its ambiguous montage of provocative theses; some in turn concluded that the author was *au fond* dead serious, although the text's "theories are asserted by half-wits" (Thomas Clerc, in *Libération*, September 9, 1999).³

The commotion occasioned by Houellebecq's work had some piquancy. A few years earlier, Western critics had expressed their astonishment at the fatwa ushered against Salman Rushdie because of his *Satanic Verses*: How could Islamic religious authorities confound a literary character's assertion and that of the author, literature, and public speech, completely missing the autonomy of the aesthetic domain? Now, here, right in the midst of pervasive postmodern aestheticization, was the occasion to reflect on the moral and ideological positioning of the novel *and* its author, a concern that gained even more momentum after 9/11. For narratologists, the additional piquancy of such a case is that it put center stage the author, with his or her ethos, stance, and intentions, this author that some loud-voiced or too-rashly-understood thinkers had apodictically discarded as irrelevant.

But what exactly is meant by *ethos*? Why would this notion, which I borrow partly from Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, be relevant for the interpretation of literary narratives and for theorizing the role of narrative in culture? In the following I hope to show the interest of the rhetorical notion of ethos for a theory of narrative interpretation and to explain the timeliness of such a focus on ethos for narratology and, more generally, for a theory of narrative.

Ancient Rhetoric and Persuasion through Character

Aristotle's treatise *On Rhetoric* elucidates what makes persuasive discourse effective and stipulates what means of persuasion can best be used

in specific situations in the public domain. For the purposes of this book, the treatise's interest resides in Aristotle's subtle analysis of the various—rational, emotional, and social—components of persuasion and of the implied interactive mechanisms. Such elements can also be traced, arguably, in the ways in which literary narratives are invested with meaning and value by their authors, publishers, critics, or readers.⁴

Aristotle, as mentioned, distinguishes three main means of persuasion: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. While *pathos* is the appeal to emotions and *logos* invokes objectivating, rational arguments, *ethos* pertains to character effects that coincide to create a trustworthy image of the speaker: “[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence” (Aristotle 2007, 1356a.38). These three kinds of proof together form a “pragmatic triangle” (Eggs 1999, 45), which connects orator (through his *ethos*), addressee (implied and anticipated in the *pathos* appeal), and discourse itself (through its argumentative force, or *logos*). *Ethos* and *pathos* are tied to a specific communication situation, with its own norms and expectations, whereas *logos* “convinces in itself and by itself”: its force of argument lies precisely in its independence from the context and from subjectivity effects (Eggs 1999, 45).⁵

Ethos itself also comprises three components in Aristotle's view, namely “practical wisdom and virtue and good will” (2007, 1378a.112). Good sense, or practical wisdom (*phronesis*), involves the capacity to gauge a situation adequately, for instance by applying general principles to a concrete situation.⁶ Good sense includes the idea of knowledge and expertise acquired through experience. Persuasion secondly requires the audience's belief in the speaker's good character or virtue (*arete*), in particular his honesty and sincerity.⁷ “We believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others],” Aristotle notes, “on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt” (2007, 1356a.38).⁸ Given the sociopolitical and judiciary context to which Aristotle's observations pertained, it is not surprising that he defined *ethos* normatively as virtue. Virtue, though, is not necessarily a matter of what we now might consider actual moral character. It means that the speaker, “[t]o be convincing, . . . must exhibit that quality of character that a culture, and not the individual, defines as virtue. . . . The effectiveness of an ethical appeal thus depends on one's

ability to gauge society's values and to display them . . . in one's speech" (Kinneavy and Warshauer 1994, 174–75). In fact, classical rhetoric oscillated between being a pragmatic training in communicative skills, meant to help create an effective impression of reliability and virtue, which of course could be deceptive, and a normative ethics of discourse, advocating actual sincerity and good—which would mean civic—character.

Eunoia, finally, translated as goodwill, refers to the means for convincing an audience of the speaker's good intentions. This leaning toward the audience, it has been remarked, requires an emotional quality (*pathos*), as well as an appeal to common ground (Eggs 1999, 36). Indeed, to display *eunoia*, the speaker needs to know his audience and to estimate what kind of style and argument appeals to this particular public.⁹ The recognition of the importance of a speaker's ability to anticipate how audiences may construct his image and intentions in response to specific clues, and given their own character and norms, calls to mind the recursive intention and character attributions analyzed in current cognitive theory, as adapted by narrative scholars (Butte 2004; Zunshine 2006; see chapter 1). But Aristotle's rhetorical theory pays more attention to concrete situational and socially coded aspects of this process of attribution in his own historical context, that of the Athenian state.

A speaker's *ethos* may be conveyed indirectly through *pathos*- or *logos*-based appeals, among others. Emotions, indeed, can strongly enhance a discourse's persuasive force, if they impart the sense that the speaker is authentically engaged in the views he seeks to convey. *Pathos* may even be more powerful than argumentative content, Aristotle notes, as "the hearer suffers along with the pathetic speaker, even if what he says amounts to nothing" (2007, 1408a.210), a remark worth pondering with the current media training of our politicians in mind.¹⁰

On the side of *logos*, a speaker's authority is often strengthened by invoking maxims and other generalizations, since audiences "enjoy things said in general terms that they happen to assume ahead of time in a partial way" (1395b.168), though Aristotle astutely adds that one should stick to the kind of wisdom that befits one's age and status (such little remarks convey Aristotle's sharp sense of the codes and roles that constitute social reality). All three ethical means—*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—whether directly or indirectly expressed, buttress each other and cooperate to warrant the reliability and authority of the speaker, and hence of his

discourse. In what looks like a feedback loop, it is indeed the discursively produced effect of trustworthiness or reliability that, for Aristotle, grounds that same discourse's effectiveness. Ideally, speakers need only to hint at recognized signals of authority and ethos *topoi* to make their audience jump to attention and adopt the expected receptive attitude.

Aristotle theorized that a speaker had to convey his ethos through discursive means alone.¹¹ Other rhetoricians, however, Cicero prominent among them, insisted on the importance of the *prior ethos*, the image an audience already has of the speaker on the basis of his reputation, previous deeds, or generally known character traits, an extension that seems indeed appropriate (more on this below), the more so in our own times of increased mediatization.

Ancient rhetoric, in any case, keenly captured and systematized a variety of factors involved in persuasion, from the display of emotions to good sense and the commonality of knowledge and norms. Its fine-grained grid takes on renewed relevance in the light not only of current institutional sociology, discourse analysis, or communication studies but also of cognitive research on mind reading, on empathy and emotion, and more generally, on the need to fine-tune and calibrate world-views and values in culture.

For a theory of narrative and literary narrative interpretation, some seminal insights regarding the components and persuasive force of ethos stand out, though they are not unproblematic, as we will see: the insight that discourse through its whole form is likely to be understood as expressing its enunciator's character; that the ethos an audience attributes to a speaker on the basis of his discourse is likely to determine deep down what message is conveyed, superseding actual semantic content; hence, that to strategically fashion one's discursive ethos is crucial; and that ethos effects rely on psychological and moral codes, whether truly shared or strategically or deceptively deployed.

If, however, one expands the analytical perspective to literary narrative, one should not forget that what counts as an appropriate ethos and as grounds for ethos attributions changes over time and depends on the communicative situation and genre at hand. Moreover, as recent rhetorical and narratological perspectives emphasize, we need to heed the complexity and layeredness of narrative transmission, an issue that will be addressed in part 2.

In connection with literature, the notion of a *prior ethos* also requires additional distinctions, such as: from what kind of clues would one infer an author's prior ethos? Can these clues be traced back to the author him- or herself, or to others who contribute to the fashioning of an author's image? What credit do we grant these various mediators? The notion of prior ethos, moreover, should be complemented with its a posteriori counterpart, as readers may be confronted with manifestations of the author *after* their reading experience, which may lead them to reconsider their interpretation and, in particular, the way in which they constructed the authorial image and ethos. This sort of reassessment happened for me in the case of Dave Eggers. What I learned about his social activities as well as his own later works retrospectively somewhat changed my view on the irony I had sensed in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (more on Eggers in chapter 7).

Still, with its keen, pragmatic perspective on the ways in which discourses secure processes of meaning and value attribution and play with anticipations on character, intentions, and worldviews, ancient rhetoric confronts narratology with challenging insights and questions, as this book aims to demonstrate.

Ethos Puzzles

Uncertainties about a source's ethos commonly arise when people with different backgrounds, conventions, and values interact, or when there is hesitation about how to frame the kind of game one engages in. Is James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* fictional, nonfictional, or something in-between? Our answer to this question of generic framing defines the extent to which the author's authenticity and sincerity become at all important.

But do (professional) readers of literary narratives always construct an ethos for authors, and how and why would they do so? Are there particular conditions under which it is more appropriate for interpreters to attribute an ethos to authors, rather than to narrators or characters? Can and should narratology account for diversity in literary interpretations, venturing beyond *de gustibus non est disputandum*? Given the complexity of the inference and framing processes involved in ethos attributions, and in processes of interpretation generally, it may seem quixotic to try to detect any sort of patterning in them. Yet this is what this book aims to do.

We can go some of the way, I believe, in formulating hypotheses about factors that guide readers' ethos attributions. Assumptions about the authorial or narratorial ethos can spark off, or reinforce, readers' decisions about how to frame the kind of work they have at hand, as well as the kind of interpretation and evaluation regimes that would be appropriate. Vice versa, the work one reads may suggest outlines for an authorial figure, which reinforce or contradict clues one has gleaned from one's previous readings of other works by this same author or from his or her media appearances. More powerfully, the way in which readers construct this ethos—of the author or of the narrating voice(s)—can completely alter the work they read. The circularity of this argument is deliberate and, I believe, unavoidable. Interpretation is a dynamic bricolage, building on hints and hunches that are confirmed, dismantled, and recursively recontextualized in the process of reading and retrospective reflection.

In fact, signaling and deciphering sincerity, deception, or irony and classifying speakers regarding their authority, reliability, and expertise have been the core business of storytelling since humankind's very first stories. Whole literary genres, such as satire or the engagé novel, are defined by their assertion mode and ethos, as are types of literary authors, narrators, and characters, from the ironist and the unreliable *Picaros*, *Madmen*, *Naiifs*, and *Clowns* (Riggan 1981) to the *doctus*, prophet, or gadfly. Literary narratives often stage characters engaged in the hazards of ethos deciphering, with sometimes dramatic consequences. Thus literature spells out codes of conduct and exemplary paths for ethos projection and attribution, helping to shape, transmit, and question culture-bound folk semiotics and hermeneutics of ethos.

However, audiences or readers will not just reenact or judge characters' motivations and intentions. They also establish, even unconsciously, a narrator's or author's ethos, which then may help them to "get" his or her tone and assess how the represented actions and perspectives are to be taken: as exemplary, or perhaps as ironically, or indignantly, staged? Even just framing a text as literary, and as fictional, suffices to create uncertainty about the degree to which an author would endorse the narrative as his or her own act of assertion, an uncertainty that extends to the authority and impact one grants to the expressed worldviews.

Take, once again, Houellebecq's *Atomised*. This novel's narrating voice refers to various scientific grids—sociology, biology, and ethology, for

instance—when explaining the characters’ individual experiences, grids that are likely to confer scientific authority to the representation. Or, anticipating another of my cases, consider Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, in which the narrator, Dave, who conspicuously resembles the author, multiplies tokens of sincerity. To decide whether Houellebecq’s frameworks for explaining human behavior are to be taken seriously or whether Eggers sincerely endorses the views on ruthless sincerity voiced by his narrative avatar, readers are likely to build on their image of the authorial ethos and intention, inferred from the novel itself as well as from the author’s other works and his para- and extratextual manifestations (Heinen 2002). In both works, the authority, authenticity, or sincerity of the narrating voices is signaled with much insistence yet so flagrantly contradicted by other aspects of the telling that their ethos becomes itself a central riddle. How do we know that we can trust sincerity or authority clues? There’s always a hole in the bucket, a loop—and a leap of faith—in the reasoning, though our experiential knowledge often feels as solid ground.

The importance of the ethos we attribute to writers, in terms of their authority, authenticity, reliability, irony, and the like, also appears from its central role in debates about conceptions of literature and about writers’ function in society, and not just in outright moralistic approaches. Throughout history, the social functions of literature and of the author have been invested with changing, but always strong, norms and values, extending in particular to the author’s or artist’s ethos.

For example, in the introduction to his book on literature and evil, Georges Bataille, an ardent defender of literature as the exploration of evil if ever there was, emphatically sets the condition of a ruthlessly sincere commitment for any representation of transgressive experience to be aesthetically and ethically justified (Bataille 1957). Such often tacit ethos stipulations mark the border between serious art and commercial, scandal-skirting provocation or kitsch, as controversies about Houellebecq, Frey, and many other writers and artists demonstrate. In the recent past, the works of Marilyn Manson, Rammstein, Andres Serrano, or Robert Mapplethorpe raised similar categorization dilemmas, which critics solved by, among other actions, taking a stand on the artists’ ethos.

Debates about the author’s status and responsibility, and about literature as critical reflection and authoritative discourse in society, have re-

cently flared up with renewed intensity in many Western countries. In reaction, it seems, to what was perceived as postmodern “anything goes” irony and disengagement, writers, like their fellow artists working in other mediums, have voiced their social or ethical commitment through their literary works, often alongside forms of social activism. Motivations for writing, such as wanting to make suppressed voices heard, to disclose history’s forgotten facets, or to defend causes such as homosexuality, are now widely recognized as central concerns of literature, rather than as exogenous, “heteronomous” ones. An author’s protestations about his or her social mission usually require as a backing that she or he radiate a convincing ethos of sincerity, experience-based authority, and so on. This is quite another ethos than the one required, for instance, for writing verse as “*aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore*,” a phrase that eloquently captures Mallarmé’s view on poetry’s autonomy as a work of art, freed from meaning, usefulness, and its own maker. The following chapters should, however, nuance such facile dichotomies.

Claims of literature’s and the writer’s social mission should be understood against the background of broader developments. These include, to start with, the diminishing prestige of what we have come to call literature in the current media landscape. The popularity of visual and audio media, such as cellphone cameras or blogs, with their suggestion of immediate, unmediated communication and of other art and entertainment forms, such as film or games, affects the status of literature. The role of literature in the educational system has, perhaps consequently, dramatically shrunk in many Western countries. But do these other modes really outplay literature’s age-old function of articulating individual or collective experience (Fludernik 1996) or its role in cultural self-reflection (Donald 1991, 2006) or in exercising the mind through a play with patterns (Boyd 2009)? To consider the continuities between traditionally conceived literature and these new forms of narrative and their common, or respective, anthropological functions perhaps serves to give back to literature, on fresh grounds, its role in society, particularly in education.

The kinds of developments I just recalled in any case prompt writers to propose new arguments, or revitalize traditional grounds, in order to demonstrate the relevance and legitimacy of literature and of their own writing. To this end, they often have recourse to ethos *topoi* that enjoy

broad recognition all over current society: real-life experience, firsthand experiences of suffering, a testimonial position, and so on. These topoi all suggest some form of indexical connection between representation, the represented, and the one who represents, an observation that merits further consideration. In Charles Sanders Peirce's sense, indexical signs are the more concrete ones, building on what we may infer through believing our own eyes or by touching, rather than on the mediation of symbolic signs, as with the disciple Thomas, who had to put his hands in Christ's wounds in order to believe. Writing, in such authentications, takes its authority and credibility from the (claims of the) writer's own physical or other proximity to what he or she speaks about.

Literary works also increasingly borrow their authority and legitimacy from nonfiction genres, such as documentary or autobiography, which, once aesthetically marginal, have now moved to the center of literary culture. But many of the texts discussed in this book precisely problematize or ironize such expected ethos topoi, drawing attention to mechanisms of meaning attribution.

Though author images have always functioned in combinations of a commercial logic and that of disseminating aesthetic, moral, or intellectual values, the foregrounding and exploitation of the author's persona, the effect of his or her actual *presence* (auratic connotations intended), have gained unprecedented momentum thanks to the availability and impact of broadcasting media and podia. In the experience economy sketched by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (1999), marketing strategies exploit codified effects of presence and authenticity, core ingredients of an author image that sells, while authors' names and postures are fashioned and exploited as a kind of branding.

Yet debates about authors still prominently evolve around ethical issues. This is well attested by painful cases of writers who were taken to embody the moral conscience of a nation—an ethos that included both the author's work and his or her identity as a person—but were exposed as frauds, in the eyes of some, when their political past was unearthed. Christa Wolf and Günter Grass, in formerly Eastern and Western Germany, respectively, are good cases in point. A recent case is the journalist-writer Günther Walraff, known for his relentless critique of German capitalism and his undercover investigation strategies, whose “authentic documentary” research came under suspicion as a result of

revelations by one of his former collaborators. The commotion around James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, or cases such as the Wilkomirski affair, similarly bring to light tacit implications of generic and discursive contracts (are their works fiction or nonfiction?).¹² The sanction makes the norm appear.

The vehemence of audience reactions should prompt literary theorists to reconsider the idea of the autonomy of the literary field and of the work of art, staunchly proclaimed or implicit in many conceptions and theories of literature, including narratology (more on this in chapter 3).¹³ The kind of attention and authority we grant to literature, and to the writer, is clearly negotiated within a specific cultural context, in relation to other media and genres, and vis-à-vis what counts as grounds for authority and authenticity in various settings. To analyze ethos attributions thus leads from discussions about a text's meaning into debates about the social status, authority, and responsibility of literature and writers and into the heart of meaning and value negotiations that weave the fabric of culture (more on these notions of negotiation and values in chapter 1).

Ethos in Narrative Theory and Criticism

Within literary and narrative studies the interest in ethos attributions is not new. In the currently flourishing ethical, ideological, and rhetorical narrative criticism and theory, the ethos of the (implied) author, narrating voices, and characters is a central concern, though usually not under this explicit label (the controversial notion of *implied author* will be discussed in chapter 5). Narratologists, moreover, are more prepared than ever to expand their scope beyond the boundaries of the text, taking into account social and historical contexts in which literary works are written, circulated, and read, as well as the role of the author. In narrative theories that build on insights from the cognitive sciences, attention to the reciprocal attribution of intentions and beliefs, broadly captured in the notion of Theory of Mind, can be argued to include, implicitly, the deciphering of the ethos of the various narrative subjectivities involved. Rich work has also been done in discourse analysis and institutional sociology of literature, on which I elaborate in chapter 2.

There has, though, been relatively little interest in the ways in which textually induced authorial intention and ethos interact with extratextu-

al ethos clues readers may have gleaned from all kinds of sources (with exceptions: e.g., Lanser 1981, 2005, 2001; Jannidis 1999; Heinen 2002; Herman and Vervaeck 2009). Nor have many narratologists been eager to sort out how ethos constructions, presupposed in statements about a narrator's unreliability or irony, for instance, are intertwined with expectations and framing acts resulting from generic cues and reading strategies. Few narrative theorists, moreover, fully address the issue of interpretive diversity, so well attested in cases such as Houellebecq's, or the fact that some works and genres particularly trigger authorial ethos constructions or debates about a narrator's reliability.

With exceptions, again, even cognitive narratological approaches have remained conspicuously silent about these issues pertaining to the pragmatic framing of assertions and their uptake. This is the more curious, as the frame theory many of them adopt would eminently equip them to conceptualize interpretive diversity and the role of framing factors. These are some issues and lacunae this book seeks to address, joining forces with congenial attempts to open up the investigation to the whole chain of literary communication and its context and to dynamize descriptive and interpretive heuristics.

Narratologists have been deeply divided over the need to take both authors and interpretation on board for various reasons, some more principled, others more contingent, as we will see in part 2. Depending on their conception of literature and of narrative theory, narratologists position themselves on the one or the other side of a divide.

On the one side of the divide, following the pathbreaking work of the Russian Formalists, the development of literary studies into an autonomous academic discipline went hand in hand with the evacuation of interpretation, of authorial intention, and of the pragmatic, moral, and existential dimensions of the literary experience. These dimensions were often considered to characterize the ordinary response to literature, from which literary scholars ought to set off their own analyses.

Happily thriving in critical, educational, and ordinary reading practices, notions connected to that of ethos, such as authorial intention and values, as well as the practice of personalizing reading, were dismissed as obsolete, at least in some branches of literary theory. While New Critics famously outlawed the recourse to the authorial intention, structuralist narratology, through authoritative voices such as Algirdas Greimas's

or Gérard Genette's, ruled that texts should be analyzed severed from their makers, recipients, and concrete sociohistorical contexts, as pragmatic considerations might endanger scientific objectivity. This was not an inevitable choice but one that corresponded, I believe, to a particular conception of literary discourse as the autonomous play of language forms, which could almost do without players. The reification of the literary work also secured narratology's sense of being a scientific discipline with a clear object and well-defined boundaries, almost like an object in the natural world.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the divide, rhetorical and intertextual approaches were quite successful in maintaining on the scholarly agenda questions of authorship and ethos (see chapters 3 and 5). Wayne Booth, and after him, rhetorical narratology, famously foregrounded issues of (un)reliability, irony, and authorial stance, crystallized in the much-debated notion of the implied author. Booth is often criticized as if he had proposed a theory (in the hard sense) of narrative fiction (see chapter 4). In fact, he emphatically defended hermeneutics as the perspective symmetrically required by textual rhetoric. To analyze any narrative's worldviews and value positions, in his view, cannot but engage the reader's active appropriation and requires first and foremost careful argumentation. Mikhail Bakhtin, whose influential work was translated into French, English, and German only in the seventies and eighties, called attention to the dynamic polyphony of discourses and value perspectives staged in the novel, both foregrounding and relativizing the author's role in the orchestration of such polyphonic effects. These kinds of approaches kept pulling on the fences raised by structuralists around the autonomous text and against interpretation, which was associated with unscientific subjectivity.

In those same decades, between roughly the sixties and the eighties, poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches, often entwined with a Marxist inspiration, on their own grounds questioned personalizing conceptions of literature, as well as the notion of the author as the text's originator and prominent voice. Mallarmé's dream of the author's disappearance or dispersion in discourse was programmatically relayed through Maurice Blanchot's notion of the dispossession of both authors and readers in the literary experience. Jacques Lacan's post-Freudian unmasking of the illusory coherence and autonomy of selves, as well as the zeit-

geist's libertarian zeal against any imposition of authority, formed part of the backdrop against which Roland Barthes and others opened up literary texts to their intertexts and to "the murmur of language" (*le bruissement de la langue*): a backdrop against which Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and others also scrutinized the inscription of texts in supraindividual structures of power, mediated through discourse, and engaged in fierce struggles for predominance. Feminist thinkers and writers, such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, or Gayatri Spivak, explored what it means to say that "I am there where it/id speaks" (*Je suis là où ça parle*; Cixous, Gagnon, and Leclerc 1977, 488) or how subaltern voices could be heard through their silencing. Philosophers of deconstruction, some of them from a feminist or postcolonial angle, criticized the foundational concepts of ethics, which underlie habitual understandings of ethos: the assumptions of shared values, of an autonomous self, of the evidence of communication, and of the author as the authoritative source of meaning, and of course the concept of morality itself.

These approaches all variously question the idea of the author as the one personalized source or subjectivity, expressed by, and accountable for, the work we read. Yet this does not make irrelevant the ideas that discourse conveys an ethos or that readers may bring such an interpretive expectation to bear on their readings. The subjectivity and ethos that are at stake may be collective ("the ruling classes" or "the subaltern") or even constitute unadopted discursive subjectivity and ethos effects (more on this notion in chapter 5).

Indeed, neo-Marxist, neo-Freudian, feminist, ethical, or postcolonial theories in some way kept holding authors or "texts" (an indication of agency perceived as more neutral) responsible for the conveyed ideologies and ethics[,] and the reader for his or her own positioning. While "teasing out [the] warring forces" at work in texts, to borrow a particularly felicitous expression of Barbara Johnson's (Johnson 1980), deconstructionists arguably seek the contours and the fissures of the author's ethos, complementing their close reading of literary works with the scrutiny of all kinds of authorial ethos expressions, discursive and nondiscursive, literary and nonliterary, synthesized in the author's name.¹⁴ Nuancing his own timely dogmatism, Barthes himself keenly diagnosed the reader's desire for the author, as an element of the strongly affective undercurrent of reading and writing: "But in the text, in a certain sense, *I desire* the author: I need

his or her figure (which is neither his or her representation, nor his or her projection), as he or she needs mine” (1973, 45–46; emphasis original; for a nuanced assessment of Barthes’s position, see, for instance, Bennett 2005).

Proclamations of the author’s death have by now been sufficiently exposed in their lively polemic contexts, and the author, or rather the author-function (to borrow Foucault’s term), has made a triumphant comeback as a subject of investigation. There is, meanwhile, a manifold historical, sociological, narratological, and discourse analytical tradition for investigating this author-function.¹⁵ Authors are definitely *in*, as are their ideological and ethical stances and, more often implicitly, their ethos. Yet within narratology the return to the author and to the personal engagement of the interpreter, with the intention attribution and interpretive activity it implied, is not always explicitly thought through in its epistemological consequences, which I hope to help clarify.

In 1999 Simone Winko convincingly analyzed the “death of the author” as literary scholars’ reaction to literature’s loss of symbolic capital and diminishing prestige, and as an attempt to ascertain their disciplinary specificity by highlighting specialized, formal, noninterpretive knowledge. The return of the author, and the ethical and narrative turns that preceded it, seems part of a symmetrical, somewhat contradictory legitimization attempt. Most narratologists’ discursive ethos indeed still signal scientific discourse, as opposed to both ordinary reading and erudition. But the anxiety of not being scientific enough now seems shot through with that of not being hermeneutic enough and of failing to shed light on the human condition, as attested by the wave of publications by narrative theorists addressing the crisis in literary studies (e.g., Harpham 2005; Todorov 2007; Marx 2005). This crisis was imputed to developments in the theoretical realm, such as formalism and deconstruction, among others, and extended in a sweeping gesture to broader movements in arts, philosophy, and society more generally, in particular postmodernism, accused of an irresponsible lack of social relevance.

There appears to be a renewed urgency to legitimize both literature and literary studies—criticism *and* theory—by foregrounding the ability of both to elicit reflection about values, rationality, or morality, reflections considered vital to culture at large as well as to individuals, a concern that I share. The search for legitimacy perhaps paradoxically also explains the rising popularity of cognitive sciences in the humani-

ties. Cognitive sciences promise a scientific framework and methods that bridge the divide between C. P. Snow's two cultures. Current research on the role that reading narrative fiction can play in developing empathy or as an exercise in mind reading and moral imagination might help give back to the humanities, on new grounds, social, philosophical, and intellectual relevance and status.

Narratology and, more broadly, narrative theory clearly constitute a domain in which contradictory strivings meet and mingle. In light of current cognitive, anthropological, biological, sociological, and psychological insights, it seems imperative that the humanities articulate the relevance not just of narrative, which receives much attention currently, but also of interpretation, as sites for the transmission of and reflection on meaning-making practices.

We live not merely in cultures of instrumental knowledge but in cultures of interpretation, as Yves Citton rightly notes: "At the heart of what we mean by knowledge, information, the flux of facts or communication, it seems important to recognize and analyze a very specific type of operation, which an old tradition articulated through the notion of 'interpretation.' . . . To interpret is neither to know, nor to communicate. . . . To put issues of interpretation center stage again should lead us to revise fundamentally and simultaneously our view on social interactions, our mapping of forms of knowledge, [and] the structure of our higher education institutions" (Citton 2010, 8–9).

This was very much the program nineteenth- and twentieth-century hermeneutics set for the humanities, interwoven with values and assumptions of commonality that aged less well, allowing the baby to be thrown out with the bathwater all too easily. I don't want to defend a utopian view of the human capacity for reason, of which history and literature themselves, not to mention theorists ranging from Nietzsche to Adorno and Horkheimer, should have cured us. But the importance of cultivating the capacity for interpretation, for perspective taking, and for critical reflection on the paths through which we attribute meaning and value has hardly diminished. Ideally this competence requires the triad of empathy, reflection, and argumentation, as well as the active cultivation of the conditions, mental and institutional, that foster this triad. It is with the importance of interpretation in mind that I would like to reconsider narratology, and ethos attributions, in this book.