

In diesem Heft



E. M. Forster



Edward Longford/
Sheridan Le Fanu



Mike Flanagan
The Haunting of Hill House



Siegfried Lenz



Digitale und multimodale
Erarbeitung lyrischer Texte

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Redaktion/Managing Editor: André Schwarck, Tel.: (0431) 880-2671 – e-mail: schwarck@anglistik.uni-kiel.de

Redaktionsassistentz/Assistant to the Managing Editor: Helena Kreuzmann – e-mail: lwu@anglistik.uni-kiel.de

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Inhalt/Contents

Burkhard Niederhoff:

Unreliable Narration in E.M. Forster's "The Story of a Panic" _____ 5

Rik Wolters:

"It becomes quite dark and there is silence": Edward Longford's
Adaptation of *Carmilla* and an End to the Cycle of Violence _____ 29

Annika Heinz:

Fungal Hauntings: Mold, Networks, and Non-Human
Agency in Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Hill House* _____ 35

Matthias Bauer:

Geschichte, Erzählung, Erinnerungspolitik
und Romanpoetik in *Heimatismuseum* (1978) von Siegfried Lenz _____ 59

Ivo Theele:

Gedichte digital und multimodal erarbeiten:
ein Konzept für den Literaturunterricht im
Übergang von der Primar- zur Sekundarstufe _____ 83

Buchbesprechungen/Book Reviews _____ 99

Unreliable Narration in E.M. Forster's "The Story of a Panic"

1. Introduction

In the introduction to his *Collected Stories*, which were published in 1947, E.M. Forster recalls how the first story in the collection came into being:

The opening item, The Story of a Panic, is the first story I ever wrote and the attendant circumstances remain with me vividly. After I came down from Cambridge [...] I travelled abroad for a year, and I think it was in the May of 1902 that I took a walk near Ravello. I sat down in a valley, a few miles above the town, and suddenly the first chapter of the story rushed into my mind as if it had waited for me there.¹ (xv)

First stories by young writers tend to be in the confessional mode, especially those that rush into their minds. This, however, is not the case in "The Story of a Panic". Instead of baring his soul and sharing his feelings, the novice writer channels the story through a narrator who is diametrically opposed to him in his views and values. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the narrator's account is thoroughly flawed; in other words, that he is a fully-fledged unreliable narrator.

The unreliability of the narrator of Forster's first story has never been adequately analysed. Narratologists have, to the best of my knowledge, simply overlooked "The Story of a Panic"; it is conspicuous by its absence, for instance, from the list of unreliable narrators in *Unreliable Narration*, the volume edited by Ansgar Nünning, Carola Surkamp and Bruno Zerweck (287–90). Forster scholars have paid little attention to the narrator or misunderstood him. Wilfred Stone speculates, quite unaccountably, that the narrator might be Forster himself (132), and Athanasios Dimakis describes him as "omniscient, all-seeing" (198), which is precisely what the narrator is not. Other critics are more observant. Colmer calls the narrator "obtuse" (30), Alan Wilde describes him as "philistine" (76) and Norman Kelvin points out that the narrator represents "all that is obnoxious in middle-class Englishmen" (22). However, these critics merely mention the narrator in passing; they are far from giving a sustained analysis of his unreliability (and fail to use the term).

In my treatment of the subject, I will proceed as follows. After summarising the story (part 2), I will point out the many signals of narratorial unreliability; "The Story of a Panic" is a veritable treasure trove of these (part 3). I will then reconstruct the alternative story that the narrator fails to tell, a story of initiation

1 *The Machine Stops and Other Stories* xv; references to "The Story of a Panic" will also be to this edition.

and conversion rather than panic and fear (part 4). At the end of parts 3 and 4, I will analyse the motivation of the narrator's unreliability; his rejection of the protagonist is bound up with a rejection or suppression of essential parts of himself. A brief postscript will indicate the surprisingly close parallels between Forster's first story and his final work of fiction, *A Passage to India*; in both works, a special site on a mountain functions as a channel of communication, a scene of panic and self-knowledge (part 5).

2. A Summary of "The Story of a Panic"

The setting of the story is Ravello, a coastal town south of Naples. To be more precise, the first part of the story is set in a mountain valley, presumably the same valley that inspired Forster to write the story. The events described in the second and third parts occur at a hotel in the town itself. The protagonist is a fourteen-year-old English boy by the name of Eustace Robinson, who has been taken to Ravello by his two unmarried aunts, Mary and Julia Robinson (it seems that the boy is an orphan). The remaining characters include a group of fellow English people who stay at the same hotel as the Robinsons: Mr Leyland, an artist; Mr Sandbach, an Anglican curate, who is Eustace's tutor; and Mr Tytler, the narrator, who is accompanied by his wife and his daughters Rose and Janet. Two additional characters are locals: Signora Scafetti, the landlady, and Gennaro, a clumsy but sympathetic waiter.

The plot begins with a trip to the mountain valley, where the English tourists have lunch and take a rest. All of a sudden, they are seized by an intense and inexplicable panic, which results in a frantic rush down the hill. When the characters have calmed down and reassembled, they notice that Eustace is missing, and return to the site of their picnic, where they find the boy in a strange but relaxed mood. It soon becomes evident that whatever caused the other characters to panic has changed his personality. Rather moody, sluggish and withdrawn so far, he now becomes active, energetic and sociable. He runs circles around the group on their return to the hotel, chases animals and interacts with the locals, especially with the waiter Gennaro. At night, he is discovered in the garden, running around, talking and singing to himself. The Englishmen attempt to catch him and eventually succeed after Mr Tytler has bribed Gennaro to help them. Eustace is locked up in his room, where he utters pitiable cries, which make Gennaro regret his betrayal and help the boy to escape. The leap from a window necessary to accomplish this leaves Gennaro dead, but Eustace is free: "[F]ar down the valley towards the sea", the final sentence reads, "there still resounded the shouts and the laughter of the escaping boy" (22).

3. Unreliability Signals

A first indication that the narrator ought not to be trusted is his name. It is derived from *tittle*, 'spread gossip or rumour', not the most reliable mode of communication.² Further signals of unreliability are given in the first paragraph:

Eustace's career – if career it can be called – certainly dates from that afternoon in the chestnut woods above Ravello. I confess at once that I am *a plain, simple man*, with no pretensions to literary style. Still, I do flatter myself that *I can tell a story without exaggerating*, and I have therefore decided to give an *unbiased account* of the extraordinary events of eight years ago. (1, emphasis added)

The narrator insists that his account is straightforward and objective, without prejudice and embellishment. Such claims to reliability often indicate the contrary, especially if they are given right at the start of a story. "The *full truth* of this odd matter" (9, emphasis added) are the first words of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), one of the most intriguing and complex examples of narratorial unreliability in English fiction, and the madman who tells us about the murder he committed in E.A. Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" similarly begins his story with the word "True!" and asks his readers at the end of the first paragraph: "Hearken! and observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (277).³

The second unreliability signal in the first paragraph can only be recognised as such in connection with a later passage. When the tourists return to the mountain valley after the panic, they find Eustace lying on the ground. Eventually he opens his eyes and gives a smile, which the narrator describes as follows:

2 See the entry under *Titler*, *Tytler* in the dictionary of family names edited by R.P. Heaney and the entries under *tittle* and *tittler* in the OED.

3 See Kathleen Wall on the counterproductive effect of repeated "assertions of his [the narrator's] honesty" in an article on Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (19). Truth claims are also included by Ansgar Nünning in a list of unreliability signals in "Unreliable Narration zur Einführung" (28). It is perhaps necessary to point out that these and other unreliability signals established by narratologists need to be handled with care. In a recent article which analyses Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel as an unreliable narrator, Kevin Stevens points out two passages in which Jane Eyre apologetically states that she is merely telling the humble and unadorned truth (Stevens 210). Reading these passages in their context, I do not find that they undermine Jane Eyre's trustworthiness. Establishing the unreliability of a narrator does not consist in ticking off a pre-conceived list of surefire signals; it requires a cautious evaluation of the passages in question within the context of a particular work. See Christoph Bode, who argues that most of the unreliability signals listed by Nünning can be "*perfectly innocent*" (268, emphasis in the original), and Vera Nünning, who points out the relevance of literary conventions: what is perfectly acceptable in one genre may be an unreliability signal in another (94-95). Vera Nünning's article can be recommended as a recent overview and typology that includes many insights from the rapidly growing body of research on unreliable narration.

"I have often seen that peculiar smile since, both on the possessor's face and on the photographs of him that are beginning to get into the illustrated papers" (8). The reference to the papers shows that Eustace has become a person of public interest although he is only twenty-two; it seems likely that the narrator's decision to tell the story now, after eight years have elapsed (1), is motivated precisely by Eustace's recent fame. However, instead of telling us about Eustace's career, the narrator only adds the denigrating remark "if career it can be called", suggesting that it is mundane or even disreputable. This is a case of what John Phelan calls "underreporting", as opposed to the more common "misreporting";⁴ a narrator omits a significant fact that is necessary for a full understanding of the story. The most obvious case of "underreporting" in "The Story of a Panic" is of course the account the narrator gives of the event in the mountain valley when he presents it as a moment of pure panic. He fails to understand, or refuses to understand, that it was experienced quite differently by the protagonist.

That the narrator is not only underreporting but also misreporting is signalled by his extreme bias against the protagonist, whom he describes as "indescribably repellent" (1). This judgment also means that the narrator contradicts himself, having promised to give an "unbiased account" a few paragraphs earlier. Similar self-contradictions, usually the most conclusive signals of unreliability, are not hard to find. At one point Mr Tytler wants to teach Eustace to swim, but his offer of a swimming lesson is refused: "[H]e said he was afraid of the water! – a boy afraid! – and of course I said no more" (2). The narrator has strong views on masculinity, in particular British masculinity, and fear is excluded from his idea of the British male. However, it is the narrator who experiences an intense panic in the mountain valley, while his own daughter is only moderately afraid (7) and Eustace apparently feels no fear at all. A similar contradiction arises when the narrator claims, "I make it a rule never to interfere between relatives" (9). To interfere is precisely what he constantly does, for instance when Eustace is reluctant to join the other tourists on their trip to the mountain valley:

He had, as usual, not wanted to come, and his aunts had nearly allowed him to stop at the hotel to vex Janet. But I, with their permission, spoke to him rather sharply on the subject of exercise; and the result was that he had come, but was even more taciturn and moody than usual. (3)

Mr Tytler similarly interferes when Gennaro addresses Eustace with the familiar "tu" instead of the formal "lei" or "voi" (13), when Eustace's aunts give him a chicken wing (3) and when they want him to ride a donkey (9). Minding other people's business has become second nature to Mr Tytler; he goes so far as to instruct the landlady how to manage her hotel, as is shown by a minor

4 See Phelan (49-53); Phelan also distinguishes between reporting, reading/interpreting and evaluating as modes of narratorial discourse. The combination of these three modes with both "mis-" and "under-" results in six types of unreliable narration.

detail towards the end of the story. Gennaro and Eustace are helped in their escape by a moment of darkness and confusion, which comes about as follows: “Leyland, that unspeakable idiot, upset the lamp with his elbow. It was a patent self-extinguishing lamp, bought by Signora Scafetti, *at my special request*, to replace the dangerous thing that she was using” (21, emphasis added). Apart from giving the lie to his self-description, Mr Tytler’s frequent meddling in other people’s affairs also turns out to be counterproductive. The lamp he makes Signora Scafetti buy helps Eustace escape, and the sharp words he addresses to Eustace about joining the picnic lead to the teenager’s experience on the mountain and his personality change.

Apart from self-contradictions, contradictions between the narrator’s discourse and statements made by characters can undermine a narrator’s reliability. Discrepancies of the latter sort are also present in “The Story of a Panic”, and the character diametrically opposed to Mr Tytler in his attitude towards the protagonist is Gennaro. After Eustace’s return from the mountain, Gennaro responds to the boy’s personality change with intuitive empathy and understanding, which, in turn, is not at all understood by the narrator: “‘Ho capito,’ I heard him [Gennaro] say as he passed me. ‘Ho capito’ is the Italian for ‘I have understood’; but, as Eustace had not spoken to him, I could not see the force of the remark” (12). At night in the garden, Eustace praises the “forces and manifestations of Nature”, excluding only his own species: “and then there are men, but I can’t make them out so well” (16). Asked by Mr Leyland to explain this remark, Gennaro answers:

‘It is you, it is I. It is all in this house, and many outside it. If he wishes for mirth, we discomfort him. If he asks to be alone, we disturb him. He longed for a friend, and found none for fifteen years. Then he found me, and the first night I [...] betray him to you and send him in to die. But what could I do?’ (20)

This is Gennaro’s counter-narrative to the story told by Mr Tytler. Instead of a spoilt and repellent weakling who needs discipline, we see a lonely adolescent who is looking for company but is constantly antagonised by the people around him. Incidentally, it also becomes clear that Eustace is aware that he does not understand the human beings around him, including Mr Tytler, while the latter is completely unaware that he does not understand the protagonist.

Further unreliability signals result from contradictions between the narrator’s discourse and statements made by the author in other writings. In the second paragraph, we read that Mr Sandbach is working as Eustace’s tutor, “endeavouring to fit him for one of our great public schools” (1). Readers who are familiar with one of Forster’s most well-known essays, “Notes on the English Character”, will raise their eyebrows at this remark, knowing that Forster’s own view of the English public school is much less favourable (*Abinger Harvest* 4–5). A similar unreliability signal is given by the many disparaging remarks about Italy. Mr

Tytler calls it “the most dishonest of nations” (18), refers to the “eternal avarice of the South” (18) and declares that “the wretched down-trodden Italians have no pride” (13). Even the trees are included in his prejudice against all things Italian; the chestnuts in the mountain valley are “puny striplings compared with our robust Northerners” (4). Any reader remotely familiar with Forster’s writings will infer that the narrator’s views should not be trusted. In Forster’s early novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *Room with a View* (1908), encounters with Italy and Italians are mind-opening and personality-enhancing experiences. Mr Tytler is unable, or unwilling, to have this kind of experience.

In referring to other writings by Forster I am not invoking the “implied author”, a much-debated element in Wayne Booth’s definition of unreliable narration (158–59); the implied author of a text is a construct that has to be inferred from the text itself. Instead, I am invoking the real author E.M. Forster, treating him as an individual with a set of views and values that is relatively stable across his different writings. Admittedly, this is a controversial procedure. It goes against the tenets of the New Criticism, enshrined in the doctrine of the “intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 486) and in D.H. Lawrence’s dictum “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale” (2). It also goes against the principles of structuralists and poststructuralists, who dismissed the author as an arbiter of textual meaning some decades ago. More recently, Ansgar Nünning has gone beyond the confines of the text to identify the standards that determine the unreliability of a narrator, yet he finds these standards not in the author’s writings but in the reader’s beliefs. This move has been hailed by some theorists but rejected by others as opening the door to relativism, and Nünning himself has qualified his initial position, allowing the author back into the game to some extent.⁵ I can only acknowledge this debate here without contributing to it at a theoretical level. My own position is that the unreliability signals inside a text (conspicuous truth claims, excessive bias, self-contradictions, etc.) are of primary importance in establishing the unreliability of a narrator. Other writings or statements by the same author are of secondary relevance and should only be used as additional or corroborative evidence, but it would be dogmatic and purist to ban them altogether. A basic procedure in interpreting a text is to place it in a broader context, and this context may consist of texts from the same time, belonging to the same genre – or written by the same author. There is no reason why this should be any different in determining the unreliability of a narrator.

In the definition just mentioned, Booth writes: “I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (158–59,

5 For Nünning’s original argument in favour of the reader, see “Unreliable, Compared to What?”; his later, modified position is stated in “Reconceptualising Unreliable Narration”. For a critique of Nünning’s original argument, see Hansen. A sophisticated defence of authorial intention as the standard of narratorial unreliability is given by Kindt (1–67); an argument for considering other writings by the same author, and an application of this approach to Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae*, is provided by Niederhoff.

emphasis in the original). An element of this definition that has received very little attention is the word “acts”, which evidently refers to the narrator’s prior existence as a character in the story and is thus restricted to first-person or homodiegetic narrators. It should also be taken with a grain of salt. Having taken one false step as a character does not make a narrator unreliable, especially if they show an awareness of their mistake. Even saints usually begin their career as sinners.

However, Booth is not entirely mistaken; the actions of a narrator may have a bearing on their reliability, as is shown by the following passage in “The Story of a Panic”, which shows Mr Tytler in his habitual mode of interference, telling the other characters not to say or write anything about the panic:

I changed the conversation by asking what we should say at the hotel. After some discussion, it was agreed that we should say nothing, either there or in our letters home. Importunate truth-telling, which brings only bewilderment and discomfort to the hearers, is, in my opinion, a mistake; and, after a long discussion, I managed to make Mr Sandbach acquiesce in my view. (10)

Mr Tytler persuades Mr Sandbach and the others to hush up an event that he finds inexplicable and embarrassing. Although this suppression of “importunate truth-telling” is part of his actions as a character, it is surely relevant to his later role as a narrator. Mr Tytler is a narrator who rejects narration, at least when it comes to experiences that do not fit his frame of mind. Elsewhere in the story, he also intervenes and prevents explanations that might lead to a better understanding of the protagonist and the panic. When the characters are reunited with Eustace in the mountain valley, Rose sits down next to him, runs her hands through his hair and exclaims, “Eustace! Eustace! [...] tell me everything – every single thing!” Eustace responds by whispering, “Oh, Rose—”, when he is interrupted by Mr Tytler, who cuts off the communication between the two teenagers (8). At night, Mr Tytler again intervenes, rushing out from his ambush to take hold of Eustace precisely when Eustace is on the point of explaining himself to Gennaro about his attitude to human beings (19).

In his remarks on unreliable narration, Christoph Bode focuses on the relevance of an unreliable narrator’s former existence as a character. He argues that unreliable narration requires a diegetic motivation (269), i.e. a motivation that is bound up with the role and the situation of a narrator when he was a character in the story (on the assumption that there is a continuity between the two, that the views and values of the narrator are derived from the experiences and attitudes of the character). In Mr Tytler’s case, this motivation is not hard to find. His relationship to the protagonist shows a striking mixture of antipathy and involvement. While he strongly dislikes Eustace from the start, he is incapable of leaving him alone. Instead, he constantly attempts to remake him in his own image, or rather to mould him according to the ideas of conventional English