

Fictional and Factual Autobiography from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

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Abstract: The study considers the pertinence of Searle's speech act theory to literary studies, more specifically to the definition of fictional and factual autobiography. Searle's conception of fictional discourse as a pretended assertion influenced Gérard Genette in his definition of the necessary condition of factual autobiography, which he sees in the identity of the author with the narrator, meaning that in autobiography, the author bears full responsibility for what he or she asserts. According to Genette, if the narrator and the author are not identical, the autobiography is fictional. These theoretical arguments are then applied to the interpretation of Bohumil Hrabal's trilogy *In-House Weddings*, *Vita Nuova* and *Gaps* and the fictional autobiography *Boyhood, Youth and Summer-time* by John Maxwell Coetzee.

Keywords: fictional autobiography, speech act theory, John Searle, John Maxwell Coetzee, Bohumil Hrabal.

Speech act theory is a great source of inspiration for literary studies. Probably the most significant influence can be detected in the field of theory of fiction: even before literary theorists such as Lubomír Doležel, Thomas Pavel and Ruth Ronen came up with their ideas on fiction, literary scholars were intrigued by John Searle's paper *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*.¹ This paper stimulated a discussion about whether fiction can be defined semantically or whether it is better to approach it from the perspective of pragmatics and observe what kind of game the author of fiction plays with the reader, that is to ask what the author

¹ Searle's study "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" was first published in a journal in 1975; later it was included in the book *Expression and Meaning* (see Searle 1979, 58-75).

“does” by writing fiction, what speech acts he performs and how these speech acts are understood by the reader. I will not go into detail of this large discussion which is still very much alive. This study only focuses on one question in the theory of fiction – on the relation between factual and fictional autobiography. I will attempt to show what kinds of stimuli precisely Searle’s speech act theory brings to literary studies with respect to this problem and at the same time I will connect this issue to an analysis of specific literary works: I am going to discuss the reminiscent narrative in Bohumil Hrabal’s loose trilogy *In-House Weddings* (*Svatby v domě*), *Vita Nuova* and *Gaps* (*Proluky*), and the fictional autobiography *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime* by the Nobel Prize in literature winner John Maxwell Coetzee.

The relation between factual and fictional autobiography was one of the topics dealt with by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette, especially in his book *Fiction and Diction* (1991). To a great degree, Genette’s conception draws on Searle’s speech act theory, or, more specifically, on the notion of fictional discourse as a pretended assertion.² Genette thinks along the following lines: in the case of factual autobiography, the author is identical with the narrator and at the same time with the main character ($A = N = C$; see Genette 1993, 70, 72-73). This entails that the author bears full responsibility for what he or she asserts: his or her narration hence complies with all the constitutive rules that condition successful realization of the speech act of assertion, which means that the narration must be true, verifiable and sincere.³ As readers, we understand such an utterance as an authentic utterance about its author.

But what happens if the author is narrating about his or her own life, yet chooses not to be identical with the narrator?⁴ This situation

² Genette takes up Searle’s conception of fiction not only in the general chapter on fiction “Arts of Fiction” (Genette 1993, 30-53), but also in the context of his ideas on fictional and factual narrative in the chapter “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative” (see Genette 1993, 54-84).

³ Searle speaks about the essential rule, the preparatory rules and the sincerity rule (cf. Searle 1979, 62).

⁴ It is important to remember that Genette does not view the identity of the author with the narrator as identity in terms of name, but he defines it (again, drawing on Searle) as the “author’s serious adherence to a narrative whose veracity he assumes” (Genette 1993, 75).

arises when the autobiography is written in the third person. According to Genette, this kind of narrative is necessarily fictional, which is true even if the depicted events accord with the events in the actual world. The author cannot guarantee the veracity of what is said in the text; the whole of the “responsibility” rests on the shoulders of the narrator. I find Genette’s use of Searle’s theory tremendously inspiring, as it helps us understand experiments taking place in the area of literature and autobiography. It also suggests certain interpretive strategies on the part of the reader. What follows is an attempt to examine this theoretical framework in the context of literature. First I will discuss the reminiscent narratives by Bohumil Hrabal.

Late in his life, in the first half of the 1980s, Hrabal wrote a loose trilogy of recollections: *In-House Weddings* (*Svatby v domě*), *Vita Nuova* and *Gaps* (*Proluky*). Hrabal recounts his life in the 1950s and 1960s; he recalls his life with his wife Eliška Plevová (nicknamed Pipsi), his friends, the philosopher Egon Bondy and the visual artist Vladimír Boudník, and the beginnings of his writing. Yet Hrabal’s narrative differs from traditional reminiscent narratives: the narrator is not Hrabal, but his wife Pipsi. All the narrated events are thus seen from the perspective of Hrabal’s wife. If one applies the speech act theory to this narrative situation, it can be argued that Hrabal pretends to be a fictional character called Pipsi, and as Pipsi he makes an assertion, hence Hrabal imitates the illocutionary act of assertion. As Pipsi’s utterance is a figment of Hrabal’s imagination, it cannot be subject to rules that usually pertain to assertions. It is thus pointless to ask whether the events really occurred as they are depicted, since the author cannot comply with the constitutive rules of assertion or guarantee the accuracy of the events.

Importantly, however, this does not mean that we cannot consider the potential correspondence between fictional and real events. Genette himself, drawing on Searle and the American literary theorist Barbara Herrnstein Smith, points out that the term fictionality refers to the act of telling itself and not to its content (cf. Genette 1993, 71). When speaking about Bohumil Hrabal, one should remember that his experiment in autobiography tops off his lifelong project of art: to make life the subject of imaginative narration. From the very beginning, Hrabal found inspiration in the reality he experienced or observed, and he also used this reality to create his short stories, novellas and novels. Hrabal certainly does not narrate in order to relate the events of his life to us,

but to shape these events into an art form which will have an aesthetic effect on the reader. In the case of the fictional, reminiscent trilogy, the use of the narrative perspective of Pipsi enables Hrabal to step back and look at himself from a distance, be self-ironic, comment on his own writing and faults, and see himself through the eyes of others. I am going to quote at least a short excerpt:

Usually my husband met me at the tram stop after my shift at the Hotel Paris. Sometimes though he wasn't there which of course meant he was at home in bed because he'd drunk too much and was ashamed of himself. That was my husband's thing post-binge shame and crawling into bed so I couldn't see how wobbly he was [...]. (Hrabal 2010, 39)

By choosing Pipsi as the narrator of the monologue, Hrabal at the same time offers the fictional character an opportunity to talk about her difficult life and to contrast it with the lives of other people: as a child of German parents, Pipsi was persecuted after World War II and her parents had to leave Czechoslovakia; Pipsi was left behind on her own, marked by the stigma of collective guilt. Through Hrabal's narrative, we look into her mind, discover her worries and fears, and we also follow her transformation after she meets her future husband. It is not necessary to go into detail: I just want to stress that Hrabal offers the reader an opportunity to contribute to the meaning of the novel: for example, in the second book *Vita Nuova* (see the excerpt above), the author does not use any punctuation or paragraphs at all, which encourages the reader to insert some pauses that will lend a certain degree of clarity and hierarchy to the otherwise homogenous text.

Hrabal's reminiscent trilogy can thus be seen as a special case of a fictional autobiographical narrative: the author, even though he narrates about his life, does not bear any responsibility for the veracity of the depicted events. This situation results from Hrabal's unusual narrative strategy that consists in letting his wife Pipsi narrate about his life. In this way, Hrabal made his life into a novel; by refusing to bear the responsibility for the depicted events, he made it possible for the text to have an aesthetic effect on the reader. The special quality of Hrabal's text can be better elucidated by speech act theory, in particular by the conclusions drawn from Searle's theory by Genette (let me mention Genette's idea again: If the author is identical with the narrator, the narrative is factual; if the author is not identical with the narrator, the

narrative is fictional; in this case the narrative is fictional even if the narrated events and facts accord with the events and facts of the actual world).⁵ The difference between factuality and fictionality therefore fully depends on whether the author can be held responsible for the represented events, as is the case with autobiography, or whether the assertion is pretended, as it occurs in fiction.

I will now move on to the second example, which is the loose reminiscent trilogy by John Maxwell Coetzee *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*. In 1997, J. M. Coetzee published a book of recollections called *Boyhood*, in which he describes the period of his childhood spent in South Africa; five years later he published *Youth* in which he gives an account of his stay in Britain at the beginning of the 1960s. Coetzee, too, tells the story of his life in an innovative way: he does not recount his experiences from the perspective of an "I" and thus there is no "first-person-narrative situation"; he looks at his life from the perspective of a "he." The books do not contain classical reminiscent narration, but loosely arranged scenes which are narrated in the present tense and in which the narrator mediates an insight into the mind of the character called John Coetzee.

Some reviewers have described *Boyhood* as a memoir while mentioning Coetzee's experimenting with the manner of narration. The question is: is this an autobiography or a fictional narrative, hence a novel? Determining the genre of a book is not a purely descriptive endeavour; it influences the reception of the text in a fundamental way: are we to read *Youth* and *Boyhood* as an account of the life of John Maxwell Coetzee, or as a fictional account whose telos is an aesthetic effect? I think that this complex question can be tackled with the help of Genette's ideas about the relation between factual and fictional autobiography: if we were to read Coetzee's reminiscent books as autobiography, the sentences would be subject to rules that apply to ordinary assertions (and the author would be held responsible for these assertions). But (and Coetzee himself is aware of this): talking about the past is tricky, as we are often self-deceived and remember things differently than they actually occurred; we have a natural tendency to forget or alter our past (such as to idealize the past or only recall events that were traumatic). What is then the relation between what really happened

⁵ Furthermore, according to Genette, the relation between the author and the narrator is a pragmatic relation (Genette 1993, 78).

and what stays in memory? Can we have genuine access to our own past? Coetzee has dealt with such questions on the theoretical level and he must have been aware of them when writing *Youth* and *Boyhood* as well.⁶ In both books he decided to make a similar move like Bohumil Hrabal: he waived his responsibility for the narrated facts and gave the floor to the narrator who is not identical with the author. In accordance with Genette's approach, Coetzee's text can be regarded as fictional autobiography.

However, Coetzee surprised his readers again in 2007 when he published *Summertime*, the last book in the trilogy. While in the first two books the reader could still hesitate regarding the relation of fiction and autobiography, in the third one the author sends a clear message about the fictitiousness of the narrative: one of the characters is a biographer Vincent who is writing a monograph about the deceased writer John Maxwell Coetzee. For the purposes of his monograph, Vincent goes to see various people who played an important part in Coetzee's life: their narration is a part of the text and thus the reader can piece together a colourful picture of Coetzee's life. What Coetzee seems to be saying in this novel is that grasping one's life, as well as the life of others, is complicated, and fraught with peril, misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Is the story of our life the story that *we* tell about ourselves, or is it the story that *others* tell about us? I think that the activation of these questions – this fictional research into autobiographical narration – constitutes an important part of the aesthetic effect of Coetzee's fictional memoir. The example of his own life serves as an illustration of Coetzee's inquiry into what is human memory, what dangers there are in writing an (auto)biography and whether it is at all possible to get to know oneself or another person.

Not only can the fact that Coetzee's first two books are fictional, that is pretended autobiography, inferred from Genette's theory, it is also confirmed by Coetzee himself when he uses the same subtitle "Scenes from Provincial Life" in *Summertime* as in the previous two books. From the point of view of reception, this is an unusual situation because the novel *Summertime* can retrospectively influence the reading of the two previous books, as it sends an unambiguous message that *Boyhood* and

⁶ Coetzee has discussed the issue of autobiography in his inauguration lecture at the University of Cape Town (see Coetzee 1984, 1-6) and in the chapter "Autobiography and Confession" in his *Doubling the Point* (see Coetzee 1992, 241-293).

Youth are fictional. As if to corroborate this argument, all three books appeared in one volume called *Scenes from Provincial Life* in 2011, which accentuates the fictionalization of the autobiographical narrative even further.

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate that speech act theory can be methodologically relevant and inspiring to literary studies, in particular to analyses of the relations between factual and fictional autobiography. Conclusions drawn from Searle's theory by Gérard Genette illuminate the ontological status of both types of narratives, but they also enable us to describe the readerly competencies that these texts expect their readers to possess.

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