Biographical narrators in psychotherapy reckon with affirmative reactions of their audience to their personal perspective. Psychoanalysis is sensitive to narrative persuasion and prepared to explore in depth linguistic processes of representation, as well as communicative enactments. The personal perspective communicated by a patient through her biographical depictions may produce in the interlocutor a sense of alienation and aversion rather than of goodwill and empathy. In this case, the patient and the therapist are faced with the task of using this potential for irritation as a space of taking chances.

For the formation of an auspicious relationship in psychotherapy, it is crucial that the therapist is in a position to take on other perspectives. One of the therapist’s competencies is being able to enter into the narrative cosmos of the patient. The patient’s narratives pertain to the narrator, who speaks on her own account. The narrator brings about the imaginative act of appropriation, whilst at the same time claiming to remain true to the facts. The “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune 1989) is in operation in this account. The narrator evokes biographical experiences in deferred dramaturgy; in doing so, her preferences and what she considers relevant are asserted. Through transferring the listener into the setting, stories set up an initial dynamic, opening up a horizon of expectation for listeners and including him in the progress of a sequential development that is headed towards a more or less favorable ending. The listeners are invited to put themselves in the ‘then and there’ of what is being narrated. The narrator seeks to win the other for his or her cause and has her or him share the narrator’s value judgements. This is made evident in the following example of a narrative of outrage (Günther 2000 has carried out an extensive analysis of the communication of accusation and indignation), produced by the psychotherapy patient Amalie in the 221st psychotherapy session. Amalie (118th narrative, 221st therapy session, Zürchner Erzählarchiv JAKOB, Original Ulm Textbank):

A Stupid Schoolmaster

I was at a concert yesterday evening
and I was sitting there next to this stupid schoolmaster
who knows exactly who I am
firstly he does sport at our school
comes to the teachers’ lounge, greets us and
and recently he was also in a study group with me as well
and yesterday evening he
was spreading his tentacles in all directions
and by chance I was sitting next to him
but he acted
as if he didn’t know me
I was so annoyed by this
that I moved somewhere else after the interval
it was quite crowded at the front there anyway
then I got so annoyed
that the whole concert was a wash
I didn’t want to stay
went home and put a record on
I got more out of it

Right at the beginning, Amalie disqualifies the person sitting next to her at the concert as a stupid schoolmaster. The stupid schoolmaster is impolite: yesterday evening he was spreading his tentacles in all directions, but he ignored Amalie, although he should know her. And he is egotistical, since he who is spreading his tentacles in all directions is, at the same time, granting an audience through his assured demeanor; albeit as a laughable tentacled creature. Amalie’s narrative is an appeal to her listener to expend goodwill, resonance and sympathetic partisanship. She demands that her portrayal of the biographical event be believed. In everyday verbal narratives, listeners usually express affirmation through short nonverbal signals of sympathy and emotional support. In the professional communication of psychotherapy, and in particular of psychoanalysis, there is an obligation to exercise therapeutic neutrality and abstinence; the restraint demanded in psychoanalysis compels the therapist to, by and large, renounce the affirmative resonance habitual to everyday interaction. Stories that express outrage make this renunciation of communicative resonance more difficult; even Amalie’s psychoanalyst communicates a subtle affirmative echo. The narrative is presented by the narrator as authentic, and this claim to authenticity is discreetly taken up by the analyst. The latter’s communicative reserve makes it possible, at the opportune moment, to create distance to the narrative partisanship so that the narrator can respond to her own constructions in a reflexive manner.

Narrators reckon with the willingness of their audience to share their personal perspective. This narrative opinion-forming process is oriented towards the egocentric impulse. It arises from an intuition about what the world would be like if there was strong support for one’s own concerns