“THAT WHICH CANNOT BE SAID”: VOICE, DESIRE AND THE UNCANNY IN ARMISTEAD MAUPIN’S THE NIGHT LISTENER

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Abstract

Voices – heard, described and discussed as distinctive, similar or identical – play a pivotal role in Armistead Maupin’s The Night Listener (2000). This exploration sets out from two base camps to show how audible voices in this novel are used to make an inaudible one emerge, which has been described by Mladen Dolar as “the object voice”. Narratology and psychoanalysis have been chosen as starting points because the object voice in Maupin’s text is inextricably tied up with phenomena best tackled by tools these theories hold in store. This article’s central thesis is that in The Night Listener the ineradicably ambiguous object voice can appear because devices like unreliability (of auscultation as well as narration) and metalepsis are installed on the level of the szujet, in order to keep perpetually open a gap on the level of the fabula. The object voice arises from this gap (between two possible origins of an uncanny acousmatic voice) that is first created by the auscultator-protagonist’s psychic technique of coping with loss, and then prevented from closing by his desire to permanently suspend solving the plot’s central riddle in order to feed his recently re-gained authorial voice.

Introduction

Maupin’s novel The Night Listener (2000) tells a story about the uncanny relationships between voice, identity and desire. Set in San Francisco, at

1 In this article I shall be ignoring both the historical events on which the novel is based – the scandal surrounding Anthony Godby Johnson’s fake memoir A Rock and a Hard Place: One Boy’s Triumphant Story (1993), which is commonly attributed to Vicki Johnson, who
the end of the twentieth century, it enables readers to glean some of its protagonist’s character traits directly from his family name, depending on how it is pronounced. Narratographically, ‘Noone’ suggests that Gabriel is a fictitious anti-everyman (*no one*) and at the peak of his profession (*noon*), while the title of his radio show, *Noone at Night*, points to his artistic appreciation of both the rhythmic and the oxymoronic. Although this punning name is but a detail, it is a *telling* one, since it draws attention to the difference a voice makes, the novel’s pivotal theme, right from the start.

Even before readers learn the first-person narrator’s name, however, he showcases his own unreliability as a storyteller. This is one of two aspects which make the novel interesting from the narratological point of view, the second being the epilogue’s move into metalepsis. Since Gabriel is also the novel’s dominant focaliser and auscultator, whose perceptions and interpretations are, thus, unavoidable filters for readers, his anecdotally supported, professional untrustworthiness is particularly pertinent. A writer of semi-autobiographical prose and self-proclaimed

posed as his adoptive mother – and the Hollywood film it has inspired. It is perhaps not surprising that the film’s adaptation, also titled *The Night Listener* (2006) and directed by Patrick Stettner, starring Robin Williams and Toni Collette, does not take as much trouble as the novel to maintain an ambiguity when it comes to Pete’s existence that seems to have all but disappeared from the real life-record. This very decision, however, makes the film less interesting to discuss than the novel, when it comes to the emergence of the object voice.

Garrett Stewart has coined the neologism “narratography” – understood in opposition to both “narrativity” and “narratology” – to describe the analytic procedure of “reading ... prose fiction for [the look and sound of] its words, word for word if called upon – called upon, that is, from within the rush, throng, and drag of phrasing” (*Novel Violence: A Narratography of Victorian Fiction*, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2009, 6).

The pronunciation of Gabriel’s name as ‘noon’ would produce a cretic foot as the show title’s underlying metre (Nóón-at-Níght); a pronunciation as ‘no one’ would make for an abbreviated double dactyl (Nó-one-at-Níght).