

THE NARRATOR AND THE AUTHOR IN FICTIONAL HOMODIEGETIC NARRATIVES IN MICHAEL SWAN’S POETRY

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In this article, we use basic conceptions of narratological and transtextual theories, as well as the theory of intertextuality to explore the agencies of the author and the narrator in the poems by Michael Swan. There is a general consensus about possibility of identity between the author and the narrator in factual and autobiographical narratives, and their distinction in heterodiegetic and homodiegetic fiction. The question whether the personality of the author can be revealed through his/her first-person fictional poetic narratives requires further discussion.

Six first-person poetic texts by Michael Swan were chosen for analysis, all featuring common narrative strategies. The author prioritizes his narrators’ “first-hand experience”, rather than exercising impersonal omniscience, to better immerse the reader into the poem’s worlds. The homodiegetic narrators of the poems are mostly the “I-as-protagonist” and occasionally the “I-as-witness” types. Fixed internal focalization is used in five out of six poems; variable internal focalization, in one. The texts share another distinguishing feature: transtextual/intertextual connections and precedent-related phenomena. Both the stories on which Michael Swan bases his poems and the stories told by his narrators describe out-of-the-ordinary situations. The plots of the former are changed in the poems; occasionally, the focus of attention is shifted. It leads to the development of quite new, unexpected themes, which in two cases are in sharp contrast with the precedent ones.

While the narrators overtly declare their presence in the poems, the personality of the author is withdrawn. Nevertheless, the recurrent narrative strategies allow us to suggest that the author’s personality is revealed through his texts. He creates text-worlds that are simultaneously based on and divergent from popular and well-studied literary/cultural phenomena, thus presenting himself as a proponent of an unorthodox approach to classic precedents.

ГОМОДІЄГЕТИЧНИЙ НАРАТОР І АВТОР У ХУДОЖНЬОМУ НАРАТИВІ ПОЕТИЧНИХ ТВОРІВ МАЙКЛА СВОНА

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У статті на основі базових концепцій наратології, теорій транстекстуальності та інтертекстуальності досліджуються інстанції автора і наратора у поезіях Майкла Свона. Загальноприйнятою є думка про можливість ідентичності постатей автора і наратора в автобіографічних наративах та їх розмежування у гетеродієгетичних і гомодієгетичних наративах, у яких художня реальність створена уявою митця. Однак потребує розгляду питання можливості прояву особистості автора у художньому поетичному тексті, де розповідь ведеться від першої особи. У шести обраних для аналізу поезіях Майкла Свона використовуються спільні наративні прийоми, що мають на меті заглиблення читача у світ художньої реальності. Перевага віддається “особистому досвіду” гомодієгетичного наратора перед розповіддю безособового всезнаючого наратора. Гомодієгетичні наратори в основному належать до класу “Я-протагоніст”, іноді – до класу “Я-спостерігач”. П’ять із шести поезій характеризуються фіксованою, одна – змінною внутрішньою фокалізацією. Ще одною спільною рисою текстів Свона є транстекстуальні / інтертекстуальні зв’язки з відомими творами і використання прецедентних феноменів. Як твори, до яких автор непрямо відсилає читача, так і його вірші базуються на екстраординарних сюжетах. У віршах ці сюжети піддаються змінам і модифікаціям, унаслідок чого виникають і розвиваються нові, неочікувані теми, які у двох із шести поезій різко контрастують з темами попередніх творів.

Наратори явно присутні у поетичних текстах Свона – на відміну від автора, чия постать видається прихованою. Проте регулярне повторення означених наративних прийомів дозволяє припустити, що особистість автора проявляється через його текст. Майкл Свон створює текстові світи, які одночасно базуються на відомих літературних/культурних феноменах і суттєво відрізняються від них. Отже, автор постає як пропонент нетрадиційного підходу до класичної спадщини.

Introduction. This study is based on six narrative poems by Michael Swan, which share the same features: fictionality, homodiegetic narrator, interconnectedness with well-known literary/cultural phenomena, alteration to the plots of the preceding stories with the resulting change of the poems’ themes. The plots of *The Twelfth Labour*, *Not what I Meant*, *A Legend of the Flood*, *The Wolf-man*, *Journey of the Magi*, and *Marco Polo* (Michael Swan,

2011), as well as their narrators, are fictional. The author is not present as a character in any of the stories. Nevertheless, we suggest that the personality of the poet can be known through his world view and attitudes expressed in his narratives: Michael Swan takes an unorthodox look at familiar texts and situations, and invites his readers to do the same. Vernon Watkins’s (1969 [1964]: xiii) comment on one of the works by Dylan Thomas, “this unique fragment,

half-fictional though it is, carries the unmistakable stamp of [the author's] personality", is truly applicable to Michael Swan.

The **objective** of our article is to examine the representation of two distinct agencies, the first-person narrator and the author, in Michael Swan's narrative poetry. The **tasks** of the research are discussion of the following aspects of the texts: types of narrator/focalization; transtextuality/intertextuality and precedent-related phenomena; themes; narrative strategies that allow us to suggest how the personality of the author is revealed through his texts.

Literature review. A narrative, "the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events" (Genette, 1980 [1972]: 25), presupposes the existence of the narrator, the narrative teller. A narrator within the story is homodiegetic, while a heterodiegetic narrator is not a present in the story as a character (Genette, 1980 [1972]: 248). The former type is subdivided into the experiencing-I and the narrating-I (Herman, 2007: 277, 279). A distinction is made between overt (personalized) and covert (neutral) narrators (Chatman, 1978: 196–261; Fludernik, 2009: 105). The narrative discourse is determined by the narrator's knowledge, perception, and point of view. This is what Gérard Genette called focalization: "a restriction of 'field' [...], a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience" (Genette, 1988 [1983]: 74). The three types of focalization are zero, internal (fixed, variable, multiple), and external (Genette, 1980 [1972]: 189–190).

According to Genette (1993), the author and the narrator should be kept apart in heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration, but they can be identical in autobiographies and factual narratives. Dorothee Birke and Tilmann Köppe (2015 a: 5) contend that in fictional worlds, "authors and narrators belong to ontologically different categories". Claudia Hillebrandt (2015: 231) states that in a lyric poem, the narrator is distinct from the author if it is "a fictional poem with a narrative structure that authorises imaginings about a (figurative) narrator telling a story". Ella Mintsyts (2024) and Hanna Kostenko (Костенко, 2011: 90) regard Joseph Conrad as the author, the narrator, and the analyst of his own experience.

Other notions employed in this study are transtextuality, intertextuality, and precedent-related phenomena. Transtextuality is "textual transcendence of the text", "all that sets a text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette, 1997 [1982]: 1). Intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980) is viewed as "the manner in which texts of all sorts (oral, visual, literary, virtual) contain references to other texts that have, in some way, contributed to their production and signification" (Childs, Fowler, 2006: 121). Precedent-related phenomena are defined

as "different forms of precedent-related connections: names, citations, situations etc.", which are "easily and immediately recognised even by recipients with less background knowledge" (Doichyk, Yurchyshyn, Velykoroda, 2024: advance online publication).

We also rely on the concept of theme as "the 'point' of a literary work, its central idea, which we infer from our interpretation of the plot, imagery and symbolism, etc. and sometimes from the title of the work itself" (Wales, 2014: 423).

The problem of author–narrator relation was discussed in many researches (see, for example, *Author and Narrator: Transdisciplinary Contributions to a Narratological Debate* edited by D. Birke and T. Köppe (2015 b)), in particular, in papers based on Old English poetry (Parks, 1987), lyric poetry (Hillebrandt, 2015), autobiographical lyric poetry (Kjerkegaard, 2014). The **central concern of this article** is to explore how specific features of fictional narrative poems, including homodiegetic narrator, can give the readers an idea about the personality of the author, who is not present in the text.

Method of analysis. The agencies of the narrator and the author in the first-person narrative poems by Michael Swan is discussed along the following lines: (i) types of narrators and focalization; (ii) transtextuality, intertextuality, and precedent-related phenomena; (iii) themes; (iv) the personality of the author as indicated by his narrative strategies.

Results. Michael Swan writes lyric and narrative poetry (as well as poetry that is a composite of the two forms), featuring both homodiegetic and heterodiegetic types of narrators. This study focuses on six out of eight poems that can be classified as homodiegetic narratives based on transtextual/intertextual/precedent-related phenomena in the collection *The Shapes of Things* (Michael Swan, 2011). Basic information about their transtextual/intertextual/precedent-related connections is added in parenthesis; capitalization in all the titles are as in the original: *The Twelfth Labour* (Heracles and Cerberus, characters in Greek mythology (Mellenthin, Shapiro, n.d.)), *Not what I Meant* (*Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 1995)), *A Legend of the Flood* (the Bible's story of the flood (Genesis 7. King James Version, n.d.)), *The Wolf-man* (Mowgli, a character in *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling (2009 [1894])), *Journey of the Magi* (the Three Wise Men (Matthew 2. New King James Version, n.d.); also the poem by Thomas Stearns Eliot (2023 [1927])), *Marco Polo* (travels of the medieval explorer (Bressanin, 2024)), *Lance-Corporal Swan* (precedent-related phenomena: Boy's Brigade, All London Challenge Cup), *700* (precedent-related phenomena: literary readings and UK literary magazines; Leicester Square as a London cultural hub). *Lance-Corporal Swan* and *700* stand apart in that they display features of family biography

and autobiography metaphorized as fiction, hence it is comparatively easier to notice the presence of the author. In the first six poems, however, the narrator and the author are two distinct agencies, belonging to different ontological levels. The narrator's "I" is typically explicit. The question is whether the personality of the author is traceable in his fictional stories. We maintain that it is covertly expressed in the texts of the poems.

Discussion. *The Twelfth Labour* (Michael Swan, 2011: 33) is a clear example of a fixed homodiegetic narration:

*Cerberus stood there snarling, acting tough,
a real performance. When he tried to fight
I blew down all six ears to call his bluff,
brought him to heel, and headed for the light.
You should have seen his faces, at the sight
of sunshine, flowers and rabbits. He went mad,
charged round all day, slept on my bed all night.
I had a friend: the first I'd ever had.
He could not settle, though, with us above.
He pined for darkness. And I was afraid,
for when the fit comes, I kill those I love,
as the gods know. A twelfth time, then, I paid:
I took him to the trail that leads below,
kissed his three muzzles, wept, and let him go.*

The story is the author's free interpretation of the famous Greek myth (Mellenthin, Shapiro, n.d.), the precedent-related phenomena being the title of the poem, the dog's name, the description of his appearance ("six ears", "his three muzzles"). The poem can be classified as a case of intertextuality. The narrator's recount of the dog's happy behaviour, his friendship with Cerberus, and warm feelings towards the monster is in conflict with the content of the original myth. Yet it is this very discrepancy that makes an impact on a reader.

It is an autodiegetic narrative; the first-person narrator (Heracles) is both the experiencing-I and the narrating-I. Within Genette's theory, it is a case of fixed internal focalization, representing events through the perception of a single focal character. "You should have seen his faces" implies a narratee on the level of fictional communication. The shift from past to present tense forms ("And I was afraid, / for when the fit comes, I kill those I love, / as the gods know") draws a reader into the act of the narration and at the same time foregrounds the experiencing-I.

The narrator is overt: he is an acting character in the story, he addresses a narratee directly ("You should have seen his faces"), expresses his opinions ("acting tough, / a real performance"; "as the gods know"), and articulates his feelings ("I had a friend: the first I'd ever had"; "I was afraid"; "kissed his three muzzles, wept").

The author changes the original text of the myth, altering its theme: now the story is not about overpowering a monster but about friendship, kindness, and sadness of parting.

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The technique of changing the plot of recognizable stories, while retaining names, places, characters' qualities, with the resulting effect of altering the original theme is also employed in *Not what I Meant*, *A Legend of the Flood*, *The Wolf-man*, and *Journey of the Magi* (Michael Swan, 2011).

In *Not what I Meant* (Michael Swan, 2011: 6), the man on a desert island ("I had a little house / made from the boat's timber") sees a ship on the horizon and waves a flag ("a shirt on a stick") only because he wants to show others the beauty of the place ("The only sadness: / such a beauty / and no one to share").

In *A Legend of the Flood* (Michael Swan, 2011: 21), an overt homodiegetic narrator tells a sad story of his family life that started with an unlawful act and is going to end with a punishment: "I ran off with a sea-king's daughter"; "For forty days and nights it has rained / till not a roof can be seen, not a spire. / And now I stand on the highest rock. / Weed floats on the water like her hair, / and I wait for the sea". The precedent-related phenomena ("Flood"; a forty-day-long rain; the sea engulfing the land) clearly indicate a connection with the story of the biblical flood (Genesis 7. King James Version, n.d.). Though, the plot of the poem (taking the bride to a "high country", having two children with "grey-green eyes", the wife's death), is distinctly different from the biblical text.

The type of the narrator in *The Wolf-man* (Michael Swan, 2011: 26) is closer to the covert end on the overt/covered scale. He/she is a member of a community that have adopted a strange boy: "When they brought him / we could see he would do no harm, / though the dogs were not easy with him". The narrator, who is not I-as-protagonist but I-as-witness, explicitly presents him-/herself as the articulator of the story only by mentioning his/her belonging to the community: "we could see"; "Our doors were always open"; "he would greet us like strangers". The precedent-related phenomena that refer to Rudyard Kipling's (2009 [1894]) character, Mowgli, are the title (*The Wolf-man*) and the indication of the character's destination and behaviour in the final stanza of the poem: "One day he took a bus / south, to the edge of the jungle; / went sniffing along the trails". The plot of the poem is "modernized" in comparison with Kipling's tale: "He liked to watch TV"; "Scientists come constantly, / measured him, / attached wires / with small pieces of plaster".

Journey of the Magi (Michael Swan, 2011: 29) has the same title as the poem by T. S. Eliot (2023 [1927]). Both poems are first-person narratives; both authors

change the original biblical description of the Three Kings's journey across the desert. T. S. Eliot "offers the suggestion that the magi could not possibly have understood the profundities of the unfolding mystery that they were there to witness in its initial manifestation" (Murphy, 2007: 278). On the other hand, the central theme of Michael Swan's poem is the inter-relationship among nature, humans, and the divine: power of kings is shown as inferior to the laws of God and nature ("The desert put us all in our places"; "ten thousand frozen stars ignored us"; "the sun kept its own counsel / indifferent rocks cracked in the heat"; "wind from the beginning of time / wiped out our footprints"; "a sand-cat killed and ate a viper / two yards from me, as if I was nothing. / And this baby, Lord of Humankind? / Kings don't count for much here"). We consider *Journey of the Magi* by Michael Swan primarily as a poem containing precedent-related phenomena ("Magi"; "baby, Lord of Humankind"; "Kings") that refer to the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 2. New King James Version, n.d.). Intertextual reference to T. S. Eliot's poem is secondary because in our cultural tradition the Bible is "regarded as a predecessor text that establishes a pattern [...] for the perception and evaluation of cultural objects" (Devdiuk, Kobuta, Huliak, 2024: 30).

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Marco Polo (Michael Swan, 2011: 8) has a more complex narrative structure than the poems discussed above:

I was talking to Marco Polo.

*He said
Yes, OK,
he went over the top a bit
in the book
to push up the sales.*

But it was mostly true.

*The years on the road.
Turkey, Armenia, Persia, Afghanistan, ...*

*Disease,
and a year to recuperate
in Badakhshan.*

*Bandits,
sandstorms and spirit voices
in the Gobi.*

*The Pamirs were the worst
he said,
with the bloody horses dying
below the high passes
where your bones froze.*

*You know
I said
I was in China yesterday.
(True enough.
We hit Terminal 3
at 7.20 this morning.)*

*I had expected disbelief,
but he understood pretty well
what we can do.*

I had not expected pity.

There are two protagonists in the poem; the first one, our contemporary, recounts his dialogue with a famous medieval explorer, whose tale is a story within the story. The fictional situation – the talk of two people – is a homodiegetic narrative internally focalized through the mind of the first protagonist ("I was talking to Marco Polo"; "I had expected disbelief, / but he understood pretty well / what we can do. // I had not expected pity"). This narrator is overt since he has his own story to tell ("You know / I said / I was in China yesterday") and expresses his feelings ("I had expected disbelief"; "I had not expected pity"). The bulk of the poem, though, is given over to Marco Polo's tale (reproduced by the first protagonist). It is also an internally focalized first-person narrative: the overt narrator describes his experience and expresses his feelings; for example, "The Pamirs were the worst / [...] / with the bloody horses dying / below the high passes / where your bones froze".

The choice of the two protagonists presupposes temporal world-switches: "[t]he poem implies that the temporal deictic centre is the [first] narrator's time-zone, which means Marco Polo's transference from his very distant past to our epoch" (Kulchytska, Erlikhman, Tron, 2023: 22–23). The theme of the poem, as we see it, is juxtaposition of contemporary and ancient experiences, their gains and the prices paid. Thus, we suggest that the two narrators are of equal status, the two stories are equally important, and the poem is the case of variable internal focalization as the conception of travelling is presented from the point of view of two focal characters.

The lines "Yes, OK, / he went over the top a bit / in the book / to push up the sales. // But it was mostly true" indicate transtextual rather than intertextual relations: they refer to *The Travels of Marco Polo* by Rustichello da Pisa (Bressanin, 2024), the traveller's contemporary, to whom Marco Polo is believed to dictate his tales. The name "Marco Polo" in combination with some familiar toponyms (e.g., "Persia", "the Gobi", "the Pamirs", "China") may be regarded as precedent-related phenomena.

In this poem the author does not actually change the plot of *The Travels of Marco Polo* because

Michael Swan's character just names the regions through which the real traveller passed and speaks about the hardships on his way east. Instead, the poem tells a different story with a plot and themes of its own: modern world's dependence on advanced technologies and their (dis)advantages.

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In all six poems, which are transtextually, intertextually, and precedentially related to literary works of different epochs and cultures, the author changes or shifts the themes of the original texts. His themes are loneliness and friendship (*The Twelfth Labour*), relations between humans and nature (*Not what I Meant*), taking what is not meant to be yours (*A Legend of the Flood*), otherness (*The Wolf-man*), comprehending one's place in the world (*Journey of the Magi*), price paid for experience and advanced technological achievements (*Marco Polo*). These poems are the kind of contemporary free verse, whose reception is "shaped more by text-worlds and themes than by readers' cultural backgrounds due to globalization" (Kulchytska, Malyshivska, 2022: 88). They aim at general human themes, which makes them both deep and enjoyable.

Conclusion. Michael Swan plays with outstanding familiar stories. He demonstrates how, thanks to their inherent complexity, these discourses can give rise to new plots and new themes, and allow the possibility of alternative interpretations. Swan's narratives are fictional worlds. The author is definitely not a specific textual entity in *The Twelfth Labour*, *Not what I Meant*, *A Legend of the Flood*, *The Wolf-man*, and *Journey of the Magi*. The voices of his homodiegetic narrators are not the voice of the author. As to *Marco Polo*, it is very tempting to suggest that there is some part of Michael Swan in the first protagonist; it appears that there is a textual cue as to the personality of the author. *The Travels of Marco Polo* by Rustichello da Pisa is not likely to be popular among average readers of today; the implication is that the first narrator in the poem belongs to the category of people who appreciate history, literature, and cultures. The same can be stated about the author.

In all the poems discussed, the choice of homodiegetic narrator may be explained by the author's intention to tell the story from the position of insider. Despite the fictionality of the narrators, their experiences are still supposed to be *first-hand*. It is first-handedness that can make readers feel closer to the narrators and immerse in their stories.

While the narrator and the author are obviously two different agencies in Michael Swan's poems, the trace of the author can be detected through the analysis of his recurrent narrative strategies: (i) choosing remarkable stories, (ii) employing transtextuality, intertextuality, and precedent-related phenomena, (iii) presenting his stories from the perspective of

homodiegetic narrators; using fixed/variable internal focalization; (iv) changing plots of preceding stories or shifting the focus of attention within their plots, which brings about changes of themes in Swan's poems.

These features reveal the personality of the author who takes a different perspective on familiar and well-studied literary/cultural phenomena, asserts importance of individual interpretation, exercises artistic creativity through building text-worlds that are alternatives to the worlds of preceding texts.

As to further research, the Free Indirect Discourse narrative technique in Michael Swan's poetry appears to be a promising area for investigation.

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