

The question of unreliability in autobiographical narration

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In the year 2001 Kristian Ditlev Jensen, a young Danish journalist and former literary student, published a book by the title *Det bliver sagt* (“It will be told”). Here he told of the sexual abuses he suffered as a child in a relationship with a pedophile adult friend, called Gustav in the book.

The book became a sensation, not only due to its shocking content but also because of its astonishing literary qualities. It has the suspense of a page turner and at the same time it is an analytical intelligent autobiography: it tells the everlasting story of how an individual person on his specific terms is confronted with the world and struggles to find his place in it. It is furthermore a kind of journalist documentary, where the same person is the investigator and part of the story being investigated. How should one read and respond critically to a book of this complex nature?

In the preface to the book Ditlev Jensen characterized it as “literary non-fiction”. The book presents his version, how he experienced the events. He does not use the real names of most people involved, he reconstructs conversations and dialogues as if he had them on tape, and he has left out some of Gustav’s other victims.

What are the differences between our ethical and critical response towards a fiction and towards a factual memoir book? On a general level, inspired by Dorrit Cohn’s theory of fiction, I will suggest that in the realm of fiction the author is the sovereign, free of responsibility towards the rendering of reality and other people. He creates his own world, and fiction may therefore be used as a free ethical exploration of the human condition. In non-fiction on the other hand the honesty and credibility of the author is decisive. It must be presupposed that the author tells the truth and he can be persecuted legally and criticized and condemned morally if this is not the case. This raises the question about the nature of the “literary non-fiction” means, the author can be allowed to use.

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When a first-person narrator in a literary text is considered unreliable, the reader is confronted with both an aesthetic refinement and a thought-provoking challenge: An interplay between the norms and values of the implied author and those of the narrator, a gap or an ambiguity to be analyzed. When a first-person narrator in a factual memoir text is considered unreliable, the reader finds himself in quite another position. If the tale cannot be trusted, it bears no documentary value and it poses ethical as well as perhaps legal problems. But how should one reflect, ethical as well as aesthetical, upon all the intermediate stages between a superhuman accuracy of memoir and a deliberate deception?

I am here inspired by James Phelan's analysis of Kathryn Harrison's autobiography *The Kiss* (1997) from his book *Living to tell about it*. When we read a fictional text with a first-person narrator and fall upon signs or symptoms of unreliability we regard this as an invitation to further analysis and reflection. The author is so to speak talking to us behind the back of the narrator. In the genre of memoir however the author and the narrator are identical, and if the narrator therefore seems unreliable the author has a problem. Unreliability is of course a strong word to use combined with autobiography, but we react with confusion and doubts, concerning the author, when we fall upon what seems to be gaps, imbalances and improbabilities in the narrated. In his reading of *The Kiss*, where Kathryn Harrison tells the story of her incestuous love affair with her biological father, Phelan detects a suppression of her own agency in the affair, a self-victimization that is not quite probable considering the fact that she is a grown-up woman at the beginning of the affair.

Let us now turn to *Det bliver sagt*. When an autobiography is written by a wellknown person, e.g. a politician or an artist the reader may consult independent sources to verify parts of the narration. This is not possible with this story from childhood. But to the spontaneous reading the narration seems highly credible. The question is of course how this effect is produced. In spite of the immediate readability of the text we have to do with a complex product of creation. The events from the past are not only recalled with a rare accuracy and vivacity, they are also brought to light and made transparent by a brilliant analytical mind. Ditlev Jensen not only reports of the seduction, he also explains how it became possible. The narration is not a "naïve" rendering for critics and

interpreters to refine and analyze. Ditlev Jensen does the work himself, and this is what makes the book a masterpiece rather than a simple report.

But let me state clearly that the story does not display any symptoms or signs of unreliability. When you overlook the whole book some minor contradictions can be observed, but they do not challenge the narration as a whole.

An early crescendo in the book is the holiday in Provence, in the south of France, that started it all. As a 9-year-old Kristian is invited abroad by the parents of his friend from kindergarten, Nikolaj, to come with Nikolaj and some of the parent's friends, amongst them Gustav. The trip is an amazing event for the little boy who comes from a low-income family. The world opens itself to Kristian and turns out to be what he could never have dreamt of: The food, the landscape, the language, the music etc. And Gustav somehow appears as the source of it all, or rather the key to an understanding of how to behave in this totally new and expanded world. In Provence he takes Kristian under his wings in a very special mixture of care and harassment or a tough educational upbringing. e.g. forcing him to eat olives although he does not like them. The friend Nikolaj is pushed aside and obviously the other adults do not pay that much attention. Gustav draws back as soon as another adult comments on his behavior.

Back home Kristian is all alone with his holiday memories. An arrangement is made so that he can visit Gustav one weekend in Copenhagen. He cannot recall the precise details behind the arrangement. During the visit Gustav insists that they share the same bed and sleep naked. In the morning he masturbates in the presence of the boy. Kristian finds it odd and uncomfortable, but it is soon forgotten as the weekend is filled with a visit to Tivoli, the movies, a boat trip etc.

Kristian visits Gustav through a period of three years, in every holiday and in many weekends. The description of the first visit is followed by a more general outline of what normally went on in the weekends by Gustav. The friendship ends after three years. Kristian tells his parents about the abuse, but they do not know how to react, and he does not himself go to the police. Many years after as a young adult, he finally reports Gustav to the police. Gustav is

sentenced to two years of suspended prison and Kristian receives a compensation of 20.000 Danish Kroner.

Based on the emotional reading experience of *Det bliver sagt* it is as if the narration loses some energy and dynamics towards the end. Maybe it simply continues longer than it should have, after *it has been told*. When I read it a few years ago with my students, one of them said, perhaps rather crude, that the book became more and more of a health journal, of how hard it had been for the author, and that his self-pity became so dominant that there was not any room left for the pity of the reader. The narration is somehow brought out of balance. But why does the author who until then has shown himself as a master of composition, suspense and analysis fail towards the end?

Legally the case is closed in the cold manner of the law, but Kristian wants more. He feels that Gustav escapes too easily. Years later the writing and publishing of *Det bliver sagt* gives him the emotional revenge and satisfaction that goes beyond the legal system, but maybe he should have tried an aesthetic imitation of the coldness of the law. Sometimes less is more even when it comes to traumas of this kind.

Are there any significant gaps in the narration? A crucial point is the transition from the first visit to the general description of visiting Gustav. As readers we never see or experience the first abuse and how Kristian reacts. A decisive point in time is blurred, the precise point of time upon which the abuser will make his defense: you wanted it yourself! This omission is remarkable considering the detailed reconstruction of a lot of other situations.

Being a child Kristian of course cannot be ascribed the same sort of agency as Kathryn in *The Kiss* read by Phelan. This would imply a reproduction of the mindset of the pedophile where the child, at least in his self-understanding and rationalization is regarded as an equal sexual partner. Kristian did not want it, but why did he not reject Gustav? This sin of omission lingers upon the narration as a torment, a feeling of shame and self-reproach without being ever articulated explicitly. In one weekend Kristian brings his friend Villy along and he can witness with what ease Villy avoids all the peculiar arrangements in Gustav's home. This is how it could have been done.

But of course, Villy is not in a similar situation. He has far better odds, is older than Kristian when he first visited Gustav, comes from a stable family background, is not being gradually manipulated by Gustav. Gustav entered Kristian's life as a parent replacement, a source of all that was new and exciting. And afterwards he was manipulated and broken down.

And what is exactly the first act of abuse? Has it already happened during the first night stay although Gustav does not approach Kristian in any direct corporal manner? Is it possible to identify the original act of abuse? The omission can reflect the fact that Kristian only gradually entered this whole pattern of behavior, that he could not comprehend what happened, that he lacked the words or the concepts for it. The crucial difference between Kristian Ditlev Jensen and Kathryn Harrison from *The Kiss* is, that she knows what happens when she and her father initiates their affair. He does not. Allow me to quote an expert on the psychology of the abused child:

"... the relation between a child and an adult will always be asymmetrically, and this fact is intensified when it comes to sexuality, because the child does not know the meaning of sexuality, neither in himself or in the grown up. A child is not born with a natural sexuality that can evolve through the right conditions. And therefore the child is not capable of establishing mutual sexual relations with adults. The child does not know what sexuality is!" (Zeuthen 2009, 37)

It cannot be told, because Kristian does not know what "it" is. This threshold of articulation is made even stronger by all the lies and manipulations of Gustav, the mixture of favors and humiliations, the invitation to an atmosphere of conspiracy where the two of them share a life the rest of the world does not know about. It is an important although somewhat underlying point in the book that the abuse cannot be limited to one or several physical harassments. It has a widespread character, also in a temporal sense. It encloses the life of Kristian not only in the three years of the relation but also many years after because the abuse is only gradually understood and recognized in its full scale.

All of this is understandable. But when the narration seems to be tipping out of balance it is due to the vehemence of a suppressed shame and self-

reproach. And in that case the book is not just an act of testimony in a factual and descriptive sense as an act of justice and restoration: Now it can finally be told. It is also a testimony of another order, in its psychological profile, in its underlying feeling of shame, a testimony of the very long aftereffects of having been the victim of an abuse of this nature. In the afterword to a new edition of the book published in 2013 Ditlev Jensen has a hard time putting the story to rest. Even now after all these years he suddenly realizes that this or that statement from Gustav was also a lie and a manipulation. In a sense the abuse never stops. The sense of justice, of satisfaction, will not appear. It is as if you cannot make the monster or the throll go away by confronting it or calling it by name. You cannot put it behind you in a creational catharsis and get on with your life. Actually, this is anticipated by Kristian's lawyer, when he after the verdict recommends Kristian to forget the whole thing and move to Nordsjælland, one of the most beautiful and wealthy parts of Denmark.

When gaps or imbalances are detected in a memoir book a certain suspicion is justified. And it is fair to ask if Kathryn Harrison is compromising herself ethically by putting too much responsibility for the incestuous affair on the shoulders of her father. But gaps and imbalances are not necessarily signs of intentional manipulation or ethical failure. They may also signify that some things are still very difficult to come to terms with, even when the remembering narrator writes the whole story through. I do not suspect that Kristian Ditlev Jensen distributes guilt and responsibility in an unfair manner. But the books contain a hidden self-reproach and a nagging doubt that is externalized or heeled out in the narrative composition as a deep and insurmountable frustration. The mastery of the composition is supplied with a lack of mastery. The invisible reverse of the title *Now it can be told* is *Why did I not manage to escape this?* For this the author does not grant himself any forgiveness. And thereby he unintentionally draws supplementary lines in the anatomical drawing of the abuse and the consequences of molesting a child.

The genre of memoir is almost as old as literature itself. Traditionally it was practiced by "important" persons, looking back in the autumn of their lives. Due to the passing of time the potential conflicts in the subject matter were often silenced or weakened. Today we witness a democratization of the exercise

of the memoir genre, and the books are often written and published in the middle of life while passions are still vibrant and the material of conflicts is still intact. These books debate problems in society by exposing personal stories. And they demand a new and sharpened attention on behalf of the reader and the critic. Which aesthetic and compositional means are legitimate and under what circumstances? How shall the reader in his psychological and ethical response balance between the strong personal and emotional appeal of the first-person narrator and the considerations for the other persons in the story? There are no simple answers to these questions. One thing is sure however: The intellectual heritage from the close reading of the New Criticism and the complex catalogues of modes of plotting and detections of reliability in Narratology does not stop being relevant when we are forced to investigate in the ethics of auto-biographical narration.