



The Dark and Darker Sides of Bill Clinton.

An intermedial reading of
consciousness representation and
some remarks on multiply mediated
experientiality

Maria Mäkelä

Comparative Literature
University of Tampere

1. Background: Literary narratology, narrative mediacy, and textual mind construction

The recognition of the omnipresence of narrative in human endeavors and in human imagination has had a controversial impact on the study of literary narratives. On the one hand, the explosive interdisciplinization of narrative studies has given a much needed boost to literary narratology, which has resulted in various postclassical approaches – the most pertinent and advanced of those new approaches being cognitive narratology. Yet, on the other hand – and I am aware that this is a strong claim – these all-embracing theories of narrativity have made us less sensitive to some narrative phenomena that are characteristic – and, I would even say, essential – to narrative fiction (see Mäkelä 2006 and forthcoming, Tammi 2006 and 2008). Literature nourishes its readers' narrative appetite with a peculiar set of modal, structural, and thematic schemata, and if one wishes to expertise in literature, one's interest should be turned to those peculiarities rather than to cognitive universals. At the wake of the narrative turn in the humanities as well as in social and life sciences, interdisciplinary breakthroughs in the literary

camp are not to be expected until we are able to get hold of the narrative mechanisms that give literary culture its characteristic shape.

In this essay, my aim is to highlight some aspects of the overarching frame of today's culture and academia, the LIFE READS AS NARRATIVE frame – aspects, that are best highlighted from the estranging angle provided by narrative literature. However controversially, the test case is both non-fictional and non-literary: this paper examines the infamous Clinton-Lewinsky media scandal as one of the archetexts of late modernity and as a real treasure trove of culturally emblematic narratives. This discussion is extracted from my Ph.D. study project *The Romantic Frame of Mind: Narrative and Literary Mediation in Textual Representations of Consciousness*, which mostly deals with novelistic representations of consciousness and focuses on literary narratologies, past and present. As a textual artifact, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal is a mosaic of legal reports and testimonies, biographical and autobiographical writing, e-mails, academic essays, public appearances, photographs, and so on. Consequently, in the context of a literary-narratological study, it is exceptional in two regards: first, it is a text made of many pieces, and second, those pieces are essentially nonfiction. Yet, in the context of my Ph.D. project, the Lewinsky scandal appears as a crucial cultural text in the long continuum of narratives on passion and adultery. Furthermore, I go on to claim that it is a text that invites its reader to adhere to frames and conventions that are emblematic of literary and fictional mind construction. In another words, it is a text which stimulates our "mind reading" capacity in the manner of the best Victorian or Modernist fictions whose allure is based on the "who-thought-what" and on the "who-knew-who-thought-who-knew-etc" type of ambivalence (cf. Zunshine 2006, Butte 2004). Finally, I suggest that a *certain* kind of reading of this scandal highlights the *literarily estranging* effects that textual and narrative mediation may have on *experientiality* (as defined in Fludernik 1996: 12 as the "the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real life experience'", and as such, as the core of all narrative understanding).

Since the entire Clinton-Lewinsky text is admittedly a messy case, as such it is a most fit and appropriate example for demonstrating the peculiarly *multi-cognitive* dynamics of narrative and textual mind construction: unlike in real life intersubjective exchange (people guessing at each other's thoughts at a staff meeting), in written representations of consciousness the experience is multiply mediated, first by the experiencing I, then by the narrating I or by some other extradiegetic narrator, and finally by the reader. Furthermore, in the Clinton-Lewinsky case, we encounter narratives that are multiply told, and retold in diverse contexts and genres. By discussing a few examples on how different texts and different readings construct the mind and

the experience of Bill Clinton, I wish to point out how a text or a reading, instead of celebrating the intersubjective quest for shared human experientiality (“What was he thinking of?”; “His behaviour was understandable” etc.) , demonstrates how the *mediacy of experience* itself becomes foregrounded.

Just to say a few more words about the narrative theoretical context of my study and the role of this particular test case in this particular context: The aim of my forthcoming doctoral dissertation is to discuss, challenge and reform the various theoretical conceptions of the fictional mind inscribed in contemporary narratology. By combining thematic analysis with an approach to the evolution of literary techniques, I wish to offer a counter-reading of the analogy between “natural” mental functioning and literary conventions (an analogy cherished by most of the cognitively inclined narratologists) by pointing out the “unnaturalness” of fictional mind construction and the ways this unnaturalness reflects the complexity of literary interpretation. As a final test case of the study, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal upends this “natural”/“unnatural” binarity and thus probes and problematizes the claims about the literariness of consciousness representation, made in the earlier analyzes of classical adultery novels and of their modern and late modern applications. How can a true story assume frames of understanding that are characteristic of literary interpretation?

Reading a real life scandal from the vantage point provided by literary narratology challenges several major assumptions governing the study of minds and narrative today. First of all, the universalizing view that the construction of one’s experience and one’s identity happen on the same narrative terms as the interpretation of literary texts – a stance taken by most cognitive narratologists and also by some narrative psychologists – may start to seem reductionist. Secondly, the “natural narratology” notion that all story-telling and story-processing is based on experientiality (Fludernik 1996) calls for refinement and attention to the nature of *mediated* experientiality. Thirdly, a literary reading of a non-literary text takes up the issue of the “Theory of Mind” in literary interpretation (see Zunshine 2006) by weighing the similarities and differences between our basic cognitive ability to attribute thoughts and emotions to other people and our methods for constructing “minds” from textual representations. Finally, the so-called “Psychological Narrativity Thesis” (see Strawson 2004) – that coping with experience equals to keeping a coherent story-line and reaching a “closure” (seminal writings on this by narrative psychologist Jerome Bruner) – meets its limits and proves a lopsided conception of human reasoning.

All in all, I hope that the following examples demonstrate that the feature that I so persistently call “literary” inheres in *readerly strategies*, and is not in any definite way immanent in specific texts.

2. Palimpsestuous minds

The scandal known as the “Lewinskygate” evoked many far-reaching and contrasting narrative interests, and the focal point of those narratives can be expressed in the shape of one question: “What was he thinking of?” In line with the recent assumptions made in narrative psychology, constructions of Clinton’s mind leaned heavily on the ideal of coherent story-lines and easily accessible generic codes: reading the President’s mind and telling his narrative went hand in hand. Yet even today Clinton’s juvenile transgressions seem both imaginable and unimaginable, his mind both penetrable and impenetrable. This is how James R. Kincaid analyses the difficulties the public encountered when trying to find generic frames for what they were told:

Perhaps it’s not our inability to cast Bill and Monica in a pornographic narrative that’s at issue but our more humane willingness to see them in a small and sad human drama. Perhaps it reminds us more of sit-coms than of high tragedy or good erotica. [...] We wish Bill and Monica could have it better, since their petty failings hardly deserve the stories that try to get told about them. [...] We have a story forlornly looking for a genre. (Kincaid 2001: 81-82)

Indeed, the scandal appears as both easily narrativizable and beyond (or below) any narrative causality or structure. A look at the textual representations of Clinton’s mental activity may help us understand how we detect such narrativity under *erasure* when reading the scandal.

Many of the texts depicting Clinton’s point of view or his experience are multiply mediated. The special investigator Kenneth Starr’s 445-page report with its abundant appendices forms the very core of the collective Clinton ToM: it is a text that serves as a background for every speculation on the workings of the President’s mind. Every text must make take its stance in relation to *The Starr Report* (1998), a legal document that spread over the internet right after the scandal broke and was published in several paperback editions. Palimpsest¹-like, it shows through even in texts that are written in hope of erasing it. Yet the legal document itself is not the *scriptio inferior*, the first layer of the palimpsest, but is itself based on other narratives:

¹ The Latin word ‘palimpsest’ refers to a “rewritable” manuscript page which may bear traces of earlier writings that have been scraped off. Philippe Lejeune and, later but more famously, Gérard Genette (1982) have adopted the word to literary terminology where it refers to intertextual practices.

testimonies of Lewinsky, Clinton, and dozens of others as well as other evidence. One attempt to rewrite the narrative and rearrange the evidence is Andrew Morton's *Monica's Story* (1999), a bibliography written in co-operation with Lewinsky.

With a poetic flourish that goes rather beyond the legal necessities, the Starr Report describes the scene thus: "A ray of sunshine was shining directly on Lewinsky's face while she performed oral sex to completion on the President. The President remarked about Lewinsky's beauty." This description provoked much public mirth, but Monica stresses that the moment was a very private, intimate, and romantic one, during which for the first time they enjoyed brief genital contact, "without penetration", as the Starr Report, less poetically, puts it. (*Monica's Story*: 131)

The example nicely demonstrates the rivaling narrative ambitions and "Theories of Mind" at work in textual representations of the scandal. The extract is framed by the best-selling romantic discourse of Andrew Morton (known also as Princess Diana's personal biographer), an *ingénue*-story of Lewinsky in which Clinton appears as "a flawed individual, riddled with doubt and desire" (*Monica's Story*, 5). Inside the biographical discourse we read another best-seller, *The Starr Report* – or, in fact, an examination record of the initial interrogation of Lewinsky (which, outrageously, happened without her lawyer present). Two genres, romantic ("poetic flourish") and juridical, both collapse and intermingle; it almost seems as if Morton were jealously guarding his own discursive realm, where rays of sunshine are stock material. Yet these competing narratives are both based on interviews with Lewinsky and the wordings hark back to her romantic frame of mind. Thus the narrative situation seems analogous to those in narrative fiction where the oscillation between narrator's discourse and character's discourse creates double-voiced effects such as stylistic contagion or free indirect discourse.

This is not the end of embedding, however. Where is Clinton in this passage? He is, after all – as Henry James would put it – the "centre of consciousness" who detects the ray of light illuminating Lewinsky's face. Although the subject of the romantic discourse may be Lewinsky, the narrative levels (or the "levels of intentionality", see Zunshine 2006) are "infected" by this banally romantic discourse top-down from the juridical discourse all the way down to Clinton the focalizer, constructing him as a true connoisseur of beauty. The discursive elements make a loop from the initial experiential level (of Lewinsky) onto the extradiegetic level of narration and then back to the level of experience, where this time (at the time of reading) Clinton must be constructed as the centre of consciousness. Such embedded focalizations are common in modernistic prose (Ron 1981: 23-24; McHale 1983: 33-34; Jahn 1992: 357-358; Zunshine 2006; Butte 2004; Mäkelä 2006 and forthcoming). In the above example, structural ambiguity is not a product of one intentional discourse but a result of narrative rivalry between different texts represented in different media with contrasting intentions.

Using narrative techniques that are in consonance with the object of description is one thing and something to be expected in narratives such as Morton's *ingénue*-narratives whose generic code assumes empathy and emancipation. But when we read a construction of Clinton's perception, represented in Monica Lewinsky's language, and narrated by the authorial and impersonal voice of a legal report, the effect is mirthfully poetic in a much deeper sense than any "poetic flourish". Accordingly, a reading of such a multi-intentional and multi-subjective representation of experience cannot be reduced to the simple quest of "who-thought-what" but is more likely to pay attention to the mediatedness per se. This kind of multi-intentionality and its interpretation bears resemblance to the hierarchical and often ambiguous structure of "voices" in fictional narratives – the favorite subject matter of classical, structuralist narratology.

3. Parallel lives

Clinton's own version, his monstrous autobiography *My Life* (2004) reinforces the impression that the scandal should, indeed, be read *sous rature*. There was an advantageous bias in the abundant evidence collected for Clinton's impeachment trial for those who wanted to distort Clinton's personality, since in most cases the source was Lewinsky. When Clinton finally had his say, the public was disappointed with his vagueness in discussing the Lewinskygate as well as his other (allegedly numerous) amours. Lewinsky even accused Clinton of historical revisionism in the *Daily Mail*. Yet Clinton's defense is taken to its culmination in the process of his self-narration, in a narrative whose ultimate aim is to construe its narrator's life as a solidly coherent life-story where every detail – and every failure – is motivated. Clinton's narrative psychology is a manifestation of the so-called "Ethical Narrativity Thesis" (criticized vehemently by Strawson 2004): the supposition that narrative understanding of experience and one's identity is not only psychologically essential (the "Psychological Narrativity Thesis") but a prerequisite for morally sound behavior. Here is Clinton's analysis of the Lewinskygate and its causes:

The current controversy was the latest casualty of my lifelong effort to lead parallel lives, to wall off my anger and grief and get on with my outer life, which I loved and lived well. [...] There was no excuse for what I did, but trying to come to grips with why I did it gave me at least a chance to finally unify my parallel lives. (*My Life*: 811)

One of the leitmotifs in the Clinton autobiography is his struggle against "the dark side" or "demons" which force him to lead "parallel lives"; his tendency to suppress the negative feelings (initially evoked by his abusive stepfather) and lead a secret inner life which at times

would manifest as infidelity. However, as Clinton suggests, the source of human evil inheres in every one of us, and in his narrative he makes an emancipatory *exemplum* of himself:

Listening to my cabinet, I really understood for the first time the extent to which the exposure of my misconduct and my dishonesty about it had opened a Pandora's box of emotions in the American people. [...] once what I had done was out there in all its stark ugliness, people's evaluations of it were inevitably a reflection of their own personal experiences, marked not only by their convictions but also by their own fears, disappointments, and heartbreak. (*My Life*: 809)

The mystical dark side played a role in media already in 1998, and not only in the Republican propaganda but also in the Clinton camp: the President invited several priests representing different religions to White House for religious consultation. To the priests the repentant Clinton has been recorded to say: "I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned" (*The Survivor*: 348). However, the above example proves that Clinton underestimated his own ability to make belated confession an art.

Yet none of these narrative acts – PR or the autobiography – offers any true glimpse at Clinton's "other life." Clinton may perceive himself as an ambivalent hero in a metaphysical western (his favorite movie is *High Noon*) or in a film noir, but this ambivalence doesn't come across in his narrative practice. If Clinton the narrator would have been faithful to his both lives, he would perhaps have written himself these words with which Andrew Morton sketches Clinton's psyche in *Monica's Story*: "the man behind the public mask, a flawed figure riddled with doubt and wrestling with guilt, yet emotionally needy, vulnerable and ultimately alone" (100). Instead, Clinton's narrative focus moves repeatedly away from his transgressive actions ("what I had done was out there in all its stark ugliness"). Yet, in spite of this narrative exorcism, the dark side found its way out elsewhere.

We can only speculate; as John F. Harris writes in his Clinton biography *The Survivor* (2005), "one can imagine the guilty negotiation between desire and conscience in Clinton's mind" (223); did he regret his misdeeds or just the public exposure of them?" (347). However, the wealth of textual material and the many "theories" of Clinton's mind evoked by that material make speculation a worthwhile narrative project. To my mind, one of the most fascinating interpretations of the whole scandal is a little booklet entitled *Poetry Under Oath: From the Testimony of William Jefferson Clinton and Monica S. Lewinsky* (1998). In this book edited by Tom Simon we find bits and pieces from Clinton's and Lewinsky's testimonies arranged to look like short, modernistic poems that bring to mind – for example, William Carlos Williams.

The Word "Is"
It depends on what

The meaning of the word
"is" is

If the – If he – if "is" means is and never has been that is not–
that is one thing
If it means there is none that was a
completely true statement
(*Poetry Under Oath*: 11)

This citation, taken from Clinton's Grand Jury testimony, is a canonized piece of cultural history. This could be regarded as a textual manifestation of the other, if not darker then at least less narrative Clinton. Harris points out that Clinton's verbal wriggling – which finds its full expression in the "Meaning of the word is" – is not coincidental, nor are its deeply philosophical undertones: "This penchant for ambiguity was central to who he was" (*The Survivor*: 341). In some poems, instead of meeting the empathic people's President of *My Life* who always wants to "do the right thing", we are able to construct a truly Shakespearean ruler, a moody creature carrying a metaphysical weight on his shoulders:

There Are No Curtains
There are no curtains in the Oval Office
There are no curtains on my private office
There are no curtains or blinds that can close
The windows in my private dining room
The naval aides come and go at will
(*Poetry Under Oath*, 17)

The most famous Theory of Clinton's Mind is the one he offered himself: compartmentalizing. That was his answer when queried about his ability not to let personal troubles interfere his work. Harris's opinion as a biographer is that "[h]e did it by illusion. [...] the president's mind worked like most people's" (*The Survivor*: 326). Self-narration is a sensitive genre and is constantly interrupted by narratively "indigestible" experiences and episodes. A reading of the scandal that remains sensitive to the constructed nature of mediated experience and to the rivaling story-lines highlights the role of human inconsistency in narrative reasoning. Such literary conventions as unreliable narration, shifts in focalization, polyphony, or ambiguity of voices provide us with interpretive frames for narrative inconsistencies and anti-narrative tendencies.

4. Readerly mediation (of a writerly text)

I have been trying to suggest that the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal is something that Roland

Barthes would call a “writerly” text: the reader must also be the producer of the text, since it has no unified structure nor one fixed intention. Here, the reader has been responsible for a lot more than simply “making something a narrative by the sheer act of imposing narrativity on it” (Fludernik 1996, 34). Above, I have tried to construct an analyzable object from the multiply mediated and narratively heterogeneous material by using interpretive frames that, instead of relying on “natural” frames of narrativization, foreground and celebrate ambiguity and multiplicity. My short analyses suggest that ambiguity between narrative voices and “centers of consciousness” as well as the thematization of rivaling narrative interests allures the reader to liken the scandal with literary representation.

Mieke Bal envisages the almost infinite possibilities of cultural narratology: “[n]ot that everything in culture is narrative; but practically everything in culture has a narrative aspect to it” (Bal 1999, 19). Is this true for the literary as well – has everything in culture a literary aspect to it? Hardly every aspect of our life is open to ambiguity. Nor are the readers all the same: the “reader” who is the protagonist of this paper is not a member of the Grand Jury but instead someone who is willing to go “beyond legal necessities” (cf. the example (a) above). Some non-fictional texts highlight the constructed nature of mediated experience more than others and urge us to reflect on the nature of textual representations of consciousness, their balancing between real and fictional minds.

I can see at least one intermedial and interdisciplinary challenge arising, a challenge that could trigger literary narratologists to develop new approaches that would sprout in their own field but could successfully expand to new areas: How to theorize and analyze readerly strategies that reflect or imitate literary construction, especially when these strategies – or interpretive frames – are applied to non-literary narratives with non-literary intentions?

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